

TOWN·PLANNING AND HOUSING·

*Supplement· to ·
The·Architectural·Review*

THE EUSTON ROAD

BY PAUL WATERHOUSE



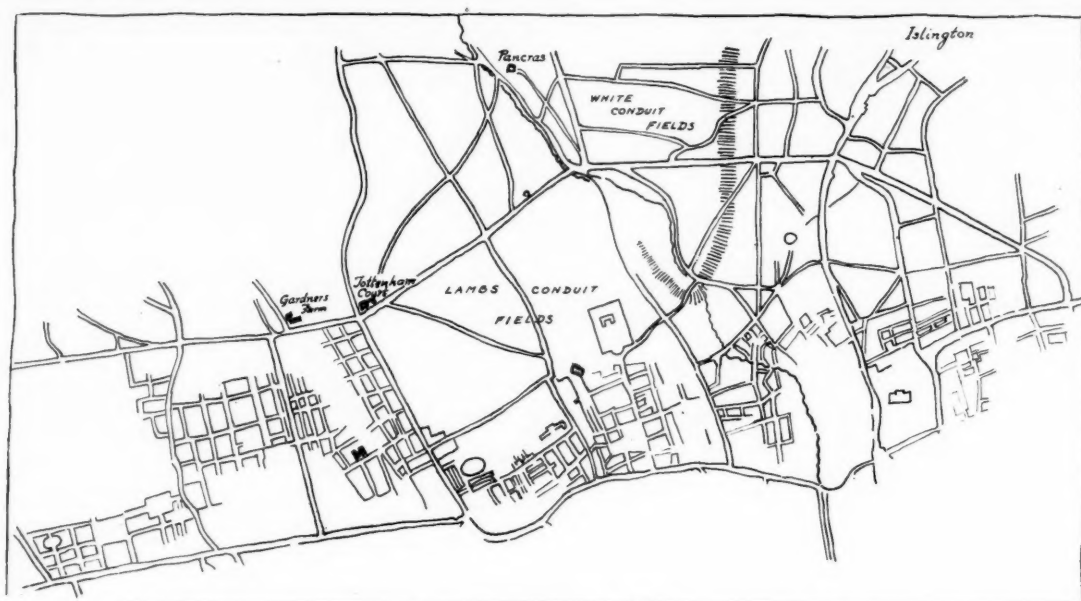
HE Euston Road may, I think, be said to rank with some historic importance as an achievement in town planning. The modern questions that encircle its present existence are important indeed, but more important and more remarkable were the considerations that gave it birth, and the spirit in which it was created.

To begin with, it is in London our principal example of an expedient to overcome the well-known difficulty which may be called the radiation problem. All large towns are, as we are wont to call them, "centres"—that is, they are literally points to which the surrounding district converges. All roads, we are told, lead to Rome; it is equally true that they all lead away from it; and as they lead away from Rome, so they also lead in a less but proportionate degree away from one another.

But it is a law of cities that the primary need of reaching the centre becomes in course of time supplemented by the need of getting from one outer point to another. One simple reason for this is that, whereas primitive cities can subsist on a needle-point centre, so to speak—a market-place, for example, which contains besides its market its judgment hall and its church—more advanced towns cannot do so. A measure of decentralisation or of multicentralisation supervenes. In other words, to put it precisely, but

still not in the most modern terms, Paddington and Islington find that they want not only to get to the Mansion House, but even at times to get to one another. They wake up, however, to find that though each of them lives on an excellent radius road, there is no circumferential track to take their inhabitants from one place to the other. And this example of Paddington and Islington is the actual instance which historically occurred. In the early part of the eighteenth century the Paddington man who would drive to Islington was, I suppose, practically obliged to travel down the Harrow and Edgware Roads to Tyburn, and after a tortuous course through the thick of London to emerge northward again by St. John's Road from Clerkenwell. But in 1756 the good sense of our ancestors culminated in an Act of Parliament which authorised the "New Road," a name that clung to it down to the memory of our own generation. For many long years that road was in open country, or at least ran through land more rural than Hampstead Heath. Before me is a map of 1783. In it Portland Place and its surrounding streets already have their being; so have the streets west of Tottenham Court Road, though they do not yet join the Portland Place group. But the new road itself is almost entirely along open ground. The turnpike at the junction with High Street, Marylebone, must have been almost the first house seen on its eastward course. Portland Place faltered into green chaos before it could reach the road. Portland Road

THE EUSTON ROAD



SKETCH PLAN OF "THE NEW ROAD"
From Sayer and Brewster's Map, 1783

(now Great Portland Street) was the next turning on the right, and near it was the Green Man Inn, whose title in those days recalled with more justice than now a wild man of the woods. To the left, isolated in pastures by a road which is nearly identical with Osnaburgh Street, stood Gardners Farm, and beyond, barely touched by Fitzroy Street—which was still in the making—the road headed for Tottenham Court, a cluster of buildings at the junction of the Hampstead cross-road. Opposite Tottenham Court stood the Adam and Eve Tavern, familiar to us in Hogarth's picture of the March of the Guards to Finchley. Then began a more rural, and one imagines a still more attractive, region. London seemed almost left behind, for far away on the right stretched the expanse of Lamb's Conduit Fields, their green acreage only violated by the Foundling Hospital. The "Duke of Bedford's new road," some day to be Southampton Row and Woburn Place, came in on the right to join on the left an older field track, and at last where King's Cross Station now stands came Battle Bridge, spanning the River Fleet and marking the spot of Boadicea's defeat. Thence began the ascent of that pleasant hill which is now covered by the buildings of Pentonville. The road in those days lay through the open grass lands known as White Conduit Fields. White Conduit House lay north of the road, on the outskirts of Islington, but the Fields extended southward almost to the angle of Gray's Inn. At the corner which we know as "The Angel," houses were of course encountered, but from there the track citywards became again rural, running as it did through the open expanse of

Finsbury Fields. Shepherdess Walk (now a mean street of meaner Hoxton) must even in those comparatively recent days have had some semblance of significance in its name.

Such was the road in the latter days of the eighteenth century; a country route from the edge of Paddington to the end of Old Street, a by-pass from a western hamlet to the verge of the city, and incidentally as fine a scheme of "town planning" with an eye to future needs and future developments as anything we Londoners have conceived and carried out in later days.

And what of its history as a road? From the first the road started with a fine purpose not only as to its direction, but also as to its width and its frontage. This was to be no mean and narrow or irregular passage, but a street or boulevard with a roadway of 40 ft. There were to be pavements 10 ft. wide on each side, and the houses were to stand back no less than 40 ft.¹ from the pavement, having the intervening space filled with private gardens and real forest trees. Such was the idea. Such in the early days of the nineteenth century was the fact. The houses, it is true, were of no great nobility. They were modest and simple residences of humble stature and of unassuming elevation. But in course of time—in fact, by the middle of the century, or very shortly afterwards—commercial rivalry on the part of those who had turned the residential property into business premises led to the conversion here and there of gardens into shops. A man, while continuing to

¹ The garden width varies from 40 ft. to various smaller dimensions. The Act seems to imply that the total extent of garden and pavement combined was to be 50 ft.

live in his house proper, would build a shanty, or even a substantial shop, on his garden plot and connect it with his house by a corridor, or by intervening work-rooms. Little by little this encroachment (originally a private sacrifice of amenity) led on to the assumption that the building frontages of the street were on a line with the garden walls, rather than in a line with the original houses, and therefore became a public loss, not merely a private sacrifice.

I offer here some photographs. One represents a portion of the road which still adheres to and fulfils the intentions of the original planners.² The gardens, originally no doubt beautiful more by intention than in fact, now enjoy the dignity of growth. The trees are no striplings, but full-grown giants giving to this road a nobility which no one would expect from its rather insignificant place on the map of London. Sir Gilbert Scott must have been at least twice in conflict with his own conscience and that of the then custodians of the law of frontage. When he built St. Matthew's Church in City Road he conformed strictly to the old line of house-face, and lay back behind his garden after the precedent of St. Pancras Church and the Pentonville Chapel, whose rural surroundings grace the roadside of

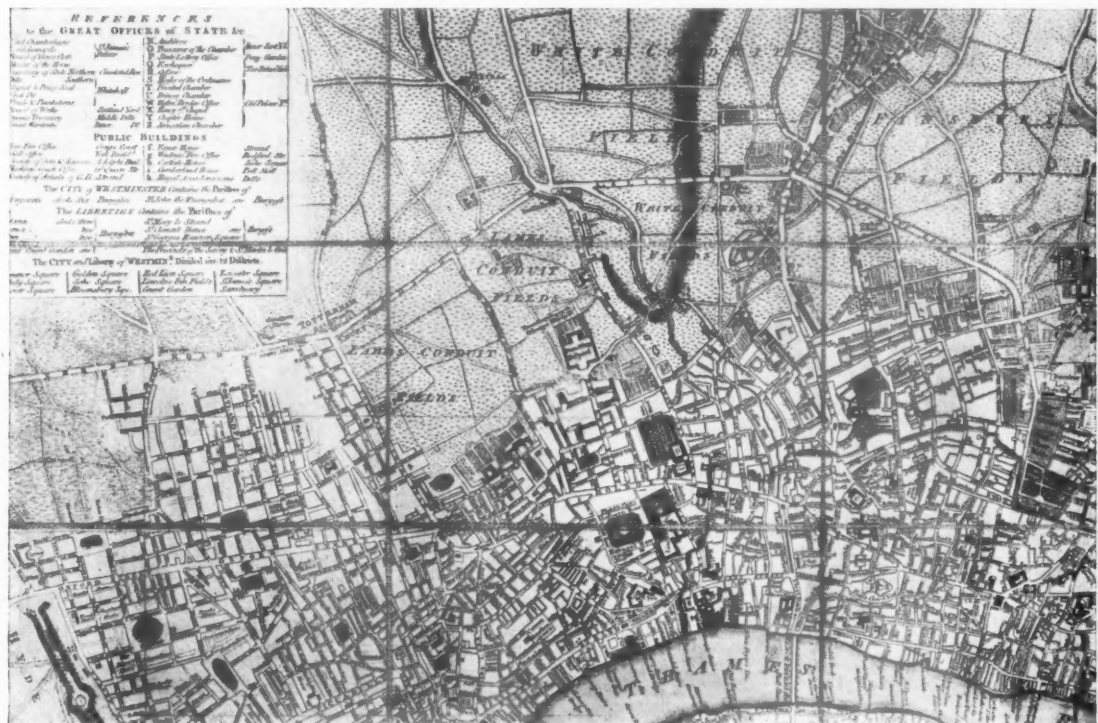
the steep climb to the "Angel." Here conscience (or authority) won. But at St. Pancras Station compromise reigned. Possibly at the time when the design of the hotel was under promotion there existed already at the west end of Scott's frontage some encroachment, like that at the end of Ossulston Street, which seemed to justify the frontage authorities in allowing the west end of the hotel to advance to the very roadway. In any case the deed was done, and we now see that though the main front of the hotel is approximately in consent with the old house-line, the entrance to the hotel itself is advanced. Incidentally it may be noticed that owing to the sharp rise of the carriage-way within the old garden area the boundary wall is, at its higher part, no mere fence, but a retaining wall high enough to enclose shops of full height.

Other photographs show shops illustrating the nature of the earlier encroachments and also the more formidable solidity into which such small beginnings only too rapidly developed.³

It must not be supposed that the continued outrages on the frontage were altogether disregarded by law or ignored by local authorities. The original Act of 1756 distinctly guards against encroachments: "No building," it says, "shall be erected on any new foundation by any proprietor or occupier . . . within 50 ft. of the said road . . . and if any such building shall hereafter be

² This photograph is taken not in the Euston Road proper, but in the City Road, between the "Angel" and Hoxton. This bit of road, though not controlled by the Act of 1756, was formed at or about the same time, and at present is the best representative of the original intentions of the "New Road."

³ These photographs are necessarily ugly. I apologise for allowing such scenes to disfigure these pages.



PORTION OF 1783 MAP, SHOWING THE COURSE OF "THE NEW ROAD"

THE EUSTON ROAD



LONDON, EDINBURGH, AND GLASGOW ASSURANCE BUILDING, ON THE WEST SIDE OF EUSTON SQUARE



MIDLAND STATION HOTEL, ST. PANCRAS SHOWING ENCROACHMENT ON EUSTON ROAD

erected the same shall be deemed a common nuisance." That in 1827 the restrictive covenants were no dead letter is proved by the fact that in that year a special Act was passed to remove doubts as to the legality of the erection of the portico of Marylebone Church, which had encroached within the 50 ft. limit. Moreover, successive Acts were passed from time to time which had reference to these restrictions and to their enforcement, including one (in 1830) in which better provision was made for the removal of such buildings as were declared to be "common nuisances" by the original Act. The power of removal was then vested in the parish authorities. It was subsequently given (1855) to the Metropolitan Board of Works, who, strange to say, had, besides the obligation to remove these common nuisances, a power to consent to similar excesses! Thus it came about that the laxity of the parishes up to 1855, and the complaisance of the Metropolitan Board of Works since that date, led to the frontage outrages which we are now deploring. The whole history and the whole position were adequately summed up in a Report of the Building Act Committee of the London County Council in 1904. "The aspect," says that report, "of certain parts of the Marylebone, Euston, and Pentonville roads has been spoilt, but there are many parts where no encroachment has taken place, and in our opinion every effort should be made to preserve the open space that is still left in these thoroughfares." This is excellent reading, and the report went on to point out that so many of these encroachments were either illegal or precarious in their legality that they could be attached by the Council with great hope of success, thereby making possible a swift and economical widening of the roadway. The conclusion of this report was a recommendation (which the Council happily adopted) confirming the refusal of an application to advance Nos. 45 to 113 beyond the original frontage.

The Architectural Review

THE PROBLEM OF THE PRESENT

These historical steps bring us at last to the problem of the present, which is of course the problem of the future. What are our proposals as controllers of London for the future of this roadway, once seemly, if not noble, in its intentions, and even now dignified in parts by the fulfilment of these intentions?

It is noted with great satisfaction that many of the important modern buildings which have sprung up in this road during our own lifetime have been forced or induced by the controlling powers to keep themselves within original bounds. It is true that the late Mr. Brydon's Hospital for Women was not wholly in conformity with the rule of the road. It has a forecourt, but still not of the required dimensions. The main front of the building commits an advance on the line of conformity. The County Council, to whom we look chiefly for a rigorous defence of the position, have set an excellent example themselves in the attractive fire station at the angle of Euston Square, and the insurance companies who are beginning to look upon this thoroughfare as a



VIEW IN THE CITY ROAD BETWEEN "THE ANGEL" AND HOXTON

local habitation have likewise, either under compulsion or inducement, kept to the ranks with excellent integrity. I allude of course especially to the Hearts of Oak building and to Professor Pite's striking essay in the language of Greece.

I wish we could be sure that for the future the frontages of this road would be inviolable. If they are not, how can we ever hope for continuity of intention in the custodians of London streets? How could any town-planning project have been better guarded? The road starts life under the protection of an Act of Parliament—the ultimate rock of British solidity. The Act is from time to time confirmed by other Acts, and the custodians of the thoroughfare are successively charged with the duty of preserving its unobstructed line. No stronger defence could possibly have been devised. As we know, these safeguards failed, and we may, if we will, attribute the failures during the first century of the road's existence to the apathy of

—a splendid victory—but they gave way to the chapel opposite.

Twice in 1904 the Skinners' Company made application to encroach along the frontage of Nos. 45-113, opposite St. Pancras Station, and twice they were refused. This is the case alluded to above, which led to the very interesting retrospective report of the Building Act Committee. I wish we could say that this attitude had not been subsequently compromised.

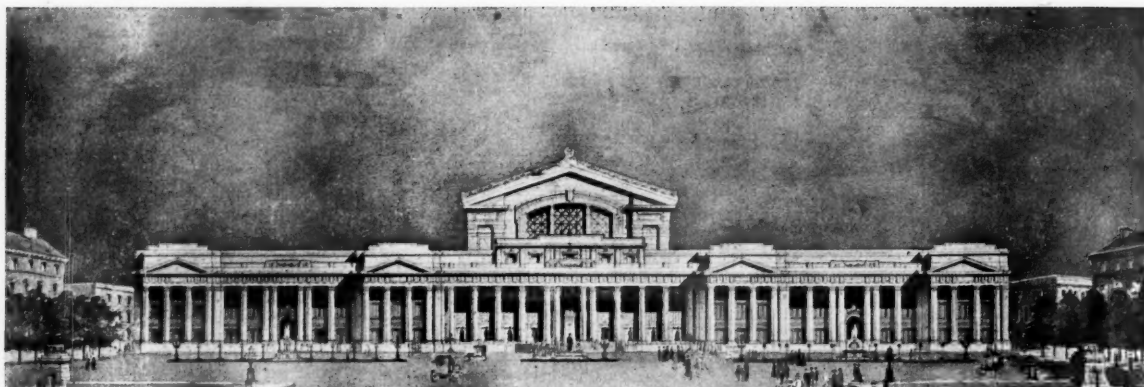
It has, of course, to be realised that the crux of the modern problem is to some people a matter of traffic rather than of aesthetics or even of hygiene. The road which our great-grandfathers devised as an east-and-west thoroughfare has more than justified its usefulness. It harbours three great termini for those railways of which our forefathers had not so much as dreamed, and it is the highway between two others. What wonder, then, that it is thronged with wheeled traffic to so great



TWO VIEWS OF BUILDINGS ON THE EUSTON ROAD, ILLUSTRATING THE ADVANCE ON THE FORECOURTS

the age. We may say, if we like, that the first half of the nineteenth century was not alive to town-planning necessities, and could hardly be expected to live up to so quixotic an ideal as that of 1756. It is not a very sound excuse; but, admitting it, we should certainly go on to say that under our present rule, that of the London County Council, all would be well. The Council, all honour to them, instructed their Building Act Committee to report on the question of these encroachments, and while admitting inability to redress the evils sanctioned and committed by the late Metropolitan Board of Works, recorded and adopted a resolution of their committee "that it will not in future authorise any similar encroachments on these roads." But fourteen years later the Council twice authorised "common nuisances" in the very narrowest part of the road. I refer to two buildings on the south side between Great Portland Street and Tottenham Court Road. It is true that they twice and finally rebuffed the owners of 250-268 Marylebone Road

an extent that when a few years ago central lamp standards were placed along the narrowest portion of its length, that portion became almost a scene of perpetual deadlock. In fact, the existence along a large part of this road of gardens—or of the forecourts which are their successors—has prompted the promoters of street improvement schemes to look upon this whole thoroughfare as providing an exceptional opportunity for the creation at a moderate outlay of an increased road width, and I suppose that we can hardly deny the reasonableness of any attempt to provide by such simple means for the solution of one of our greatest modern problems. Indeed, no one who is sincerely interested in securing the diminution of the London traffic difficulty can fail to recognise the importance of this opportunity; but still—and this is the main point of this article—I cannot help pleading for the retention of a large measure of that almost rural amenity which was the charm of the road's original intention. No doubt there are places in the course of its journey



SCHEME FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION OF EUSTON STATION: ELEVATION TO EUSTON ROAD
RICHARDSON AND GILL, ARCHITECTS

where, owing to lack of vigilance or of proper powers in the recent past, the encroachments have been so great that it will be a tough battle to win back even enough to provide the necessary increase of road space; but where the original conditions in some degree prevail it is to be hoped that consideration will be given to the possibility of retaining on each side of the widened roadway a trace of the original verdure.⁴

If the houses are all to become bit by bit shops, or at least commercial rather than domestic houses, it will no doubt be considered undesirable that they should be divorced from the passing public by gardens or forecourts. But this is a difficulty easily overcome. The gardens are still in places about forty feet, measured from house to pavement. Of this let 14 ft. be given up to increase of roadway (thus making a road altogether 68 ft. from kerb to kerb); of the remainder 12 ft. might be formed into a public footway adjoining the houses, and the remaining 14 ft., even if paved, might still give space for the growth of a row of trees, some of which might be the identical and graceful tenants of the present garden plots. I am aware that these liberal figures do not prevail all along the road, but even in narrower parts the principle is not inapplicable.

What is the moral of it all? A magnificent scheme launched with incredible forethought and the strongest possible safeguards has in the course of one hundred and fifty years struggled along with many buffetings, not into a generation of unsympathetic aliens, but into an epoch which is alive with the spirit that ruled its original promoters. And what does it find? A welcome, I think; at least a hope. Certainly there are many men among the county councillors who are alive to the fact that it is of no use to talk of large schemes of London improvement if we are unable to keep and cherish the work of our predecessors. But

⁴ I find that this idea was anticipated in a report (1904) by Lord Meath, as Chairman of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association.

there are others who, I suppose, simply fail to recognise in this much-maimed and disfigured roadway any trace of its original nobility; there are others (probably few) who are indifferent; and others again who may let the traffic question—the mere widening of the roadway—overrule those considerations of beauty and health which are at least as important as locomotion.

In any case let us learn this lesson: The success of a town improvement lies not merely with the energy and forethought of its promoters, but still more with the vigilance of its custodians. Our present age, with its writings and speeches on town planning, cannot afford to keep the Euston, Marylebone, and Pentonville roads in their present mutilated condition, saying to all the world "This is what London has done in four generations to one of its finest schemes." No; let us in this year of Conference shake hands in spirit with those Georgian gentlemen who made so brave a show with their street of gardens through White Conduit Fields. And let us act.

EUSTON STATION

THE accompanying illustrations show a scheme by which the Euston terminal becomes of some architectural importance in the arrangement of Euston Square. The frontage is brought out nearer the Euston Road, and the general scheme of planning and grouping is entirely remodelled. The railway hotels and the smaller hotels are placed on sites at the east and west sides of the square. The existing grass plots and trees are cleared, and a formal arrangement is substituted. The authors, Messrs. Richardson and Gill, have given careful attention to the re-arrangement of the railway tracks, and propose that those now given to traffic be removed from the central station to a site near the Hampstead Road. Connection by electric traction could be formed by means of an incline between the London and North-Western main line and the underground line in the Euston Road, thus creating an additional link between the northern and southern railway systems.

A RETROSPECT OF THE TOWN PLANNING CONFERENCE



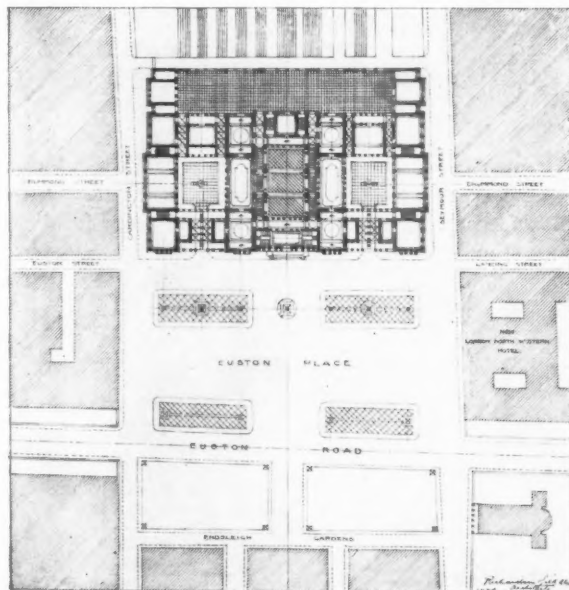
SO marked was the success of the Town Planning Conference held in London in October, that it calls for some mature reflections in the light of a retrospect. Certainly it was a distinct step forward in our social education, affording a very fitting complement to the Town Planning Act, and it cannot fail to have produced a spirit of enlightenment, encouragement, and enthusiasm amongst the large number of those who attended the meetings.

The range of subjects covered by the Conference included nearly every aspect of the subject. It was considered in the abstract and in the concrete, from the historic, classical, academic, aesthetic, legal, imaginative, social, and horticultural points of view. Two aspects, however, were somewhat scantily treated: that of the landowner and that of the local authority. An important fact which has been somewhat overlooked is that the legislature has placed the work of town planning primarily in the hands of our local authorities and of the landowners, upon whose initiative and judgment the working of the Act mainly depends; and although the position of these important agents was lucidly explained by Mr. Chaloner Dowdall in a paper on the legal aspect of town planning, it is perhaps disappointing that no British representative was forthcoming to speak on behalf of the parties in question. I say "British" because the point of view of the local

authority in Sweden was very ably described and explained by Herr Lilienborg, the municipal architect of Gothenburg, in a paper which showed the earnest manner in which Swedish authorities are dealing with the subject. Mr. Quennell laid particular stress on the relation between local authorities and landowners, but the relation between these bodies and the general public, including architects, was somewhat neglected. After all, important and vital as may be the position and the influence of the architect in relation to town planning—or rather, as Professor Eberstadt would put it, "town building"—he has no actual *locus standi* under the Act, and does not enter professionally upon the scene until invited to do so, so that his influence in the preparation of a scheme must depend somewhat on the attitude and policy of the local authority.

In order to produce a relationship between local authorities and architects which would be compatible with the successful co-operation between these bodies, the frequently strained relationship produced by a tendency to an autocratic exercise of legal functions on the one side, and a natural impatience on the other, will have to be got rid of, and a spirit of compromise and co-operation cultivated. The architect's primary work, as it seems, is to educate and to cherish local and public interest in the architectural possibilities of town planning. The public are apt to be apathetic towards anything that does not contribute to personal convenience and advantage, and anything unintelligible, startling, or expensive is in danger of alienating public sympathy. We cannot afford failures, nor can we ignore the material aspect. The ratepayers are not clamouring for monumental municipal magnificence, but they are susceptible to common sense and the common good.

Professor Reilly's plea for greater sincerity and the suppression of rampant individualism is one that we may well take to heart; and though the substitution of an "organised democracy" for the "benevolent despotism of the great landlords" is not a revolution that the Town Planning Act is likely to effect, the first step towards an "organised democracy" must be through co-operation between local authorities, landowners, and the public. In this connection we may usefully bear in mind the words of Mr. Burnham, who, referring to the power of the democracy in the United States, observed that "when the inhabitants perceive the value to the community of a fine street plan to bring convenience and beauty into



PLAN OF SCHEME FOR THE
RECONSTRUCTION OF EUSTON STATION

A RETROSPECT OF THE TOWN PLANNING CONFERENCE

the heart of a city, they can carry it out if they desire to do so." A British democracy of the twentieth century is not likely to insist on fine streets, but the lesson from the United States seems to be that the people are a strong force in town planning, and this applies largely to Great Britain. Town planning, therefore, must be made popular. Jealousies must be cleared away, individual and personal prejudices sunk, and public interest excited.

Mr. Quennell also alluded to this in his common-sense paper, saying that "much depends on the spirit in which the interested parties are prepared to lend their support to the local authorities." Mr. Quennell might reasonably have gone still further and have said that without this spirit town planning must inevitably fail.

That the problem of London should form an important item in the programme is a natural corollary to any town-planning conference in England. Mr. Crow's suggestion of an *ad hoc* authority for the metropolis is deserving of notice, though such an authority would be liable to overlap or to come into conflict with the London County Council and the Road Board. Certain it is, however, that some kind of broad scheme for dealing with outer London as a whole must be taken in hand if the existing chaotic development is to be arrested, and this brings us to the scheme for suburban development in the form of a wide radial road with a ten-mile radius round London—a suggestion originally put forward by Mr. David Barclay Niven in the columns of *THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW* and described at the Conference in a paper by Mr. Pepler. The idea, which will bear full investigation, is merely the application of a principle that has been thoroughly tried and adopted in several large Continental towns on a scale proportionate to the size of London. Mr. Riley, than whom no one is better qualified to speak on this subject, pointed out that the fundamental defect in London has been the absence of any practical attempt to control extension on a systematic plan; hence the appalling expenditure on street improvements.

The negative lessons of the Conference are to be drawn mainly from the paper of Professor Eberstadt, who, with excellent effect, struck a note of warning against the tendency to copy

other people's mistakes rather than to benefit by them; this having reference to the attractive street construction of Berlin and other German towns, where only at great social sacrifices fine though somewhat superficial street effects have been obtained. On the other hand, Mr. Unwin, in a paper which for practical value and common-sense was perhaps the most valuable contribution to the Conference, advocated the construction of roads of comparatively narrow width for particularly limited circumstances and the grouping of our buildings with open areas between them. This is an admirable suggestion so long as it does not create any sort of social classification. But the design of a town plan must depend entirely on local conditions, and no hard-and-fast rules can be set down for general application. Boulevard streets and gardens that might be conspicuously suitable in residential towns such as Harrogate, Cheltenham, or Oxford might be absolutely inappropriate in the towns round Manchester, in Leeds, or in Newcastle, where not only are the social conditions quite different, but where all vegetation is blighted by a chemical process peculiar to such towns, and where even the best-intentioned recreation ground is but a depressing waste.

The Conference has done work of great value in producing in small compass a scheme of education in town planning, and the success of the undertaking will surely encourage the Royal Institute of British Architects to follow it up with all the machinery at its command. Great Britain enters upon the subject fifty years too late, and with a deplorable record behind her. She has before her town-planning problems of a more difficult and complex nature than any other country has ever been called upon to solve. She has, however, the immense advantage not only of the experience of other progressive countries, but of the mistakes of the past, and the epoch which this Conference has marked with such distinction must be entered upon with confidence, enthusiasm, and care. The process of town planning is inevitably a slow one, but it is all the more likely to produce well-considered schemes and to reduce mistakes to a minimum. The key of the whole position in England is co-operation.

B. K.

