



Spring 1963

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Recommended Citation

Blair T. Bower, *MacKaye, Benton, The New Exploration*, 3 Nat. Resources J. 371 (1963).
Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol3/iss2/14>

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BOOK REVIEWS

The New Exploration

By

BENTON MACKAYE

Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1962

Pp. xxx, 243, \$1.75

The University of Illinois Press has done a service in reprinting this work by MacKaye, first published in 1928. This edition includes an introduction by Lewis Mumford, giving some of the pertinent highlights of MacKaye's life, and an article by MacKaye from the *New Republic*, March 12, 1930, entitled *The Townless Highway*.

It is a service because MacKaye, three and a half decades ago, issued a warning about the problems and the undesirable effects of uncontrolled metropolitan growth. This was in the early period of development of the automobile and the concrete and asphalt tenacles associated with it. MacKaye accurately foresaw the car-hot dog stand-revolving neon sign-concrete ribbon society of the present day. Along with Patrick Geddes, and his contemporaries and associates Lewis Mumford and Stuart Chase, MacKaye expresses a concern for the quality of life. He sees the potential of the machines which modern civilization has produced, but opines that man at present is the servant and victim, rather than the master, of the machine.

Basically the content of the book reflects the subtitle, *A Philosophy of Regional Planning*, with emphasis on philosophy. MacKaye defines regional planning as the visualization of the potential workings of three processes, (1) the conservation of natural resources, (2) the control of commodity-flow, and (3) the development of environment. The basic problem for the regional planner is that of minimizing the concern with the means of life and of maximizing living, *i.e.*, the fulfillment of the ends and the development of the human individual. The ultimate goal of all sound, comprehensive regional planning is the ever widening of man's mental and spiritual horizons.¹ Regional planning then involves arranging the environment in such a fashion that the goal of living may be effectively and eagerly pursued.² Consequently, the regional planner should have, from the outset of his work, some definite philosophy with respect to life's objectives on which his plans and explorations should be focused.

For MacKaye, planning is comprised of two aspects; first, an accurate formulation of our own desires—the specific knowledge of what it is we want,

1. P. 132.

2. P. 133.

and second, an accurate revelation of the limits and the opportunities imposed and bequeathed by nature.³ He sees the planner as essentially a "revealer," one whose job is to seek and reveal the opportunities and potentialities in the indigenous environment. The primary jobs of the regional planner are first, to chart, reveal and contrast the metropolitan and the indigenous "molds," and second, to control population distribution—in essence, to control the metropolitan flow or flood.

The metropolitan mold is characterized as a population distribution in the form of one mass disgorged along transportation routes from a single center. This metropolitan mold is intrusive, mechanized, artificial and cacophonous. Metropolitan flow, now generally termed urban sprawl, is described as "a shapeless widening deluge of headless suburban massings which know no bounds or social structure."⁴ The metropolitan invasion is viewed as a recent development, having evolved suddenly within a generation from the beginning of the 20th century.

In contrast, the indigenous mold is characterized as innate, inherent, and intrinsic. The indigenous mold or environment consists of the primeval, the rural or communal, and the urban or cosmopolitan environments. The primeval vides the contact of man and nature. The rural, in the form of the small town or rural village, provides the generalized contact of man and man. The urban environment provides the specialized contacts of man and man.

For MacKaye, as for Thoreau, Matthes, and Muir, the primeval environment is the basic component of the indigenous environment and the foundation for man's spiritual development. Thus "the unmodified environment, apparently, approaches closest to the common mind of all humanity . . ."⁵ And, "there seems to be within the primeval that measured cadence between expectation and fulfillment which goes to the bottom of all harmony."⁶ Despite this emphasis on the primacy of "the open" life, MacKaye notes the importance of the varied stimuli available in a cosmopolitan (urban) setting, *e.g.*, the arts, sciences, and different types of individuals.

Regional planning, as MacKaye sees it, should be focused on guiding population flow into some form of the indigenous mold and away from the metropolitan mold. This involves controlling the metropolitan flow, planning the distribution of population, and developing the indigenous natural environment.

To control the metropolitan flow and develop the potential of the indigenous environment, MacKaye suggests two tools. The first is to establish barriers to the metropolitan flow by utilizing natural topography—mountains, ridges, rivers, and swamp lands. These barriers would be maintained in their primeval

3. P. 147.

4. P. 66.

5. Pp. 138-39.

6. P. 140.

state to the extent possible, given the existing development. The second tool is to distribute population in discontinuous villages and small cities within each region. The grouping of the villages and cities would equal a regional city and provide the cosmopolitan urban environment, yet with no predominance by any one city. Such a grouping would provide all three elements of the indigenous environment—the primeval, the rural or communal, and the urban or cosmopolitan. MacKaye states that this population distribution is feasible, because the development of electric power transmission and motor transport enables the job to go to the village dweller and the village dweller to go to the job.

Between and among the cities within each region, belts of travel or “open ways” would be provided. Straddling the open ways would be controlled or zoned areas in which those uses non-essential to the traveler would be virtually eliminated. An occasional dwelling or farm would be permitted, but all structures logically in towns—offices, factories, schools, etc., would not be permitted. This procedure precludes the development of “continuous tunnels of structures” along what are supposed to be arteries of travel, as is the all too common situation at the present.

This regional development in the indigenous mold would provide ready access to the primeval environment for all individuals. This is important, for MacKaye assumes that there is a “latent if not evident desire, within a large body of the people, for experiencing the opposite mode of life from that provided by the channels of metropolitan civilization.”⁷

While one may be in sympathy, as I am, with MacKaye’s objectives, with his condemnation of the mechanical and material values of present civilization, and with his stress on the importance of the natural environment and the need to provide ready access to the primeval, these expressions of philosophy and value judgments are of little help in indicating how such objectives might be achieved. Many of the major problems of regional planning are not mentioned. For example, what kind of institutional structures or administrative agencies should do regional planning within the context of our federal-state-local governments? Through what mechanisms can the attitudes of different groups in the society with respect to land use be expressed? In a democratic society should the planners be the ones to set the goals or objectives? On the basis of what criteria are investment decisions to be made for allocating resources to land use planning and development over time? To what extent is the regional mold defined by MacKaye relevant or possible, considering economies of scale and agglomeration economies in modern industry? How are the values of present day American society to be changed toward support of the objectives enunciated by MacKaye, given the obvious fact that the vast majority does not appear at all bothered by the proliferation of concrete and asphalt roadways, hamburger stands, neon signs, and billboards?

7. P. 180.

I wonder also about the existence of the "latent desire" of people for experiencing the primeval environment. One has only to spend a short time at a place such as Bear Mountain State Park in New York to realize that most of the people there are, or have been conditioned to be, interested only in moving the local Brooklyn environment to a greener setting for a few days or a few weeks.

Nevertheless, MacKaye very effectively posed, in 1928, the choice that is still before us, although, with the spread of metropolitan development since that time, we now have far less room in which to maneuver. That choice is: do we wish to guide the development of our environment consciously and rationally toward the goal of developing individuals rather than producing highways and automobiles per se, or do we wish to opt for uncontrolled land use development because of the value judgement that the "right" of the individual to choose the location and the architecture of his hot dog stand is all important and should be preserved at all costs? If we choose to plan land use in order to preserve the natural environment, at least in a few places, and to provide a more orderly and less chaotic urban environment for living, then MacKaye still leaves us with unanswered questions about the planning processes, organizational mechanisms, and financing necessary for such planning.

With respect to *The Townless Highway*, it is interesting to observe that MacKaye proposed in 1930 a road system for the United States with characteristics essentially the same as those of the Interstate Highway System now under development. Unlike many highway engineers, however, he proposed that highway planning should be but an integral part of national planning for transportation and population migration. Such planning would include the transportation of people, commodities, power, light, and messages by all modes and for all purposes. The objective of transportation planning, as with his regional planning, would be the guiding of population "into appropriate communities and settings for furthering the cultural growth, and not merely the industrial expansion, of American civilization."⁸ Comprehensive transportation planning in the United States is needed now much more than three decades ago. The intervening period has seen the compounding of the problem because of the evolution of a multiplicity of agencies at various governmental levels with a splintering of responsibilities in the field of transportation.

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8. P. 235.

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