



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

Urban development has seen many changes during the last generation. The automobile, the steel frame or reinforced skyscraper, the kitchenette, the apartment house and the outlying motion picture theatre are greatly affecting the physical layout of cities. Perhaps no one factor is more influential today than the rapidly increasing number of automobiles congesting downtown business streets designed for a mere fractional part of the demands now made upon them. Regardless of the widening of these streets and opening of new arteries, provision of large garage parking buildings, the use of building roofs for parks, and other efforts there is no question that there is underway a certain decentralization of downtown business centers. This does not mean that every city, large and small, will not continue to have its main downtown business section, so vitally important to every city; in fact, every effort should be made to conserve the values of downtown business property, stabilize its location and increase its efficiency and service to the community in every possible way.

Automobile congestion in these streets, however, and the piling up of population into the air in large apartment house centers, and the creating of night life in the outlying suburban centers through motion picture theatres and other amusement places, are bringing about a large amount of suburban shopping center development. The direction of these suburban shopping centers to meet the new needs of today and making them best serve the interests of their city is a large task. We must not allow these suburban business centers to fail to recognize present day needs and endeavor to forecast, as far as possible, future changes.

In all American cities of any considerable size, our new outlying business centers being built today are becoming the ugliest, most unsightly and disorderly spots of the entire city. New traffic throats of congestion are being created that will sooner or later call for the expenditure of gigantic sums of public funds to relieve. Buildings of every color, size, shape and design are being huddled and mixed in together in a most unrepresentable manner. A mixture of glaring billboards, unsightly rubbish dumps, hideous rears, unkempt alleys, dirty loading docks, disrelated, uncongenial mixtures of shops of every type and use, with no relation to one another; shacks, shanties, mixed up with good buildings; perfectly square, unadorned buildings of poor design, giving great masses of unpainted common brick walls reared along the sides of a little shop building of good design, are bringing about disorder, unsightliness and unattractiveness that threaten to mar the beauty and good appearance of the residential regions of American cities. In nearly every city an occasional developer, with broader vision and a greater regard for his city's future, is endeavoring to meet and solve these problems. Every municipal authority, every property owner, merchant, professional man and, in fact, the

citizenship as a whole, should realize the importance to his city's future growth of these problems.

The percentage of our population, crowding into our cities, is increasing at an alarming rate. The percentage of the country's wealth represented in urban real estate is gigantic. Millions of dollars are lost in American cities from the unnecessary shifting of property uses. The abandonment of formerly beautiful residential areas, neglected and blighted former business sections, should arouse every one in a determination to protect the appearance of his city as well as property values themselves. Unnecessary encroachment of injurious property uses should be prohibited in otherwise beautiful section of a city. The very home life of a city should be protected.

The following are suggested as underlying factors in the development of new and outlying business centers, throughout the United States:

1. No streets less than 100 feet in width, with a paving of at least 60 feet, and preferably 72 feet in width, in order to give diagonal parking for automobiles, thereby increasing two and one-half times the parking area on the streets. A width of 72 feet is really necessary, in order to give ample room for three lines of traffic between the lines of cars parked diagonally on either side of the street, and also to give a certain freedom in roving cars in and out of their diagonal parking position.
2. The provision of interior loading and unloading courts in the interior of business center blocks so as to relieve the front streets from all delivery trucks. Certain types of delivery trucks are not only of immense size and otherwise absorb a large amount of the front street space necessary for the parking of the patrons' cars – but they also contribute litter, disorder and uncleanliness to these streets. Then, too, deliveries on front streets unnecessarily contribute to the misuse of sidewalk streets for the handling of freight, frequently causing danger to pedestrians, crowding sidewalk uses and presenting a situation unattractive to the clients of the merchants.
3. Where blocks are not of sufficient size to create interior loading courts, alleys should be 24 feet in width, if possible, in order to give three lines of traffic through alleyways so that cars may be loading or unloading at the rear ends of the stores, and still permit the passing of the third car through the alleyway. It is better to shorten the length of the buildings, in order to give wider alleys or interior loading courts, than to continue to occupy the full depth of the lot with the building, and forcing delivery wagons on to the front of the stores.
4. Control of building heights is most essential in new outlying business centers before high rent values are established, and before other tall buildings have established a higher building line. It is possible, and worthwhile in the long run, to establish low building heights, and in no instance more than two stories. In the first place it is difficult to make outlying stores pay a rental above the second story. Every additional story in a shopping center increases in direct proportion the amount of traffic in front of the building. If six, eight and ten story buildings are permitted in outlying business centers, regardless of wide streets, regardless of interior loading courts, and regardless of increased number of streets, the

- constantly increasing number of automobiles will in a few years give as great traffic congestion in outlying business centers as most cities are suffering today in downtown shop centers. These new shopping centers should be built horizontally and not vertically. In the long run, over congestion of automobiles will drive away trade. In the long run the outlying business center that limits all buildings to a maximum of two stories in height will be more stable, produce better spread values and better serve the community.
5. The provision of smaller blocks and the dedication of a larger per cent of street area, if possible perhaps even as much as 50% of the land being given to streets. In this manner the percentage of land occupied by buildings is reduced – to that extent contributing to the solution of the traffic problem. Then, too, groups of shops in a small block contribute trade-pulling power to one another, more than shops in a large block where the distance from the merchant on one side of the block around to the merchant on the other side of the block is far greater and to that extent, less influential in helping one another.
 6. By-passing of through lines of traffic around outlying shopping centers, instead of endeavoring to throw all general through traffic through a shopping center will, in the long run, help solve the traffic problem in outlying centers, and to that extent stabilize the new business center. Most realtors today are constantly doing everything in their power to lead trafficways and boulevards through their business centers, thinking that a great number of cars passing through a shopping center adds to its trade getting powers. Of course, every such shopping center should be immediately accessible and entirely visible to these main arteries of travel, but wherever it is possible to carry these main flows of traffic around, or along the side of the shopping center instead of through the shopping center, it is wise to do so. The limitation to a two story height, the provision of wide streets, wide alleys or interior loading courts affords ample opportunity for light, air and sunshine, both for the health and convenience of the patrons and employees of the shops themselves.
 7. Massing of the shops into contiguous blocks, radiating, if possible from one center, contributes greatly to the solution of the traffic problem and creates many conveniences in contrast to the development of a string-street development where continuous shops are built on each side of a street one or two miles in length, The string business street soon becomes a main artery of travel, causing each a great flow of traffic over it that little space is left for parking along its sides and in front of its shops; and then, too, the pulling power of one shop for another is far less in such a type of development than where shops are massed in several radiating or contiguous streets, bringing shop keepers closer to one another and enabling patrons to park their cars and easily walk from shop to shop. Then, too, a string of stores extending a mile or more on each side of the street carries business houses into large areas of residential sections, frequently creating great injury to abutting homes in the rear of or among these stores. It is the very opposite of wise zoning and districting of a city. It destroys values instead of creating values.
 8. The grouping of related shops should be given much more study than has been customary. The economic hazard to a fine jewelry store or a fine restaurant

caused by the adjoining shop of an unpleasant character, is a large factor. A hardware store, a garage, a fire or police station does not particularly help a ladies' wearing apparel shop. A plumber or a tin shop is not a good neighbor for a shop catering to the needs of the baby. Wherever possible, women's and children's shops should be grouped together; building materials and supplies should be put together; shops handling heavier merchandise should be grouped; and service shops, such as barber shops, massage parlors, shoe shining shops, etc., should be grouped together. Produce, meat markets, groceries, and all such shops are much more help to one another if grouped closely – and yet they generally produce an odor and a disorderly appearance not helpful to shops of a more refined character. The odors of a restaurant are much more objectionable to certain types of shops than others. There has already been a certain natural classification of automobile display rooms and automobile repair business in most cities which is of convenience to patrons and of value to other types of shops.

9. America has an opportunity in this new era of outlying shopping centers. It is possible to make these shopping centers distinctive and appealing in appearance, individualistic and attractive in design and layout, affording character and color to the general appearance of the city. Cleanliness and good order, a reasonable uniformity and harmony of design, height and elevation, will go far to make our American cities more attractive, more appealing and of unquestioned value to the people that live in these cities. Out of this order and cleanliness will come a practical beauty of great intangible value upon the spirit, patriotism and well being of any community.
10. In the building of these new shopping center, reasonable regulations as to the placing of billboards, of dangerous and unsightly overhanging signs, elimination of unnecessary screaming advertising placards, hideous combinations of color, great scrawling, flaming advertising lettering across an otherwise pleasing store front or plate glass window, can be prohibited. Their direct value to a merchant is highly questionable. Their injury to a neighboring shop is frequently great, and in the long run, the general good to any new shopping center controlling such unsightly, ugly appearances will give far greater value to each unit in the shopping center than any sacrifice suffered by a merchant in foregoing such practices. Buildings must be distinctive; store fronts must be attractive, with maximum amount of plate glass; window displays must attract the attention of the casual passerby without displays which displease and frequently drive trade away from such over-ambitious merchants.
11. Streets and sidewalk spaces in new shopping centers should be kept free of unnecessary obstruction. Pop corn stands, sign boards, news stands and other stealing of city streets and sidewalks should not be permitted. This not only assists in handling traffic but gives a more orderly appearance and is more appealing to the patrons.
12. Too great a uniformity in store fronts perhaps may bring dull monotony. Sufficient variety can well be applied to give interest to a street scene and building fronts.

It is well, wherever possible, to follow a general type of architecture in each group, one group having harmonizing Colonial types, another Spanish, another English, another French, and other good, general architectural designs. In this way, good appearance is given to a city's picture as a whole. Careful restrictions should be made as to changing of color schemes or building design of these buildings. Control of design of buildings erected in a shopping center should be as carefully safeguarded as is being done by restrictions on residences in high-class subdivisions today.

13. Street lighting and store front lighting should be studied in advance and given much more attention than has been the custom heretofore.
14. There should be a provision of a group of shops for immediate local and daily needs, in contrast to a larger shopping center also comprising stores of general needs to serve a larger territory, The center providing a few neighborhood units, such as retail grocery, meat market, bakery drug store and beauty parlor, can well be placed approximately half a mile apart. Certainly there is no necessity of closer grouping. From one to two miles apart, larger general groups should be provided, giving desirable locations for stores that can only prosper by serving a larger territory.
15. Reasonable regard should always be had as to the appearance of the sides of shop buildings on side streets, the views of the roofs and even the rear of buildings where viewed from the store fronts or second story windows of adjoining buildings.
16. The provision of certain very small open squares or plazas, or space for fountains or a little piece of statuary will add attractiveness and appeal to a shopping center as well as add civic beauty and adornment to the city as a whole. Grass, trees, flowers, shrubbery and garden ornaments can be made an integral part of new business centers, as is so well exemplified in many European cities.
17. Control by the zoning board of the city as to the provision of too great an amount of business property in the outlying sections of the city is vital to the permanence and stability of such values. There is a tendency today to greatly overbuild outlying shops, cheapening the character of the buildings, destroying the possibility of a reasonable profit to the merchant, and also contributing an unnecessary injury to otherwise beautiful and attractive residential areas of a city. In many of our larger cities there are from five to ten times as many outlying shops and business properties being developed as is justified by needs. Sooner or later the owners of the land the tenants of the buildings will find a great shrinkage in value and a great dearth of trade. Real Estate, the real foundation of all wealth, becomes unstable in a lack of general control. Zoning is the greatest boon known to a city today and in fact the greatest protection to city life. It affects equally the protection of the God-given rights of air, light and sunshine and decent surroundings for the small cottage of the laboring man as well as the large residential estates of a community. It is just as vital to the protection of the investor in a small outlying business lot as it is to the owner of a great office building in the downtown business district.

It sets aside and reserves for industrial, railroad and manufacturing uses, land for the city's normal development, just as much as it serves the areas properly belonging to future residential development. It puts order instead of chaos into American city building. And, perhaps, no greater opportunity is offered for better civic development than in such careful zoning and regulation as is possible today in the establishment and control of the thousands of outlying shopping centers springing up in every city of any considerable size throughout our land.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) – Speech JCN004

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.