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Joyce Earley Lyndon

Reading, fifty years after the end of World War Two, the articles in *Places* 9.3 in which planners and architects are exploring their roles in dealing with the crises ahead — social, economic, environmental — recalls the architects in Britain during and after the war, working outside their traditional role; their versatility; their capacity for sustained hard work under pressure; their immense contribution to reconstruction.

The Depression of the Thirties had shaken Britain. Many people had been unemployed. Farmers, using sustainable practices learned from experience and tradition, could not compete with cheap, imported food; some of the best land was disappearing under motorways and the factories of new, footloose, light industries. The British in 1939 were resolutely pacifist.

September 1939. Hitler's troops, having taken Czechoslovakia, invaded Poland, bombed Warsaw. Britain declared war. Men and women joined the armed forces. Factories changed to war production. Complexes to make war material, with houses for workers, were being built by contractors in remote countryside.

Everyone did a full-time job plus volunteer work. Everyone had a ration book for food and clothing, a gas mask and an identity card. (Ships bringing essential supplies were being sunk by the enemy.)

The country was divided into 12 regions, with offices of the central government in the regional capitals, and a commissioner with executive powers, so that if London's Whitehall were bombed out, the planning of food, labor, fuel, power, transport, supplies, trade and information would continue. Regional officers exchanged information, went regularly to London to meet the headquarters staff and colleagues from other regions. They were also in close contact with local administrations in their cities and counties. A basic principle of sustainability was being observed: "Everything connected."

May 1940. Bombing raids began on London for fifty seven consecutive nights. When the rubble was cleared, there were acres of open space patterned by street lines in the City of London, the East End and the Docklands. Then provincial cities were bombed, the rail networks, the cathedral cities and the western ports. When the raids stopped in June 1941, 3.5 million houses had been damaged or destroyed.

The British government realized that after the war Britain would have to rebuild its economy in radically different conditions. People's lives would be very different, city governments preparing development plans would need regular information on national policy; planning of cities and counties would have to be coordinated.

Under the 1932 Town Planning Act, covering "areas ripe for development" adjacent to built-up areas only, planning had been a minor activity of local government, generally in the departments of the city engineer or surveyor. Now a planning system covering all land was needed.

September 1942. A new planning ministry was set up in London with offices in the 12 regional capitals.

The number of experienced planners needed to meet the sudden demand was inadequate, but architects were available. William Holford, a South African architect who had been leading technical teams on factory construction, became Chief Technical Planner at the Ministry in Whitehall, with a multi-disciplinary staff. In the Bristol Region, probably typical, an experienced surveyor–planner supervised a staff of five, with three architects. In the Bristol City Engineer's office, ordinance survey maps (the standard map to be used for planning across the country) were being updated by a team of seven — a retired O.S. surveyor, a mining engineer, two local architects, an artist, a planning student and a bomb disposal officer who, when called to a "job," shook hands, half-joking, all round and was cheered on his return.

1944. Beginning in June, Hitler's Flying Bombs harassed southeast England; beginning in September, V2 rockets attacked, the whining scream of their travel arriving after the explosion. Thousands were killed and many more buildings were

destroyed before the Allies overran the launching sites at the end of March, 1945.

May 1945 – victory in Europe. Britons were thin, shabby, grateful and one nation. Working together, they had defended and sustained the country.

1946. Town and country planners crowded into a hall in London to hear Lewis Mumford. Afterwards, outside, a knot of people formed around a man conspicuous in army uniform – Percy Johnson-Marshall, just returned from Burma. He took out of his pocket a book, Lilienthal's *TVA – Democracy on the March*[1] "You should buy it", he said, "Good value. Ninepence."

It was a revelation! Few planners in Britain then knew that a democratic form of regional planning had been operating in Tennessee since 1933; (or that a progressive social reform movement in the U.S. early in this century had broadened the concept of conservation to include economics, political science, public administration, art and public health, as well as natural resources). In poverty-stricken, rural Tennessee, regional planning was restoring prosperity. In Britain, ironically, the government had just closed all the regional offices.

"The London County Council (Architects Department)...attained its postwar excellence largely through the brilliant early leadership of Robert Matthew and Leslie Martin and a young corps of inquiring, eager architects... (no private work of any kind could be done.)"[2]

Thanks to the LCC's enlightened hiring policies, the corps of eager architects designing public housing included many women. These women had not been tenants in public housing or acquainted with their clients, but all were still living in tight, makeshift spaces, had fed their families with the limited choice and amounts of food available, had repeatedly mended and patched their old clothes, had queued with sore feet for an hour at the local shop for luxuries just delivered (oranges or bananas, one item per ration book) and had experienced disturbed sleep and power blackouts. They knew how to help housewives and mothers with the design of their houses and so ensure stable families.

At County Hall, land-use planners and architects worked on the same floor, met in the cafeteria, walked together to buses and tube stations. The women talked about problems – what factors determined the position of the kitchen window, besides a view of the children's play area? Where to locate the play areas in relation to bedroom windows with night-shift sleepers? Should front doors allow eye contact from the doorstep along and across the street? And so on. There was only one social scientist; she was gentle, knowledgeable and helpful.

The Parks Department, whose staff today would explain sustainability in terms of natural principles, was in another building and did not use ecological words in public. It was clear, even then, that while human nature remained much as it had always been, following nature's way of restoring equilibrium after changes, by using mechanisims evolved over time, was no longer adequate. The speed and violence of changes and the new technologies needed more effective procedures to establish different equilibriums – to begin with, better organized and speedier cooperation between governments, as well as between specialists and among the public.

In 1959, I travelled across the United States. In Tennessee, a Soil Conservation Officer was happy to explain the agency's methods and demonstrate successes. The farmers I spoke to were content. TVA officials talked enthusiastically about recreation facilities on the reservoirs. But it seemed that the spirit Lilienthal had written about, of communities cooperating at the grassroots, was not apparent. Perhaps communities need crisis conditions to motivate them to work together. In that case, there are crises like hurricanes ahead.

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Notes

1. David E. Lilienthal, TVA – *Democracy on the March* (New York: Penguin, 1944).
2. G.E. Kidder Smith, *The New Architecture of Europe* (New York: Pelican, 1962).