



ROBERT WOOD TALKS ABOUT THE CITY

*The city's special urban functions are
mobilization, mixture and magnification . . .
a higher capacity for cooperation and
a widening of the area of communication
and emotional communion . . .*

—Lewis Mumford

Robert C. Wood was interviewed for DIALOGUE by Royal Shipp and William Robinson, in June, 1968, in Washington, D.C. Mr. Wood is Under Secretary for the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Previously he was head of the political science department at MIT and member of the Faculty Policy Committee of the MIT-Harvard Joint Center for Urban Studies. He is author of the pioneering study SUBURBIA: ITS PEOPLE AND THEIR POLITICS (1958) and co-author of POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT IN THE UNITED STATES (1965).

The city is the interaction of two scientific disciplines, biology and physics. It includes suburbia, it includes megalopolis. It is wherever movement and volatility are found. I cannot think of cities without a relatively high degree of density and without a variety of people and activities.

The ideal city is a will o' the wisp. St. Thomas, Aristotle, and Plato set limits at 20,000 to 80,000 people. Lord Bryce thought the best-governed city should not exceed 100,000. I am not disposed to set a fixed number. There are major economic advantages for large cities. If we could get lead time in government action, in community participation, in the ordering of space;

if we could be sensitive to beauty, if we could deal with pollution and other environmental needs, we could accommodate large numbers.

Santayana said that those who do not know history are condemned to relive it. But there are those who know history so well that they are trying to relive it under inappropriate circumstances. The Greek polis is not the same as Newark, New Jersey.

We are still the only country in the world seriously using the city as a device for assimilation. But America is learning, quite painfully, the dangers of that old illusion, "There's nobody here but us small town folks." We have always been committed in our folklore to the small community, to the sturdy yeoman, to the Western cowboy hero, to the Mormon pioneer. But behavior tolerable in a small town assumes different proportions when people live in congested circumstances. The village idiot, tolerated at home, cannot get around in the city. Driving a car recklessly down a country road endangers only the driver, but on a modern highway it causes an accordion accident. A broken window is overlooked in a small town, but may spark a riot in a big city.

It may be true that many a young woman coming from a small town to the big city risks the "Perils of Pauline," but there may have been less obvious perils in the small town. I think the city provides greater opportunity for growth, for freedom, for morality of the highest order. It provides opportunity to know and to experience the plurality of life that I think our creator intended.

The "Urban Crisis" is basically a crisis in expectations and frustrations. Actually cities today are *not* worse than they were fifty years ago. Our streets are safer than they were in Victorian times; American cities are better places to live. But we have never been satisfied with conditions as our fathers found them. We are expanding beyond the family unit, developing neighborhoods, finding substitutes for some of the bonds of ethnicity and religion. It is this painful, slow process that creates the "crisis." It is clear too that mass media and high literacy play a key role in creating this crisis. There is now no place for the rich to hide.

Our basic concern is not slums and civil rights, but city building. We must ask ourselves what kinds of communities, what patterns of life we want. We are Johnny-come-latelys, but given the Urban Coalition, given the billion dollar fund of private industry, the new federal legislation, we can unleash all our massive energy and sophisticated management upon urban problems. The key needs right now are not money and resources, but manpower and research.

Neighborhood people must be involved in rebuilding and reconstructing the slums. Programs affect the lives of people with terrible intimacy. Visible change must come to the ghetto; jobs must appear, schools must go up, houses must improve. But city hall and neighborhood must engage in shared experience.

Those who would applaud the rise of an all-black central city and an all-black government must consider that it might mean a return to a subtle form of the “back of the bus.” I think separatism, whether voluntary or compulsory, represents a backward step in American society. We *are* still the only nation in the world seriously engaged in the quest for equal opportunity and equal rights under law. But, as McGeorge Bundy said of Vietnam, “grey is the color of truth.” This is also true of the American city. But we will not await the Millennium to attack the slum; we have prepared a model cities program designed to improve conditions as quickly as resources and manpower will allow.

The role of the Church is of critical importance in the city. Cities work best when organized institutions display their power. Very few churches have been urban. The Roman Catholic and the Episcopalian churches were the first to put down roots there. Most churches will go where the action is, and in the city there are amazing opportunities for laity and clergy to find action. A church need not follow the shopping center pattern — a new church every twenty minutes. But it is possible for parish and church life to move now against exclusiveness, against suburban compartments. Every major church in America must come to terms with these threats in the next few years.