

SICK CITIES, by Mitchell Gordon.

Two great liberal Presidents of the U. S. A. have proved the depth of their feeling of responsibility to the country by extending their public concern into the fields of architecture and urban planning.

One was Thomas Jefferson. The second was John F. Kennedy. In the latter's time America looked at itself more honestly. Before him it had accepted with equanimity the hideous mess its developers were making of much of the beautiful American countryside. It had been almost proud of the intimidating ugliness in most of its cities: the tangles of wires and billboards and rusty iron els (or elevated railways), the heaps of discarded cars and the choking traffic jams of non-discarded 20-foot-long Cadillacs straining their 400 h. p. against red traffic lights. All this was an inevitable visual expression of the dynamism of the American Way, they said - those who noticed it; or most of them. But many architects and planners knew that things were going wrong, that two of America's proudest accomplishments, the skyscraper city and the automobile, were fighting each other to the death.

President Kennedy took up the cause of the prophets and President Johnson has carried it on. Better cities are an essential element of his vision of the Great Society. And some new books have been added quickly to the short shelf previously occupied almost exclusively by

Lewis Mumford. These include a devastating piece of pictorial self-criticism by Peter Blake called 'God's Own Junkyard'.

Now comes a thick, quick, readable report of the troubles of American urban life called 'Sick Cities'. It is a Penguin Special, published in America, and is written by Mitchell Gordon of Los Angeles. Mr. Gordon is not an architect or planner, but a knowledgeable journalist, and his book is non-technical and non-partisan. He is not talking about the art of making beautiful cities; he is urging therapy before the present cities break down physically. He doesn't make too much of visual ugliness. He finds traffic problems only part of the trouble. He is concerned with the overall deterioration, the uncontrolled sprawl, with ^{as Mr. Gordon says =} "all the ailments of the squatting, modern metropolitan region whose air grows fouler and more dangerous by the day, whose water is threatened increasingly by pollution, whose mobility is undermined by accumulations of vehicles and withering transit, whose educational system reels under a growing variety of economic, social, and national urgencies."

Most of the problems are international and are quite familiar enough in Australia. Some are uniquely American. For instance the seemingly ridiculous system of ~~an~~ autonomous village-type police forces which makes life somewhat easier for itinerant urban hoodlums in the U. S. A. than in other countries.

For instance,
And then there is the real sickness of colour segregation in the U. S. town. In nearly all cities across the land an ominous example of involuntary political or sociological town-planning is developing. Well-to-do white people constantly move out into sprawling suburban rings, leaving a poverty-ridden core, continuously and often rapidly widening. In these cores live the people who nowadays are referred to as 'minority groups': that is, about 98% negroes, whose presence can be almost forgotten by those who fly over them on the magnificent freeways - except for these sudden outbreaks of violence.

Mr. Gordon faces up to all these problems unemotionally, and hints at possible cures. For instance, he wants to break up the ghettos and give Negroes a new deal in the suburbs. Then he tells of cities that have outlawed billboards, junkyards, and even used car lots, like Beverly Hills; and of others, like Santa Barbara, which are paying to put their wires underground. More basically, he looks to the day when freedom will come for the motorist rather than the motorcar.

Mr. Gordon has prepared a good, meaty, helpful book which makes fresh and illuminating reading for city administrators and city lovers everywhere.