

Chapter 3

Regional Visionaries

Benton MacKaye, Lewis Mumford, the Regional Planning Association of America, and the Region

We need the big sweep of hills or sea as tonic for our jaded nerves – And so Mr. Benton MacKaye offers us a new theme in regional planning. It is not a plan for more efficient labor, but a plan of escape. He would as far as is practicable conserve the whole stretch of The Appalachian Mountains for recreation. Recreation in the biggest sense – the recreation of the spirit that is being crushed by the machinery of the modern industrial city – the spirit of fellowship and cooperation.¹

Clarence Stein, 1921.

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the regional parkway in the eastern United States is intimately tied to the development of the Appalachian Trail. This chapter discusses the theory of regional planning brought out by the development of the Appalachian Trail concept, the broader debate over regional planning, and the legacy of this theory, which in the end brought on the conflict associated with the development of the regional parkway.

The main players in this story are the forester/regional planner Benton MacKaye (1879-1974) and the American cultural critic and regionalist Lewis Mumford (1895-1990). It was MacKaye's Appalachian Trail article, published in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* in 1921, that began the debate between the regional planners associated with the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) and the "metropolitan" planners associated with Thomas Adams (1871-1940) and the Regional Plan of New

York and Its Environs (RPNY & E). This debate culminated in the 1932 publication of one of the essential polemics in the planning field – Lewis Mumford’s criticism of the Regional Plan of New York and its Environs – and Thomas Adams’ defense of that plan. The Appalachian Trail project provided a practical alternative to the developing urban- and suburban-based automobile culture and that culture’s offspring – auto tourism and road development. The broad debate – a vision in the face of decentralization versus accommodation to the market – defined the two sides in the conflict over the development of the parkway in the region.

Benton MacKaye’s article “An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning” was part of the theoretical and practical model for a vision of regional planning in the United States. The vision included an orderly recentralization throughout the region, that is, regional planning that respected small-town culture and values, valued work and leisure in the same place, and attempted to keep from the region the life-draining afflictions of congestion and sprawling “dinosaur cities.” This vision, according to MacKaye, would help to reverse the migration from rural to urban, mitigate the desire to merely escape the overcrowded cities, facilitate sustainable agricultural and forest industries, and provide opportunities for recreation, rejuvenation, and healthful living.² MacKaye wrote, “[i]t is the slow quiet development of a special type of community – the recreation camp. It is something neither urban nor rural. It escapes the hecticness of the one, the loneliness of the other.”³ Over time, the boosters of the national park in the Southern Appalachians, the Skyline Drive, and the Green Mountain Parkway would use some of MacKaye’s rhetorical vision in support of their own projects. As will become apparent, however, these boosters really only understood part of MacKaye’s plan.

Through the RPAA, which began in 1923, a loosely organized group of planners, architects, housing experts, economists, and intellectuals fleshed out a regional planning vision sparked by MacKaye’s Appalachian Trail article. Lewis Mumford served as the primary spokesperson for the group and articulated the regionalist view best, certainly better than MacKaye did.⁴

The regional vision advocated by MacKaye and Mumford called for regional economic development on a scale compatible with the inhabitants of the region. That is, it called for development in line with the existing and potential agricultural and forest resources. The regional development approach devised by MacKaye presented an alternative to unbounded industrialization evident in the cities and metropolitan areas. Re-entry, recentralization, or even migration into the region at the appropriate scale was a humanizing force, one that would, in the future, allow for a reconnection of living and working in a partnership that had been severed by industrialization. The primacy of the connection between human beings and

the land, as outlined by MacKaye, led to the regional visionaries' rejection of the parkway as idealized and constructed by the metropolitan planners.

2. ROOTS OF THE REGIONAL VISION

2.1 Patrick Geddes and the Influence of the Regional Survey

Benton MacKaye and Lewis Mumford subscribed to many of the ideas espoused by the Scottish biologist/planner Patrick Geddes (1854-1932). Geddes' ideas influenced the conception of the region, regional planning, and the regional vision supported by MacKaye and Mumford. Peter Hall, in *Cities of Tomorrow*, characterized Geddes as "an unclassifiable polymath who officially taught biology (more probably, anything but biology)."⁵ Moreover, not only did Mumford champion many of Geddes' ideas, he articulated and wrote about them in a way Geddes could not.

According to Frank G. Novak Jr., the editor of *Lewis Mumford and Patrick Geddes: The Correspondence*, Geddes influenced Mumford in three major areas. First, Geddes' view of the city, its historical make-up and future potential, as related through his 1915 book *Cities in Evolution*. Geddes' analysis helped Mumford understand the relationship of the city to the region. Second, Geddes taught Mumford to apply his intellectual findings as an activist. Finally, Geddes served as Mumford's "model of the intellectual as generalist."⁶

Both Lewis Mumford and Thomas Adams invoked Patrick Geddes in support of ideologically opposite approaches to regionalism. This fact is testimony to the breadth of Geddes' scope and to the murkiness of his discourse, since Geddes' writings were not always clear. Geddes' two primary influences were his scientifically based survey and his political/economic understanding of history. The historical analysis quickly came out as the major influence on Mumford, MacKaye, and others. The survey methodology emerged as the second among equal influences. On the other hand, it was Thomas Adams and the RPNY & E who invoked the Geddesian survey, without the historical underpinnings, to justify their work.

Geddes viewed the industrial age and the innovations in new technology as a perfect opportunity to push society towards a more equitable and efficient use of land and wealth. Just as the Paleolithic and Neolithic eras of the Stone Age delineated two phases of human progress, the Industrial Age seemed to demonstrate that it was prepared to make the next step to the Neotechnic order, to use Geddes' terms, out of the Paleotechnic era of mixed

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Dalbey, M.

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