



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

Cities are handmade. Whether our American cities are physically bad or physically good is our responsibility.

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 Planners", representing a new profession, devoted not only to improving the living conditions of our cities, but devoted to the stabilizing of urban values and the increasing of the industrial, commercial and residential efficiency of our cities.

Most American cities 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 retail business centers, creating immense loss in value in the abandoned sections and rendering unstable the highest valued real estate in the city; good residential sections being ruined by the encroachment of other property uses, highly injurious to residential neighborhoods; industrial property hampered in expansion because of encroachment of residential property, thereby making it extremely costly to acquire lands for industrial expansion; growing and costly traffic congestion in the centralized business retail sections, wholesale districts, 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 in the number of automobiles and trucks.

In nearly all American cities we find improperly placed school houses, public markets, fire stations, police stations and other utility stations, because of the failure to be guided by proper studies and 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 are frequently of improper size on account of the failure to properly look ahead as to future needs; we find certain blocks in the general street layout are either too long or too short and certain streets too wide or too narrow, to meet the conditions that have

arisen as the city has grown in size; main traffics arteries extending not in the main lines of traffic, but in the direction of the lesser amount of traffic.

We also find great difficulties and expense in providing later on for the proper amount of playground and park areas so important to the moral, social and physical life of any community.

Generally suburban belts of property immediately beyond the municipal limits are developed with practically no control.

All of these conditions and many others, not only lay a heavy toll on every movement of trade within our growing cities, not only create conditions menacing to the health of its people, but render real estate values unstable, (the foundation of all wealth); make industry and commerce uncertain, and create a lack of confidence in the permanency of the home and lack of patriotic and civic pride for the city itself.

Cities have changed more in the last fifty years than they did in the previous two thousand years. Revolutionary changes in communication between community centers in the last 20 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 foreplans for the future, will not only suffer in its competition for supremacy in trade and fail to appeal to families from throughout its trade territory to come and live in the city, but it will also fail to hold its own 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 decades and from one end of the country to the other the words, "City planning" have taken on a wonderful meaning. We have ceased to regard city planning as a visionary dream of a reformer or the extravagant embellishment or ornamentation of our cities.

We 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.

Efficient city planning involves vitally every industry and every individual of our cities. It is the insistent demand of business and human instinct for the use of reason, fairness and foresight in the planning of the organic construction of a city according to a carefully prepared plan on exactly the same principles as govern any commercial undertaking, the building of any house, the laying out of any farm or the intelligent execution of any human activity.

A city – a civic machine – is dependent upon the efficient performance of its every part, as is the body, the human machine, dependent upon the workings and relation of its parts.

An intelligent city plan thinks impartially for all parts of a city at the same time, and does not forget the greater needs of tomorrow in the press of today. It recognizes the economy of preventive measures over corrective cost's. It is simply good, practical hard sense.

Today almost every city of any considerable size is spending immense sums in correcting the evils of its past 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.

A good city plan will stir the 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.

Compared with the cost of the plans of any house, factory, barn, bridge, or public utility, the cost of preparing a city plan is ridiculously low – perhaps not exceeding 1/10 of 1% of the property and other values involved, while you pay 3% to 5% for the plans of a mere barn or garage.

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 assures to every section of a city the best conditions possible for its particular uses with due regard to surrounding Districts; it recognizes the need of differentiation 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. It sets up reasonable regulations of height, use, and area 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, yet elastic plan to guide every phase of city building, the placing of every utility, the establishment of every car line, school, church, fire station, subway, bridge, viaduct, post office, water main, trafficway, boulevard, park, playground, approach to rural highways, public building, freight terminal, freight distribution station, railroad and interurban station, art museum, public library and every other feature of the physical side of the city.

Zoning checks the haphazard, piecemeal, selfishly directed growth of the city, according to the whim or desire of every individual owner and establishes higher standard of 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 conflicting and uncongenial surroundings. It actually stabilizes and increases general values by a "Live and let live" practice, rather than by the "Dog eat dog" custom of the past.

By height and area regulations, and the establishment of "use zones", fire risks are reduced, traffic congestion improved, the health of the occupants of the buildings safeguarded and the character and use of particular sections made permanent and stable.

It has been said upon reliable authority that a loss exceeding a billion dollars annually has been entailed in our American cities as a result of the evils attending the lack of proper zoning. This loss may be the result of encroachment of a public garage, undertaking establishment, flat, 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 it may be an encroachment in industrial areas by the development of residential subdivisions or perhaps the result of ill-placed public buildings and utilities soon to be left abandoned or outgrown and of little value in a part of a city where the character of that particular section has entirely changed.

This zoning or districting system – this organic development of a city – puts the various inter-related parts to their highest and most specialized use, in the same general way in which any business institution would organize and lay out the physical arrangement of its plant, and the handling of its raw and finished material, so that every part would nourish and stimulate every other part. The past planless and wasteful procedure of our large cities is just about as sensible as the building of a house and providing for the piano in the kitchen, the cook stove in the drawing room, and the entrance of your guests through the coal chute or the basement window.

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 establishment of zones, is the street and block lay-out of the city. The blind conformance to a checkerboard and standardized plan of street platting or a standardized width of street and length of block, is perhaps the most senseless act and greatest curse in the entire making of the cities of the United States. It is wasteful, extravagant, inelastic and an absolute failure in fulfilling the real purpose of a street plan. You may as well try to make one suit of clothes fit all sizes of men.

Street areas occupy from 20% to 40% of the land within an American city. 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 hundred times or more traffic than that part of the city where only a few vehicles a day occupy the streets. By your city ordinances, 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 caused the city to utterly fail to provide highways of sufficient width to serve beyond the needs of the present day.

The automobile is increasing the traffic problem manifold. While in residential districts it has made it possible to greatly increase 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.

That city which is not providing for the proper handling of this traffic, increasing so surely in a geometrical ratio, 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 or diagonal highways, the opening up of short cut roads, the separation of traffic, provision of pedestrian ways, are all as important as the widening of the streets themselves. But city planning at all times does not think in the terms of the needs of today, and should wisely calculate and estimate growth of the city over future periods of the city.

It does not necessarily 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 in 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 guided by a zoning map, 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 future population centers in they city. It recognizes the increasing number of vehicles approaching downtown centers, public parks, and other common objective points. It recognizes the encouragement of business traffic by easy grades reducing the cost in every trade movement.

On the other hand, it appreciates that residential character may be encouraged and made permanent on certain minor streets by the provision of narrower paving and walks and grades that discourage through traffic. These purely residence streets are, and should of course, be well related to the main boulevards, business streets and trafficways, of ample width and easy grades. The plan of these residence streets should eliminate alleys, follow the contour of the land, be fitted to the lots and blocks, affording sites of interesting shapes, and permitting individual landscape treatment. They should preserve and reveal vistas, creating street pictures instead of the stiff monotony of the usual rows of houses and garages.

Closed street views, so interesting in the Medieval towns, should be frequent, and wherever possible, architectural accent should be given the street by building fitting homes on the axis of its best approach.

These streets, or any character of streets, should not extend for a long distance in the direction of the prevailing winds.

Triangular parkways, at appropriate street intersections, add interest to the street scene as well as serve as traffic guards and dust shields.

Building lines should not be uniform, but should be varied according to site and view; blocks should be treated as a unit and whenever possible harmonious group planning and collective building should be carried out. Local residence streets should have a cozy, domestic character, quiet, self-contained garden like affording air and sunshine with ample free space to every home – a residential triumph of our modern cities.

Such local residence streets, free of poles and overhead wires, should have economy, picturesqueness and convenience, and create a homelike atmosphere, exclude industrial encroachment, fix permanently the residential character of the place, and establish security of value.

Most of these considerations, (and to a still greater degree), apply to the workingmen's home. There is no greater crime in our city planning than the forcing of streets of unnecessary width and improvements of high costs, and lots of unused depths, into the workingmen's districts. It has been estimated that the cost of workingmen's homes is increased from 10 to 15% by this blind conformance to standardized lots and blocks and standardized street width and street improvements.

City planning recognizes the assistance that the efficient street layout can afford the zoning plan in concentrating objective traffic at certain logical business centers; it encourages further industrial expansion in the so-zoned sections and assists in the exclusion of business encroachment in certain zoned residential neighborhoods. No public utility or public building, or even large private commercial enterprise can be intelligently placed in a city 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 coordinates all existing functions in the most efficient way, according to a generally accepted plan, sufficiently elastic 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 growth and movement of the population, and maybe located in relation to various parts of the city devoted to permanently zoned 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. Necessary land for such purposes may be acquired a sufficiently long time in advance to avoid the expensive condemnation of high-priced land and unnecessary improvements.

In a city plan, street railways, freight terminals, passenger stations, interurban stations, fire and police stations are not placed according to the manipulation by political influence, the selfish activity of 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 utilities and institutions to not only best serve the city of today, but meet the needs as indicated by the city plan, in the future successive periods of the city's growth.

Interesting 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 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.

City planning looks ahead and provides for the future development of the city – it looks beyond the present city limits and foresees the demands of the still greater city. In fact, the heterogeneous, inharmonious masses of beautiful country estate and modest suburban homes mixed with factories and outlying stores, truck gardens quarries, rubbish dumps, slaughter houses and other tag ends making up the usual suburban belt just beyond the limits of most of our cities, present one of the most crying needs for fore-planning. And yet, plats and additions beyond our city limits are permitted, with no regard whatever, for the adjoining city as a whole, or the future needs of the city when the limits are extended.

The harmonious grouping of a number of public buildings gives an effect of dignity, beauty and civic adornment far greater than the effect of the sum of the single units of such buildings scattered throughout the city. European cities have demonstrated so well the value of the proper placing of public buildings the proper approach and proper open setting. The civic center, well planned becomes a rallying place in public life, crystallizes a devoted love, affection and patriotism for your city of incomparable value, not only in city building, but in civic spirit and general morals of the community.

The good city plan constantly endeavors to establish the individuality of a city, preserve its historic memories, its surrounding points of interest, its traditions and the pride of its citizens catch its peculiar spirit, preserve its distinctive flavor and accent its particular situation.

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 and disorder breed 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, for example, one of the seven busiest corners in the world in a downtown business section, is not a sane excuse for unsightly 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 look beyond and 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 and opportunities of your city through the future and boldly and determinedly sets about to so plan and diagram the future of your city as to inspire from year to year desire for the greatest service in the hearts of the living, loving souls who consecrate the lives of their families to the city they have chosen and devote their careers to the commercial, professional, civic, public welfare opportunities afforded in the city they call their own.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) – Speech JCN008

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.