

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900

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PROMINENT SPEAKERS AT PREVIEW OF NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNINGEXHIBITION AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

At a meeting which preceded the preview of a twelve-panel exhibition on neighborhood planning entitled Look at Your Neighborhood held at the Museum of Modern Art Tuesday afternoon, March 28, Stanley M. Isaacs, President of the Board of Directors of United Neighborhood Houses, Mrs. Mary Simkhovitch, Vice-Chairman of the New York City Housing Authority, and Cleveland Rogers, member of the City Planning Commission, spoke on the need for neighborhood and city planning. Monroe Wheeler, the Museum's Director of Exhibitions and Publications, was Chairman of the meeting and introduced the speakers. Alice Otis, staff member of the Museum's Department of Circulating Exhibitions which prepared the show and will circulate it throughout the country, also spoke briefly.

As an amplification of the twelve-panel exhibition the United Neighborhood Houses, with the assistance of the Museum, has prepared four additional panels. These show how some of the principles of planning can be applied to New York. A proposed housing project in the district of Chelsea was chosen as an example of how future building in New York can consider the needs of the whole community and form the nucleus of the neighborhood in which it will exist.

The meeting and preview were held in association with United Neighborhood Houses of New York. Among the guests at the preview was a group of children from the Chelsea district. These children, between the ages of nine and thirteen, belong to a handicraft group at the Hudson Guild, 436 West 27th Street, and are at present studying the subject of neighborhood planning. At the Guild they build models of what they would like to have in their community--houses, recreation centers, playgrounds, and so forth.

Mr. Isaacs spoke as follows:

I am delighted that this great Museum of Modern Art has planned such an interesting exhibit, and is furthering so effectively a cause in which United Neighborhood Houses has been interested for many a year. The settlements of this community are essentially democratic institutions, whose chief objective is to marshal the forces in the neighborhoods they serve in order to improve local conditions, so that those who

live in the neighborhood can find broader opportunities, greater security, increased happiness, and give their children the full opportunity for satisfactory development that every young American should have.

The objective of city planning is to develop opportunity for a fuller life for those who live in the city and the surrounding region. This exhibition graphically helps people to understand what a fuller life can be. These panels show that a properly served neighborhood necessarily involves the people who live in the neighborhood in the planning of their neighborhood. I hope that people all over America will have an opportunity to study this exhibition and make sure that the program for their community is what they themselves need. Here in New York as in other parts of the country, we are planning for the future. Above all, the people themselves must share that responsibility, for they are planning their own future and the future of their community. We should have faith enough in democracy to make sure that we follow the democratic process at home. This exhibition suggests a sound pattern for democratic planning.

The United Neighborhood Houses, representing all of these settlements, has found out long since that what each house finds essential in its own neighborhood is more or less the same--better housing, improved schools, more recreational facilities for young and old, opportunities for those who live in the neighborhood to know each other, to work together. We have long realized that the objective of city planning is not to create a city beautiful, or just to improve traffic conditions, but that housing, living conditions lie at the heart of planning; that its real objective is to develop opportunities for a fuller life for those who live in the city and the surrounding region.

Accordingly, I can add to the interesting panels that are now disclosed by the Museum of Modern Art another panel that cannot be depicted on your walls, except possibly by photographs of people in action: a panel which would show that a properly served neighborhood necessarily involves the people who live there in the planning of their neighborhood; their organized interest in local problems. We know from experience that a good neighborhood means good local community leadership; that a good neighborhood means sound relations between local residents of varied creeds, varied races, varied nations of origin; that a good neighborhood means widespread local interest in all the local and broader problems that confront the people living in the neighborhood.

It is only too often true that government officials planning to the best of their ability develop their program without consultation with the people most affected. For example, the immense program of planning for post-war construction now being developed by The City Planning Commission is quite obviously a jumbled mass of proposals emanating from governmental agencies and that the people themselves who are most concerned have played little part in the planning. We have asked our member houses to study these post-war plans insofar as they affect their own neighborhoods--to study them and make sure that the program is what they themselves need, what they themselves long for; to make certain that the new housing development contains adequate facilities for community life and is not just so many houses; to make certain that the new school is not only open to children during the day time, but that it provides facilities for adult education as well, for community meetings, and for cultural and other activities available to the entire community; to try to consolidate services like welfare and health in one building instead of two, not merely because of the economy involved, but because centralized municipal services will give to the people who live in the neighborhood more efficient service.

We are planning for the future of New York--planning progressively and intelligently. We must think of the people first--all of the people. We must make sure that we are opening the doors of opportunity wide to children and adolescents. We must make certain that we bring together citizens of every creed and every race in mutual activities that will ultimately bring them together in friendly intercourse, help them to

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understand each other, encourage them to protect each other from discrimination or attack. Above all, the people themselves must share responsibility for planning if we want a progressive city.

Finally, may I add as an essential part of the program that planning must be kept within sound and reasonable cost. The planning program must be economically sound, without waste and without extravagance. Just because of our desires for extended services, we must recognize that the taxpayer, small and large, must be protected from waste. We must realize that if we want to have all that our neighborhoods desire, all the services that we believe necessary in a progressive community, all the facilities that we believe advantageous and essential to a fuller life, we must make sure that we use our available funds prudently. Otherwise they will run dry before we accomplish this vital purpose.

I do believe that the City can afford to and must provide all the services that are reasonable and properly demanded as their birthright by those who live within the city; that those services should be expanded as our needs expand; and that the people themselves should share in the planning of their own future and the future of their community. We are defending, and I hope expanding, Democracy today. We should have faith enough in it to make sure that we follow the democratic process at home--that we recognize and take advantage of all that Democracy means in our own city, and in that way suggest a sound pattern for others to follow.

This Exhibition of yours is truly staged along democratic lines.

Mrs. Simkhovitch spoke as follows:

Americans have a passion for new words, new styles, new songs, for going somewhere, for rushing to luncheons, dinners, and all-day conferences. It is a symptom of our energy, our readiness for change, and for the thoughtless gaiety which characterizes a country of plenty and of still boundless resources. Reflection on a week's activities of almost anyone suddenly forces one to ask, "Whither and why, busy man?" The modern accent on publicity still further emphasizes the new "It pays to advertize" as they say. And often substantial realities go into the discard in favor of the new competition for public attention.

Underneath all this boiling heterogeneous energy there are certain basic needs and outlooks which are shared in by all. Every family wants education and health for its children, an opportunity to acquire a livelihood, and freedom to move, think, and act within the law. Although this basic design for American families is essential for the public welfare, the realization of these simple aims is far from attained by millions of our people.

There are neighborhoods devoid of these opportunities all over the country. What part do the neighbors themselves play in an effort to realize these basic objectives? To what degree, if at all, is a neighborhood conscious of need?

An individual may come into a neighborhood for its special facilities. If there is a good high school and the family has children of high school age, there is sufficient reason to come into that neighborhood for that reason alone. And very likely that may be the only community relationship that family may have. It will put up with the fact that shopping facilities are poor, that cultural opportunities are few or even that the transportation is inadequate; or a family may determine its residence by nearness to work, or by its adequate housing. But rarely does the ordinary neighbor see his neighborhood as a whole, with defects to remedy, with objectives to pursue, with in fact a plan for its present and for its future.

The word "plan" is one of those fashionable words now in vogue. Let us hope that it does not meet the fate of many another dated word. For we plan, even when we don't plan consciously. Not to plan is to deteriorate, to let the tide of life roll on and sink in with the clam-life acceptance

of what happens. Yet the good planner will not let his ideals run away with him. It might be a very good idea, for example, to burn up New York and start again. Some planners are said to receive with equanimity the news of the destruction of cities by war as a wonderful opportunity of rebuilding in a better way! But the changes of tomorrow will be succeeded we may hope by the changes of day after tomorrow. There will never be a last word. New materials, new methods, new institutions will arise as life goes on. Probably it is a mercy that change has to be gradual and that old neighborhoods will have to replan their neighborhood life under the limitations of expense and a popular appreciation and understanding.

Through the past half century there has been only one social group whose primary task has been the development of a local area. That is the settlement. Always these centers have subordinated their own activities to the development of a neighborhood plan. No other organization either of government or of private enterprise has made this its chief aim. But of course there have been many contributing factors that have moved in this direction. We had a germ of such an organization in New York in the old local improvement boards. But the tide of change in that period was toward centralization rather than decentralization, and these boards withered away.

During the last forty or almost fifty years the settlements have worked with their neighbors in local areas to furnish the neighborhoods they serve with facilities for a full life. They have done this by arousing public opinion to create a demand for civic services, and through these special efforts have fostered a community spirit which has often been fruitful. I do not believe it is generally understood to what extent these neighborhood houses situated in different New York communities have been the fertilizing agents for the creation of public opinion and resultant social action. The activities settlements conduct are wholly secondary, no matter how useful or fascinating, to their primary purpose of energizing their neighborhoods to develop a common consciousness of need and a common effort to meet those needs, in other words, as we say nowadays, a plan.

One of the weaknesses of neighborhood work is that for a long while it has been competitive in character. The demand for local improvements had little relationship to the total problem of the city's needs.

An aroused community, bound to have good playgrounds, swimming pools, libraries, schools, health centers and what not, on the whole stands a better chance of getting somewhere than a dormant community registering no demands. Obviously, however, neighborhood planning must be coordinated with the city plan as a whole. The point of our discussion today is, however, that as the neighborhood plan must be considered in relation to the city as a whole, so the city plan is dependent upon neighborhood planning. It is a two-way process. The zoning that started in the early nineteen hundreds was the beginning of this recognition. The Congestion Exhibit of 1910 featured the evils happening in New York neighborhoods. But out of that Exhibit, addressed at its opening by Governor Hughes who later appointed a State Commission on the same subject, came the first National City Planning Committee which met in Washington in 1912. From this group issued a long series of organizations both for planning and housing which have resulted in gaining a permanent foothold in the public mind of the importance of community planning. In 1902 the first neighborhood association in New York was formed. This group has been the major factor in building up the social and cultural life of that area. The settlements as a whole have fostered and participated in the development of many local city or country-wide efforts to enrich the life of their neighborhoods through social action of a public or private character.

It is of great significance that at this present moment the development of local planning is being emphasized in widely different groups. Labor is organizing in community councils. The Welfare Council is accenting geographical areas for the pursuance of its work in health and welfare, and progressive education is shifting its emphasis to community development. The settlements are gratified that their half century of work in accenting the local area is bearing fruit in so many directions.

All the forces for the future of America are mirrored to a greater or less degree in neighborhoods. Long ago the pioneer philosophers of the neighborhood movement, Mary Follet in her great

and two little known volumes, The New State and Creative Experience, and Cooley in his notable book Social Organization, have shown the neighborhood to be that intermediate group between the family and the State, where the richness or barrenness of life is determined.

What the neighborhood is and may be fixes the pattern of our American life. Properly planned our city neighborhoods (and rural communities also) can ensure a stable existence for the coming generation, which while leaving enough freedom to experiment in, will reduce the casual haphazardness of existence and provide an ordered life full of the rewards which reason alone can effect in the midst of chaos.

But the neighborhood can never plan efficiently except in the larger framework of city, state and national action. Social security, housing, an adequate standard of living, are national problems, but what happens is highlighted in the day-by-day happenings of neighborhood existence. A neighborhood which becomes conscious of a need for a plan will direct its attention not only to municipal action, but to the state and nation, not forgetting that there are many problems which can be met either by private enterprise or through cooperative techniques.

But it is as idle to suppose that private enterprise can solve all our problems as it is to suppose that government action is all we need. Democracy can never be realized until the pattern of the good life is made up through private initiative, cooperative enterprise, and governmental action. It is the integration of these forces which neighborhood planning must attempt to compass.

If our city were really divided into areas whose dwellers realized the vast power which united action can bring about, we could not only point to the fact that these neighborhoods are the grassroots of the nation, but one might expect to see these grassroots grow into an ordered life fit for children to grow up in.

What made the strength of pioneer life in this country was the sense of boundary. The family's self-sustaining economic life, bolstered by school and church created a good but tough life. In Town Meeting the life of the community was organized. Everything necessary was contained in that compact unit. As we have moved on to wider fields we have gained much. We are now in the way of becoming world citizens. As the world shrinks we shall feel more at home in it. But these wider and ever wider loyalties will lose their meaning, if we do not hold on to those primary obligations which have the rich substance of day-by-day living. I learn about the world from my neighbor. He has a story of interest and concern. He has his own background, tradition, and outlook. He is my teacher. I do not have to go far afield to find out what the world needs. It is all implied in our daily neighborhood relationships. For the neighborhood is the microcosm of that larger world we hope to live in. If we fail there, we are likely to fail in the larger world. There never was a time when the word neighbor meant as much as it does today. For the neighbor is beginning to realize he is master of his fate if he lives in a purposeful fellowship of neighbors, which is perhaps a pretty good definition of that vast and hazy word democracy.

Mr. Cleveland Rodgers spoke as follows:

It is significant that this interesting exhibition is being sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art. So much emphasis is placed on engineering, on the architecture of specific buildings, on zoning and other matters, we are inclined to forget that City Planning is, or should be, an art. Mr. Lewis Mumford says the City is art. Certainly there are several broad definitions of art which cover City Planning: "Skill in the adaptation of things in the natural world to the uses of human life," is one from Webster.

Classic City Planning is recognized as the greatest of art manifestations. Modern City Planning has lagged behind science and technology, as well as art. But we may be facing something like a Renaissance. At least we may glimpse some of the future's possibilities in recent achievements in and around New York City.

Highways give Civic Art its form and unity. The comprehensive system of parks and parkways, expressways, some of the new housing, Rockefeller Center and other features, completed or planned, are bringing about a marked transformation in the Metropolitan area.

We are making progress, but much remains to be done. New York still has miles of slums and blighted areas where millions live in deplorable surroundings, but the larger patterns are emerging. Modern democratic cities are the products of many forces and cannot be shaped by fiat. We have the resources and the skills, but something is lacking.

Since classic times the sciences and arts have become separated from each other and all of them have become separated from feeling. In the planning and building of great cities in the past, as in the design and erection of the medieval cathedrals, there was a merging of crafts and skills and a fusing of thought and feeling.

If we are to have better cities we must want them badly and feel strongly about them. There must be a merging of all the arts and sciences and a new fusion of feeling to give modern City Planning real meaning. And this must begin in the homes and neighborhoods where people live. Your exhibition should help. It is altogether fitting that the Museum of Modern Art should provide leadership in furthering modern City Planning, which may become the greatest and most useful of modern art manifestations.