



Planning for Permanence: the Speeches of J.C. Nichols
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Responsibilities And Opportunities of a Real Estate Board In Building Cities

Cities and towns are hand made. Whether they are physically bad or physically good, is the responsibility of the realtor. We cannot claim that our business is a profession unless we constantly endeavor to improve the product of our hands. If we simply serve as a medium for the mere exchange of real estate, we are not a profession; the world does not recognize any calling as a profession unless its members intelligently work to add knowledge and betterment to the world. Even the farmer boy constantly strives to grow better corn and raise better stock; the factory hand to improve the design and quality of his product; the physician to alleviate suffering and master disease; the scientist to attack hidden mysteries and give the world new ideas, new methods, and greater blessings. The engineer, the botanist, the chemist, all chafe under conditions of their time, and frequently sacrifice their lives in the advancement of knowledge, making them truly entitled to be called a profession.

Unless the realtor will devote his time to the actual creation and stabilization of property values, the improvement of living conditions, the making of his city more efficient, economical and practical, better planned, more beautiful, cultural and orderly, we fail to rise to the standards of our profession and to our responsibility and opportunity in the building of cities. Laboratories of research are needed in the real estate profession. "Realology" should be as much an established science as geology and zoology.

Let us consider for a moment the evils in city building for which the realtor is responsible – mistakes which commit his city, whether it be large or small, to an eternal burden. In how many American cities do bad jogs in its main downtown streets levy a burden in loss of time and expense of traffic regulation, in every movement of every vehicle and individual, increase the danger to life, increase fire hazards, or mar the orderly appearance of the city? I venture that one bad jog in a city of a quarter million people may easily levy a tribute of almost a million dollars per. And how unnecessary this is! Failure, perhaps, of two realtors to give any heed to through connections in the streets of their respective plats; or lack of effort to reconcile boundary lines, or lack of proper municipal control in permitting such plats to be filed. It would not stretch your imagination very far to estimate that jogs in important streets cost many American cities a billion dollars annually.

Narrow throats of traffic resulting from poorly designed street layouts, largely through lack of vision of the early developers of the city; excessive grades, through lack of proper consideration of general public welfare, in the desire to make a slight saving in the original improvement expense; blind conformance to standardized size of lots,

blocks, and street widths, one of the greatest curses in American city building – all are conditions for which the realtor cannot dodge his responsibility. Lots, blocks and streets should not be of standardized size, but should vary as greatly as the sizes of water mains or gas mains and sewers vary according to the function for which they are built.

What more foolish error in city building is there than the street, with one hundred times the traffic of a minor street, yet being of the same paving and walk widths? Or what more ridiculous than having the blocks of your city practically all the same length, regardless of the intercommunication and general circulatory needs of the respective sections. Certainly, blocks in purely residential areas may well be two or three times the length of blocks in heavily congested business sections. Yet you will find plat after plat being filed today in the new sections of our cities and towns, blindly conforming to some previously arranged checkerboard, standardized street plan, providing no circumferential or diagonal or main highways, or absolutely failing to recognize topography and main lines of traffic. Yet these conditions vitally affect every individual, business and industry of our city.

Is the frame of your city being hardened beyond economical remodeling or replanning? Cities of a quarter million or less population and small towns fortunately are still plastic and permit of redirection along lines commensurate with the needs of the city which they aspire to be.

How would you regard the merchant who offered you his wares in as dirty, unsightly condition as we today offer much of our merchandise – the ordinary vacant business or residential lot? In how few cities does the realtor see to it that vacant business property offered for sale is clean, well-kept and presents a desirable appearance, – or the vacant residential lot, free of rubbish, trash, or tall-grown weeds. What is more disgusting than to look from the office window of a tall business building across the disorderly, littered roofs of the adjoining buildings? What is more disorderly or uninviting than to look up and down a business street, with a heterogeneous mass of signs projecting, of all sizes and all lengths and colors, stealing the street area which does not belong to adjoining properties, and endangering the lives of pedestrians, each owner, in his strife to gain advertising value over his neighbor, practically nullifying the value of all the signs?

Is there not a responsibility of the realtor to make our merchandise present an attractive appearance in the city? What would we think of merchants whose show windows were as unsightly as many of our vacant lots?

Do our ideas of salesmanship from our own selfish ends alone in the offering of merchandise, approve this disorder and the unattractive appearance of the properties we frequently offer for sale?

How often have you taken your prospective purchaser to view property actually being used as a rubbish dump, or so near to one that the very appearance of the neighborhood is offensive and disgusting?

How frequently is the paving in the streets upon which your merchandise is located, in such bad condition, so full of holes, that the impression upon your prospective purchaser is almost surely unproductive of sales?

How often is that suburban belt of realty just beyond the city or town limits a jungled mass of property of varying and conflicting uses, such as hog lots, slaughter houses, rock quarries and rubbish dumps, not only largely destructive to values, but creating an immense burden and cost in its later conversion into well ordered city property, creating great expense later in providing playgrounds, parks, traffic ways, school lands, traffic highways and proper differentiation and segregation of uses of city property?

How little thought, planning and effort is being given by the American realtor to the proper control and development of lands beyond our city limits, yet land that the realtor generally proudly boasts will soon be a part, even if a deplorable part, of his great city.

Is your city, or my city, full of fire hazards from improper control of buildings and lack of adequate, properly enforced building codes? Every Real Estate Board should assume full responsibility for the buildings code of his city.

Are the buildings in your city unsanitary, producing a housing situation which is a disgrace to our profession?

Are apartments in your city being built according to standards which, in theory, none of us could approve?

Are we piling up great masses of families in inflammable, poorly built structures, that may be death-traps? Or of such construction as to soon be eyesores to their city?

Are we permitting the construction of individual homes of such flimsy character that the life savings of the buyer will be dissipated in a rapidly deteriorating structure, rather than a permanent home of joy and satisfaction throughout his years?

Has your city a pleasing approach by river or railroad, or is the approach of your visitors almost the worst your city offers? One might as well enter the guest to his home through the coal chute in the basement as the manner in which many of our towns and cities bring their guests into their community along railroad right-of-ways running through the most disorderly and ugliest section of their city; along side rubbish dumps, trash piles, ragged rear of lots, unkempt right-of-ways and the very worst appearance the city affords.

Do you try to make the furnishings and decorations of your streets such as lamp posts, fire plugs, trash cans, poles, wires, street signs, pleasing and attractive, or are they of riotous, clashing colors and conflicting designs, messing up the street scene in every direction?

Does ugliness confront the visitor to your city, equally injurious to the small town as to the great metropolis? Does ugliness confront the residents themselves of your city – conducive to crime, immorality, and a daily uninspired grind of human existence? Or does good order of things and beauty enlighten and charm your visitor, inspire and push forward your citizen to greater acts and greater deeds and a greater spirit of building?

Are there unsanitary conditions in our merchandise? Have we foul-smelling sewers, tolerated from long custom, rather than from actual need? Do we permit sewer

outlets, endangering our water supply, or rendering unhealthy large areas of otherwise valuable property?

Have we provided the proper amount and distribution of parks, school and public playgrounds, so essential to town building? A place to play, to relax, to enjoy good fellowship, to make good citizens, to enjoy living in this beautiful world, in which God has placed us?

Are we, as Real Estate Boards, surrounding our people with uplifting influences for greater citizenship, or are we leaving these essentials of city building to others than those in our profession?

Is your city or town poorly zoned as to use, height and size of buildings?

Do you, in your city, permit property values to be stolen by unnecessary encroachment of property of injurious uses?

Do you permit the absolute necessity of God-given light and air and sunshine to be stolen from the small workman's cottage, or from the scant windows of the great apartment or tenement?

Do you permit alley houses? Do you permit the disregard of building lines and proper free space for each family? Do you provide wide streets and open spaces, the lungs of your city to give ample air for your people to breathe?

Are real estate values stable in your city, or do they shift almost with each decade? Have you blighted residential areas, or abandoned business sections? Is your city building a constant process of building up and tearing down – an extravagant American custom and a gigantic economic loss? Mr. Walter Stabler who, as Comptroller of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company lending more money on real estate than any other company in this country, has told me that my estimate of a billion dollars per year is conservative for the losses resulting in American cities as a result of shifting residential and business sections and the economic hazards and property injury resulting from improper encroachment of enterprises of undesirable and of conflicting character. The permanency of location, permanent durable character of construction, stability of real estate investment through the centuries in European cities afford a most striking comparison with the constantly shifting locations and character of various sections of American cities and towns, creating a condition causing loan companies to refuse to lend more than fifty per cent on the value of city property. The realtor can and should stabilize our property values, not only as a national economic saving insuring permanency of investment, but to justify the security for larger loans.

Was it not sad comment upon the stability of our wares when, in a certain part of New York in ten years the highest priced realty in the world deteriorated in value fifty per cent – and has not the history of New York in the last eight years proven, to the satisfaction of every realtor in every American city, the value of districting or zoning, controlling the use of property for the health, morals and safety of its people?

Have you maximum freight distribution at a minimum cost? Are you reserving ample areas for industrial development and freight yards, equally important as reserving by restriction residential sections?

Have you carefully studied the proper building heights for your particular city? One tall building in New York today casts a shadow at four p.m. across seven and one-half acres of land, taking away the essential sunlight from all the occupants of the buildings within this area. There is both a human and commercial limit to the carrying capacity of streets serving the pedestrian and vehicular traffic incidental to such tall buildings. There is an economic limit, as well as a human and public welfare limit, which should control building heights. There is a horizontal method of building our cities which is far more desirable than continued piling up of population in a vertical construction of our business and living sections.

Cities have changed more in the past fifty years than in the previous two thousand years. The automobile, truck, motor bus, the increasing size of transportation units on our streets, the airplane, picture-show, apartment house and kitchenette, the building of good connecting highways, the radio, the tall steel or concrete structure, – all have added new factors in planning for the future of our cities.

Have you a traffic problem in your city? Is automobile congestion rendering unstable property values in certain areas, causing great loss of time to your people and sooner or later a decentralization of business sections unable to handle the traffic? And are you, as a Real Estate Board, leading in thought and action the solution of this great automobile traffic problem in our cities and towns? The great system of Federal State Roads destined to be built in Kansas will further increase the traffic problem of our towns and cities.

Are future corrective costs of poorly planed cities accumulating every hour for future generations, and are you marshalling your forces for wise, preventive measures along well planned studies for handling the traffic which increases in a ratio of the square of the population, and which is the very lifeblood of certain property values? Remember when your town is four times its present size, your traffic will be sixteen times as great as it is today.

Are your public buildings, such as court house, fire stations, city hall, public library, etc, conveniently and effectively located? Have you convinced the people of your city that in a civic center the cumulative effect of the good appearance of a number of well related public buildings is far greater than the sum of the units of these buildings scattered throughout the city? Are all your public buildings located in an impressive manner, with appropriate dignity to the greatness of your city, according to the splendid manner in which European cities always place their public structures? Such a civic center becomes a rallying place of public life and crystallizes a spirit and love for a city of indomitable force in building patriotism and ambition for your town.

An open square around a public building, a handsome structure placed on the axis of a broad approaching street, stately monument, a beautiful fountain or colonnade gives distinction and civic magnetism.

Are we building cities and towns monotonously alike throughout America, or are we accentuating their particular features and preserving their objects of natural beauty and historical interest, giving them that peculiar personal appeal and lure of the orderly and lovely city or town which is to great a factor in its growth for commercial supremacy?

Have you created in your city or town impressive architecture, masterful highways, wide residential areas of appeal and charm, which demand the attention and hold the respect of your visitor, imprints an indelible picture in his memory, bringing him to you again and again? Have you created a civic order and beauty that has grappled the hearts and love of your citizenry in a manner that they will never, for long, leave the city they call their own?

Have you given a quiet domestic character to your purely residential streets, so designed as to discourage business traffic, so adapted to the topography as to create interesting home sites, affording the best currents of air, preserving the best views and most desirable orientation of the house, assuring harmonious environment to which the owner of every home is entitled? The term "back-yard" should be unknown, and replaced by the "gardenside" of the home – a real living lawn in which the children may safely play and the family may enjoy the great outdoors.

Are you creating the proper standards for developing the best child life in your community – the future citizens of your city? Are you teaching them to be observant of the beauties and joys of life, appreciative not only of the best things in character and in the home, but of the proper relation and right order of things in neighborhood and civic development? The Realtor may be largely responsible for good or bad public taste, resulting from architecture and design, particularly of the public structures throughout his city. Your city, through the Realtors, is truly responsible for the standards of your community.

Does your Real Estate Board assume its share of the responsibility of the death rate of its community? Are we wide awake to our opportunity in combating the health-destroying tendencies of large cities?

Are you properly safeguarding and perpetuating the character of your residential subdivision by proper building restrictions? Are you giving proper assurance to your clients that their property values will be maintained in your subdivision? There is a growing consciousness of the subdivider that he is not alone concerned in the values and prices at which he may sell lots in his subdivision, but that he has a professional responsibility for the maintenance of the value of the wares he sells his client. There is also a growing sense of obligation on the subdivider to at least so handle his subdivision that it will not be a detriment to surrounding lands, but rather tend to lift the character of its particular section of the city – add values to its neighborhood, rather than capitalize and steal the values that others have created.

Are you, in your subdivision, creating a residential atmosphere and residential morale as important as Army morale, to which they are entitled and for which they place their faith in you, when they locate their family in your property? Are you providing maintenance associations to properly care for community needs, provide economical community service, afford proper maintenance and upkeep of all vacant lots, parks, playgrounds, gateways and other ornamental features, and continue long after your property is sold, and your organization has left it? Are you creating in the beginning the community organization that will see that restrictions are enforced, that the property suffers no future neglect from civic or municipal authorities and public utilities and develop and maintain a neighborhood and community spirit, so important in fostering a

permanent respect and traditional love for one's home and neighborhood and so fundamental to creating a civic pride for one's town or city and a real patriotism for one's nation?

Great responsibilities and opportunities in city building are all of these, and yet, what group of men in civic life should challenge this responsibility more than the American Real Estate Boards?

Because mistakes have been made in the past in town building – because particular cities have shown far greater growth than anticipated and burst beyond the functions planned in various municipal matters, we have too long grown to the habit of thought of accepting existing conditions as unavoidable. We have, to a certain degree, by peculiar reasoning, grown to accept such conditions as axioms and customs in city building and failed to allow our experience of the past to become our guide and beacon light for the future.

It should not have been necessary that the great movement of city planning in this country was so largely fostered ten years ago and led by landscape architects and engineers, rather than by realtors themselves. In our National Convention in New Orleans I read the first paper of our Association calling attention of the realtors to the growing importance of city planning. In Kansas City the realtors have been the ones who first demanded a city plan and zoning for our city.

The opportunity and the responsibility of each Real Estate Board in America is greater today than ever before in our history. We should be the leaders in all ideals, thoughts and activities having to do with the betterment of our cities or towns.

What man in any city is better fitted to serve as Mayor than the Realtor? What municipal board should exist without a realtor as one of its most influential Members? In Kansas City we have several Realtors members of our City Council: an Ex-President of the Real Estate Board is President of the Board of Park Commissioners; and Ex-President is Chairman of the City Plan and Zoning Commission, with four other Realtors in his Board; a Realtor a member of the Board of Education; A Realtor on the Fire and Water Board Commission, our County Commissioners, Law Enforcement League, Building Code Commission, Board of Public Works, Health Board, etc. Your splendid President of the National Association has long been active in our welfare work; a Realtor is President of our Art Institute, Vice-President of the Symphony Orchestra Association and Liberty Memorial Association, and so on throughout all the activities of our city.

In every study of the city's, or county's or states, transportation or traffic road system, in every housing, sanitation or building code commission, in every industrial survey, river transportation study, every population density study, in every investigation of freight rates or raw food cost supply affecting a city; yes, in every educational, cultural and recreational activity, the Realtor should lead. The Realtor should be the man of plan and vision on every board. He is, by our profession, best adapted to forecast the city's future needs.

Will your city soon outgrow its water supply? What man in your city is in as close touch with its future growth and population needs as the Realtor? Sectionalism in the building of any city or town should be forgotten. Realtors should not be alone

concerned in those things affecting their subdivisions or particular parts of the city or county where they are active, buy they, above all other citizens, should be city-wide, suburban-wide, and trade-territory-wide in their grasp of future needs.

Courses in the study of real estate science should not only be included in the curriculum of our colleges, but in the high schools of every city. Realogy should be one of our noblest sciences.

Approximately seventy-five per cent of our taxes is borne by the merchandise which we create and sell. What group of men has a greater right to be heard, and upon what group of men rests a greater responsibility as to whether our cities are bad or good, than the men in this convention?

We are not scientific unless we constantly endeavor to improve the product of our hands – unless we develop to the highest specialized uses every part of our city or town – a civic structure – an organic machine – every part related to every other part – as in the structure of the human body or in any well-organized industry.

May I repeat, we should create and stabilize values, and not simply transfer and sell values. Poor living conditions in our city should bring more shame to the realtor than to any other man. If the conduct of trade or social intercourse in your city is inefficient, we should admit our failure. If any civic board or agency of our city functions improperly, we should assume our share of the responsibility. We should see that future generations should have no cause of condemnation of the short-sightedness of the realtor of today.

If our city or town lacks personality, individuality and charm, and if our city fails to appeal equally to the man of commerce and the man of culture seeking the most desirable place for his business and for his family to live – if our city fails to hold its citizenship after their fortune is acquired, if factories pass our city doors and locate in other communities, the Real Estate Board of that city should admit its failure in rising to its responsibility and opportunity.

If realtors boldly advertise the advantages of subdivisions under the caption "No city taxes", inviting their clients to avoid their share of supporting and building their city, to my mind they are failing in the responsibility and the ideals of our profession. Every section that derives advantages from community life should seek the opportunity of paying its proportion of community expense.

Do you permit auction sales of subdivisions – the greatest abuse of our real estate profession – as they are frequently conducted? The selection of the location for the home of a family is too sacred to be made in the exciting and unthinking methods generally employed.

The City Practical, the City Orderly, the City of Economy, the City of Efficiency, the City of Health, the City of Wise Plan, – yes, the City of Culture and the City of Beauty for which I offer no apology to any man – is one that will stand the competition of time, is the one that will win in its race for commercial supremacy, and hand down a heritage to future generations of unconquerable spirit, of imperishable human values, of undying influence for better life among its citizenry and record such achievements that eternally placed Athens and Rome in control of much of the destiny of the world.

Population is crowding into our cities at an alarmingly and unfortunate increasing rate. Municipal problems are becoming almost staggering in their importance. Commerce, trade, industry, finance, recreation, education, culture, is concentrating in our congested centers to a degree unbelievable a generation ago.

The position of America throughout the civilized world is becoming more and more dominated and more largely influenced by the success and achievement of American cities. Will the Republican form of government of the United States succeed? Will it perpetuate itself and endure as no other Republic in history has done?

My answer is – Look to our success or failure in the future building of our cities.

And in this building of our cities and towns, no other group of men, no other profession, has so great a responsibility as the Real Estate Boards of America. Ten years ago few groups of realtors throughout our land recognized this responsibility. This meeting today exemplifies the rapid growing consciousness of our responsibility, and the higher standards which now prevail.

As the late Daniel Burnham counseled his splendid city, Chicago, in advocating a city plan – make no little plans for your City. They die and are soon forgotten. Make big plans, to stir men's blood and grapple the souls of future generations. Big plans once diagramed on the map of the city's future, recur again and again, directing its growth holding high in the hearts and thoughts of men a civic order and a beacon light throughout the ages.

May each man in this convention go home to his own Board, thrilled, inspired, and driven by an insatiable desire to assume the responsibility and opportunity that is ours, and so plan and build our cities and towns for the future as to make them the glory and the achievement of modern times, and the greatest contribution to civilization that our world has ever known.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) – Speech JCN007

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.