THE DETROIT OF DOXIADIS

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The basic problems which can be recognized in the urban area of Detroit can be summarized into two broad categories of understanding: problems due to the crisis of race relations on the one hand, and problems due to changes and modification in the urban structure on the other hand. They do not have a local character, but instead should be seen as nation-wide problems, not only because they can be observed in the most important urban areas of the United States, but also because they are the consequence of shortcomings of national policy in two different directions. The first one is toward the ability of integrating minority groups into the structure of the society, and the other toward a more effective control and amelioration of the conditions of the urban environment.

Both problems point out how a nation which is the richest in the world has not yet succeeded in resolving not only the minor problems regarding the conditions of urban living, but all of those concerning the equity of rights and choices that a democratic society should have resolved long ago.

The city of Detroit, and the Foreign Fellows' specific area of interest is a good example of the most important problems that the American city is forced to confront at present. The complexity of this makes our work stimulating concerning the development of analyses and goals, but also deeply frustrating because of the dim hope that the present political and institutional aspect of American society allows for implementation. I came to
the conclusion that American cities do not need new physical plans, proposals, analyses: they need instead a totally different urban policy whereby a new and stronger control on the market forces--which seem to be the only subjects able of giving shape to the urban pattern--is established.

In Detroit, as in all of the other most important urban areas of the United States, the spatial trends that represent the dynamic reality of urbanization--and with which urban planners are forced to deal, can be summarized in three broad categories, as follows:

1) A trend of concentration of population as well as of resources, moving from the country toward the metropolitan areas, that can be defined as a process of growth:

2) A trend of decentralization inside of the metropolitan area, from the center toward the outer rings which can be defined as a process of change of the spatial pattern of the metropolitan region;

3) A trend toward the concentration of minority groups and low-income people in the core of the metropolitan areas, which can be identified as a process of class and racial segregation in the space.

While the phenomena of growth seems to affect the metropolitan area of Detroit (2% or more of yearly population increases), no symptom of this kind is seen inside of the city limits--and, vice-versa, decentralization and concentration of minority groups are the two categories of phenomena recognizable in the central core.
The situation is not new, but only now has it reached serious dimensions.

Compared with the general situation of the metropolitan area, the city of Detroit, and especially the area on which the program is supposed to focus, can be defined as "depressed." Friedman and Alonso define areas within a regional system as depressed when they have a declining or stagnant economy, only able of offering modest development prospects, and losing most of their workers, and a good proportion of capital, to the major growth regions. I think that this definition is expressive of Detroit's particular situation, and of the dynamics of its trends.

The indicators that are normally used to test the level of social and economic health show that activities are declining, especially in the most central areas of the city.

- Since 1930 the population of Detroit has been increasing at a slower rate than that of the nation, while correspondingly the outer rings of the metropolitan areas have grown more than four times that of the central city---well above the national rate of increase. More recently---since 1955---the city has registered an absolute decline of population, and has today reached a level inferior to the one of 1930.

- The largest portion of the black population of the metropolitan area is settled in Detroit---only in the decade of 1950-1960 did the immigration of people of minority groups reach the
dimension of 182,000 people. Today between 30 and 35 percent of the population of the city is black, which already gives some indication of the economically depressed situation of Detroit since the median income of the black family is 58% that of the white family.

Concerning the educational attainment of the population, expressed in terms of median school years completed by persons, the city shows a slower rate of increase than the region does as a whole. While in 1940 the city had the same level of educational attainment as that of the metropolitan area, the evolution has been different--ten years of attainment as compared to eleven now.

Employment has been decreasing in Detroit, of about 120,000 units in only ten years (between 1954 and 1963) while in the metropolitan area, vice-versa, there has been a steady economic growth.

Unemployment has always been more extensive in the city of Detroit than in the metropolitan area.

Aggregate income and per capita income have not been growing at the same rate of speed as they have been in the metropolitan area: Between 1950 and 1960, income has increased 20% in the region compared to 9% in Detroit. In 1965, the Detroit family income was an average of $6,300
lower than the national average, compared to $7,700 in the
metropolitan area.

- The value of the land has been decreasing, and has now
assumed the same value as it had in 1915. The changes in the
pattern of the distribution of population and resources has been
brought about by the technological changes in transportation of
the last fifty years. Residential congestion has steadily
decreased! For the first time, a large share of the city
workers have had the opportunity of living in less urban or
even rural environments. Why? Because technological innovations
and a new technology of transportation has terribly increased
the amount of land available for potential location, making
it feasible to escape high land values, high taxes, and
congestion without increasing the total cost. For a variety of
reasons, a given amount of housing space, and desired living
conditions, can be acquired at less cost in the suburbs than
in the central city. The principal difference between the
cost of two locations is the cost of the land. Lower taxes,
larger lots, more play space for children, and separation from
other racial or ethnic groups are also factors, and since the
differential costs and living conditions favor the metropolitan
rings, the majority of new dwelling units have been located
in the suburbs.
Economists and industrialists have discovered that in light of modern conditions of transport, it is no longer necessary for great industries to be located within the limits of the central city. There is a broad zone of indifference, probably several miles in diameter, which is locationally suitable. Within this zone, the manufacturer must find a suitable site, water power, transportation, facilities for waste disposal. Hence, in a high proportion of instances, the optimum location for industries is somewhere within the general vicinity of the metropolitan center, but at a point where the total combined cost of manufacturing and distribution are at a minimum. Because this ring provides lowland values, low taxes, plenty of space, lack of congestion, and a labor which can be available because of commuting out instead of commuting in, and of other subsidies and concessions by small towns which are anxious to gain added industry, the most desirable sites are frequently outside of the central city. The new industrial constructions have been in the metropolitan ring, rather than within the central city. Retail trade and service industries tend to follow the residential concentration rather closely. As a result, the metropolitan ring has a rapidly developing retail and service structure. Satellite cities have a built-in, large and diversified shopping facilities. Modern methods of merchandising have permitted a stocking of a maximum number of items with wide
selections within a small place: this combined with congestion-free access, free parking and numerous services has permitted suburban merchants to compete effectively with downtown merchants for a high proportion of the total metropolitan retail trade. Warehousing and wholesaling have been undergoing changes, allowing new location in less central areas as well as business offices that can be relocated in less crowded quarters at much cheaper rents and without long commuting journeys.

The changes in size, and therefore in structure of cities have affected their centers as well as their edges. While the suburbs have continued to grow very fast, virtually every central city has lost population in the last decade. This has brought about a strange alliance between intellectual—usually liberal—critics of the suburbs, and those business—usually conservative—with an interest in central city real estate. Their combined argument runs: the city (the central city) is dying; the city is the focus of our economy, and the center of our culture; therefore, unless something is done, our economy is endangered and our culture is weakened. This, of course, is nonsense. The city today is the metropolitan area, and it is growing lustily. As it grows, it is developing and changing its structure, redistributing people and activities. What is, in fact, happening is that as the result of this redistribution, businesses and people are shifting out from the center.

(William Alonso, Cities and City Planning)

These remarks are probably right if we take the metropolitan area of Detroit as a whole: but as a consequence of these trends regarding the redistribution of people and activities in the urbanized region, the economical and social situation of the city, as well as the physical one has been becoming worse as is the physical one. The problems that the city has to face in this context are many: on the one hand, the increasing decline of
revenues and of economic resources; on the other, the increasing social and political problems that the administration has to resolve such as poverty and crime, slums and riots.

Detroit seems to be characterized by extreme decay, by a low level, thus, of urban quality, by a progressive deterioration of the urban environment, etc. The policies which aim and have aimed toward an amelioration of the environment can be judged altogether as incoherent, economically and spatially, especially in the area in which the Foreign Fellow Program should focus. This area seems to be in even worse conditions than Detroit as a whole, and is affected by a broad phenomena of physical deterioration as well as of social disaggregation, by a low level of income and by concentration of segregated colored groups.

These problems are not only characteristic of Detroit: they seem instead to characterize all the big cities of the United States. It is also a mistake to believe that the increasing amount of urban problems are the direct consequence of the present physical structure of the urban American environment. Some of them can be eliminated through a more efficient urban policy, capable of correcting location trends and of providing better transportation or housing! Most of them are, instead, more directly political and are the consequence of the present structure of the American society which seems to have accepted poverty and segregation as institutions.
In spite of every political propaganda democracy has remained a dream for a big amount of the people living in the United States.

If we look at the situation of the inner city of Detroit area we have to understand that the troubles of the inner city cannot be resolved in the same area where they manifest themselves:

It is our view that the problems to be found in these areas are not problems of areas, but problems of allocation of public and private reallocation of resources. Public policy to aid ghetto and slum residents should be tested in terms of its ability to enlarge opportunities for blacks and for the poor. This recasting of policy does not imply ending planned improvement of urban spatial and structural conditions, rather, it makes these conditions the means for serving human needs. If neighborhoods are to be rebuilt in central city ghetto areas, it will be necessary in many cases for the population density in these areas to be reduced. Rebuilding at present densities raises impossible problems of cost and residential amenity. To renew the neighborhoods, we must open opportunities for outmigration to new, decent housing outside the ghetto. Once densities have been reduced in this way, clearance of dilapidated structures can take place without creating insoluble problems of relocation of temporary relocation while reconstruction goes forward.


If, in the process of decentralization, economical activities and population moved toward the suburbs, it is in this direction that a policy should be organized. To call back the people and firms to the city that had moved out is practically impossible: these trends are the result of complex economical processes which the political authorities cannot have any impact on at all, and the attempts organized in this direction in the last twenty years
of urban policy have shown the limits and the cost of this operation. On the contrary, the suburbs should be opened up to the different economical and racial groups through alternative policies of location of housing and transportation, through an elimination of segregative zoning, etc.

If we observe the area of concern of the Foreign Fellowship Program, it is possible to observe some trends of modification: the expansion of the University, the location of the medical center, projects of urban renewal, etc., but these so-called positive trends of amelioration are not positive at all for the low-income groups living in the area. These actions are not going to resolve the basic problems of the urban area of Detroit; more likely, they are going to postpone them in time or relocate them in some of the space. The area has a desperate need for low-cost housing, and to tear down slums and to change land use from residential to institutional use does not resolve the problem. To the contrary, it only takes a slice of money out of the pockets of the poor people, and by decreasing the supply of low-rent housing, it raises rent prices. To eliminate only the physical presence of slums is not the real achievement.

Some of the problems can be resolved only at a regional or national level, with new policies directed toward:
- A different national distribution of population, and of resources, able of tying together into one system the development of large-scale regions, the flows of immigrants and the internal structure of the metropolitan areas, so that changes in one of these factors would bring about changes in the others;

- A new national housing policy capable of providing every person with equality of choice, and which would eliminate segregation;

- The creation of over-all metropolitan government for the metropolis;

- Tax revenues sufficient to enable to metropolitan government to acquire the land and to carry out the public works necessary for its development, and able of compensating for the economic losses resulting from different location decisions in the various administrative units;

- Public ownership of all, or most, of the land that is to be developed.

When these institutional and political devices are going to be introduced in the American social pattern, it is difficult to foresee: very likely they are not going to be introduced at all. It is not, anyway, my concern. A national reactionary slogan says, "America: Love it or leave it." Well, I do leave it.