# A visual A.B.C

Ian Nairn (1930-1983)

Matemático formado pela universidade de Birmingham e piloto oficial da Royal Air Force britânica até 1953. Em 1954 passa a trabalhar como crítico de arquitetura na Architectural Review, que publica a edição especial Outrage em junho de 1955.

This is the sequel to "Outrage", first published in the REVIEW for June 1955, which allowed what we are doing to our environment in the name of progress. Opposite (fig.1) is a reminder of it which could also stand as a visual equivalent of the "prophecy of doom" we made there-for this is Los Angeles, the "most up-to-date city in the world," the "pattern for twentieth century living," and hence a likely forecast of England in the 1970's or 1980's. Its area is approximately seventy miles square- the equivalent of East Anglia. In the U.S. this may be all right; in Britain it would mean obliteration. In fact we doubt whether it is even a Californian ideal; already a morning's shopping may require a fifty-mile journey, and families are chained to their superbly-equipped houses in the evenings as nobody is prepared to come and sit-in because of the distances involved: St. Simeon Stylites got a similar result with rather less complex organization. Is there a way out? We believe that there is and have tried to outline it in this issue. The article which follows sets down the basic principles simply and the Casebook (pages 361-407) illustrates them. The two articles succeeding (pages 408-430) deal with landwaste and the final article, "A Plan for Planning," translates these visual principles into workable administrative terms.

"The root of the trouble," sighed the administrator, wailed the designer, 'is that the public is apathetic." Maybe, but the response called up by Outrage has made us think that at least some of what looks like apathy is in fact a feeling of helplessness. We believe that the man in the street would be genuinely eager to master the principles of visual planning if he thought that there was a chance of understanding what the thing was about.

Figura 1: Fonte: California State Highways Dept. (Los Angeles Div.)

There is. The basic ideas behind sane visual planning are few, simple and easily comprehended. This article sets them out as a layman's visual ABC- it is literally almost as simple as A.B.C. for there are just four items. They can't be called strictly principles or precepts or rules of thumb, for all the points combine something of each: they are really elements in a four-point sequence which are always meant to be used together as a continuous process-applied both to any existing scene and to any proposed change in it. The examples on pages 359 and 360 show how the sequence works when applied to two typical bits of subtopia, one urban and one rural.
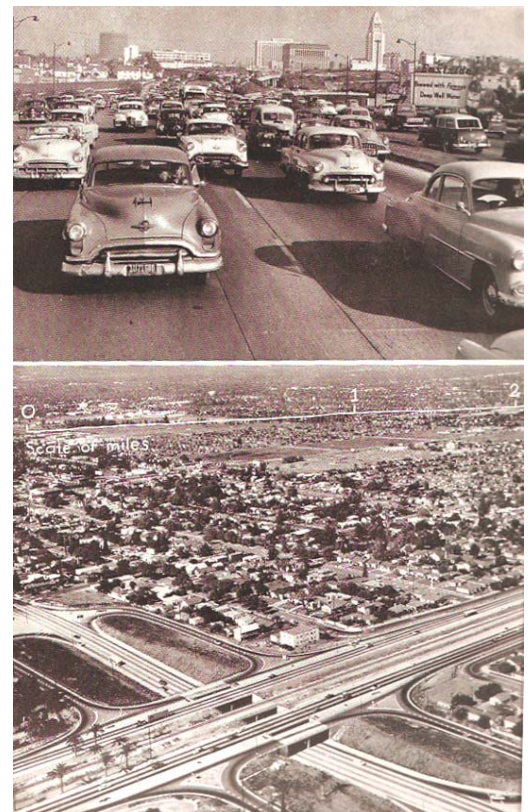
The crime of subtopia is that it blurs the distinction between places. It does so by smoothing down the differences between types of environment-town and country, country and suburb, suburb and wild – rather that directly between one town and another. It doesn't deliberately set out to make Glen Shiel look like Helvellyn: it does so in fact by introducing the same overpowering alien elements- in this case blanket afforestation and the wire that surrounds it- into both. The job of this issue is to get straight the basic divisions between types of environment, and to suggest a framework for keeping each true to itself and distinct from its neighbours. When that is done the problem of differentiating between places will solve itself: if, for example, two towns only contain truly urban things, and are without a common mass overprint, differences in topography, climate, size and use will take care of the rest. There are in fact hundreds of categories into which Britain could be divided, from total wild (the top of Suilven) to total metropolis (Piccadilly Circus). As a practical working minimum we have reduced these to five:[1] wild, country, arcadia, town and metropolis. We have used "arcadia" rather than "suburb" because of the way "suburb" is used to describe any town's penumbra of low-density housing, when in fact most of this is subtopia and as far from the true idea of a suburb as is Woodberry Down from proper urban redevelopment. The aim of this sequence and the casebook that follows is to re-establish the integrity and separateness of these five basic divisions, and to suggest means of channelling the existing mess back into these legitimate environments. Put visually, this is the difference between an "average environment" – subtopia - as the lowest common denominator of all the categories mixed up indiscriminately, 1, and a stratified environment with each category differentiated, 2.

1. The first step in applying the sequence to a particular place is to decide what type of environment (wild, country and so on) it is. That sounds obvious, only subtopia has in some cases blurred the divisions so far that the category itself may not be clear. The housing estate at New Addington near Croydon is an example of this: it is such an ambiguous botched-up mess that it could as easily become either town or suburb. Having fixed the category, track down the elements from other categories that have strayed into it. There is a "town" way and a "country" way and a "wild" way of doing everything, and to confuse them is to ruin any hope of integrity from the beginning.[2] There are also some combinations of object and environment –like advertising in the wild- which are bad in themselves as well as being capable of appropriate or inappropriate treatment. The whole of the casebook (pages 361-407) is an explanation of how these two statements work out in practice (i.e. what is the "town" and the "country" way of doing things) and is designed to make clear the first point of the sequence, which is, put simply, to maintain – or regain- the unity of the place: to classify it as town or country or wild, remove the alien elements, replace the alien treatments, and resist any attempts to reintroduce them, and thus blur the categories once again.

[1] And two special cases; first, that where big industry is unavoidably set in the countryside, it makes its own landscape-the industrial area-with its own rules (see pag.398); second, that the trunk road has its own values as a horizontal strip crossing all the categories (see pages 401-2).

[2] For many visitors to Britain, quite literally from the beginning: the trim and furniture at London Airport, though all of it is "modern" and most of it is wall designed, has so hopelessly mixed up the categories that it is as incoherent as Hounslow By-Pass which leads from it into London.

Figura 2: Imagem de Nairn, I. (1957). Fonte: Counter-Attack against Subtopia Architectural Press London.
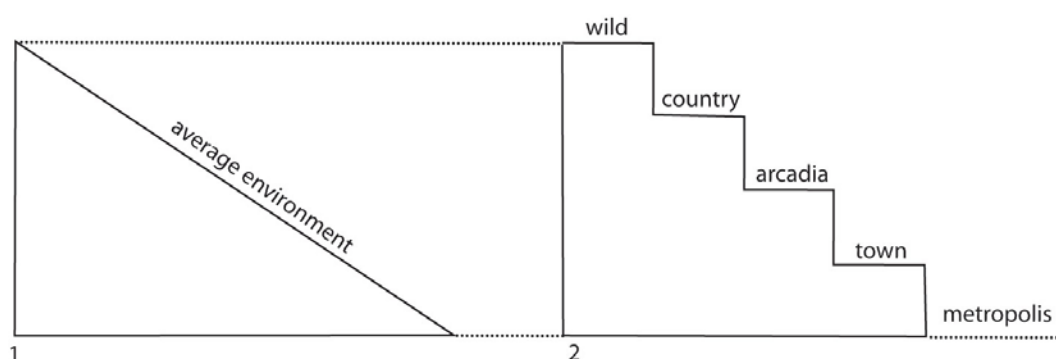
2. When that is done, and the unities are re-established, there are still so many vertical objects in view that the eye is disoriented. It can't see straight: at its simplest, it sees not the street itself, but the 25-ft. lamp standards stalking down it; not the reservoir but the poles of the wire fence in front of it. This is due quite simply to the fact that horizontal objects flow with and blend into the landscape, while vertical objects punctuate it: erecting a vertical automatically means that man is interrupting the landscape to say something.[3] In a town, men need to say a lot – "I am a church, a corn exchange, a market hall, an art gallery." In the country, which is a compact with nature, much less-little more than " I am a church representing a village community"; in the wild, nothing at all: the only man-made vertical should be man himself, puny and dwarfed, creeping across an immense moor. In no case is there ever, in any category, licence to mouth platitudes such as "I am Ministry of Transport standard No. 39201."

To reset the visual compass, the need is therefore to reduce the clutter; to cut out useless verticals, and minimize others; to tidy up. That has long been axiomatic with big verticals like factory chimneys in the countryside-though, of course, it applies just as much to the towns as well; but in fact it also applies down to as simple a thing as a wire fence.

A wire fence in the landscape reads as a line of poles (i.e. verticals) senselessly punctuating a field- re-establish a horizontal by making it into a post and rail fence, and the fence is at the same time *more* obvious but *less* obtrusive. The most obvious example of this need for horizontality is the road and everything connected with it the road itself being a horizontal strip, the trim, structures and signs cry out to be treated horizontally, and the casebook shows how, on pages 400-405.

Point two in the sequence is therefore to cut out useless verticals: to re-create as far as possible a horizontal world with verticals in their proper place as man's way of expressing things that are worth saying.

3. The scene may now have unity and be free from mess, but may still look like an agglomeration rather than a place. A handful of well-designed elements can't in themselves make up a landscape or townscape: they have to be related to one another.

Two sketches can show this better than words (as can the comparative photographs of Old Hatfield and Stevenage on page 414). [below page 414]

[3] The thicker the vertical the louder it says "I am": if it appears on the skyline (i.e. breaking out of the scene altogether) the damage it can do is multiplied. Once above the skyline attaching horizontals thereto no longer makes it blend but sets up a parody of the land surface below: that is why overhead wires in towns (or hulking lamp standards with hulking horizontal fitments) are such fundamental crimes.
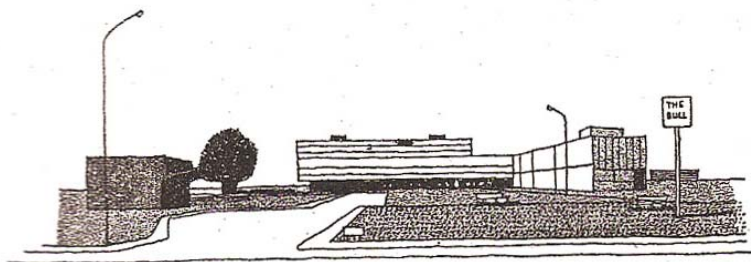
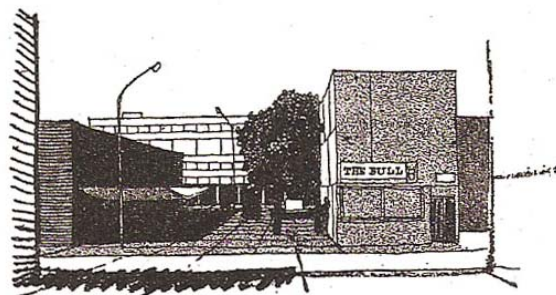**Figura 3:** Fotografias de Nairn, I. (1957). Fonte: Counter-Attack against Subtopia Architectural Press London.

17   18

Figura 4: Imagem de Nairn, I. (1957). Fonte: Counter-Attack against Subtopia Architectural Press London.

The result: *fit everything together with a minimum of wasted space and results like this will come almost automatically -17, Old Hatfield. Waste the space and the town will never get any better than this - 18, Stevenage (it could be almost any post-war estate in the country). At the same time the countryside will be over the horizon instead of at your doorstep.*

Pleasant things separated and isolated look like this, 3, a familiar scene, as you can see it in any of the New Towns. Simply bringing them together, and stopping the waste of space (by being ruthlessly economical *not* with the living standards but with the dead ground in between houses) produces something like this, 4- a living place, not a "neighbourhood unit."

This is a particular case of a general principle which is the third point in the sequence-the Principle of Economy: that is, of never wasting a square inch of ground, whether the waste is a vacant lot, a plot of ground too tricky to fit into a standardized layout, or simply the result of making things twice as wide as they need to be. Dead ground means a dead town (or village, or hamlet): each square inch should earn its keep.[4]

In a country as crowded as England, this serves a double purpose. Half an acre saved from waste in a town and put to good use means half an acre of countryside left untouched somewhere else: it is the saviour not only of one environment but two.

[4] Remembering that any space can earn its keep expressively as well as functionally. Everyone ought to deplore the wasted acres of gardening in Hull's City Centre, because they do nothing to make Hull into a city; nobody would object to Yarm having the biggest market place in England because it is a country town space well treated in a country town way: it makes the town, it is not dead ground.

Page 415 shows the saving that could have come about - 2,600 acres per fifty thousand inhabitants- in each of the New Towns if this principle had been followed: Adeyfield could have stayed green and at the same time Hemel Hempstead New Town would have ceased to be a set of housing estates casting around desperately for a town centre. [below photo on page 415]
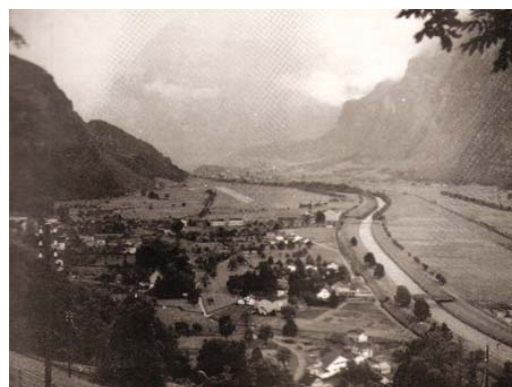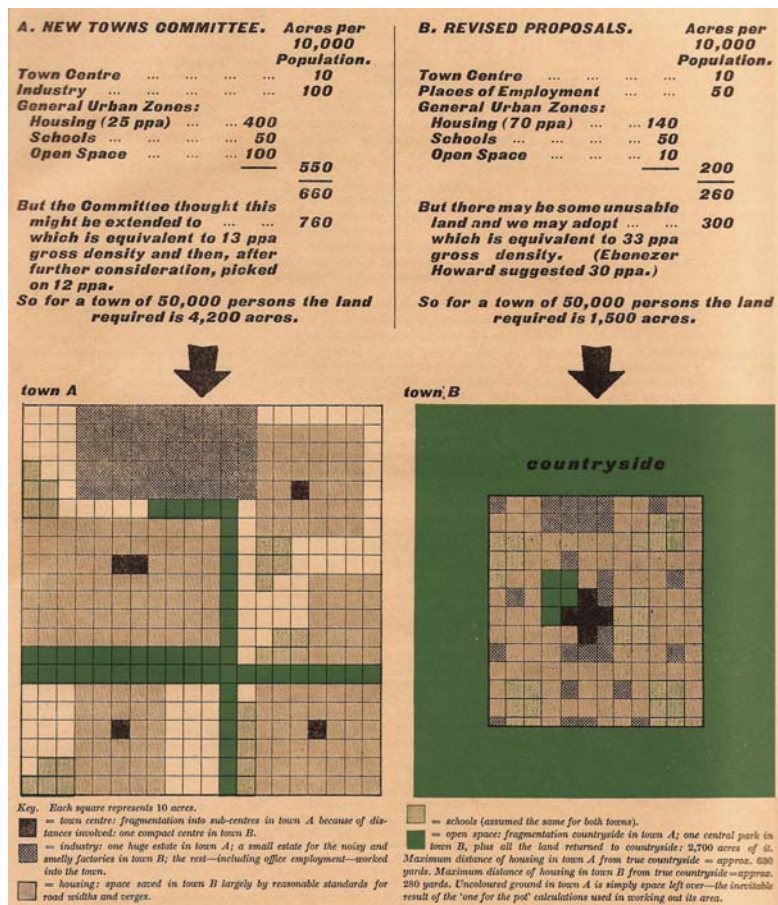
In practice much of the difficulty of introducing less wasteful standards lies in the byelaws, the false assumptions and muddled thinking by "informed opinion" and the timidity of local authority: the articles

on byelaws ("The Machinery of Sprawl," page 409) and housing policy ("Oversprawl," page 427) indicate the obstacles, and how they can be overcome.

4. Finally, if, having applied these three points as far as practicable, there are still solecism or interruptions (and inevitably there will be in an island as crowded and multiform as this) the residue must be camouflaged, and made one with the surrounding landscape. This can sometimes be done with neat design like the Swiss airstrip on page 399: more often it means planting as well. [below photo on page 399]

Figura 5: Imagem de Nairn, I. (1957). Fonte: Counter-Attack against Subtopia Architectural Press London.

Figura 6: Fotografia de Nairn, I. (1957). Fonte: Counter-Attack against Subtopia Architectural Press London.

The fourth point in the sequence is, therefore, to camouflage what's left over. The aim of integration into the landscape puts the traditional Water Board camouflage-a screen of conifers- out of court for many localities because the conifers themselves would be an interruption as great as the thing they are intended to screen. Some examples of camouflage are given on page 375, but the principles are easy enough. [below photo on page 375]

What is more difficult is to force the bodies erecting the interruptions to make even the smallest effort to show that they care for the countryside - our suggestions are on page 432.

That is the sequence: it might be summed up as unity, economy and freedom from clutter. We have tried to translate it into administrative terms in the article "A Plan for Planning" on page 431. There we have indicated the changes in the planning system which may ensure that-given the right men for the job-some sort of coherence might come naturally and not have to be fought for. What the sequence provides is not a magic wand, which will transform subtopia overnight, but the conditions for the basic fitness of objects in the landscape. The capital crime is to blur the categories-whether this is done by uniform housing at so many to the acre dumped down indistinguishably in town, suburb or country, or from the city engineer doing over metropolitan roundabouts with rustic flower gardens and Cotswold stone walling. And the first duty of the citizen who wants to avoid being an accessory after the fact is to establish which category he lives in, and then to grow adamant in his determination to cherish it: to enhance it when he can, and to protect it when it needs protecting.

Figura 7: Fotografia de Nairn, I. (1957). Fonte: Counter-Attack against Subtopia Architectural Press London.