The Public Housers' Responsibility for a Post-War Program

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The National Public Housing Conference is a non-profit membership corporation, founded in 1931 to promote slum clearance and low-rent public housing.

During the war the Conference has concerned itself with the need for adequate war housing. It is now working to develop a sound program for post-war housing in cooperation with local housing authorities, labor unions, architects, business groups, welfare workers and others.

Local housing authorities are participating in this program through subscriptions to the Conference's special Informational Service for local authorities at fees scaled from $25 to $100 a year, depending on the number of dwelling units managed by the authority.

Individual memberships are $5 a year (Active), which includes a subscription to *Public Housing* and copies of all other publications; and $2 (Subscribing), which covers a subscription only. Officers of the Conference are: BRYN J. HOVDE, *President;* CATHERINE BAUER, *Vice-President;* AGNES FAHY, *Secretary-Treasurer;* LOUIS H. PINK, *Chairman of the Board;* ALEXANDER L. CROSBY, *Executive Director.*

THE need for building activity on a larger scale than ever before during the period of difficult industrial readjustment immediately following the war requires no detailed explanation here. We face the possibility of a drop in national income of $25 to $50 billion a year. This might mean unemployment of 10 to 20 million people. A building program, planned and prepared now, is one of the few obvious measures to help prevent such a catastrophe.

Nor do I need to stress the vital role of home building in that picture. Hardly an article or a statement comes out, from whatever source, that does not make housing the prime example of how to win what Milo Perkins called the "long, long fight to make a mass production economy work." Usually it sounds all too easy.

Just the other day I found that some eminent economists in responsible positions are counting on housing alone to provide employment, directly and indirectly, for some 3 million workers —a figure far higher than anything ever achieved in the peak building booms of the past.

Right here lies the first responsibility of the public housers. Who convinced the country that 8 or 10 million American families live in substandard dwellings which can and must be replaced? We did. Who gave the economists the notion that a huge housing program is the simplest and most obvious method of providing employment and counter-acting depression? We did. Who knows the facts *now* about the housing market in this country and the proportion of the need which we can reasonably expect ordinary private enterprise to meet? Well, if we don't, then nobody does.

A PROGRAM IS NEEDED

So responsibility No. 1 is the preparation and promotion of a realistic housing program, on both a local and national scale, based on an honest analysis of the housing market in terms of need, cost, and the capacity to pay.

Cold statistics will themselves bring out one axiomatic principle: namely, that if a housing

program is to play an important part in re-employment (let alone solve the social side of the housing problem), we will have to make sure that the housing market must be made effective for *all* income groups. That means, in any given community, that new housing of suitable standard should be built in all rent and price ranges. It means an end to the old "filtering up" or "dribbling down" theory. For otherwise, while there might be a temporary boomlet of building for the top (although it has never happened before except in a period of rising income), it would be sure to end in overbuilding and crash. The leftover houses would, as in the past, become the slums and blighted areas of the future. And the new homes, if unguided and uncontrolled, will merely sprawl out further and further from the center, leaving larger and larger circles of blight and decay behind them.

Acceptance of this principle does not mean that all old housing must eventually be scrapped or devalued. Many older homes of sound construction have advantages of location, extra space, and individuality, which will permit them to compete favorably with minimum new homes. Many more, if they have to compete with new dwellings, can be brought up to modern standards.

These facts and proved principles have been largely forgotten in the current proposals of the Federal Housing Administration and the Urban Land Institute.

NO-MAN'S LAND

Responsibility No. 2, therefore, is to explain why a universal housing market, reaching all income groups, is essential, and to promote measures to facilitate it.

At present there is a vast no-man's land between the effective market for new private housing, and the families eligible for public low-rent housing. This gap must be filled. Private builders must devise means of reaching much further into the middle group. And local authorities will have to take care of the remainder, including

some families who require little or no subsidy and may not live in outright slums.

One of the great potential virtues of such a principle is the stimulus it would give to self-improvement on the part of private enterprise. This is evidenced in a lively article in the Readers Digest by Eric Johnston, president of the U. S. Chamber of Commerce. He says:

> Now we will make organizations which will include representatives of all elements of housing production and we will produce housing at a private cooperative consolidated cost that will baffle public planners in the whole of Washington. Some of them would like to do all this building. We will do it first—and better. We will stop railing at the government. We will start outthinking it and outdoing it and outstripping it.

But what about improvements in public housing practice? We have no cause to be smug. New legislation and much broader policies will be necessary if we are to carry our share of this overall program. First of all, our own effective market must be broadened to include 1-person families and such non-citizens as the Mexicans in the southwest; to reach both lower and higher income groups and those who may neither live in outright slums nor require a subsidy but are nevertheless entirely outside the private market for decent new homes; and to attract those who own the slums they live in.

VERY LITTLE DELIGHTE

We are none too popular as it is, even with the restricted group we have tried to serve. Our projects may be statistically decent and theoretically advanced in site-planning but the majority is dull and dreary in actuality. In terms of an old definition of the purposes of architecture, they offer a fair degree of Commoditie and Firmnesse, no doubt, but very little Delighte. Very often our management policies are far too paternalistic for the temper of American families.

I would enlarge on that point but the last time I did was at the National Public Housing Conference meeting a year ago in Washington, where I made my usual plea for less emphasis on Crime

and Disease. A very quiet young man—whom I remembered having seen but never heard at other housing conferences — got up and said, "Miss Bauer says she is tired of hearing about crime and disease in relation to public housing. I just want to say I am tired of hearing Miss Bauer say it." The most successful heckle I ever experienced!

We have hardly tackled such tough problems as the future of local tax-exemption, how to encourage sound cooperative initiative, and how to get rid of individually owned shacks and move the occupants into low-rent housing with a minimum of friction and bitterness. Maybe that isn't a problem in the east, but on the west coast—where half of the slum dwellers are ordinarily shack owners—it is a major problem. It can't be solved by shouting about exploitative property owners, either.

THE SAWDUST TRAIL

All in all, the third responsibility of public housers is obvious: to defend and also improve the public housing mechanism. There are all too many and too powerful forces, even among the post-war planners, who would like to see it destroyed.

But houses are not just commodities which, if the price and quantity and quality are right, automatically get to the right consumers. They also have to be in the right place from the viewpoint of both the occupant and the community. And there is no greater issue in the current discussion of post-war housing than this matter of location.

Even the terminology has changed. We used to call them "slums;" now they are "blighted areas." This may be an improvement, unless it helps us forget the social side of the issue. Anyway, blighted areas are now at long last generally recognized to be economic as well as social problems, and to their owners as well as to the city as a whole. More and more owners of downtown

property are frightened to the point of seeking salvation down the sawdust trail of federal aid.

This mood should not be discouraged. Far from it. In many localities it would be worth while to rebuild large central areas even at high cost, rather than spread out still further at the rim. But the bailing out of disappointed owners and mortgage-holders simply cannot be the exclusive central concern of a healthy post-war housing program. The replanning and rebuilding of suburban shacktowns and still-born subdivisions is just as important (particularly in the west) and would be a lot cheaper and quicker for immediate post-war action.

Many cities will have such a severe shortage left over from the wartime building hiatus, that entirely new land will still have to be opened up. Moreover, the factors that promoted decentralization in the past have been speeded up, if anything, by the location of magnificent new plants for war industry out in open country, and the likely future of automobiles and airplanes. No King Canute can stop this tide entirely, nor restore central values based on congestion and exploitation. And finally, any notion that Congress (whatever its political complexion) will hand over billions of dollars of outright subsidy simply for land purchase, in a period when the war has to be paid for and when employment itself will be the direct concern of the country, is politically naive to say the least.

PROTECTING PUBLIC INTEREST

So our fourth responsibility is to represent, clearly and positively, the broad public interest in the formulation of urban redevelopment policies.

Along with this are certain specific corollaries, as follows:

1. The adequate rehousing, on the site or elsewhere, of families displaced by redevelopment operations (whether public or private) must be accepted as a legal public responsibility. (Probably such a condition should replace

the present policy of "equivalent elimination." Put it the other way around and say that whenever either private or public action removes low income families from a blighted area, there is a public responsibility for rehousing them, either on the same site or on some suitable location elsewhere.)

2. Powers of condemnation for purposes of redevelopment should rest solely in local public agencies, who should retain permanent title to such property whether it is redeveloped by public or private initiative. (If you accept that, you realize of course that the four state redevelopment acts, which began in New York, would not comply because they grant powers of condemnation to private agencies. I think that is one thing on which we should be absolutely firm.)

3. Powers of public land acquisition should include suburban as well as central areas, protective green belts, and sites for entirely new communities.

If we had these three things written into any program of land acquisition and urban redevelopment we should have instruments which could be used safely and fruitfully to promote the overall public interest.

ISOLATION MUST END

We have all fallen into the habit of making easy generalizations about "comprehensive" land-purchase and housing programs, "coordinated" redevelopment, and "overall" planning and programming. But have we faced the implications of these phrases?

Public housing has been a little island. Subject of course to limitations from Washington and occasional battles with city councils, local housing authorities have nevertheless been pretty self-sufficient. They have on the whole decided for themselves what constituted a "slum" and a "slum" dweller, how much housing to build, where to put it, at what rents and density, and how much to pay for the land. But that was all back in the dear dead days beyond recall, before

the post-war planners and city fathers and central property owners and private builders got religion too.

If there is really going to be a planned comprehensive program of housing development and redevelopment in the future, as there must be, there are only two possible alternatives for local housing authorities: Either they will lose most of their present powers to an entirely new agency, or they will themselves expand to *become* the broader agency required for land acquisition, programming and guidance for private as well as public housing, in addition to low-rent housing construction and operation.

EXPAND THE AUTHORITIES

I favor the latter course, not because of any emotional attachment to local authorities *per se*, but because I think it's a sound and natural development, in tune with the way we tend to do things in this country. Housing authorities are established and experienced agencies, with broad powers of land acquisition already, many of them with jurisdiction beyond city limits. Most of them know whatever *is* known about slums and blighted areas, and the housing needs of low and middle income families, in their communities. They have had concrete experience with neighborhood planning and large-scale building. They are corporate agencies with excellent success in marketing their bonds.

Eventually we shall probably need Land and Development Authorities, on a metropolitan or regional basis, with very broad powers. But this must parallel a movement to consolidate local governments in urban areas: it cannot happen overnight unless we are willing to hand over the whole problem to the federal government. It seems to me that to expand the housing authorities is a much more practical and feasible step in this direction than to go after entirely new federal, state and local legislation and agencies. Perhaps this sounds conservative, but should we be afraid of being the practical realists in the post-war picture?

The fifth responsibility is therefore clear: the local authorities and public housers must decide whether they'll take on a bigger job or hang on desperately to a smaller one.

This has to be done now.

One thing we should face very clearly is that leadership in preparing and promoting legislation and policy—the whole strategy of housing politics—from now on rests with the local housing authorities. This is even truer than it was in the past for public housing was formerly represented in Washington by a relatively independent agency. The United States Housing Authority formulated its own policy, and local authorities on the whole just followed along.

Reorganization was essential but we must not forget that the Federal Public Housing Authority is now part of the National Housing Agency. Whether or not NHA officials are personally and completely sold on what public housers want, within NHA are also the Federal Housing Administration and the Federal Home Loan Bank Administration. No public statement can be made nor can any legislative program be promoted until it has been modified to satisfy everybody on all sides. If we want our side presented and promoted, we must do it ourselves.

WE ARE THE CUSTODIANS

All I'm really saying is that public housers and their supporters represent much more than just another little vested interest. For better or worse and whether we like it or not, we are the custodians of the progressive social viewpoint in the entire field of housing and city planning. Back in the thirties the immediate need (and the only real opportunity) was to get some low-rent housing and slum clearance started. But today the horizon is much broader.

Our responsibility is much greater than mere self-defense. Indeed, we should not fight for subsidized public housing *per se*, and must not allow ourselves to be put in that corner where, if you're in favor of public housing, you must be against private enterprise. Not at all. If we truly

represent broad progressive leadership, we're in favor of a housing program that reaches all people, gets rid of slums, creates good neighborhoods, and gradually transforms our obsolete, inefficient, ugly cities into modern, efficient, pleasant ones.

If and when the day comes when incomes are so high and building costs so low, and private building and financing methods so effectively revamped, that planning and land acquisitions are the only public measures necessary to accomplish these ends, well and good. There should then be an end to subsidized public housing.

But in the meantime—and that means within any visible, figurable future—we're for a big public housing program along with a big private program, because these ends cannot be achieved under present conditions without it.

OOMPH IN REVERSE

The public housers are the social conscience, the practical idealists, of the housing and planning business. As such we're pretty unfashionable at the moment. But don't let any inhibited expert tell you that a huge post-war building program—or full employment by any other means—can be accomplished without the dynamic drive of a great social purpose behind it. The word "planning" has no political oomph at all (except in reverse).

"Saving cities?" I wonder for how many citizens that phrase would have any positive meaning. But "better homes for everybody" is something everybody understands and a great many will fight for.

Public housing is controversial simply because it is further ahead than the other elements in a comprehensive housing and planning program. We *can* have a lot more friends than we've had in the past, but there's no way to avoid a fight. So let's get into it.