

Let the Cities Rebuild

A Reconstruction Program Projected Through America's Municipalities Could Ease The Jolts During Conversion

By H. V. THORNTON

AMONG the various jurisdictions which direct our public affairs, municipalities are the first to feel the full impact of social change. They will be the first to feel the effect of demobilization. Their streets are the headquarters of the unemployed; the centers where discontent finds its most violent expression. Unfortunately the average person generally fails to recognize the essential and intimate character of municipal services, and the difficulties involved in the administration of municipal affairs.

Municipal government is sometimes derisively referred to as the "hot-bed of novelty." And without doubt more experimentation with governmental forms and procedures have occurred on this level than on any other; but it is far from correct to conclude that various plans and innovations are the outcome of the whims and caprice of our urban electorates. They are instead evidence of the desperate attempts of urban centers to meet their responsibilities in a world of increasing complexity.

While many cities may be the despair of some critics, we might as well join those optimists who see in our urban centers the last hope of democracy, the final testing ground of responsible government. It is rather obvious that other units of local government are losing much of their original usefulness, while the vitality and significance of municipal government increases. Perhaps this trend may appear objectionable; but cold uncompromising statistics mock those who dissent.

Two-thirds of the people and two-thirds of the wealth of the nation are found within the corporate limits of municipalities. In Oklahoma, a rural state, more than half of the inhabitants and assessed wealth are similarly located. Although this state lost population according to the last federal census, larger towns and cities registered an absolute gain. And it is not probable that this trend will be interrupted by the effects of the war and the influence of technological developments.

Every sign points convincingly to the enlarged role which municipal government seems destined to play in the lives

of our people, and in the management of our common affairs. It must be admitted, however, that those who regard with concern the rapid urbanization of the country have good reason to fear the effects.

Cities, even cities of ordinary populations, have always failed to reproduce themselves. The birth rate here is lower than in rural America. Thus far, experience seems to indicate that the city is not conducive to the type of family life which has always been associated with our civilization. The uncertainty and instability of industrial society, the great diversity of interests and attractions, seem to destroy a sense of purpose and individual responsibility. Suicide is far more common in the city; and while it is probably incorrect to assume that urban bred people are more inclined to engage in lawless activities, cities afford greater temptations and encouragement to those who are criminally disposed. Cities will create greater problems which will test even more severely the processes of democratic government.

In part, at least, our difficulties have grown out of a failure to give intelligent direction to the development of our urban centers. They have been regarded less as places to live than as places for making a living. Their growth has been conditioned solely by erratic, short-term,

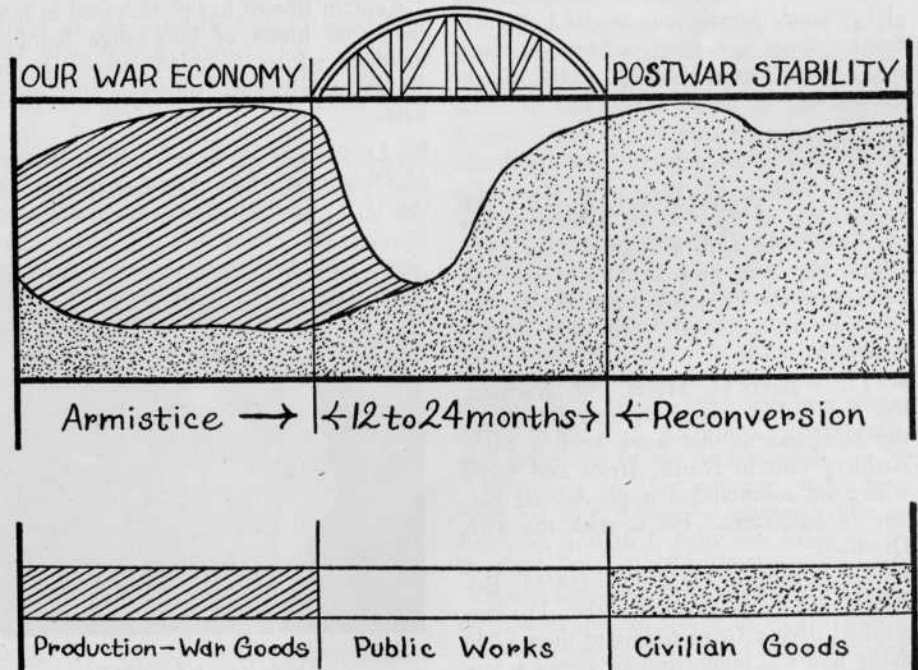
economic interest. A large share of the responsibility for failure to make our cities more attractive, and less destructive of normal social relationships, rests upon public indifference. But those who have honestly tried to give some sense of direction to urban development have been frustrated not only by a "real estate development psychology" but by the decision of unimaginative supreme courts. City planning and city zoning have always been hedged about by severest utilitarian consideration. Aesthetic factors, which add to the amenities and satisfactions of urban living, are yet to be favorably received by our courts of law.

This attitude, among other things, explains the over-all architectural deficiencies of our cities compared with the cities of continental Europe. Of course, little can be done about the matter. Only time, fire, and a fighting public conscience will overcome the evils of conjection, filth, blight, and sheer ugliness of established centers. However, more sensible attitudes can be taken toward future developments.

I

Postwar municipal planning, if its effects are to be enduring, must be regarded as a phase of long-term municipal planning, a step in the direction of making our cities more congenial for human habitation. In

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a previous article the point was made that unemployment will probably reach dangerous proportions after the cessation of hostilities. The Research Institute of America, in a careful and conservative analysis, predicts that the unemployment may exceed twelve millions by the end of 1945. If the war on both fronts ends suddenly, the number will be vastly greater. If such conditions prevail, public works programs must supplement the efforts of private enterprise to provide jobs.

It would be unfortunate indeed if supplemental public works programs were set up hastily. Careless or indifferent planning is scarcely superior to "made-work" methods of providing employment; the job as well as employment must be a factor in postwar planning. Anyone who has given time or thought to public planning of any sort is soon made aware of the technical difficulties involved, of time consumed in marshalling necessary facts, and the deadening indifference or skepticism of the populace. It calls for leadership of the highest order.

Nevertheless, municipalities, for several reasons, ought to assume this responsibility because they surely will feel most immediately and profoundly the dislocations that are bound to come with the armistice. Municipal plants and structures, because of their nature, will have depreciated more from neglect occasioned by the exigencies of war than those of other governments. Furthermore, municipalities have, in the midst of this armed conflict, improved their financial status. Finally, considering the current mood of Congress, there is slight prospect that a constructive postwar planning program will emanate from Washington. If help comes from the national capital, it will probably be in the form of hastily considered appropriations; and unless local units of government are prepared with plans, substantially in blueprint form, we shall see a repetition of the same wasteful spending methods which prevailed in the late depression.

The needs of a modern city, from the environmental point of view, are not difficult to list, not, if planning is judicious and farsighted, impossible to finance. The most obvious of such needs are:

1. An adequate, safe, and satisfactory water supply, and water rates which do not discourage industrial development and ample consumption for domestic uses.
2. Streets and roads which are well built, properly maintained and lighted, and designed to serve the needs of traffic with maximum of safety and convenience.
3. Well trained and well equipped fire and police departments.
4. Parks, playgrounds, parkways, swim-

ming pools, and other recreational facilities sufficient to meet the recreational needs of persons of all ages.

5. Means for the sanitary disposal of waste, domestic and industrial.
6. Adequate and dignified housing for the various agencies of municipal government including a Municipal hall, fire stations, power plants, etc.

Getting the job done is far more difficult. If it is well done, the following steps must be taken:

1. Appraisal of needs.
2. Preparation of detailed plans and specifications.
3. Provisions for financing (taxation, bond issues, grants-in-aid).
4. Scheduling construction (rating projects in order of importance and need).
5. Development of public understanding of the broad as well as the immediate objectives of planning.

Mere listing of projects can lead to nothing better than "boondoggling." Systematic planning will lead to purposeful employment and the creation of an urban environment better adapted to our needs.

II

Municipal planning in Oklahoma is faced with some serious difficulties which can be removed only by action of the State Legislature. And while relief from such restrictions probably cannot be provided in time to assist in postwar planning activities, they should receive earliest attention possible.

1. Municipal planning boards may exercise their powers only within the corporate limits. This is an objectionable type of restraint because many enterprises established just beyond corporate limits may defeat the orderly development of an urban community. A considerable number of states have recognized this fact, and have granted planning boards authority to control developments as much as three miles beyond municipal boundaries. A few have granted jurisdiction up to five miles. Oklahoma permits the creation of district planning bodies with power to control rural development contiguous to municipal limits, but no great benefit has been derived from these authorities.

2. Municipalities are unable to plan effectively because the laws of the state do not permit the establishment of cash reserves. At least this is true of statutory towns and cities, and while home rule cities may have the right to do so, few charters make such provisions. As a result, the financing of municipal improvements usually demands the issue of bonds, which because of the interest burden, makes improvements unnecessarily costly.

Furthermore, the inability to create cash reserves may have the bad effect of discouraging possible economies in current operation spending. There is, of course, danger of mismanagement of cash reserves, but the experience of many cities demonstrates that this danger can be largely eliminated. Approximately one-half of the states have abolished restrictions which make municipal cash reserves illegal.

3. Oklahoma municipalities, with some exceptions, find great difficulty in financing current operating costs. In spite of the marked increase of municipal services, along with the increase of urban populations, not much has been done to adjust the tax structure in their behalf. Although they serve more than half the people of the state, they receive approximately a fifth of the tax levy on general property. Municipal governments cannot perform adequately the enlarged role which postwar developments may impose upon them unless their financial stringencies are relieved by a more liberal tax policy. The power to tax has been declared to be the sovereign prerogative of the state. A municipality has no inherent powers in this respect, and can exercise such powers only with direct legislative permission.

4. Finally, the classification of cities in Oklahoma is inexcusably narrow. Too many fundamental differences exist to justify placing a city of two thousand and a city of two-hundred fifty thousand in the same class. Its objectionable features are evident in the expedients the state legislature has employed for the purpose of circumventing such classification. The situation is relieved measurably by provision for home rule. But the supreme court has, on the whole, refused to extend home rule prerogatives into those fields of municipal activity which would facilitate municipal planning. Taxation, borrowing, budgetary procedures, and the jurisdiction of municipal courts are rigidly, and often too narrowly restricted by uniform laws. It has been demonstrated over many years of bitter experience, that state control of such municipal activities is necessary. But regulation of this nature might respect differences in municipal affairs on the obvious and simple test of size, and still retain the necessary degree of control.

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Coast Guard

Orval Schmidt, '41-'42, Lone Wolf, seaman first class in the Coast Guard, was stationed at the Navy Section Base, New London, Connecticut. Mr. Schmidt recently completed eight-months duty at sea.

Jack Burris, '42law, Locust Grove, was on duty with the Coast Guard in Nashville, Tennessee, as a yeoman third class.

R. H. Young, '42bs, Ponca City, seaman first class, was in training at the Coast Guard Academy at New London, Connecticut.

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