

THE WAY AHEAD

We were to speak, to chat,
Involve our several minds on how
To frame a City.
We were asked, judiciously, to talk of beauty
In a town, how the town would change,
Turn supple, rugged, yet acceptable.

There were the four of us,
A Professor, much travelled and artistic,
A Senior Civil Servant who knew the way ahead,
The Town Planner and I; I?
The average man, the man-in-the-street,
Feeling nervous, struggling to free
Practicalities from dreams,
Leaving a small remainder hopefully sensible.

The Professor favoured China-town, not surprisingly.
His thinking was crowded, bred by city living.
The teeming interchange of word and gesture,
The odour of ordinary lives,
Intimacies overdone or underdone,
Privacy come to grief, private grief made public,
Were seen as energies of a proper order,
As breaking the loneliness of man.
It had the right perspective, he said,
In the middle of tourist China-town.
The flats were fine, but parcelled out too neatly.

The Town Planner took a different view.
Intricacies of change were based on principles;
A flat in the sun was to be had by everyone,
A spaciousness, part of the better deal,
Politics, economics, the re-deployment of custom,
Clan and tribe. Impulses of a national kind
Gave common rights. There has been talk of heritage.
There should be change, a reaching for the sky,
Brightening the City's eye, clearing the patches
From the shoulders of her hills,
For regiments of flats.

What could I say? Or think?

A city is the people's heart,
Beautiful, ugly, depending on the way it beats.
A City smiles the way its people smile.
When you spit, that is the city too.
A City is for people, for living,
For walking between shadows of tall buildings
That leave some room, for living.
And though we rush to work, appointments,
To many other ends, there must be time to pause,
Loosen the grip of each working day,
To make amends, to hear the inner self
And keep our spirits solvent.
A City should be the reception we give ourselves,
What we prepare for our posterity.

The City is what we make it,
You and I. We are the City.
For better or for worse.