

– Subtopia –

This issue is less of a warning than a prophecy of doom: the prophecy that if what is called development is allowed to multiply at the present rate, then by the end of the century Great Britain will consist of isolated oases of preserved monuments in a desert of wire, concrete roads, cosy plots and bungalows. There will be no real distinction between town and country. Both will consist of a limbo of shacks, bogus rusticities, wire and aerodromes, set in some fir-poled fields: Graham Greene's England, expanded since he wrote in the 'thirties from the arterial roads over the whole land surface. Upon this new Britain the review bestows a name in the hope that it will stick – SUBTOPIA.* Its symptom will be (which one can prophesy without even leaving London) that the end of Southampton will look like the beginning of Carlisle; the parts in between will look like the end of Carlisle or the beginning of Southampton.

How has this come upon us? Britain is an industrial country. Britain has a population of 50,000,000 crammed into an island which could take 25,000,000 decently. Britain is top-heavy. Industrialisation has created an 80 per cent urban majority. Popular misunder-

standings of one sort and another – misunderstanding of the meaning of democracy – vulgarisation of the concept of liberty – have led the man-in-the-street to kick against the principle of land planning.

False tolerance, likewise, has led him to tolerate every kind of abuse in the name of free competition or public expediency. There's a lot of unspoilt country, the feeling runs, and sooner or later the population graph will level out and even take a dive and then urban spread will cease. A fallacy. Spread is dependent no longer on population increase but on the services a power-equipped society can think up for itself. With radio and supersonic speeds you get the capacity for infinite spread, the limiting factors of time and place having ceased to operate. The city is to-day not so much a growing as a spreading thing, fanning out over the land surface in the shape of suburban sprawl. However, something even more sinister is at work: applied science is rendering meaningless the old distinction between urban and rural life; the villager is becoming as much a commuter as the citizen; the old centres of gravity have been deprived of their pull at both ends and in the middle; no longer geographically tied, industries which once muscled in on the urban set-up are getting out of the mess they did so much to make, and making a new mess outside. The arterial road has developed a way of life of its own with its own ribbon-type development – villa, 'caff', garage, motel, caravan camp – carried into the heart of a countryside

which is under sentence to machine agriculture.

This thing of terror, which will get you up sweating at night when you begin to realise its true proportions, we have called, as we say, Subtopia. It consists in the universal suburbanisation not merely of the country, or of the town, but of town-and-country – the whole land surface. Suburbia becomes Utopia, Utopia becomes suburbia.

This is not to say suburbia has no place in the scheme of things. The review has from time to time regaled its readers, to the dismay indeed of some, with the charms of the suburban ethos. What is not to be borne is that that ethos should drift like a gaseous pink marshmallow over the whole social scene, over the mind of man, over the land surface, over the philosophy, ideals and objectives of the human race; for this is what it is doing. And it is doing it not only as a psychological but a physical, a geophysical phenomenon. Not in England merely, in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas. Before the eyes of Frank Lloyd Wright in his hide-out in the Arizona Desert now runs a complicated pylon network. In the Pampas, once synonymous with the vast liberty of nature, areas the size of Britain are cut up by rectangular wire fences not unlike those that have completed the downfall of the once open downs of our own country. The same fate is overtaking the Highlands of Scotland. Australia boasts a wire fence a thousand miles long. Holland is already a suburb, Switzerland a hydro. Baghdad has trams. The Alps