

Mapping a War on Slums

By J. Charles Laue

At last an authoritative book for those who are "slum blight conscious" and tax conscious—a book that depicts in broad strokes the financial consequences to cities of having neglected for generations to conserve their biggest asset, the land. In gathering the facts for "Urban Blight and Slums," the author, Dr. Mabel L. Walker, has ranged the related fields of taxation, city planning, zoning and housing. She sets forth the practical remedies that are at hand before still greater fiscal errors occur, such as handing to land speculators our socially created treasure house a second time.

New York City studies from an important part of the volume. It shows the depopulation of the blighted lower East Side. In spite of this the density of some of these areas is appalling as it is shown also for Boston, Pittsburgh and other cities. Dr. Walker's book is most timely for those who spend the housing millions and those who are taxed for these subsidies.

Dr. Walker's summary based on this mass of data follows:

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"It would be easier to accept the conclusion one frequently hears to the effect that nothing can be done concerning the problems of urban blight and slums if one did not see on every hand such a variety of things which could be done. There is no single solution of the problem and this may account to some extent for the discouraging attitude so frequently met. But there are many possible lines of attack each of which offers considerable promise..

"The most important objectives appear to be as follows: 1. An adequate city plan. 2. More logical zoning regulations. 3. More effective control of subdivisions. 4. Better

and more standardized building regulations. 5. Clear and sufficient legal powers for the creation of state and local housing authorities. 6. More effective methods of land assembly at fair prices, and of the exercise of eminent domain for housing purposes. 7. Reform in the system of taxation. 8. Wider use of excess condemnation for replanning purposes. 9. Improvement of home-financing policies. 10. The creation and rationalization of a real home-building industry. 11. Extensive government research in the various aspects of the problem. 12. Government demonstration projects. 13. An intelligent and informed public opinion."

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In the conclusion Dr. Walker well says:

"Our most promising attack, therefore, is the creation and rationalization of a large-scale home-building industry which can meet the people's housing needs, and strict governmental regulations concerning planning and building with a vigorously enforced condemnation and demolition policy and a reformed tax system. We do not have to build cities, but to rebuild them."

Among the points brought out are:

"Progress in social reform does not spring full grown from the brows of governmental Joves. We cannot expect public officials to be very much ahead of the wisdom and temper of their times.

"Temporarily and perhaps permanently, a Federal housing subsidy is needed. . . . It should not be a rent subsidy, a tax subsidy, nor a subsidy to land owners and holders of obsolete property. . . . Nor should cit-

izens be taxed in order to make things easy for the landlord. . . .

"If the local governments wish to subsidize housing it should be by direct grants rather than through tax exemption."

"It is regrettable that social reformers, using that word in its better sense, do not collaborate more closely with those groups working for improved methods of government and public finance. There are many instances of socially minded groups, actuated by the highest motives, promoting policies that are in conflict with the generally accepted standards of students of government and taxation. During recent years we have at times seen educational groups campaign for the regressive general sales tax and we have seen housing groups recommend the unwise and unfair policy of tax exemption. Other instances could be cited. The ultimate aims of such groups are sound. Cooperation should reveal a way to realize their objectives without using methods which are likely to cause greater evils than they cure. . . ."

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"An alternative is a thoroughgoing shift in the incidence of real estate taxation whereby ALL improvements would gradually become partially or wholly tax exempt. . . . The untaxing of all improvements would afford relief to all the low-income groups."

This book is tax education in one volume. The book's importance is attested by the sponsorship of Lawson Purdy and Harold S. Bottenheim. The volume of 442 pages is No. XII of the Harvard City Planning Studies. It may be had from the Tax Policy League, 309 East 34th Street, New York City for \$4.00. It includes an excellent bibliography on the subject.

