



Figure 9.1 Project for a riverside or lakeside (Gropius, 1935)

trees which separate the blocks and serve as playgrounds for the children' (Gropius, 1935). Projects of the time, speak most clearly to this aim of destroying the traditional urban fabric of the city and replacing it with ranks of unadorned blocks standing serenely in a field of green (Figures 9.1 and 9.2). Giedion, the apologist for the Modern

Figure 9.2 Project for a group of ten-storey dwellings (Gropius, 1935)



movement in architecture is quite clear in his condemnation of the street block. Berlage's fine development in Amsterdam South is composed of streets and street blocks: for this and other shortcomings, Giedion dismisses Berlage as an architect of the previous century: '... Berlage's schemes reflect the central difficulty at that date: the inability to arrive at new means of expression in the solutions offered for the problems peculiar to the times. In the 1902 plans particularly (and to some extent in the later version of 1915) we sense the struggle involved in Berlage's attempt to break with the formulae of previous decades...' (Giedion, 1954). In contrast Giedion, in his discussion of the Cité Industrielle, commends Garnier for his arrangement of lots at right-angles to the road and for his elimination of the street block: 'The closed blocks and light-wells of Hausmann's time are completely eliminated' (Giedion, 1954). It is time to re-assess the value of the street and street block in the light of the new imperative of the green agenda for the city, and in particular in the light of the need to reduce atmospheric pollution caused by the burning of fossil fuels. The green agenda for the city renders obsolete the critique of the street and street block by the masters of the Modern movement in architecture. It is necessary to turn for inspiration, once again, to the great traditions of city building: to interpret those traditions in today's context in order to develop a new and enlightened vision for the sustainable city.

In the design of street blocks there are three broad sets of considerations. The first is the socio-economic function of the block; the second is the visual or physical role of the block in the city structure; and the final set of considerations is concerned with making the block work in terms of

technology and includes considerations such as the lighting, ventilation and heating of the buildings which comprise the block. When form was considered the product of function and technology, then the street block varied in size according to function and to the limits set by technological feasibility. The result is all too obvious: cities with large blocks of single use disrupting the intricate network of public paths; a coarse-grained city dying at night, a fearful place for citizens unprotected by the comforting envelope of a fast-moving car (Figures 9.3 and 9.4). Most urban functions, however, can be accommodated reasonably in urban street blocks of similar shape and form (Turner, 1992). Street blocks or insulae in historic towns dating back many centuries have been modified a number of times as they have changed ownership or use. The following paragraphs, while addressing function and technology, will place greater emphasis on the visual and structuring role of the street block in the city. If a reasonable size and form for the street block can be determined from considerations of its structuring role within the urban fabric, then it is argued here that it will accommodate, with modification, most city needs.

While the theory of sustainable development points clearly towards a mix of land uses in the city, the quarter and the street block, neither the precise nature nor the degree of intricacy of land use mix is specified. Clearly, the placing of buildings designed for large-scale noxious, noisy or dangerous activities next to family homes would be unacceptable to both professional and citizen alike. More difficult is the decision about the juxtaposition of homes where peace and quiet may be the expectations of some with pubs, 'takeaways' and other small-scale commercial activities



Figure 9.3 Broadmarsh Shopping Centre, Nottingham

which may cause noise, litter and other nuisance. Such activities in a city, however, add to its life and liveliness. To what degree, therefore, should land uses be mixed in the city? In particular, should the street block itself be of mixed use? These two questions are part of the debate in sustainable development. Theories can only give part answers; an examination of developing practice will provide the evidence for definitive answers.

Clearly, there will be single-use street blocks in the city of the future; that is, street blocks given over to, or almost entirely to, residential, commercial, industrial or some other single land use. Where possible, large areas of the city devoted to such single use should, however, be avoided. As a guide, a city quarter of 20 000 to 100 000 people should contain within its boundaries



Figure 9.4 Victoria Shopping Centre, Nottingham