Omnibuilding!

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Here in Acadiana, where the houses still look like houses and towns still resemble traditional cities, most of us have never been exposed to the bold experiment in contemporary architecture called the omnibuilding.

What is an omnibuilding? It's the newest thing in architecture — and the oldest.

It floats, or sprawls along a mountain's crest; it houses a family, or 70,000 people; it contains wide open spaces with running brooks, or busy streets and stores.

Horizon magazine defines it more precisely as a single, continuous structure housing an entire city — factories, residences, offices, schools, etc. The concept is not entirely new.

They Were Castles

In medieval times, societies constructed similar walled cities for protection from invading war lords, and called the structures castles. In a century of multiple-warhead missiles, walled cities are no longer forms of protection. But they still offer the social amenities of a bustling, public life, and according to Horizon, they are making a comeback in modern, elaborate versions.

Appropriately, one of the first of these 20th century "castles" was built in Cumbernauld, Scotland, about 14 miles from Glasgow. The town center, which opened in 1967, is only the first phase of a planned structure which will accommodate 70,000 people.

Already the building covers five acres and contains stores, offices, pubs, banks, restaurants, penthouse apartments, a medical center, bowling alley, library, hotel, community hall and sheriff's office.

Montreal Has Trade Center

Our Canadian neighbors have also constructed an omnibuilding in the form of an international trade center in Montreal, called "Place Bonaventure." The concrete-walled building covers about six city acres. In a region with long, cold winters, the trade center offers shoppers the warmth of internal streets lined with stores and showrooms. The rooftop contains restaurants, hotel rooms and an open garden with a running brook.

One of the most elaborate omnibuildings yet proposed is still in the planning stages. It is designed to sit at the crest of a mountain overlooking Santa Monica, Calif. The sprawling structure would extend downhill in a terrace-like fashion, with inclined elevators connecting townhouses with the central city.

British Have Sea City

The British have been even more futuristic in their designs, creating a model called Sea City, which would sit on concrete stilts fifteen miles from the shores of the North Sea.

The center of activity would be an artificial lagoon with floating islets for homes and boat anchorages. The North Sea may seem like an uncomfortably cold environment for such aquatic activities, but a natural-gas heating plant would be used to raise the temperature of the lagoon several degrees, and give the city its own umbrella of balmy weather.

When congestion and compact living are made this attractive, over-population seems to be a bit less of a problem. A busy public atmosphere can be as enjoyable as open spaces and privacy, and in the future, omnibuildings will be offering both.