



Planning for Permanence: the Speeches of J.C. Nichols
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**First Letter to Land Developers & Home Builders
under Presidency of C.S. Wanless**

Kansas City, Missouri March 6, 1937

Dear Fellow Realtor:

C.S. Wanless, the new chairman of Land Developers and Home Builders Division has inaugurated the plan of a monthly letter to members of the Division from one of its members. He has asked me to write the first letter.

1. All of us engaged in developing restricted subdivisions are very much concerned in recent Court decisions giving priority to tax liens over restriction covenants. In other words, property acquired under tax foreclosure could wipe out restrictions on any particular property, thereby nullifying our whole program. I suggest you get in touch with H.W. Nelson and obtain advice as to proper procedure to get laws enacted in your state making restrictions prior to tax liens.

2. Regardless of apparent trend of recovery, I believe we are seriously concerned in the labor situation. Responsibility rests upon all of us to be sure we are paying a fair living wage to our employees. I presume most of us engaged in house building provide more regular work than is customary in the erection of large commercial structures. We may be confronted with an effort to unionize all residential work. It is my opinion the earning power of many buyers is not as great as union scale of wages demanded in many communities. Certainly labor should recognize the more constant employment in our industry and the economic relation of wage scales to the buying power of our customers. Let's all be sure we are paying a fair wage to our labor and forestall an advance which might curtail our building operations.

3. There has never been a time when so much favorable national publicity has been devoted to home building as now. Our division of the National Association has been devoting much time to encouragement of the entry of national magazines into this field. My company finds it well worthwhile to read various articles written today by such as "Good Housekeeping," "McCall's" "Architectural Forum," "House and Garden" and others.

4. We are finding it is wise to considerably stress the assured rapid advance of rental scales throughout the country. Many families have been occupying homes on a rental basis for less than a fair return on the property. In some cities Realtors have cooperated to bring about a reasonable advance of rentals, thereby encouraging the purchase of homes. If you are interested in erection of homes, I suggest you give thought to an effort in your city to bring about a cooperative effort to advance rentals to a fair return on the value of the property.

5. In my company we have a man constantly employed in study of new materials and type of equipment being brought on the market. Here I wish to add a word of caution. There is always considerable danger attendant to use of new materials which have not been thoroughly tried. We want to keep abreast of the times, but at the same time, exercise greatest care, not going too extensively into the use of untried materials until you, yourself, have had them tried out in your community.

6. It is my judgment we are still a long way from mass production of pre-fabricated houses. I recognize a reasonable approach to pre-fabrication through use of prefabricated units, but do not believe we are confronted today with competition of completely pre-fabricated houses.

7. Those of us interested in developing land should give considerable thought to the reduction of amount of land devoted to streets. We certainly can make our residential blocks from 1,000 to 1,500 feet long providing we do not conflict with main arteries. We find it increasingly difficult to sell corner lots. We believe we should discourage traffic on minor streets. This can be done by creation of sharp curves and narrow pavement, and the residential character of the area greatly enhanced.

8. Many of our cities require standardized widths of paving, curbs, and sidewalks. We have succeeded in some of our developments in reducing widths of sidewalks from 5 or 6 foot to 4 or 4 1/2 feet, thereby giving additional lawn or parking area, and still meeting pedestrian needs. In many of our outlying properties we have provided sidewalks on only one side of the street which seems to meet all modern needs. We believe 26 or 27 feet is the maximum width of paving necessary on purely residential streets – much of our paving is even narrower than this. It is extremely important, however, if your pavement is narrow that you provide radii for driveways leading from the street into private driveways.

9. We made mistakes in our early development by not providing ample tree growing space in our parking. As trees have grown roots they have raised curbing and sidewalk, creating very difficult problems. It is our judgment that a tree should be planted at least 4 or 5 feet from curb or sidewalk. In other words, it should have at least 8 to 10 feet for root growth. We have recently been planting 4 to 6 inch trees with balls of earth rather than 2 to 2 1/2 inch trees. The early-finished appearance justifies the additional cost.

10. In many of our early subdivisions we provided lot widths of 50 feet. With the modern manner of attaching the garage to the house, frequently at the side, and moving of the porch to the side of the house, we find this entirely too narrow. In fact, in a recent new subdivision we provided 75-foot lots, and most of the houses, being built with the broad side to the street, the garage attached and a side porch left a rather crowded feeling. It is my judgment that 85 or 90 feet is the minimum width houses costing \$10,000 to \$12,000 should have. Of course, I realize the problem of persuading people to buy larger tracts of land, however, a lower price may be justified on account of more rapid absorption of ground and better ultimate results.

11. We are finding growing interest in development of the rear yard as the garden side of the home. We believe it has a good sales value.

12. There is much discussion by housing experts as to omission of basements. In our city, we have not found it desirable or practical.

13. Many housing theorists propose the leaving of certain rooms unfinished to reduce original cost. Here again we have not found this feasible because generally we have to go back after the sale of the house and finish those rooms at a cost much greater than if they had been completed during the original construction.

14. We tried a few houses with combined living-dining rooms, but have not found this very successful.

15. We believe in holding floor level close to the ground, avoiding projection of basement windows.

16. We are discouraging detached outbuildings where possible, thereby giving more free space and lawn area.

17. We have found it disadvantageous to get large crowds through exhibition homes. In our opinion it is better to have people go through in smaller groups leisurely, and study everything carefully. In other words, we feel it is unwise to put on a big campaign of publicity and get huge crowds to rush through the house. It is better to feed them along gradually. To save our salesmen's time we adopted the plan of putting a woman hostess in our homes, coaching them carefully on the art of procuring names of prospects.

18. Unless members of our Division and other homebuilders earnestly approach the problem of smaller houses to meet lower income brackets, we may be confronted with some form of governmental competition. I suggest every member of our Division, where it is practical, apply himself to the solution of the smaller house problem. Our experience, however, has been that turnover and comeback in smaller houses is greater than in larger ones.

19. We believe the interest rate obtainable on superior residential loans is still too high, and payment period too short. Ultimately we should come to 25 or 30-year amortization of first mortgages, or at least partial amortization over 15 or 20 year periods. Also, we feel good residential loans should be made under present conditions at not to exceed 4 1/2%. Perhaps our advocacy of longer terms and lower rates will lead lending agencies to make rates commensurate with interest on industrial bonds and other securities.

20. We doubt somewhat the frequently expressed opinion that we are confronted with an immediate boom. We believe we have before us gradual improvement but we should build cautiously and feel our way under present conditions. There are so many national and world conditions which might upset rapid recovery that we should all be careful not to be in the position of building or developing on such a large scale that we might be caught with a lot of unsold property.

Above thoughts are set down at random with no effort for continuity, but simply a desire to pass on to fellow members some of our experiences. I am in thorough accord with Charlie Wanless's idea of the value of constant interchange of thoughts and passing on our judgment concerning problems and opportunities now on our horizon and monthly letters from different parts of the country.

Let me add that I think every one of you should take upon yourselves the task of persuading other home builders and land developers to join our Division of our National Association, thereby strengthening and broadening benefits and service to be derived from it.

Yours sincerely,
First Vice-President
JCN
National Association of Real Estate Boards

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) – Speech JCN057

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.