Aided housing in a new industrial city
Ciudad Guayana, Venezuela

This is a project for a new industrial city which, characteristically, has already been born and the infant threatens to grow faster than the plans, legislation and organization necessary for its formation.

The city has a beautiful and dramatic site at the confluence of the Orinoco and Caroni rivers in the centre of the Venezuelan Guayana (Guiana), open savannah country surrounded on three sides by rain forests, and about 300 miles from the relatively developed areas around Caracas and Maracaiibo to the north-west. The region is rich in minerals—the summit of Cerro Bolivar alone consists of half a million tons of 66 per cent ore, it has unlimited hydro-electric and hydro-carbon resources and is easily accessible for heavy road and ocean-going sea transport. In 1954, two years after moving in men and equipment, Orinoco Mining Co., a US steel subsidiary, was exporting five million tons of ore annually and by 1962 there was a local population of some 50,000 in the already established town of San Félix, in the 'open' company-town of Puerto Ordaz, and in the various squatter settlements.

Ciudad Guayana is one of Venezuela's main footholds by which it can hoist itself out of the economic pause currently affecting the whole of Latin America. Fortunately for all concerned, the Corporación Venezolana de Guayana was created in 1960, and in collaboration with the Joint Center for Urban Studies of MIT and Harvard University, is actively engaged on the economic and physical planning of the region as a whole, together with the development of detailed plans and action programmes for Ciudad Guayana itself.

This project is fascinating for anyone concerned with industrial and urban development, especially in under-developed areas, but, as Charles Alckrens has said: 'The planning of Ciudad Guayana cannot be compared to the spawning of England's new towns, where industrial settlement was controlled throughout the country, investment was seasoned and property rights acknowledged both in tradition and practice. Neither the city's development can be compared to the United States, where investment in building is predominantly private, squattting almost non-existent, financial mechanisms matured and ample funds for building available at reasonable rates.'

Norman Williams, Director of the Project, wryly describes the planners' surprise on their arrival: 'At the start of the project, we Northamericans were full of high hopes—but, as things turned out, rather naive ones. Our attention was concentrated on how to develop a shining brand-new city, expressing throughout the best that modern city planning has to offer . . . rarely have we encountered such high hopes dissolved so rapidly on contact with reality. For it did not take many hours on the job to make it apparent that the real problem was quite different; and our Venezuelan colleagues are still kidding us about the surprised looks on our faces when we discovered this . . .'

Far from being virgin territory, the city contains some 50,000 people living in a series of scattered settlements, highly disorganized both physically and socially—with a high rate of unemployment and with large numbers of people in wretched housing, mostly lacking in the full range of urban services—low schools, few sewers, not even water. This situation called for making immediate decisions, in a real hurry, on all sorts of pending projects providing for immediate human needs . . . thus the processes of planning and implementation have necessarily gone on simultaneously. While perhaps less glamorous, this revised concept of the project was really

continued opposite

The site of Ciudad Guayana lies at the confluence of the Orinoco and Caroni rivers, which bring together natural resources, electric power and water for production and transport: three essentials for the new industrial city. The terrain is mainly flat, breaking into slopes down to the river-banks. These slopes form three distinct groups of districts:

The Orinoco districts, lying northwards over the llanos or great savannah
The Caroni districts, looking southwards towards the mountains of the Guayanes; and
The central district: natural focus of the whole area

Phases of growth
1. The Orinoco route will be developed first, linking the two industrial areas with the new centre and strengthening existing settlements along the river bank
2. The Caroni valley will then be developed, and the Orinoco areas linked directly together, free of the centre
3. All four limbs are completed, and the southern by-pass constructed
all to the good; for our planning work had to come to
terms at once with some of the most important aspects of
the Latin American reality.'

Two housing problems typical of South America face
the planners, architects and administrators of Ciudad
Guayaquil: the 'company-town' problem, potentially
solved by the creation of the city itself, and the squatter
settlements inevitably stimulated by industrial and
urban investments. The former could distort the city's
initial formation, and the latter could wreck it altogether.

From the beginning, fortunately, the Orinoco Mining
Co. was advised by Wiener and Sert, and the Company has
avoided the worst evils of the classic 'camp' or company-
town by throwing Puerto Ordaz open to all and sundry so
that a good deal of the property is now in other hands.

Even so, according to a company representative, only
about 10 per cent of the ordinary workers accept
Puerto Ordaz; the rest preferring the full independence
offered by San Félix or the squatter settlements.

Company housing, it appears, has been unsuccessful
both socially and economically, and the sale of land has
involved the Company, unwillingly and, all too
unprofitably, in real estate operations.

However, Puerto Ordaz is administratively independent
and its integration into the new city should be relatively
simple; the only major problem being the product of
typical legislation and union contracts which, though
aimed at the protection of the ordinary worker, tend to
make him increasingly dependent on the employers by
forcing them to give him a substantial part of his wages
in the form of subsidized housing and other fringe
benefits. In fact, the worker usually prefers to get the
housing subsidy in cash.

Until such companies are enabled, through improved
legislation, to pay their employees directly, and encour-
gaged to pay them enough to be fully independent
socially—that is, their wage be enough for them to save to
build their own house, for example, instead of having to
borrow one from the company, or to live in the shack—
some apparently secondary considerations, such as the
length of the journey to work, are apt to have an
exaggerated importance. In this particular case, local
labour law and union contracts oblige the company to
provide free housing and to make heavy contributions
for transportation. As company directors naturally tend
to judge everything by its impact on direct production
costs, and to overlook the non-computable social factors,
such as the worker's satisfaction with, and sense of
security in his environment, Orinoco's interest in the
location of the residential area does not necessarily coin-
cide with that of the city as a whole, with those of its
industrial development, or with those of its own
employees.

Charles Abrams summarized the squatter settlement
problem with admirable clarity: 'One of the main factors
that will control the city's future pattern will not be what
is put into the blueprint as much as what will be imposed
by 'rancho' (squatter settlement) movements. The
appearance of Caracas with the squatters dominat-
ing its horizon and planned portion of the valley, is an
index to the influence of unguided population move-
ments. That (Ciudad Guayaquil's) population leaped to
50,000 people before the industrial wheels were even
beginning to creak suggests that the population influx
will exceed by far the number of job opportunities that
will be offered. . . . If infusos are anticipated and
planned for, the planning can be substantially preserved.
This calls for a designation of sites on which settlement
will be permitted and those on which it will be pro-
scribed. It calls for firmness with understanding. It
entails a policy of land layout that will permit settlement
according to plan, help with materials where essential,
and even undertake some inspirational building by the
government to influence the character and course of
growth. Rancheros will settle where they can if they are
not told where they may. They will build what they can
afford if they are not helped to build what they should. I am
less worried, however, about what they will build than where
they build it and less concerned about initial standards
than about initial layout. Rancho houses will improve with
time and with better economic conditions if the rancheros
are given a stake. The slum concept and the public housing
tenancy concept of the more developed nations are irrele-
vant in Ciudad Guayaquil.