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THE CITY AS A SOCIALIZING AGENCY^{*}
THE PHYSICAL BASIS OF THE CITY: THE CITY PLAN

FREDERIC C. HOWE

We have generally assumed that the city problem was a personal one; that it was a problem of men, of charters, of political machinery. We have approached the city as a personal, ethical, political question. Reform has been directed to securing efficient, honest officials. We have thought of the city as an agency of the state, not unlike the county or the town. We have been like a builder who seeks a care-taker rather than an architect; like a business man who neglects his factory in the perfection of a system of bookkeeping. We have thought of men rather than of things. We have had no city program.

The city problem is primarily an economic not a personal problem. Our failure to see this is far more costly than the inefficiency and dishonesty about which so much has been written and for the correction of which so much energy has been expended. The basis of the city, like the basis of all life, is physical. The health, comfort, convenience, happiness of the people is intimately bound up with the material side of the city. Much of the poverty is the product of our neglect to control the economic foundations of the community. The houses we live in, the streets we travel over, the air and the sunlight are controlled by the attitude of the city to physical things. So is the distribution of wealth, the cost of living and the vice and crime of the community. All are intimately connected with the way the city is built, with the economic or social rather than the personal, the ethical, the political questions with which we have been absorbed.

Our cities are what they are because we have not thought of the city as a city, of the town as a town, of the rights of everybody as opposed to the rights of anybody. A million men are thinking only of their individual lot lines, of their inviolable right to do as they

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will with their own, irrespective of its effect on the community. We do not see beyond our own doorsteps, we do not think in city terms, or appreciate that the progress of society has so far socialized old conditions that the community must have a life of its own separate from, or the composite of, the lives and property of all of its people. We have exalted the rights of the individual above the common weal. Our cities have been permitted to grow with no concern for the future and with no thought of the community or the terrible costs which this uncontrolled development creates.

This failure to think in community terms, to appreciate that the city is a physical thing involves costs which the future cannot repair. And the most costly blunder of all is our neglect of the city's foundations, of the land on which the city is built. The American city is inconvenient, dirty, lacking in charm and beauty because the individual land owner has been permitted to plan it, to build, to do as he willed with his land. There has been no community control, no sense of the public as opposed to private rights.

Our cities have been planned by a hundred different land owners, each desirous of securing the quickest possible speculative returns from the sale of his property. Streets have been laid out without regard to the needs of the future. They have been cheaply paved, watered, and sewered. There have been few building restrictions, little provision for parks, open spaces or sites for public buildings.

The site of a city and the suburbs should be studied with the care of an architect selecting the site of a public building. Streets are worthy of as much thought as a cathedral, which is to endure for centuries. They should be planned with a far-sighted vision of the future. Every bit of land should be allotted and planned by the city rather than by the owner, in order to insure the harmonious growth of the community.

The convenience and attractiveness of the German city is due to the fact that the city treats the land on which it is built as a whole. It lays out suburbs for a generation in advance of building. It determines the width, style, character of streets. The city controls the land, the buildings, the streets and public places for

all people and for all time. The city restrains the lawlessness of property just as it restrains the lawlessness of the individual.

The city of Washington is an example of a city that controlled its physical environment in advance of building. It was laid out more than a hundred years ago for a community of 800,000 people. Sites for public buildings were provided. Streets, parks, gardens, and open spaces were selected far in advance of any building. The water front was reserved for the community as it should have been in all cities. The width, style, and character of streets, as well as building restrictions were fixed in the engineer's plan. Recently the railways, the terminals, and stations were made an integral part of the plan. In consequence Washington grew harmoniously. It escaped the costly blunders which confront other cities. For all time Washington is saved from the monotony, the congestion, and the street disorder of the average American city. It is probably the best example of formal planning in the world. What L'Enfant did for the capital of the nation might have been done for every one of our cities had we but had the prescience to do so.

Streets, too, are part of the physical foundations of a city. They are the circulatory system of the community. They are a matter of less concern in America than are our sewers. Yet they add to or subtract from our comfort and convenience, more than anything else save the houses we live in. Streets can be given endless charm, beauty, dignity. They can be built as the Greeks built streets, as Louis XIV and the two Napoleons built the streets of Paris as streets are being built in Germany today, as things of profound concern to a city.

In the years which followed the Franco-Prussian War the German city was threatened by the rapid growth of the factory system, with the license of land speculators, builders, and factory owners, just as were our own. But Germany courageously faced these problems, just as she faced her condition after the defeat of Prussia by Napoleon. She protested against the spoliation of her cities by the individual and set about to prevent it. City planning grew out of this protest. The cities rejected the American gridiron type of streets, adapted by land speculators interested only in the

largest possible profits. For the speculators' streets the city substituted highways, planned with an eye to easy circulation, to convenience, to beauty, to charm. The streets of the modern German city are works of art. The city also controlled the factory, locating where it willed, irrespective of the comfort of the community; it controlled the tenement owner and the slum with the disease, vice, and crime which they produce. Germany turned her trained intelligence to the control of the physical side of the city; to the control of property, as we control persons whose license is inimical to the community. Private property was subordinated to humanity, while the speculator, builder, and factory owner were required to use their own as the community decreed.

When we think of city planning in this country we think of city centers like those of Cleveland, Denver, Rochester, and other cities; we think of the city beautiful, possibly of a well-planned suburb. Or we have in mind a street-widening project or possibly some big commercial planning undertaking like that of Chicago. First in Germany and now in France and England city planning has become a far bigger idea than this; it is more comprehensive than all these combined. A much better phrase to describe city planning is city building; the building of a city for all the people, for all business, for the future as well as today.

The big difference between the German city and our own is not a difference in honesty. Nor is it a difference of efficiency. The thing that sets off the German city as the most finished in the world is the fact that it is built as we build World's Fairs for fugitive pleasure; as architects design office buildings, or as a private individual lays off a private estate. The city is built as a whole with a conscious realization of its unity, of its possibilities of good as well as its possibilities of evil.

In the first place, Germany recognizes the city as a permanent thing. Officials realize that mistakes made today will continue to curse succeeding generations; they realize that streets, parks, the water front, and sites for public buildings should be planned and acquired far in advance of present needs and uses.

Cities should be planned in anticipation of years of growth. Cheap land should be purchased and held for public needs. Streets

should be planned by expert landscape architects. There should be broad radial thoroughfares to serve as main arteries. These should have parking in the center, with provision for street railway tracks, for business and pleasure use. There should be frequent gardens and open spaces and playgrounds, so that mothers and children can have a convenient place to rest and play. Residence streets should be planned in the same far-sighted way, not in a big spacious manner but for coziness, picturesqueness, retirement. They should have as much variety as possible. There should be restrictions as to the distance houses should be from the street, as to where apartments and tenements may be located, as to where business shall be carried on. The home buyer should be protected in his purchase by the community just as is the housewife at the grocery.

In the second place, the American city has not only neglected its site, it has neglected its plumbing as well. Transportation, gas, water, electric light and power, are as much a part of the city as are the elevators and plumbing of an office building. They are the vital organs of the city. We have turned them over to private hands, failing to see that they form the sensory, the circulatory system of the community. The life of the city depends upon them. Transit controls the distribution of population. It controls the style of houses we shall live in; it decrees the tenement of New York or the suburb of Boston, Chicago, or Philadelphia. It establishes the area of the city. Transit profoundly influences the disease and mortality rate; it has a direct connection with vice and crime. When we begin to study the pathology of the city we will see that the diseases of society are intimately connected with the relation of the city to its plumbing, to the provision made for transportation, light, heat, and water.

European cities recognize these organs as life-giving ones; they recognize that they must be owned by the city rather than left to private hands for exploitation at a cost to the city that cannot be measured by the objections usually urged against municipal ownership. They are a part of the city plan, part of the city structure, like the streets in which they are laid. They should be used to serve all the people instead of a few.

In the third place, we have failed to control the city's superstructure, the houses, tenements, office buildings, and factories in which men live and work. Everything has been left to the uncontrolled license of the builder. Like the land speculator, he has been free to do as he willed with his property and our cities have suffered in consequence. Our political philosophy has assumed that house building was subject to the same competitive laws that prevail in automobile building and that progress would be promoted by reliance on private initiative. Unfortunately for that philosophy many of us have either lived in or know the cities of Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, or New York. These cities are filled with close-packed homes as monotonous and ugly as they could possibly be made. There is no competition for beauty, comfort, convenience here. The cities of Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, or those of the West are little if any better. The tenements and slums of our larger cities are products of the same neglect to control the city's physical side. The Triangle Fire in New York turned the searchlight on factory building as well. The annual costs of the neglect of the physical side of the city, of dirt, of the vice, disease, and crime, is certainly not less than the annual cost of the Civil War, running into hundreds of millions as it did.

The houses people live in, like the land on which they are built, is a matter of community concern. House-building can be controlled, easily controlled. German cities limit the amount of land that can be built upon in the business sections to from 65 to 75 per cent; in new sections to 35 per cent of the lot areas. They limit the height of buildings, usually to the width of the street. They provide that sunlight shall have a chance to enter into every story. It is this community control that gives the German city its charm.

Factories are required to build in those sections away from the direction of the prevailing winds, so that the smoke and dirt will be driven away from the city. Cities open up parks near factories so that workingmen may have a convenient place to rest and play. Germany controls its factories in the interest of human life and efficiency.

We have also neglected our water-ways. They too are part of

the physical foundations of the city. In consequence, trade and commerce is strangled. Railway rates are freed from the competition of water rates. The water front of nearly all our seaboard, Great Lakes and river towns, are monopolized by private interests, at great cost to the community.

Our cities too, have failed adequately to provide for happiness and recreation; failed to recognize that men and women undergo the weariness of a day's work because of the hope of some relaxation at the end of it all. This desire for happiness is one of the strongest motives of life. It is the driving force of individual activity. But the cost of recreation is prohibitive in a large city. It could be provided at insignificant cost did the city think in social terms and provide places for play, opportunities for music, entertainment, and education as is done on the continent of Europe. Provision for happiness should be as obligatory on a city as provision for police protection. It too is part of the physical basis of the city.

Some idea of the extent to which the life of a community is controlled by physical things is seen in the garden cities recently developed in England. These cities are planned before they are built. The land is controlled in perpetuity. Building restrictions are fixed with an eye to convenience and beauty. Shops and factories are located in the places they should naturally go. The city is studied and built as a whole.

The pathological costs of our neglect of the physical side of the city are even more costly than those enumerated. For the cities' economic foundations control the distribution of wealth. Poverty is largely a social rather than a personal thing. The city creates the pauper as well as the millionaire. There is a single family in New York whose fortune has grown from \$20,000 to \$450,000,000 by the growth of land values in that city. The total value of the land in New York city is \$4,500,000,000. This is almost exactly \$1,000 per capita.

In four years' time speculative land values in New York have increased by \$1,000,000,000 or at the rate of \$250,000,000 a year. These are the official figures of the Commissioners of Taxes and Assessments. In Cleveland, Ohio, land values increased \$177,000,000 in ten years' time. The population during the same

period increased by 172,000. Here too, land values are at the rate of \$1,000 per capita. In almost every city where land values are accurately valued they aggregate from \$800 to \$1,000 per capita. Every babe that is born, even the ignorant immigrant coming to the city, adds this value to the land and to the land alone. He produces wealth by his coming, and then is charged an annual rent for that which he himself has produced. This is one of the paradoxes of society. The wealth the worker creates is given to another who in turn levies tribute in the form of land rent from him who produces it.

Is it not clear that the city is a wealth producer on a colossal scale; is it not obvious that here is a source of revenue far in excess of the needs of any city? Is it not equally obvious that the city levies tribute on its people and passes it on to a few who have done nothing to create it? City ground rent increases the cost of city living. It is the heaviest burden on city life. In New York City, ground rent amounts to an average of \$250 per family. The ground rent alone of a miserable two-room tenement on Grand Street amounts to \$90 per year, almost as much as the rent of a comfortable cottage in a small town. This is a social burden imposed on people by the failure of the city to control its economic foundations in the interest of the people. It is one of the principal causes of poverty.

The private monopolies which supply transportation, light, heat, and power are another cause of poverty. They collect such tribute as a corrupt alliance with the city sanctions. The city of Cleveland reduced the burden of car riders by \$2,000,000 a year when it cut the rate of fare from five cents to three cents. It saved its people this substantial sum. But this is the least of the costs which the private ownership of the public utility corporation involves. They are operated for monopoly profits. They should be operated as a public service, for the relief of housing, for the promotion of decent living conditions, for the health, for cheap rent, for cleanliness and comfort. Our failure to recognize the plumbing of the city as a public rather than a private function is another of our costliest errors.

Poverty could be reduced to the vanishing point if the city

thought in public rather than in private; in social rather than in personal terms. If the city took in land taxes, what the city itself creates, it could abandon all other taxes; it could supply many services at no cost whatever, that are now privately exploited. With this abundant revenue the city could acquire public utilities, could widen education, could build slaughter houses, markets, and cold storage plants; it could furnish many kinds of recreation and amusement, now denied to people.

But more important by far than the fiscal gain, the taxation of these increasing land values would relieve the housing problem, it would reduce rents and distribute people far out in the country. For the taxation of vacant land compels owners to use it, to build upon it, to cultivate it, and that is the great gain from this reform. With a heavier tax on land values, opportunity would call men to work, to build, to cultivate. Then speculators would be punished for their idleness rather than rewarded for it. Then too, new wealth would be created, prices would come to a competitive basis and those monopolies identified with the land would be destroyed. For the taxation of land values would open up nature to use by man, it would offer him a place in which to live, and to labor. It would create new opportunities. It would relieve poverty by the creation of more jobs. It would lead to a more equitable distribution of wealth.

Finally, I think the psychology of our city politics, the neglect and indifference of the voter which Mr. Bryce ascribes to ethical causes, are traceable to the relation of the city to its physical environments. I am inclined to question if the American voter is any more indolent, any more partisan, any more absorbed in his daily occupations than is the voter in England or Germany. I do not believe our political conditions are due to personal or ethical causes. Rather I should say, the qualities referred to are a result rather than a cause; a result of an antecedent economic relationship. The psychology of politics, like the social costs enumerated above, is physical; it springs from the relation of the city to the citizen. Even the corruption of our cities is not personal; it too is economic or institutional. American business men are probably no more dishonest than German and English business men. We ourselves are

largely responsible for their offenses. Our laws have encouraged corruption. We invite it and then wonder at its existence. We give away franchise grants of colossal value; we invite men to struggle for them and then complain when they adopt the only weapons available for this struggle. The franchises alone of the street railways, gas, electric lights and many other public utility corporations of almost any city exceed in amount the total city debt. In the larger cities they run into millions, even in hundreds of millions of dollars. Franchise values in Boston are assessed for taxation at more than \$100,000,000. In New York they are worth more than five times this colossal sum. Owners of these law-made privileges are able to keep what they have acquired, are able to be free from competition, or municipal ownership, only by controlling the politics of the city. This they do by controlling the party. Privilege selects the nominees for mayor, council, and other offices. In order to be sure of the city these interests have to control the state as well. They oppose charter changes, direct primaries, the initiative and referendum, or municipal home rule. In almost every city the cause of corruption in city and state can be traced from the city hall to the boss; from the boss to the man behind the boss in the franchise corporations, from whom it runs to the boss of the state and the legislative chambers in the state capital.

Corruption is not personal. It is largely institutional. It is due to the false relations of the city to its physical foundations. And these false economic relations, like the legalized institutions of slavery, divide the city into two classes, on the one hand, the privileged, containing the talent, wealth, and intelligence of the community, which owns the press and aligns it against the city; and on the other, the unorganized, misled, undisciplined mass of the unprivileged. It is this that keeps our best men out of city politics. They cannot and dare not enter. For the franchise corporations are identified with the banks and trust companies, with business men and chambers of commerce. This conflict of interest, this class war growing out of our attitude to the public utility corporation can be reproduced in any one of a dozen cities that have tried to touch the franchise question. We have made

municipal honesty almost impossible by our laws; by inviting civil war and by exiling the talent of the city from interest or participation in the life of the community. One has only to read the accounts of the struggles in San Francisco, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Chicago, where privilege has been challenged by the people, to find an explanation of the corruption of our cities.

The indifference and indolence of the voter are also explained by the economic relation of the city. In America there is no economic nexus between the voter and the city as there is in England and Germany. With us municipal taxes are levied on property. More than two-thirds of our city dwellers are tenants. They are not conscious of the taxes they pay. In the English city taxes are paid by the tenant directly. They are not levied on the owner. The English citizen votes as a rate payer. He thinks as a rate payer. When he goes to the polls he goes with strong economical interest. The same is true in Germany. One-half the municipal revenues in that country come from the income tax. They are felt directly by the voter. This arouses his interest. It keeps it alive. It promotes watchfulness and interest over the council.

A still more potent influence for interest in the European city is the extent of the city's activities. The city is the biggest corporation in the community. It serves the citizen in countless ways. Municipally owned street railways touch the voter daily. His interest is quickened by his common ownership of many things. In the British cities people talk tramways, gas, water, and electric-lighting undertakings, they talk rates and taxes to the exclusion of everything else. It is a common bond of conversation. The same is true in the German city. The utility corporations, slaughter houses, markets, baths, savings-banks, pawnshops, restaurants, orchestras, operas, theaters, all owned by the city and operated by the city for the people, awaken an interest on the part of the people that is reflected in their attitude toward the city.

The American city has none of these stimuli to interest. Our cities only serve the people in routine, non-industrial ways. Our municipal services are negative rather than positive. There is little to awaken the enthusiasm, the affection of the voter. This, I

think, rather than any ethical, personal, or partisan reason, explains the failure of our people in things municipal. We lack a city sense because we have little to create a city sense. There is nothing to awaken love, affection, interest. The attitude of people to the state is a reciprocal state of mind born of the attitude of the state to the citizen. The city has neglected the people and the people in turn have neglected the city.

And we cannot have a real city until we reverse our point of view. That will only come when the city enjoys a kind of sovereignty, a sense of its dignity, a local pride and power like that of the free cities of the world. When we are endowed with that kind of freedom and when we exercise that power for the building of cities, for their conscious intelligent planning, for the promotion of beauty, of comfort, of convenience, when we begin to think in terms of the whole city, as we did a few years ago about the World's Fair at Chicago, then the personal, ethical, and political conditions that we treat as causes will disappear. For then the interest of the whole community will be on the side of the city. There will be none of that cleavage of classes that we have today. Then the economic viewpoint of community ownership and city service will create a new citizenship before which the personal derelictions will disappear. For then we will have corrected the cause of our disease rather than the results, causes we have vainly tried to cure by a treatment of symptoms.