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THE PROGRESS IN CITY PLANNING

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I HAVE been asked by the Executive Committee to open this Conference by a general discussion of recent progress in city planning.

I want to make clear, at the outset of my paper, that I shall not attempt a detailed and comprehensive catalogue even of the more notable recent steps in the progress of city planning. The slender and ill-defined organization of Executive Committee, Chairman and Secretary, by which the life of these Conferences is carried over from year to year, exists only for the purpose of arranging these annual markets for the exchange of ideas, and has been quite without any means for systematically collecting or disseminating information during the intervals between them. The facts, therefore, upon which my discussion rests are, frankly, very fragmentary, in view of the vastness of the field. We are not here to serve up and assimilate the predigested material resulting from a year of work by a limited staff of special investigators or experts: we are here on the common footing of perplexed but earnest students of an intricate group of problems, for the exchange of information and ideas. My duty is merely to put the ball in play.

Of the many kinds of activities that may properly be considered under the head of city planning, by far the most important group, because of the number of cities concerned, the volume of work done as measured by expenditure for salaries and so forth, and the immediate practical effect of the work upon the physical aspect of the cities,

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is that of the regular and often long-established bureaus or departments in which are made the plans that actually determine, for better or for worse, what form shall be taken by the various sorts of development coming under the control of the executive departments of the cities. Even though the action of the several parts of a given municipal government may seem disconnected, short-sighted and uncoöperative in making the decisions which in the aggregate fix the city's plan, the decisions are not made by the toss of a coin, they are really the result of planning after some fashion; and it is only a question of degree how far the planning looks ahead, how far its several parts are correlated, how skillful and intelligent it is, what it leaves to chance and the discretion of individuals in the future.

No sane person dreams of a city plan that shall fix everything in advance, even tentatively. For my own part I feel perfectly clear that in some respects the methods of street planning now frequently in vogue give too little latitude of choice to the individual investor who has his own ideas as to the most desirable size and shape of lots and of buildings for his purposes. What I suppose this Conference stands for is merely this: that it would pay to exercise a stronger and more far-sighted control over some of the features of a city's physical growth than is now usual, that the plans for different classes of features could profitably be coördinated to a greater degree than is now usual, and that we are all in great need of light both as to principles and as to details of practice which will help to make the planning that is done more effective.

It is a distinction of degree or of method or of scope or of point of view, not at all a distinction of kind, which separates the work of a City Plan Commission from the work done by a park department in laying out parks, or by a school department in choosing sites for new schools, or by a street department in determining upon new streets and widenings, or by a traction company or a public service

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commission in passing upon plans for improvements in a street railway system.

I say, therefore, that by far the greater bulk of all the city planning that is being done today, especially of that particularly important class of city planning which stands some reasonable chance of being carried into execution, is being done by regular and generally long-established planning agencies which form a part of the executive departments of the cities or are closely attached to those departments. Each planning agency is in general working on a fairly narrow part of the whole field and troubles itself very little about the aims of the other planning agencies; many of them are working in a short-sighted way, but each is pegging away at its own job and making or adopting plans that do get carried out. It would therefore be particularly interesting and illuminating if we could have a reliable and comprehensive critical review of the work of city planning that is done in this manner; if we could trace in it the evidence of progress and note the chief opportunities for further advance. Unfortunately I am far from having at my command the data for such a critical review. With perhaps a dozen cities I have had to do sufficiently to form some distinct personal impression of the local situation, even though based on fragmentary observations. Our Secretary, Mr. Shurtleff, in the course of some studies he has been making of the methods of acquiring land for municipal purposes, has visited other cities and has confided his observations to me. Concerning some few others I have formed an impression from reports of one or more departments; although, as you all know, the reports of municipal departments seldom afford very safe or complete evidence of just how their work is done. With the warning that you must take my general impressions thus formed for no more than they are worth, I will put them before you.

Adopting the customary divisions in the work, and leaving aside for the present all question of the correlation of

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those divisions, the most fundamental is street planning. In nearly all municipalities there is at least a nominal official control over the development of the street plan. There is a bureau or official who is supposed to exercise technical skill and foresight in planning streets and whose approval of a plan is a regular preliminary to the acceptance or laying out of any street. In theory the authority of this street plan bureau, as I will call it, varies considerably, but in practice its influence varies enormously more. In a great many cases it is hardly too much to say that it acts merely as a draughtsman, surveyor and clerk for those who want to put land upon the market. "Subdivisions," planned independently of each other and by or for their respective owners, are submitted for approval, and are accepted without much question unless they transgress a few accepted and more or less arbitrary canons of the office, the most usual relating to a minimum width of street and to the avoidance of dead-end streets. Each plat submitted comes up as a brand-new problem. There is often a more or less conscientious effort to consider the plat upon its merits in relation to any general public requirements which the officials in charge for the time being happen to think of upon the spur of the moment, or may happen by chance to have had upon their minds before. But there is no general scheme of main thoroughfares planned in advance in the general interest of the city, with which to compare the local subdivision plats and on the basis of which to ask for modifications in them. This method is really a censorship upon private street plans, not a means of creative planning; but it is generally associated with an irregular succession of spasms of creative planning which design specific street improvements in the public interest, and endeavor to push them through to execution while the spasm is still active. The initiative for these creative spasms seems generally to come from outside of the official bureau, although the latter sometimes leads and is often sympathetic and coöperative when a project

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is actively pushed by a mayor or councilman or by active outsiders. In some places the creative spasms are frequent enough to give a semblance of continuity and comprehensiveness to the planning and to achieve some notable results, but in principle the machinery is like an explosion engine without a flywheel. It takes very frequent impulses to keep things moving, and there is apt to be enormous waste through repeatedly starting and stopping without accomplishing much work.

With the addition of certain other kinds of city planning effort, the above may be regarded as generally typical of the street planning of the Boston Metropolitan District, and I think it is typical of the great majority of cities throughout the country. A decided step in advance, so far as concerns the mechanism of street planning, is exhibited by those cities in which the official bureaus prepare complete street plans for large districts on their own initiative in advance of the proposals of land owners, and generally impose their plans, with or without modification, upon the land owners. Of course there is no sharp line dividing cities which do this from cities whose street-planning bureaus follow in the wake of private initiative. In Boston, for example, although it has been rather by fits and starts, a good many subdivisions have been platted entirely on the initiative of the public authorities and in advance of any proposals from the land owners. The difference between the first class of street plan bureaus and the second class is largely a matter of appropriations, for the best will in the world cannot keep the extension of a city's street plan much ahead of the actual growth without adequate funds for the work; but there is usually also a difference in point of view. A great many people are really averse to the idea of the city's taking a strong initiative in the matter. This aversion has some basis in certain objectionable results that are to be seen in much of the street planning that has been done by the more active, aggressive and forehanded bureaus. In the past the whole-

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sale street planning of such bureaus has often been done in a rather perfunctory manner and with more regard to the point of view of land surveyors, and of mere brokers in real estate technically ignorant of the practical details of development, than to the point of view of broad-gauge engineers with a sense of responsibility for the total net results and costs in execution. It has tended to a mechanical uniformity of treatment. It has shown almost as much timidity as the work of the stand-pat bureaus in the provision of adequate main thoroughfares, which ought to be boldly designed as traffic routes for the benefit of the whole city with little regard to the details of land subdivision; and on the other hand it has failed to recognize that great and important economies are possible by differentiating from the thoroughfares those streets which are needed only for local purposes and treating them as such.

The cure for the evils of injudicious and perfunctory official street planning is in better planning, not in a return to *laissez faire* methods or to the method of a halting censorship of fragmentary plans made on private initiative. And it is an extremely healthy sign that the stronger and more aggressive street-planning bureaus are improving their methods, and adapting their means to the varied ends before them more skillfully and intelligently. I am inclined to think that progress is upon the whole more marked in this respect than in the advancement of old, timid, conservative bureaus into the aggressive class.

Another gratifying sign of progress is the tendency, upon the part of some at least of the strong and aggressive bureaus, to give a greater and more intelligent recognition to esthetic considerations in the development of street plans, both in the endeavor to avoid the needless destruction of agreeable natural features which might be put to use in the streets themselves or in parks or on the lots of suburban districts, and also by recognizing that the appearance of the street scenes and vistas of the future city is worth considering and is largely dependent upon the street plan

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and the location of summits and valleys thereon. I cannot say that this tendency to regard esthetic considerations on the part of the regular street-planning bureaus is widespread, nor has it brought out much latent artistic talent, nor has it gone so far in most cases as to seek eagerly for the coöperation of architects and landscape architects. But so far as it has gone it is a distinct sign of progress.

Parks come next to streets in the percentage of city area they occupy, and, like the streets, they need to be constantly extended and reduplicated to keep pace with growing population. For the most part parks are acquired as the result of particular spasms like those which often carry through specific thoroughfare improvements, each on its own merit without much regard to a general plan. Looking back over a long period, there is perhaps a little more tendency today, especially in the case of newly created park commissions, to regard the parks of a city as an organized system, and to consider with the aid of experts what will be required to make the system perform its function adequately for the whole of the city as the latter grows. But such comprehensive studies are the exception and are usually made on the initiative of a new commission not yet burdened with troubles of detail or else at the instance of some outside agency. The inducement to make such comprehensive plans for park development is even less than in the case of streets; because private capital seeking speculative return from land stands ready if it must to pay for most of the streets required in a proper street plan, whereas practically the whole cost of parks must usually be extracted from the reluctant general tax-payer by a constantly changing city council, or raised in some analogous way, and the supply of funds from such a source for anything but the absolutely unavoidable annual expenditures is so utterly undependable from one year to another as to discourage all idea of system and continuity in the plans for park acquirement and improvement, and to force a policy of hand to mouth opportunism.

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It is this same disheartening difficulty, even more than any lack of understanding or of technical skill on the part of the street bureaus which makes their planning as weak as it is in the matter of main thoroughfares. They say, "What 's the use? It will never be done."

What is true about parks and main thoroughfare improvements is true in perhaps greater degree about public buildings and the sites for them. The planning for these, in the sense of city planning, is almost perforce spasmodic. It is probably least so in the case of schoolhouses, which in our larger cities are so numerous, so rapidly increasing and so closely dependent on the distribution of population that the spasm of providing for them tends to become a continuous function and so to systematize themselves. The results are to be seen in the notable increase of practical and artistic efficiency in the school buildings of large cities of recent years, notably here in Boston for example.

I will not stop to discuss other city-planning activities going on continuously or spasmodically all the time in the regular bureaus, but in regard to the correlation of these activities I may cite the case of sewers and drains.

In view of the direct effect of the plan and grades of the streets upon the efficiency and economy of sewers and storm water drains and the great cost of supplementing the latter when they are planned inadequately in the first place, I have been astonished to find how generally the planning of sewers and drains lags even behind the planning of streets in American cities and how little the relations of the two are regarded in street planning.

In one city, which is distinctly among the leaders both in devising its tentative plan of streets well in advance of private developments and in its reasonable attitude of modifying and accommodating those tentative plans, in their non-essentials, to the wishes of land owners, and in which also the planning and construction of sewers and storm drains

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has of recent years been handled in an unusually comprehensive and far-sighted way, the process of street and sewer planning is something like this:

The street-planning bureau makes topographical surveys and then prepares tentative street plans without fixing any grades. The grades are studied sufficiently to see that it is not impracticable to construct the streets without too excessive cuts, fills or gradients, but the proposed grades are not made a part of the plan and they may even not be recorded. When the streets come into existence, usually by dedication, the profiles are established by a different bureau, having no connection with the first except that their respective heads are both appointed by the mayor. Then the streets are turned over to still another bureau which has independent discretion as to the cross sections of the street and the method of construction and which disposes of the storm water in the easiest way it can under the limitations imposed by its predecessors, discharging the water into the most convenient natural water courses or into storm drains if they happen to exist in the district. The locations and grades of storm drains and sewers are determined by still another independent bureau, generally subsequent to the determination of the streets, but occasionally as to main drains in advance. I do not mean to imply that there is no coöperation between these several bureaus. They do consult more or less, or the situation would be intolerable; but they are in fact practically independent and there is no strong force other than personal good will to overcome the inevitable centrifugal tendency of departmental jealousies.

It is needless to add that streets laid out by a man who is not responsible for the profiles adopted, and running upon grades determined by a man who had nothing to say about the location, not only involve some serious and needless difficulties and expense in the final development of the sewerage and drainage system, but also fail to afford locations for the extension of the traction system as,

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good as might reasonably have been secured if that problem also had been taken into account.

The Park Commission in this same city is fortunate in having a dependable tax income not subject to erratic variation by the City Council, a condition not uncommon in the West, and has been pursuing an unusually systematic course during the last few years in regard to planned extensions of the park system, the plan having resulted from a spasm initiated by a citizens' association through employment of an outside expert to make a special report. But again, any relation between the plans for park extension and those for streets have been the result merely of personal good sense and good will on the part of the men working in or for the several bureaus and of the fact that some of them have put themselves out of their way to bring about a coöperation that is beyond the scope of their legal duties.

Since the normal attitude of the administrative official is that of not looking for any trouble which is not plainly part of his job, and equally of resenting the interference of any one else who butts into his affairs without being under official obligation to do so, it has long been apparent that the progress of comprehensive city planning demands the development of administrative machinery for facilitating and enforcing coöperation between the various planning bureaus as well as for stimulating some of them to more far-sighted and better planning and for supplementing the gaps where needful planning is not provided for by any bureau.

Consider for an instant some of the conditions which you saw today in the automobile trip: A splendid harbor with a commercial waterfront now at last largely under the control of a strong central authority, but absolutely dependent upon the voluntary coöperation of the railroads for its successful development. A park system which, in spite of being laid out and administered by more than a score of independent authorities, comes nearer being a single, adequately connected system than any other in the

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country, but which is greatly impaired by the gaps in those parts of the system which belong to the borderland between parkways and highways, and which is utterly unsystematic in respect to the distribution of local recreation grounds. A number of first-rate radial thoroughfares, every one of them the result of a separate spasm, and elsewhere thoroughfares of even greater importance, like outer Washington Street, allowed to remain absurdly narrow because by mere chance no sufficiently strong spasm of improvement happened to come that way. Narrow picturesque local streets charmingly adapted to suburban single family houses, set back from the street; but permitted to be built up solidly with tenement houses without a setback for the protection of the street, without adequate open space for light and ventilation on the lot, and with almost utter disregard of fire risk through crowding of inflammable structures. The evils of the old slums needlessly being reduplicated throughout the suburbs, with rapid change and deterioration of neighborhoods through the practically unlimited freedom of choice of individuals in the use of their property regardless of the interests of their neighbors. I will not extend the catalogue of evidences that we need here in the Boston District a central, continuously acting, coördinating force to make our city planning what it ought to be, and it is a discouraging thing to contemplate the defeat of the Metropolitan Plan Commission bill in the present legislature.

But elsewhere there are better signs of progress.

It is notable that within the last year or two a considerable number of cities have established city plan commissions, either expressly permanent or created for an indeterminate period. The conception of the duties of such a commission and of its organization and methods of work, as held by those who have created them and by the commissions themselves, appears to be vague and various, and they are not clearly distinguishable as yet from the numerous temporary commissions which have preceded them.

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The function of the temporary City Plan Commission has normally been to bring about the preparation and publication of a report with plans embodying a considerable range of suggestions for the physical improvement of the city: dealing always with improvements in the street system both in respect to extension and alteration; generally with improvements and extensions in the park system, and in the public buildings, by grouping and otherwise; not infrequently with improvements in the systems of street and other railways, of waterways and wharves, and miscellaneous public facilities; and to some extent with questions of housing and the regulation of private building generally. Each of these reports has been of value in two ways: first and mainly, as an educational effort for the development of a more intelligent understanding among the general public and among city officials of the value and the need both of far-sighted planning in all lines of city work and of the intimate correlation of all such plans; second, as direct contributions to the aggregation, more or less thoroughly digested and correlated, of plans and projects for physical changes in the city which are actually recognized as probabilities or possibilities, the thought of which does actually influence decisions, and which taken all together form the real city plan such as it is. The interesting and instructive essays in city planning produced by these spasms of city planning, have varied from a brief and sketchy brochure dashed off by some sympathetic and well-trained observer after spending a day or two in perambulating some small town, to such an elaborate and ambitious work as those produced for the Commercial Club of Chicago in 1909 and for the Municipal Plans Commission of Seattle in 1911.

Without in the least questioning the value — the actual necessity — of spasms of city planning such as are represented by these temporary commissions and these reports, in several of which I have had a part, without belittling the painstaking, thorough and constructive work which is

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often shown in the plans and reports, I feel that it marks a great step in advance that a number of cities, and the State of Pennsylvania and New Jersey by general law, have recognized the city-planning function to be a continuous permanent function and not a thing to be done in a spasm once for all, or even once for a generation.

I feel this to be true, despite the regrettable fact that I have not heard of a single one of these permanent plan commissions that has yet begun to show notable results, to show any such vigorous signs of life as the excellent reports of many of the temporary commissions. To some extent they may feel staggered by the bigness of their job and hesitate where to begin, and for the most part they are left hanging without funds or with very inadequate funds. Moreover, some are still in the first throes of organization.

Those which have begun to settle into a regular stride, like the Hartford Commission, which is the oldest of the lot, seem to be regularly performing as yet not a great deal more than the functions of a street-planning bureau. In many cases the main efforts of the Commission seem of necessity directed for the present to further educational work, to the building up of a sufficient public opinion to back the Commission in the inevitably costly work of city planning which shall be at once thorough and comprehensive and unremitting. We have had thorough and far-sighted planning of fragments of the city. We have had some broad surveys of the field that have been of necessity rather superficial and spasmodic. The drift is decidedly toward the far more difficult task of combining these qualities in a continuous operation, and it is yet too early to speak of results except as they appear at close range to those in the midst of them.