



Planning for Permanence: the Speeches of J.C. Nichols
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City Planning

Cities are handmade. Whether our American cities are physically bad or physically good is our responsibility. Were we living in cities centuries or thousands of years old, they might become so rigid and so fixed in their physical make-up that comparatively little might be done in the established portions of our old cities to increase the efficiency by which they could meet their growing needs and perform the functions of a city. In such cities, the efforts of planning for the future may be well applied to the newer sections, and to the urban belt. Any re-planning or re-making of the older established sections becomes very costly. "Too late" are the saddest words in city building.

Even the farmer boy constantly endeavors to increase the productivity of his land and the character of his herds; the factory worker is constantly urged to improve the product of his hand; the progressive professional man never becomes too old or well established in his work to fail to keep abreast of all progressive knowledge of his calling, yet, until comparatively a few years ago, little thought was given to improving the profession of the making of cities. In the last decade there has developed throughout our country, a group of men known as "City Builders", representing a new profession, devoted not only to improving the living conditions of our cities, but devoted to stabilizing of urban values and the increasing of the industrial, commercial and residential efficiency of our cities.

American cities of one hundred thousand population or more have immense areas of vacant land not increasing in value as rapidly as the carrying charges; blighted and abandoned residential sections representing but a mere fraction of their former value; shifting down town retail business centers, creating immense loss in the abandoned sections and rendering unstable the highest valued real estate in the city; good residential sections being ruined by the encroachment of property uses, highly injurious to residential neighborhoods; industrial property hampered in realty expansion because of encroachment on industrial property by residential property, thereby making it extremely costly to acquire lands for industrial expansion; a growing traffic congestion in relation to the centralized business retail sections, wholesale shopping districts, the light and heavy manufacturing sections and residential areas. We are told by traffic engineers that the traffic increases by the square of the population and when your city becomes four times as large as it is today, your traffic problem will be at least sixteen times as great. This ratio is perhaps being even further accelerated, by the increased size and weight of the transportation units on the streets and the marvelous increase of the automobiles and trucks, the future growth and number of which it would even today be difficult to estimate; improperly placed school houses, public markets, fire stations, police stations

and other utility stations, because of the failure to be guided by industrial and census surveys and growth forecasts in order to so place these utilities today to serve the needs of tomorrow; water mains, sewers, gas lines and other utilities of improper size on account of the failure to properly look ahead as to future needs; blocks too long or too short and streets too wide or too narrow to meet the conditions that have arisen; main lines or arteries extending not in the main lines of traffic, but in the direction of the lesser amount of traffic; great difficulties in providing the proper amount of playground and park areas so important to the moral, social and physical life of any community. Suburban belts of property immediately beyond the municipal limits developed with practically no control; the heterogeneous mass of property uses, badly planned street layouts and connections, almost impossible grades on the streets, all making conditions extravagant and inefficient for later conversion into an important part of the city itself. All of these conditions and many others, not only lay a heavy toll on every movement of trade within our larger cities, not only create conditions menacing to the health of its people, but render unstable real estate values, the foundation of all wealth, and creating a lack of confidence in the permanency of the home and lack of patriotic and civic pride in service and greatness of the city itself.

Cities have changed more in the last fifty years than they did in the previous two thousand years and the changes in civic life and communication between community centers in the last ten years have been almost miraculous and the city that fails to take inventory of the conditions under which it lives and transacts its business and fails to take account of its growing needs and make proper provision for the needs of the future, will just as surely suffer in its competition for supremacy in trade and not only fail to appeal to families from throughout its trade territory to come and live in the city, but it will fail to hold its citizens seeking the most desirable place to transact their business and rear their families. Fortunately, our American cities have awakened from the self-complacency and the lethargy of the previous decade and from one end of the country to the other the words, "City planning" have taken on a wonderful meaning. They ceased to regard City planning as a visionary dream of a reformer or the extravagant embellishment or ornamentation of our cities. They have quickly realized that city planning is the making of the city practical and the planning or re-planning of cities is a definite and precise science; they realize that the city is a civic machine with each part definitely related to every other part – a city is an economic body with the service rendered by any section or part of the city as directly influenced by the efficiency of the other parts of the city as any member of the human anatomy is directly affected by any other part of the body. City planning is the insistent demand of industrial and human instinct for the use of reason and foresight in planning to meet the growing physical needs of the city; it vitally concerns every individual and every commercial interest of the city; it believes in preventative foresight rather than in enormous corrective costs and applies the same common sense methods in making of the cities as guides a manufacturer in laying out the plans of his factory and providing for the growth of the future – as guides the retail merchant in the careful study of best serving his patrons and to meet the future increasing demands on his institution – as guides the farmer to endeavor to so lay out his farm as to make the least lost motion in its conduct – or as guides the man, in building his home in the arrangement of the rooms and their service so as to bring a maximum efficiency, the greatest degree of comfort at the least loss of time – it applies inspiration(?) for planning

that enters into every commercial undertaking which has so woefully been disregarded in meeting the absorbing needs of today in many of our growing cities, where so frequently has been forgotten the problems of future generations.

Practically all growing cities of considerable size today are spending immense sums in correcting the evils of city building. Fire risks, health standards, traffic needs, economic business hazards, protection of home surroundings, stability of property values and many other phases of city life are crying out for the better planning of our cities to meet both their present and their future needs.

City planning in its great fundamental meaning is not so concerned in the manner in which the plan is to be executed, as it is in the making of the plan itself, which will stir ambition and imagination of its people and record a diagram for future growth so logical and so sound and so meritorious that its force will recur again and again at every step of the city's structure.

First in importance in the various phases of city planning comes the zoning of the city. Zoning is merely the application of common sense and fairness in governing the use of private property; it is the natural advancement of civilization in placing the public welfare above individual and selfish rights; it gives to every section of a city the conditions necessary for its proper functions with due regard to surrounding Districts; it recognizes the need of differentiating and specializing in the use of city property; it recognizes the different needs pertaining to property of different uses; it protects an owner in the enjoyment of his property rights, from unreasonable injury by the owner of adjoining property taking unfair advantage of his neighborhood. Yet, with it all, zoning treats all men alike. Zoning sets up reasonable regulations of height, use, and size of buildings; it catalogues all the uses of property within a city and with reason and foresight groups uses of harmonious kinds; it protects industry as well as the home; it provides for future expansion of all types of property uses; it creates a definite plan to guide every phase of city building, the placing of every utility, the establishment of every car line, school, church, fire station, police station, subway, bridge, viaduct, post office, water system, trafficway, boulevard, park, playground, approach to rural highways, public buildings, freight terminals, freight distribution stations, railroad stations, interurban stations, Art museums, public libraries and every other feature of the physical side of the city. Zoning checks the haphazard selfishly directed growth of the city according to the whim or desire of every individual and establishes a higher standard of the general benefit and public welfare from which eventually every piece of property and every resident of the city procures a greater gain; it recognizes the economic hazard attending every property value as a result of uncongenial surroundings; it regulates the height of buildings in proportion to the needs of the city and actually increases general values by a "Live and let live" practice, rather than a "Dog eat dog" – by height and area regulations, fire risks are reduced, traffic congestion improved and the health of the occupants of the buildings safeguarded. It has been said upon reliable authority that a loss exceeding a billion dollars annually is entailed in our American cities as a result of the evils attending the lack of proper zoning. Whether this may be the result of encroachment of a public garage, undertaking establishment, laundry or factory adjoining your home, or may be the deterioration of a prosperous retail section by the encroachment of factories and other enterprises undesirable in such districts, or whether it

may be an encroachment in industrial areas by the development of residential subdivisions or the results of ill-placed public buildings and utilities soon to be left marooned and of little value in a section of a city where its character has entirely changed.

Zoning is designed to prevent the blighted district. Zoning is planned to avoid the extravagant re-building of American cities. Zoning creates a respect for property rights and crystallizes a public spirit for the city itself.

Closely attending zoning, and in fact necessarily considered simultaneously with the making of zoning maps, in the street and block lay-out of the city. The blind conformance to a checkerboard plan of street platting or a standardized width of street and length of block is perhaps the most senseless act in the entire making of the United States. Blind conformance by many cities to the same uniform plan adopted when the city was small, has gone on through generations endeavoring to meet the changing and growing conditions of the city. Frequently the broader streets of easier grade do not run in the direction of the city's greatest traffic. Frequently the blocks are just as long in the part of the city having a thousand times more traffic than that part of the city where only a few vehicles a day occupy the streets. By city ordinance, a sidewalk or paving, or the street width itself may be required to be as great on a minor street as upon a major street. Perhaps one or two broad streets in the original plan of the city has lulled its citizens into a sense of civic satisfaction and a city utterly failing to provide highways of sufficient width to serve beyond five years from the present day. At this juncture, the automobile is increasing the traffic problem manifold. While in residential districts it has made it possible to greatly reduce the length of blocks and reduce the number of side streets so long as it does not interfere with the main lines of traffic of the city, it has at the same time, thrown upon our downtown streets and our main traffic boulevards an undreamed of burden. Traffic congestion will eventually drive business away from the established business sections of the city. That city which is not providing for the proper handling of this traffic increasing so surely in a geometrical ration, will not only suffer the decentralization of its downtown districts, but will render unstable its highest valued real estate.

City planning calls for the study of traffic needs, based upon the changes in traffic counts, analysis of the objective points of traffic and the changing sources of traffic. It studies the street layout and street functions just as carefully as the sewer or water engineer studies the size and needs of sewer or water mains. Diversion of unessential traffic from certain streets, the creation of circumferential highways, the opening up of short cut roads, the separation of traffic, are all as important as street widening or the opening of new streets. But city planning at all times does not think in the terms of the needs of today, and should wisely calculate the estimate growth by future periods of the city, and carefully calculate future needs. It does not entail great costs on the present generation but sees to it that the present generation does not do the things that bring colossal costs in the next decade. The mere establishing of a building line on a street ultimately destined to be a broad highway, may be no cost to the property owner of today, and yet save millions upon that one street alone by caring for the traffic needs of the future. All of this by saying to the property owner of today, "You must not extend your building nearer than a certain number of feet to the street line." So long as this rule is

made universal on that street, any injury or loss of depth is more than compensated for by the confidence in the future of the street and the security with which improvements may be erected.

City planning designs its streets in relation to the fundamental sources of the traffic. It recognizes the different needs of the highways serving the wholesale or factory district or approaching the railway stations, or connecting with the permanent or important rural highways. It recognizes population and future population centers in the city. It recognizes the increased number of vehicles approaching downtown centers, public parks, and other common objective points. It also recognizes the increased value of the street designed to discourage business traffic and create purely a residential atmosphere. It recognizes the encouragement of business traffic by easy grades reducing the cost in every trade movement. On the other hand, it realizes that residential character may be encouraged on certain minor streets by the provision of grades that discourage through traffic. It recognizes the assistance that the perfect street layout can afford the zoning plan in concentrating objective traffic at certain logical business centers; in encouraging further industrial expansion in the so-zoned sections and assists in the exclusion of business encroachment in certain logical residential neighborhoods. A minor and major street map based upon scientific traffic studies is essential to the proper zoning of the city, and no successful minor or major street can successfully be made without the aid of the zoning map. No public utility or public building, or even large private enterprise can be intelligently placed without these two important guides of city planning. The greatest municipal investment of cities today is in street widths and street improvements. Unnecessary street widths and street improvements in certain sections involve a colossal loss in every large city, while the lack of proper width of street and street improvements in other sections of the city, involve a handicap to trade and the pleasure of living in the city, of still far greater cost. City planning, guided by scientific street plans for zone districts, rapidly proceeds to coordinate all existing functions in the most efficient way, according to a generally accepted plan, sufficiently artistic to adjust itself to the changing needs of the city. The parks, the boulevards, the playgrounds, become a matter of definite calculation in proportion to the population, and may be located in relation to various parts of the city devoted to permanent uses. In this manner, playgrounds and parks should continue to be convenient to the neighborhoods for which they were intended and boulevards designed for permanent service and future expansion. With the schedule of growth guiding the establishment of parks, boulevards and playgrounds, careful consideration, not only governing their size and location, but necessary land acquired a sufficiently long time in advance to avoid the expensive condemnation of high priced land or unnecessary improvements. Public markets, fire stations, police stations, and all such municipal buildings may be provided for and located as needed in the most efficient and economical manner. Street railways, freight terminals, passenger stations, interurban stations are not placed according to the manipulation of political influence or selfish activity or real estate operators, or the influence of vested property interests in certain sections of the city, but are scientifically placed according to the sections evidenced by the scientific city plan, which generally clearly indicates the most logical and most serviceable location for such public or semi-public institutions to not only best serve the city of today, but meet the needs as indicated by the plan in the successive periods of the city's growth. Increasing needs in the water

supply, or many other necessities of a city's population, become more evident when forecast upon a plan for your city's future growth. The enclosing of an obnoxious open sewer or undesirable stream may be foreseen before encroaching improvements make the project a costly one. Surveys showing the costs of raw food supply and the distribution of food, compared with other cities, may become an important guide in freight distribution and the placing of public markets. Population density counts made in the study of zoning maps or traffic studies should bring before the people its present housing conditions and point the need of relief or proper future provision. Industrial surveys employed in zoning and traffic studies should point out the industries which should properly succeed in that city and call attention to those which do not logically belong to that community. Industrial studies should bring to light the comparative costs of distribution and the conduct of industry in your city, as compared with competing cities. The very location of public building, such as the city hall, the county court house, the Post Office, the library, the art gallery, the natural history museum and other kindred buildings becomes a matter of conscientious responsibility, both as to their convenient location and to their impression upon the public. The harmonious grouping of a number of public buildings gives an effect of dignity, beauty and civic adornment far greater than the single units of such buildings scattered throughout the city. European cities have demonstrated so well the value of proper placing of public buildings, the proper approach and proper open setting. The civic center, well placed and well planned becomes a rallying place in public life, crystallizes a love, affection and patriotism for your city of incomparable value, not only in city building, but in civic spirit and general residential morale of the community. City planning, while fundamentally concerned in the practical, efficient arrangement of things, recognizes that from good order comes a civic beauty of immeasurable consequence in every city. Ugliness breeds contempt not only for the thing itself, but for the conditions which permit it. Civic beauty has a direct relation with city politics. Every human being is influenced by his surroundings. There is a gigantic ugliness, and almost a contempt for the city itself, which comes from a haphazardly developed city, where property uses run riot with no regard to public good – where cities are built without a future plan and strewn from one end to the other with the wrecks caused by the shifting of the various parts of the city. Abandoned industrial areas frequently become public dumps and neglected eyesores. The boasting of an occasional unregulated sky scraper, or one of the seven busiest corners in the world in a downtown business section, is not a sane excuse for filthy river fronts, ramshackle buildings in abandoned districts, or a loss of 15 or 20 minutes a day in traveling time to every working man or woman in the city. The spectacular raising of a million dollars by popular subscription for some great civic or charitable purpose, is not a mark of city greatness sufficient to justify a poor health standard or high cost of raw food supply or an unnecessary toll upon the traffic of the city. Greater than all is the well ordered, beautiful, efficient city, in which every section has its definite part to perform, with the greatest benefits to itself and the least injury to surrounding districts. Greater than all, is that city so designed that every generation is freed to carry forward the great growth of its city and the accomplishments and achievements of its generations, rather than be overburdened with enormous taxation to correct the evils of city building of the generations just passed. And greater than all is that increased development of civic conscience and social solidarity and intelligent, scientific civic diagnosis that takes stock

of your city as you find it today, calculates the growing needs of your city through the future and boldly and determinedly sets about to so plan your city building of today as to not only most efficiently meet your present needs, but provide for the changing and growing demands upon every phase of your physical, civic structure as your city adds from year to year the living, loving souls who consecrate the lives of their families to the city they have chosen and devote their careers to the commercial and professional opportunities afforded in the city they call their own.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) – Speech JCN003

Arguably Jesse Clyde Nichols (1880-1950) was the single most influential individual to the development of metropolitan Kansas City. Moreover his work, ideas, and philosophy of city planning and development had far-reaching impact nationally – so much so that the Urban Land Institute has established the J.C. Nichols Prize for Visionary Urban Development to recognize a person or a person representing an institution whose career demonstrates a commitment to the highest standards of responsible development.

Nichols' objective was to “develop whole residential neighborhoods that would attract an element of people who desired a better way of life, a nicer place to live and would be willing to work in order to keep it better.” The Company under Nichols and his son, Miller Nichols (1911-), undertook such ventures as rental housing, industrial parks, hotels, and shopping centers. Perhaps the most widely recognized Nichols Company developments are the Country Club District and the Country Club Plaza Shopping Center, reportedly the first shopping area in the United States planned to serve those arriving by automobile rather than trolley car.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) contains both personal and business files concerning J.C. Nichols' private and business life. Included are personal correspondence, family related material, and speeches and articles written by him. Business and financial files pertain to actions of the Company, including information about different developments and the securing of art objects; and printed materials produced by and about the Company.