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The Ladywood Regeneration Framework

*Regeneration framework Urbanism
Cities Great Britain Birmingham*

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Projekt prenove Ladywooda

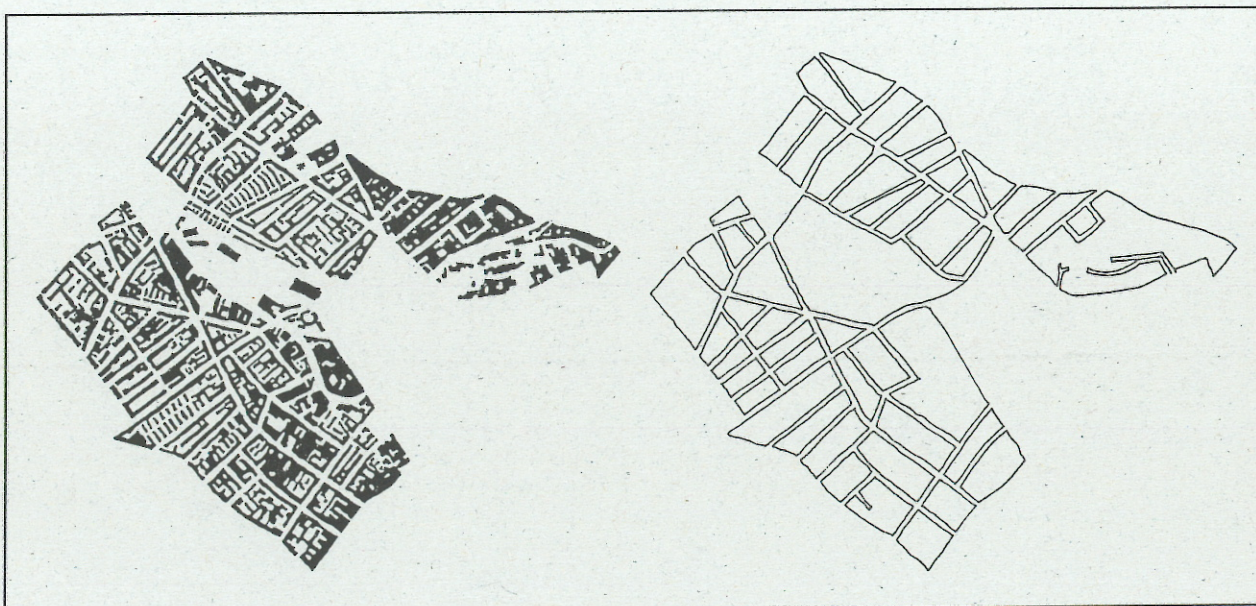
*Prenova Urbanizem Mesta Velika
Britanija Birmingham*

V obdobju 1955-1975 je bil izveden program doktrinarne prenove in ponovnega načrtovanja središč v britanskih mest. Malo je zgodovinskih obdobj ali krajev kjer je bila prenova tako nenadna in kataklizmična kot teh primerih. Tukajšnji prispevek obravnava enega od primerov tega procesa, to je Ladywood v centralnem območju Birminghama.

For two decades, from about 1955 to 1975, the inner areas of Britain's cities were subjected to a programme of doctrinaire replanning and redevelopment. Before redevelopment, these areas were typically composed of a network of streets, filled with densely-packed terraces of small houses, mixed together with industry, rows of shops, corner pubs, schools and churches. This fabric was essentially the product of the boom years of the late 19th century, when industrial cities had grown enormously. These areas were unplanned, and lacking in green open spaces, and much of the housing was unsanitary and deficient in construction. Huge numbers of working-class families lived in these poor conditions, but the environment had some compensating virtues; it was cheap, it was neighbourly, and it was convenient to the city centre and other facilities. It was a hard environment, and perhaps we should not regret its passing too much. But today it seems like a totally departed world.

The doctrine behind the redevelopment was heavily influenced by the ideas of Le Corbusier and his contemporaries, but usually flavoured by an English picturesqueness. It resulted typically in a drastic reduction in residential density (often from about 400 people per hectare to about 250), and in an environment in which the familiar streets had disappeared and been replaced by a mixture of high-, medium- and low-rise housing placed among green public spaces. Through the method of compulsory purchase, the industry had mainly been moved out, and the variety of privately-owned shops and other facilities replaced by council-owned facilities grouped in local centres.

Middle-class residents like teachers and doctors, who may have owned their own houses, were often moved out too, as the compulsory purchase process was indiscriminating, resulting in a uniform, single-class, single-use urban environment.



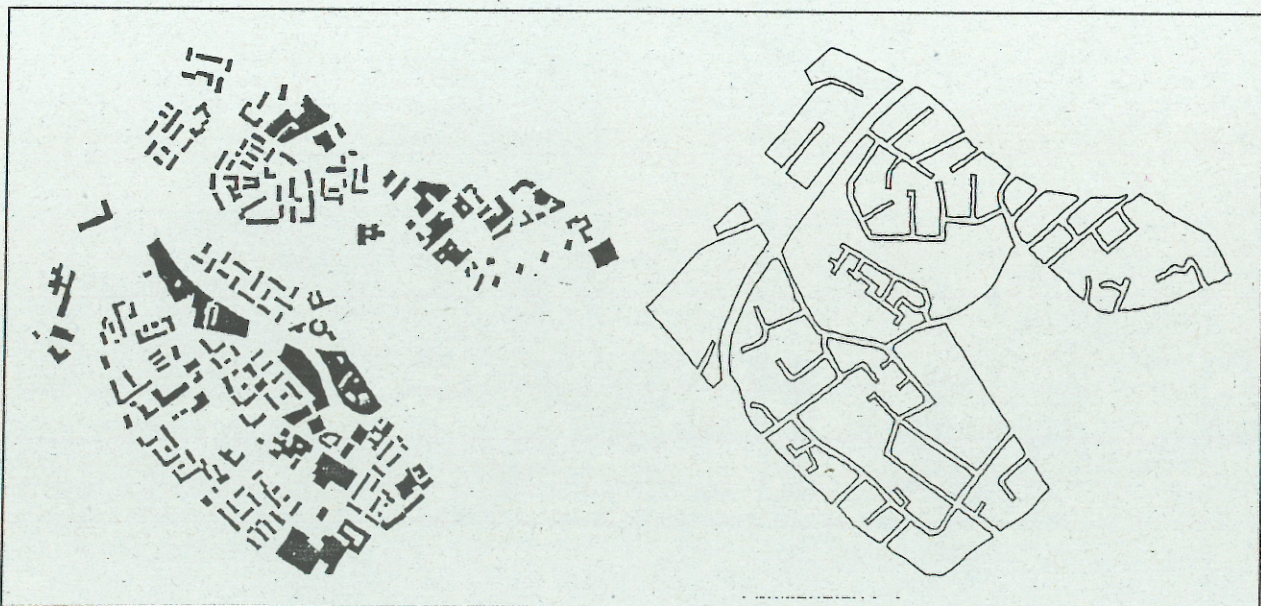
Picture 1: Road network and figure / ground plan before redevelopment

In few historical times or places has development or redevelopment been so sudden and cataclysmic. It was done with the best of intentions on the part of government ministers, local authority councillors, town planners and architects, who believed they were building a new, better post-war society. It was also done with at least the passive support of many of the residents, who believed the propaganda and trusted that the experts knew what they were doing.

But from the advantage of the perspective of the present day, we can see that there were two main deficiencies in this process. Firstly, the new principles of urban design on which the redevelopment was based were untested and mistaken. Secondly, the residents of the redevelopment areas were treated simply as consumers who had no choice; the experts knew what was good for them, and the residents had no say in the way in which their familiar environments were destroyed and replaced. A feature of the 1980s and 90s in British cities is the way in which these redevelopment areas built in the 60s and 70s are being redesigned in an attempt to correct both these major historical mistakes. This article is a description of one example of this process, in a part of inner Birmingham called Ladywood.

Up until the 1950s, Ladywood was the kind of inner area described above. It was a loose grid of streets, pierced by railway lines and canals, with factories and workshops mixed in amongst the housing. About 15,000 people lived there - mostly in slum housing, including many insanitary blocks of pre-by-law back-to-back houses around small courtyards, although there were some terraces of good, sound houses too. With four other similar areas that tightly ringed the city centre, it was declared a Comprehensive Redevelopment Area in the 1950s. Everything except a few factories that bordered the canal was swept away, and a new Ladywood built.

The mistakes that were made when the new Ladywood and similar areas were built are now common knowledge. The street network that connected the whole area was replaced by disconnected superblocks, fragmenting the area into separate estates. Plenty of open green space was provided, but mostly of a featureless, unfriendly kind that is pleasant to look at from the tower blocks, but is not very usable and often positively unsafe. The legible, secure and neighbourly space of the street was replaced by a confusing and unsafe tangle of courtyards and culs-de-sac. The convenient landmarks of corner shops and pubs disappeared altogether, creating a



Picture 2: Road network and figure / ground plan after redevelopment

monotonous and uniform landscape.

In 1989, one of the local councillors representing Ladywood on the City Council told a startled meeting of Ladywood Community Forum, the group representing Ladywood residents, "The planners got it all wrong in the 1950s. We are going to redraw the map of Ladywood." But he proposed that this time the Council did it in partnership with the residents, recognising that nobody knows better what needs fixing in an area than those who live there. The Community Forum wisely realised that if residents were being invited to work alongside the Council, then they needed their own advisers, just as the Council had its own architects and planners. That was where my practice, Axis Design Collective, came in, at the invitation of the residents.

The first thing we did was to get the Forum to draw up a budget of anticipated costs, including our own fees, and submit it to the Council. If

the Council was serious about residents being active participants in the planning process, then it had a responsibility to provide them with the means to do it properly. This was agreed by the Council, and for the past five years we have been working for the residents, paid for with money provided by the Council, putting together what is called the Ladywood Regeneration Framework.

The proposed partnership between the City Council and the residents was a brave and enlightened move by the Council, but it did not really know how to go about it. We made success on our terms certain by making sure that the residents' side captured the initiative in the early months by setting the agenda for the improvements. We did this firstly by using the established technique of Planning for Real to make the "shopping list" of improvements that residents wanted done. Planning for Real is a simple technique which employs a model of the estate at about 1:300 scale, and a large



Picture 3: Street corner in 1960 before redevelopment

selection of cards which contain descriptions of proposed changes. Our initial meeting attracted about 200 people, and the model was littered with hundreds of proposals. From this beginning, and through several other similar meetings, the objectives for the transformation of the estate were defined.

Following the Planning for Real meetings, which dealt with the whole Ladywood area of about 2,500 households, we divided the area into eight smaller sub-areas, and held what we called Housing Design Workshops for the residents of each of them. These made detailed proposals for the improvement of the housing, the redesign of open space, traffic management on the roads to deal with speeding and parking, identifying sites where new housing could be built, and many other things. Priority was to be given to the improvement of the existing housing. There was only one area of housing, of about 200 flats, where residents felt demolition should take place, because of the multiple pro-

blems which that particular area possessed. Elsewhere, despite the deficiencies of the existing housing, improvement was seen as a better alternative to demolition. Residents wanted gradual improvement, not a repetition of the cataclysmic changes of the 50s and 60s, which disrupted the social fabric of Ladywood as well as the physical fabric.

At this time, there was no money to carry out any of the work that residents were proposing. Beginning in 1990, the City Council has made three applications to the Government to borrow money to spend on improving Ladywood housing under the Estate Action programme, each time with a programme of work which has been set by the residents themselves. Each time the application has been successful, and so far Ladywood has been granted #36m from this programme. The housing which it was decided to demolish has been sold by the Council to a housing association, which is demolishing it and replacing it with new houses and flats with money



Picture 4: A Planning for Real session

borrowed from the Housing Corporation. With the restrictions that the Government places on local authorities like Birmingham, this is the only way that new housing can be built. The tenants who have elected to stay will move from being tenants of the City Council to become tenants of the housing association.

In addition, there have been new children's play areas, improvements that we have designed to the local shopping centre, and a new health centre which we have also designed. The one part of the overall plan which has seen little progress is that dealing with roads and traffic. The City Engineer's Department, whose province this is, have been more reluctant than other departments to make Ladywood a priority area, and little traffic management has so far been done.

We have learned a lot in the five years so far of the Ladywood Regeneration Framework. We have learnt that ordinary working-class residents, if they are given the confidence that improvement really will

happen, given the resources with which to plan, and given expert advice to help them make decisions, are very capable of deciding what needs to happen to improve their environment, and how it should be done. When we were holding the initial Housing Design Workshops, we were concerned about how we were going to rank the eight sub-areas in terms of their priority for improvement, and place them in the three planned phases of Estate Action improvement. We assumed that all residents would believe that their area should be top of the list. This was not so - we were surprised that residents could be very objective in their prioritisation, and there was very little disagreement about which sub-areas went into which of the three phases.

There has also been considerable agreement between residents about the content of the improvement schemes. People who live in a particular place have a shared experience of what it is like to live there and of what needs doing to make it better; they are the experts, and it is the job of the professionals to listen



Picture 5: An aerial view of the local centre



Picture 6: Before and After views of a renovated 1959 block of flats in Estate Action Phase One

to what they say and to translate it into a process by which the improvements can be realised. A high priority has been improving security in blocks of flats and maisonettes, with concierges, door-entry systems, and defensible space measures. In addition, better thermal insulation, new windows, and replacing defective flat roofs with pitched roofs have become standard ingredients. The improvements have not only been concerned with technical performance, but have been directed at changing the appearance and image of the buildings, from two-storey houses to twenty-storey tower blocks.

We have learnt not to place too much importance on architectural style, that area where architects normally believe they have the right to impose their own strange ideas. Our clients are naturally conservative when it comes to the appearance of their dwellings – they just want them to look like everyone else's dwellings, and they certainly do not want to be patronised. There was an unpleasant incident in Es-

tate Action Phase One when an executive architect, directing a contract based upon the residents' brief, had balconies painted in loud and varied colours. The residents felt that the architect was amusing himself at their expense, and at considerable cost the balconies were repainted in more sober colours.

We have learnt that, though they can be effective at tackling their own individual agenda of housing, roads, leisure, education and so on, City Council departments are not good at working together to produce a coordinated plan. They suffer from specialisation. Despite the Council's considerable resources of staff and finance, we on the residents' side found that we were often able to move more quickly and think more holistically, unrestricted by departmental boundaries, and therefore maintain the initiative in moving the Framework along. Moreover, because the Council's departments each were responsible for only one subject, and none was responsible for coordinating them all together, we found ourselves often adopting



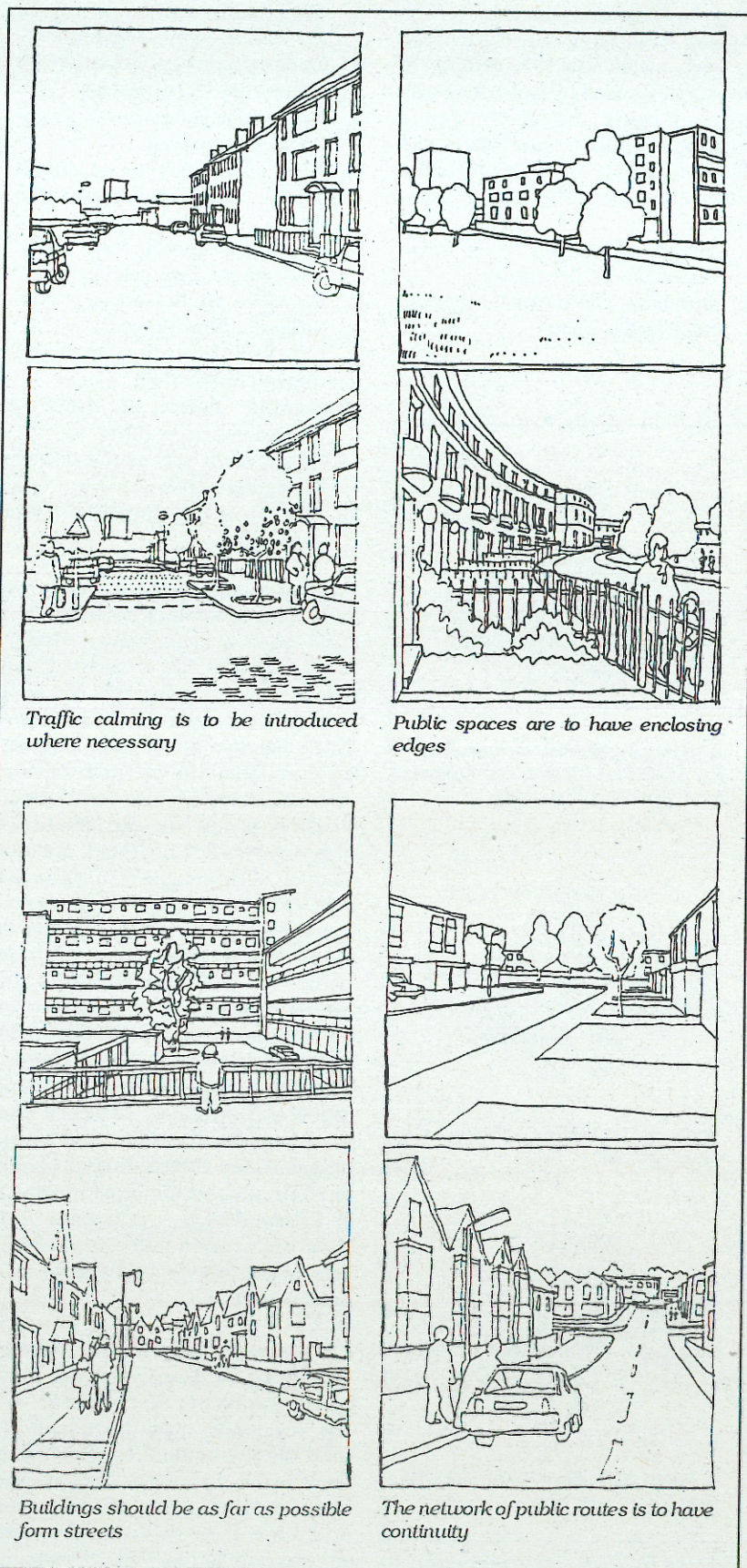
Picture 7: 1959 maisonette blocks about to be demolished in the Housing Association redevelopment

the coordination role ourselves, although this was not a role we were being paid to do.

This coordinating role is of course one of the definitions of what an urban designer does. We soon realised that an urban design perspective was required in the regeneration of Ladywood, and that nobody would do it if we did not. The Forum applied to the City Council for extra funding for us to write the Ladywood Urban Design Study, which we published in 1992. It was necessary for two reasons. Firstly, in order to coordinate the various initiatives which were all being applied in parallel - housing improvement, new housing, redesign of open spaces, play areas, shopping centre improvement, new railway station, plans for a new swimming pool, and so on - to try to make sure that the total environment was more than just the sum of the various parts. Secondly, in order to attempt to shape the new initiatives so that together they could deliberately change the qualities of the urban environment of Ladywood from those which it had been given by the modernist redevelopment of the 50s and 60s.

This second objective was perhaps the more important one, but correspondingly more difficult to achieve. One of the starting points for the analysis was to look back to the pre-redevelopment fabric and identify the positive qualities it possessed which had been lost. These were such qualities as connectivity, legibility, conveniently mixed land uses, and the variety of commercial and social facilities that a high residential density can support. In their place were disconnection and severance, disaggregation, land use zoning, a thinly spread residential density, and a shortage of all kinds of facilities.

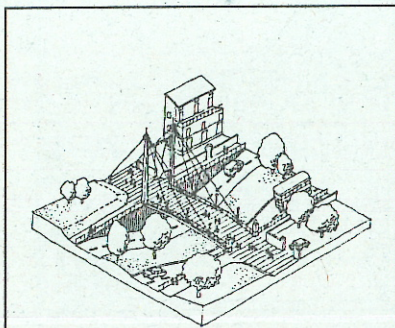
The analysis defined what was wrong with the townscape of Ladywood, and how new developments could contribute to changing it. Part of the advice was contained in a set of twelve rules, many of which summarise a reversal of the principles which were dominant in the 60s.



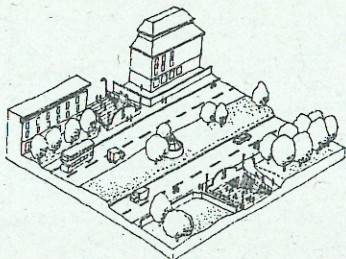
Picture 8: Four pairs of before and after drawings illustrating four of the twelve urban design principles

They concern such matters as the placing of buildings in relationship to each other, the overcoming of severance caused by wide dual-carriageway roads, the relationship of buildings to public open space, and the permeability and legibility of the routes network. The twelve rules are;

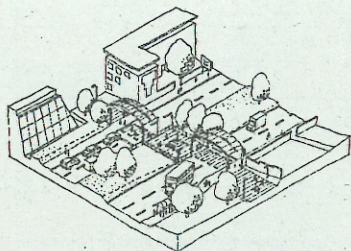
1. Traffic calming is to be introduced where necessary.
2. Buildings should as far as possible form streets.



Lowering the Middleway and allowing pedestrians to cross at ground level separated from traffic



Widening an existing subway into an underpass



A better form of surface crossing than the present one

Picture 9: Three improved ways to cross the Middle Ring Road and overcome severance

3. Old buildings are to be integrated with the new development.
4. Opportunities are to be taken to create more local places.
5. Unpopular pedestrian subways are to be removed.
6. Local places are to be enhanced by environmental improvements.
7. Buildings should have mixed uses where appropriate.
8. Premises should possess comprehensible addresses.
9. New buildings are to be figurative in composition.
10. Ground floors of buildings should generate activity.
11. Public open spaces are to have enclosing edges.
12. The network of routes is to have continuity.

In addition to these global rules, the Ladywood Urban Design Study contains place-specific urban design briefs for all of the residential and non-residential sub-areas of Ladywood. These include such ingredients as sites for new housing on left-over land, the creation of new pedestrian routes, new and better crossing points on the dual-carriageway Middle Ring Road, and the creation of defensible space around high-rise tower blocks. We were encouraged that the general policy of the Ladywood Urban Design Study - which can be summarised perhaps as "reurbanisation" - is echoed in the European Union's 1990 Green Paper on the Urban Environment. This too condemns the fragmented, zoned and dispersed localities that were built in the 60s, and encourages the re-establishment of many older, more traditional principles of urban design - principles that have been tested over hundreds of years and whose robustness has been proved.

We are encouraged also by the fact that in general our new/old principles of urban design coincide with the residents' descriptions of the kind of environment in which they want to live. However, tensions and contradictions between our views and those of the residents do occur. An example is residents' resistance to proposals to build new houses on underused pieces of green space.

Although the benefits of a higher residential density - a livelier, safer public realm; more shops and facilities which can be supported; local schools more viable - are agreed in principle, there is great attachment to grass and trees and a reluctance to see them disappear. The debate about issues such as these is a valuable and ongoing part of a community-based regeneration process.

A greater disappointment is the failure of the Ladywood Urban Design Study to be incorporated into official City Council planning policy. Much of its advice has been translated into reality through the successful Estate Action housing improvement programme, and some of its strategy has been borrowed by the Council and incorporated into its Local Area Plan. But overall, there is still a lack of an officially recognised urban design framework which can be legally enforced in order to transform the urban quality of the area.

But generally the first five years of the Ladywood Regeneration Framework has been a success. Although both sides in the partnership had little idea at the outset how to go about the task, the Ladywood experience is now regarded by the City Council as a model for other community-based regeneration schemes in the city. From the residents' point of view, Ladywood is gradually being transformed from a place whose reputation was a liability into a place where people positively want to live. Moreover, they want to live there because it is not a place with suburban values, but a real part of the city centre. In addition, a large number of residents have, through the experience of the regeneration process, become used to acting, not as passive consumers, but as active citizens, thinking and taking decisions about the form and nature of the place where they live. The collective effect of that social change is incalculable, but it must be considerable.

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