

Commentary

These case studies show that considerable power, financial and/or political, is required to build total urban designs on any large scale. Although such designs are easier to implement in totalitarian societies, they have been carried out in vastly different legislative, legal and administration systems. The degree of singular control over the property development and design process varies considerably from case study to case study. On one hand there are schemes such as Rockefeller Center, Brasília and Avenue of the Victory of Socialism in which much was designated by a central authority – private in the first case, public in the latter two – without much outside interference. On the other hand Raleigh Park, although the product of one organization, was very much battered by city politics and the conflicting requirements of local community groups. There were two major designs and a number of other proposals for the Raleigh Park development. There were half a dozen for the Barbican.

The quality of the schemes described in the case studies varies considerably. Some of them, such as SUNY, Albany are regarded as ‘powerful architectural statements’ others less so. Many total urban designs are admired for their geometrical boldness. The buildings at Brasília and in Chandigarh are much photographed as abstract sculptures. Such environments, however, are often devoid of the urban elements that support life generously.

Strong geometrical ideas are more appropriate in some types of developments (such as capital complexes) than in others. Powerful symbolic statements are important for they boost our self-esteem. Problems, however, can arise: (1) when the symbolic statement is perceived by people to present a poor image of them, it has negative associations and (2) when art substitutes for life, where geometrical cleverness is the prime design criterion. Both can happen more easily when design power is centralized. The lesson of Pruitt-Igoe that there is often a gulf between what politicians, developers and architects want and what people want is still to be learnt not only in the United States but elsewhere (Michelson, 1968). The French experience, for instance, is illuminating.

Val-Fourré, a *banlieue*, the largest of 1100 such housing estates in France, houses well over 30,000 people (28,000 officially) in 1960s and 1970s tower blocks. Located 85 kilometres (about 50 miles) from Paris, its inhabitants in 2004 were drawn from almost 30 different ethnic groups, mainly recent immigrants. Such estates may work well in China for middle-income people and are being built at varying sizes but they do not do well for socially and psychologically dislocated people with many children who have nothing to do. Val-Fourré is called a *banlieue sensible* (sink estate or trouble spot) or pejoratively a *cité* or HLM (cheap rent homes). The 23 de enero estate in Caracas, Venezuela (see Figure 3.4) consists of 30 slab blocks and is equally notorious. It is amongst many other similar estates around the world. Philadelphia alone had a dozen such large-scale housing projects. The last of them, the Martin Luther King Jr. Housing, was demolished late in 1999.