Urban Planning Theory since 1945

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To my father, with admiration and love,
and all those others who endured or died in
the Second World War hoping for a better future

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

This book describes the history of town planning theory since the end of the Second World War (1945). Over this fifty-year period ideas about town planning have changed significantly. Yet students of town planning lack a book which describes, in an accessible way, the recent development of ideas which have informed their discipline. This book aims to fulfil that purpose.

As part of their town planning studies, students usually take some course in 'planning theory'. But as I know from my own experience of teaching this subject, students find the subject difficult. Part of this difficulty may be due to the intrinsic nature of the subject-matter, which deals with ideas and arguments rather than the accumulation and transmission of facts about planning. But the difficulties which students experience are not eased by the literature of planning theory. Much of the original literature in the subject is unnecessarily complicated and obscure, and so pretty impenetrable to the average student. Enthusiasm kindled in the opening week of a course on the subject can soon be drowned by the first reading of some 'classic text' in planning theory! There are some useful 'readers' in planning theory, such as Andreas Faludi's reader published in 1973 (Faludi, 1973a), and the more recent reader put together by Scott Campbell and Susan Fainstein (1996).[1] However, what is still lacking is a book which 'tells the story' of how town planning theory has changed since the end of the Second World War. Again, I have tried in this book to meet that lack. In so doing I have tried to tell the (his)story in a clear and accessible way, without sacrificing analytical rigour. For in my view, a book on the history of ideas should not only describe the ideas under consideration but also draw the reader into assessing them. Whether or not I have succeeded in these aims I leave for others to judge.

Before I begin I should say something about what I take 'town planning theory' to be (this itself has been a matter of debate amongst planning theorists since 1945). On this, it is worth saying to begin with that, if the practice of town planning is, literally, actually doing it, then everything that town planning students do at college is 'theory' about town planning of one kind or another, even when, for example, they are learning about the law that governs town planning. What is distinctive about the subject of 'planning theory' is that it aims to provide some overall or *general* understanding of the nature of

town planning. Because of this, the sorts of questions planning theorists ask (or should ask) about town planning are *fundamental* questions about town planning. Questions such as: What sort of an activity is town planning? What should town planning be aiming to do? What are the effects of actual town planning practice? Because these are basic questions about town planning, they are also 'simple' questions; they are the sorts of questions a child might ask about town planning. But, as anyone who has had children will know, the 'simple' (i.e. fundamental) questions are generally the most difficult to answer, because they probe to the very basis of our thought.[2] This, then, is another reason why many students may find the subject of 'planning theory' difficult and why also, in spite of my best efforts to make this book straightforward and accessible, some parts of it may still make difficult reading.

A brief note, too, about the term 'town' planning. I use this term for simplicity's sake and also because it is probably the most widely used term the world over to describe the activity I am concerned with. But in using 'town planning' I take it to refer also to what some people (especially in the USA) call 'urban' or 'city' planning. All the terms 'town', 'urban' and 'city' make it clear that the focus of this discipline is the (planning of) the built environment. However, the way we fashion the urban (built) environment also affects the rural and natural environment, and so we should perhaps rename our activity 'environmental' planning (some texts on 'town' planning do carry this title). What I describe here as 'town' planning also encompasses what in Britain has been traditionally, and charmingly, called 'town and country' planning.

The story I have told is from a British perspective. But since the Second World War, the kind of town planning that has been practised and debated in Britain has been similar in many respects to town planning in other advanced capitalist democracies. So even though what I describe here is the development of town planning thought in Britain, much of this thought came from other places, especially the USA. I therefore hope that readers in other countries will find this account of interest and relevance to them.

So much for the terms of this text. More important than all this is the following fact: *in the twentieth century, most people in Europe and North America, and now increasingly in other parts of the world too, have come to live in cities.* This 'move to the city' has been associated with a great sense of loss for something which the countryside, or 'wild nature', provided, and in Britain this has generated a 'rural nostalgia' and a tradition of 'anti-urban' literature (see, e.g. Williams, 1973). This has played a significant part in twentieth-century town planning thought. I don't think we should belittle these sentiments, for it may be that, in the prescence of 'wild nature', many people experience something sublime and transcendent which is generally not available in cities. On the other hand, cities can be wonderful places, as is indicated by the numbers of people who flock to see cities like Florence and Venice, Paris and Rome, London and New York. But these, perhaps, are the exceptions. If there is another source of the anti-urbanism which has been so prevalent, it is that many cities are inhospitable, ugly places. But cities are human-made things, and the fact that some cities are congenial and uplifting

shows that the miserable urban environments which most people are con-
demned to live in don't *have* to be like that.

It is this which makes town planning important. Indeed, it is an extraordin-
ary fact that, in our contemporary urban culture, the activity of town planning
is not more widely discussed and written about, and so, apparently, not per-
ceived as being very significant in relation to the quality of our lives. The point
has been well made by the novelist Margaret Drabble (1991, p. 32):

> I was recently talking with friends about which of the arts has the most
> powerful and direct effect upon the emotions. The rival claims of music
> and poetry found the most powerful advocates, until one unexpectedly
> nominated architecture. A surprised and respectful silence fell. Architec-
> ture? Did she really mean architecture? Did *buildings* make her want to
> weep or sing with joy? We questioned her and, yes, she did mean buildings
> . . .
> I have thought back to this discussion many times, and now consider this
> friend's point is less eccentric than at first appeared. Some of the greatest
> and grandest emotional and aesthetic experiences come from architecture.
> Who can forget a first vision of Venice, of Rome, of Istanbul, of Mar-
> rakesh, of Carthage, of Tangiers, of Paris, of Rio de Janeiro, of Moscow,
> of Sydney, of Cape Town?

There are some points I would want to add to alter, slightly, what Margaret
Drabble says here. First, although cities can be experienced as large works of
art, so that questions of aesthetics should be central to their planning, cities are
not just works of art; whether or not we experience them as pleasant or
repugnant depends on more than this. Good town planning therefore depends
on more than good urban design. Secondly, and most important, Margaret
Drabble speaks of *architecture* and of *buildings*. But although individual build-
ings, and thus architecture, are important to the quality of towns, it is the
whole ensemble of buildings and spaces in a town – including its parks and
gardens – which governs how we experience it (notice how in the above
quotation Drabble slides from talking about individual buildings to cities as a
whole). In other words (and in so far as it is an 'art'), it is really the art of town
planning which emerges from Drabble's reflections as arguably the most sig-
nificant art. But with these qualifications added, what Drabble says here is very
important, for it draws attention to the extraordinary fact that town planning
(and architecture) is not generally perceived as very significant in our society
(notice, again, her initial surprise at her friend's 'eccentric' suggestion). And
this even though most of us live in cities, and even though most of these cities
are unpleasant to be in, and even though it is possible for humans to create
wonderful cities for people to inhabit.

If town planning is as important as I contend, then clearly so too is the
general theory which underpins it. Moreover, from the above discussion it
would appear that a central part of that general theory should be concerned
with three questions: First, what are the components of good-quality urban
environments? Secondly, under what conditions are these qualities most likely

to be realised? And third, to the extent that public sector town planning is one of these conditions, what part can town planning play in bringing about better cities (and a better environment more generally) for people to live in? I shall return to these questions in concluding this book. However, for much of the time since the Second World War planning theorists have been more preoccupied with other questions, and particularly with the basic conceptual question of how we should conceive of (and so *define*) the discipline of town planning. There have been good reasons for this, the chief amongst them being that theorists of town planning since 1945 have held different, and in some ways opposing, conceptions of town planning, and thus different and opposing views about the theory which is most relevant to inform it. But this is to anticipate the story which I should now begin.

NOTES

1. Other readers in planning theory include: Burchell and Sternlieb (1978), Healey, McDougall and Thomas (1982a), Paris (1982), Mandelbaum, Mazza and Burchell (1996).
2. If this account of 'planning theory' is correct, then the 'discipline' of planning theory is rather like philosophy, for philosophy asks basic, fundamental questions about the world and our place in it. Perhaps, then, the 'planning theorist' should be someone with a philosophical predisposition, and not only in the sense of asking fundamental questions about planning but also in the sense of employing the analytical rigour that is typical of the best philosophy in examining those questions.

PART I
EARLY POST-WAR PLANNING THEORY

1

Town planning as physical planning and design

INTRODUCTION

In this and the following chapter we shall be examining the view, or theory, of town and country planning which prevailed in Britain for about twenty years following the Second World War. There are two aspects of post-war planning theory which I shall distinguish and examine separately in this and the next chapter.

First, in this chapter, I examine the prevailing conception of the *nature* of town (and country) planning as a discipline; that is, the view which most town planners held in the post-war years about the kind of activity they were engaged in – how planning theorists at this time would have *defined* town planning. A useful way of approaching this is to imagine a leading town planner of the post-war years being asked by an intelligent layperson: 'what *is* town and country planning?' Although as we shall see, the concept or definition of town planning which prevailed at this time could be summarised in one or two sentences, we get a richer picture if we fill out this definition somewhat, and that, too, I shall do in this chapter.

Second, in the next chapter, I examine the main views held during the post-war period of what the *purposes* or *aims* of town planning should be. This necessarily involves an inquiry into the values which underpinned town planning at this time, and so in describing this second aspect of post-war planning theory we examine the *normative* theory of planning which predominated in those years.

First, the prevailing view held in the post-war years of the *nature* of town planning. The concept of town planning which predominated was similar to that which was held during the war and pre-war years and, indeed, long before that. During and after the Second World War there was in Britain (as in other western democracies) an added political ingredient to town planning because of the widespread discussion about establishing a new *system* of planning for the country as a whole. This was connected with a view that emerged following the war and the interwar economic depression that the state should play a much more active, interventionist role in society. The post-war Labour Government represented this emergent position of 'social democracy' (as it came to be called), and between 1945 and 1951 this government established a new

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political agenda based on an expansion of the state's responsibilities: a 'welfare' state providing universal education, health care and social security, etc., and in the state's more active role in managing the economy (including, in some cases, the nationalisation of major industries and services). The expansion of the state's role in town planning, as represented by various pieces of planning legislation (of which the centrepiece was the Town and Country Planning Act 1947), was thus part and parcel of this new post-war politics.

But if people had been asked at this time what sort of an *activity* town and country planning was, then, I suggest, their answers would have reflected a concept of town planning that had not changed significantly for some hundreds of years, since at least the time of the Renaissance and subsequent European Enlightenment. It was generally assumed that town planning was essentially an exercise in the *physical planning and design* of human settlements. As such, it was seen as a natural extension of architecture and (to a lesser extent) civil engineering, and hence as an activity most appropriately carried out by architects (and civil engineers). It is therefore this 'physicalist', design-based view of town and country planning which I describe in this chapter.

Before doing so, there are two preliminary points to note here which anticipate material presented later in the book. First, whilst conceptions about the *nature* of planning during the post-war years exhibited continuity with earlier periods of history, views about the *purposes* or *aims* planning should pursue were more particular to that time and had their roots in more recent history (see Chapter 2).

Secondly, though the view about the nature of town and country planning stretched back into history, it was a view that came to be questioned and to some extent abandoned during the 1960s because many of the outcomes (or apparent outcomes) of post-war planning *practice* were criticised in the late 1950s and 1960s. The conception of town planning described here is one which persisted for about twenty years following the Second World War. After that, new ideas and perspectives emerged, and it is the task of the rest of this book to describe these.

My account of the 'physicalist' conception of planning is drawn chiefly from books and other written sources published in and around the period of the Second World War, and especially from 'textbooks' which sought to explain, in a general sense, what town and country planning was about. After all, our understanding of the view of planning that was taken during this or any other period must rest to a large extent on what relevant people *said* about it, and this translates, for the most part, into what people *wrote* about planning. Examples of such texts include Patrick Abercrombie's *Town and Country Planning* (first published in 1933), Thomas Sharp's *Town Planning* (1940), Lewis Keeble's *Principles and Practice of Town and Country Planning* (1952), and Frederick Gibberd's *Town Design* (1953). Keeble's was a standard and highly recommended textbook for students and practitioners of planning from the time of its publication through to the mid-1960s, and thus it expresses in a particularly vivid way the view of town and country planning which prevailed

during this period. As was written on the sleeve of the fourth edition of Keeble's book published in 1969:

'Principles and practice' has always been much more than a student's textbook. In this edition it emerges fully as probably the clearest and most explicit, certainly the fullest and most comprehensive, work yet published upon the vital subject of physical planning . . . Today there are few planning offices and almost certainly no schools of planning in the English speaking world where it is not in use.

The blurbs on book jackets, of course, always makes grand claims like this. Nevertheless, I do not think this particular claim is either untrue or unreasonably immodest. Throughout the 1950s and into the mid-1960s, Keeble's book was recommended to all students of planning (and often as the main course text). It was also used as a standard work of reference, even as a planning 'manual', in many planning offices, so that amongst planners themselves it was probably the best known and most widely used book on town planning.

THE COMPONENTS OF THE POST-WAR CONCEPTION OF PLANNING

The description of town and country planning in the post-war period (and long before that was conceived) as essentially an exercise in physical planning and design, but this abbreviation needs to be more fully explained. We can distinguish three related components to this:

1) Town planning as *physical* planning.
2) *Design* as central to town planning.
3) The assumption that town planning necessarily involved the production of *'master' plans* or *'blueprint'* plans showing the same degree of precision in the spatial configuration of land uses and urban form as the 'end-state' blueprint plans produced by architects or engineers when designing buildings and other human-made structures.

Town planning as physical planning

After the Second World War, there was much talk of 'planning' in a *general* sense – that is, state intervention in, and playing a more active role in, the managing and planning of social and economic affairs generally as part of the changed political climate. As town and country planning was only one form of planning activity, the question naturally arises as to what made town and country planning different from other forms of planning. The prevailing view was that, with the possible exception of regional planning controls over industry,[1] town and country planning was concerned with the 'physical' environment and was thus most appropriately described as *physical* planning, as opposed to 'social' and 'economic' planning. As Keeble (1952, p. 1, emphasis added) put it on the first page of his book:

> Town and Country Planning might be described as the art and science of ordering the use of land and the character and siting of buildings and communicative routes . . . Planning, in the sense with which we are concerned with it, deals primarily with land, and *is not economic, social or political planning*, though it may greatly assist in the realisation of the aims of these other kinds of planning.

There are three points about this statement worthy of comment. The first concerns the conceptual problem of distinguishing between 'physical' and 'social' (as well as 'economic') planning. The second concerns the alleged relation between physical and other forms of planning. And the third concerns the suggestion that town and country planning is not 'political'.

The conceptual problem arises because it is difficult to make much sense of the idea that town and country planning is *not* concerned with 'social' and 'economic' matters. One could suggest that town and country planning is concerned with the 'physical environment' – and so with buildings, roads, land, etc. (i.e. with physical *objects*), and that this is distinct from planning (for example) health care or education. The former could be described as 'physical' and the latter as 'social' planning. This is, however, a rather contrived distinction. If one were to ask what physical planning is *for*, or *why* one might wish to plan a part of the physical environment, then it is difficult to think of a reason for this planning which is not 'social': for people generally wish to control the form of their environment to maintain or enhance their well-being or welfare. The nineteenth-century town planning movement in Britain was very much concerned with the physical planning of cities for reasons of public health, and policy for health is generally regarded as 'social'. Furthermore, town and country planning is a form of social action just as much as planning the provision of health care or education. So there is some incoherence in this distinction between planning which is said to be only, or even primarily, 'physical', and planning which is, by contrast, 'social'.[2] However, as is evident from Keeble's way of defining planning, town and country planning was typically thought of at this time as being about the physical environment, and hence as only *physical* planning.[3]

This is not merely a pedantic point. For if we allow that there is some distinction between 'physical' and 'social' planning, the question of whether town planning should be defined as 'physical' (and *not* 'social'), or alternatively as 'physical *and* social', is a question of what the proper *scope*, and hence the *purposes*, of town planning should be; it is a question of whether town planning should be conceived as an activity which is 'only about' the physical environment and physical development or as a wider activity encompassing 'social' and 'economic' matters as well. Donald Foley drew attention to these alternative conceptions of town planning in a well-known paper about the ideology of British post-war planning (Foley, 1960). Here he made clear that there is considerable tension, and ideological debate between, a 'physicalist' view and a wider 'social' concept of town planning.

Secondly, Keeble suggests that town planning, though it is not social and economic (or even political) planning, 'may greatly assist in the realisation of

the aims of these other kinds of planning'. If we allow that there is some distinction between physical, social and economic ends, then implicit in this statement is an assumption that social and economic ends could be advanced by physical means – that is, by the location, siting, disposition and physical layout of buildings and roads, etc. At one level there is nothing exceptional about this, for clearly the physical form and layout of a town can affect social and economic life (e.g. new roads can attract commercial development to an area; and a toddlers' play area can attract young children and so bring children in a neighbourhood into contact with each other). Keeble's statement, however, is worth attending to because the idea that the physical form of the environment could affect social and economic life was quite central to planning thought at the time. This sometimes took the stronger thesis that the physical form and layout of buildings and spaces could *determine* the quality of social or economic life, and this thesis was appropriately termed physical, architectural or environmental determinism (see Broady, 1968, Chap. 1). The post-war 'Mark 1' new towns, for example, were designed from a common assumption that, by laying out residential areas in physically distinct neighbourhoods, with 'their own' local shops, recreational open spaces, primary schools, etc., there was a greater likelihood that a 'social' neighbourhood (i.e a 'community') would develop. As it turned out, this was sociologically naive (as we shall see in Chapter 3). Nevertheless, this assumption was built into early post-war planning thought, and Keeble's statement hints at this.

The third point concerns Keeble's assertion that town and country planning is not 'political' planning. Again, much hangs on how we interpret this. If he meant that town and country planning is not concerned with planning the political *system*, then we could concur with this. But if he meant that planning does not involve or assume a commitment to a political *position*, then this is questionable. The very introduction of land-use planning entails an acceptance of some form of state intervention in the property market, which in turn entails a particular political ideology (such as social democracy). Indeed, the introduction of publicly accountable town planning presupposes, even if it does not itself directly 'plan', a certain kind of political system, so that from this point of view town planning *is* a form of 'political planning'. Decisions about how land should be used and developed necessarily involve making choices which affect the interests of different groups in different ways, and so these choices are also 'political' in this sense. Whatever Keeble himself may have meant, his statement is worth attending to because it was also part of the prevailing conception of town and country planning that planning was primarily a 'technical' activity, and so an activity that was not in itself political, or which at least did not carry with it any specific political values or commitments. Indeed, its designation as 'physical' (not 'social' or 'economic') was precisely one of the reasons why people at this time thought of town planning as technical and apolitical.

Assuming that town and country planning was conceived of as physical planning, the question naturally arises as to what technical skills were thought relevant, which brings us to the second component of the post-war conception of planning.

Town planning as urban design

Because town planning was viewed as an exercise in planning the physical location, form and layout of land uses and buildings, it was also regarded as an exercise in physical or urban *design* (the term 'civic' design was also much used). Town planning was regarded as an 'extension' of architectural design (or to a lesser extent civil engineering) in the literal sense of being concerned with the design of whole groups of buildings and spaces – with 'townscape' rather than the design of individual buildings and their immediate sites, and also in the sense that architecture too was seen to be an exercise in the *physical* design of built forms. It followed that the professionals generally considered as most qualified to undertake such work were architects, together with the two other main built environment professions, civil engineering and surveying. It is not surprising, therefore, that these other built environment practitioners resisted the establishment of town planning as a separate profession in Britain on the grounds that town planning was a natural extension of their work and hence part and parcel of their brief (see Cherry, 1974, Chaps. 6 and 7). Hence, although the British Town Planning Institute had been established in 1913 and had petitioned for a Royal Charter in 1948, it was not until 1971 that the institute succeeded in obtaining the grant of a Royal Charter to become fully recognised as a distinct profession.[4]

Most practising town planners in the immediate post-war period, therefore, were architect-planners.[5] Three of the most famous planners in post-war Britain – Patrick Abercrombie, Frederick Gibberd and Thomas Sharp – were all architects. This situation was reflected in other European countries: in The Netherlands, for example, from the end of the First World War to the mid-1930s, the early modernist architect H.P. Berlage was responsible for Amsterdam's southern extension plan, and in the post-war years the famous modern architect Le Corbusier was commissioned by various cities to prepare town planning schemes.

It is thus not surprising that most of the town planning treatises written at the time put great emphasis upon urban design. Books written specifically about urban design, such as Frederick Gibberd's *Town Design* (published in 1953), were regarded as standard texts on town planning. And in Europe generally, most of the influential twentieth-century tracts on town planning, such as those by Tony Garnier (1917) and Le Corbusier (1924; 1933), likewise saw the task of planning cities as an exercise in large-scale urban design.

This emphasis on town planning as urban design is very evident in Lewis Keeble's *Principles and Practice of Town and Country Planning*, as Figures 1.1–1.5 show. 'Theoretical' master plans for new towns (Figure 1.1) are worked up by the author into a detailed design (Figure 1.2). Then, homing in on particular areas within an imaginary town, there are examples of representative designs for a town centre (Figure 1.3, also reproduced on the cover of the 1969 edition), and for residential neighbourhoods (Figure 1.4). Even a plan for an imaginary urban region is shown as if it were an exercise in large-scale design (Figure 1.5).
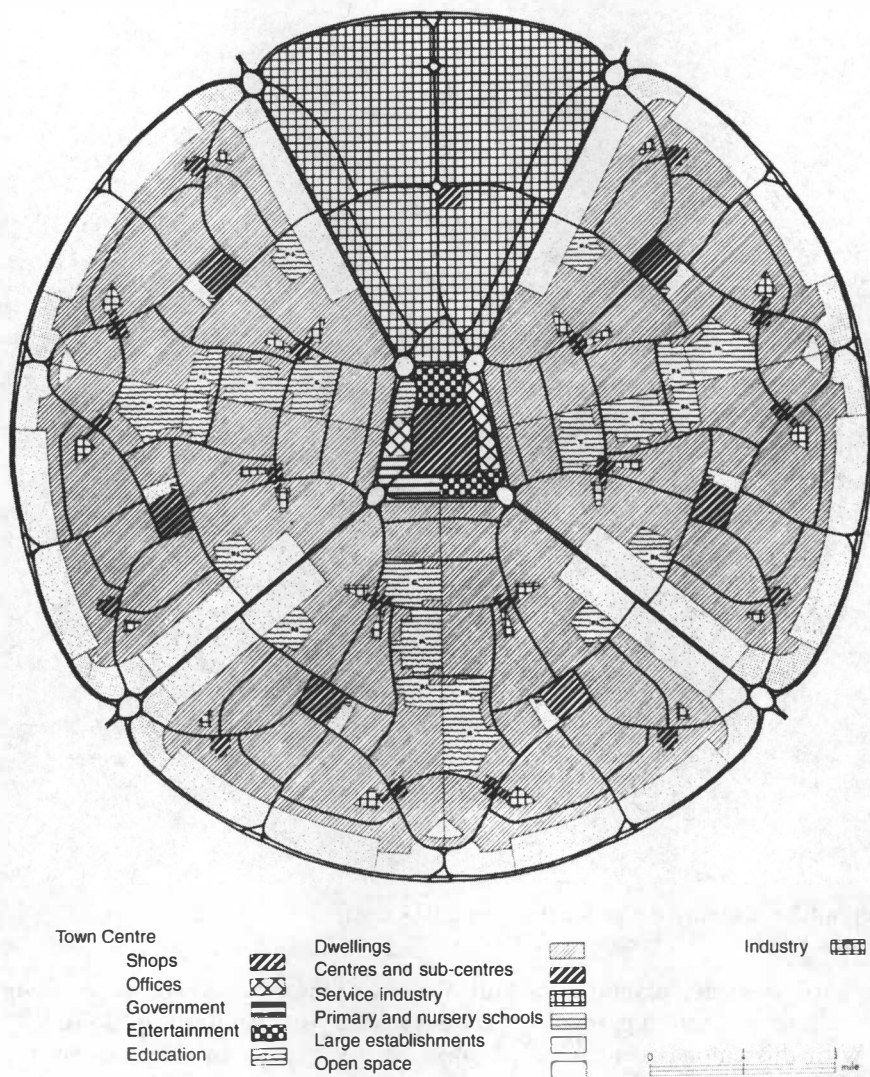
Figure 1.1   Theoretical new town
Source: Keeble, 1952 (1969 edn), Figure 30

The training town planning students received naturally reflected this approach. 'Studio work' (design projects of various kinds – housing layouts, designs for shopping centres, town centre plans, master plans for imaginary new towns, etc.) was at the heart of planning education, and all students were equipped with the same kind of drawing materials as architectural students (drawing boards, T-squares, set-squares and scales, cartographic pens and pencils, Letraset for printing, etc.). There were differences. Whereas architecture students were engaged more directly on the detailed design work for individual buildings, town planning students were concerned with the design of whole groups of buildings and urban spaces – in other words, with design
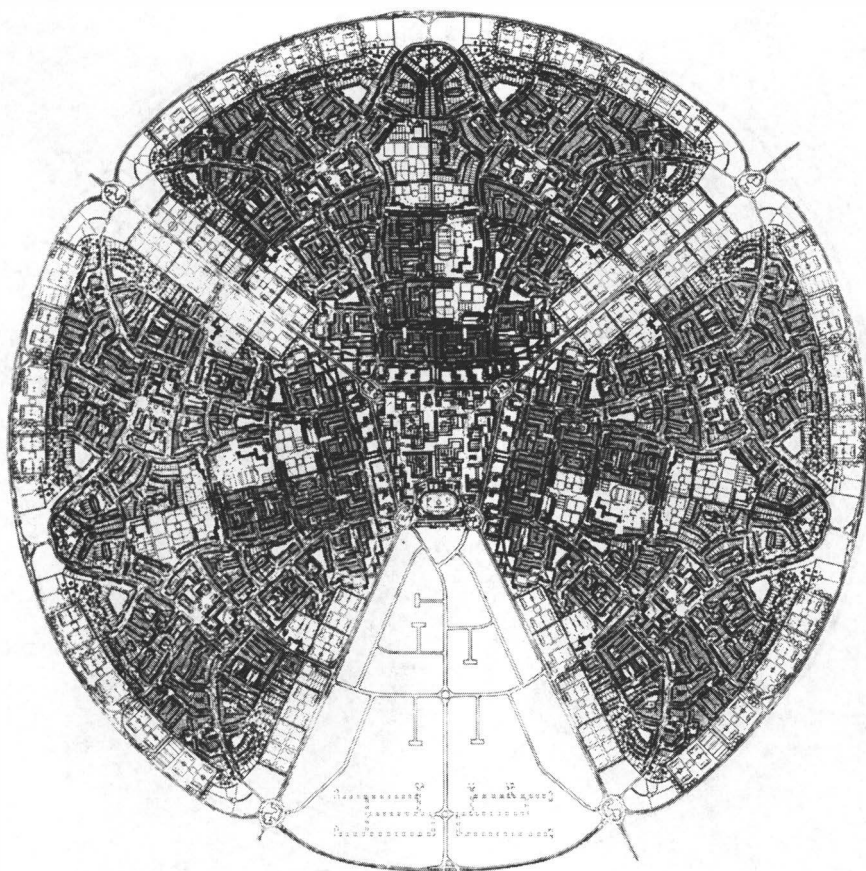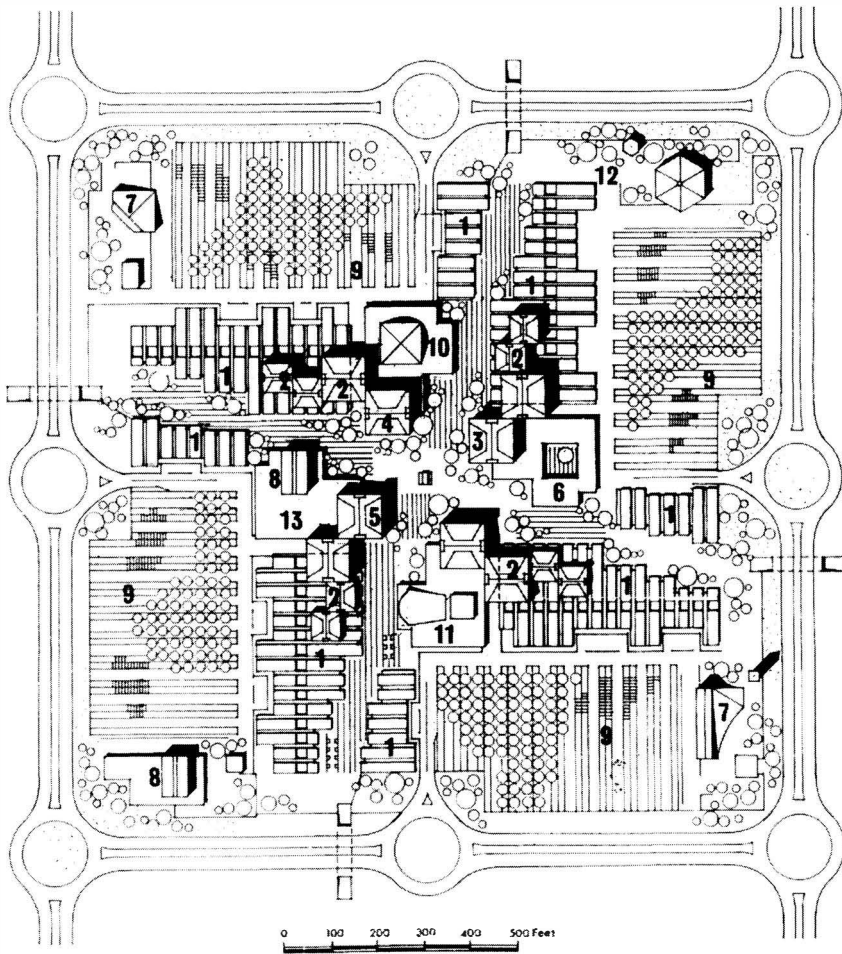
Figure 1.2 Detailed design for theoretical new town
Source: Keeble, 1952, Figure 31 (1969 edn)

'layouts'. But town planning was still viewed and taught as a natural extension of architectural training, involving the same kinds of spatial design skills.

With this emphasis on town planning as design was an emphasis on the *aesthetic* character and qualities of existing areas of townscape for which plans might be prepared, together with an emphasis on making plans which (it was hoped) would enhance the aesthetic quality of environments. Raymond Unwin – a leading exponent of this concern with aesthetics – stressed the need for beauty in urban life: 'Not even the poor can live by bread alone' (cited in Creese, 1967, p. 71). Unwin spoke of town planning unreservedly as an 'art' which would provide 'the opportunity of a beautiful environment out of which a good human life would grow' (Unwin, 1930, cited in Creese, 1967, p. 165; note again the physical determinism of this). The aesthetics of urban form and design dominated the standard post-war texts on town planning. Thomas Sharp's (1940) *Town Planning*, for example, was greatly preoccupied with the aesthetic qualities of suburban as compared with terraced housing development.

Figure 1.3 A design for the centre of a theoretical new town
Source: Keeble, 1952, Figure 78

The centrality of aesthetics is also echoed in many of the town planning reports produced at the time, and the planning reports for cities produced by Thomas Sharp provide a vivid illustration of this. Sharp's (1946) plan for the blitzed city of Exeter begins with an analysis of the aesthetic character of the city centre and his proposals are largely governed by aesthetics. For example, his block design for the pedestrianised shopping street Princesshay was located and aligned on aesthetic grounds to provide a perspective view of the cathedral, rather than from an analysis of the locational requirements of retail businesses or of people's shopping behaviour.

Admittedly, land and buildings were used and thus how the parts of a town 'functioned' were also considered as part of the process of urban design. This was, after all, the age of modernist 'functional' architecture. Just as architects saw architectural design as the art of designing forms to accommodate (even