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Abrams: The City Is the Frontier

Edwin A. Rothchild

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emergence of a strong Left in our country. And without such a Left, based on a passionate hatred of the social and economic conditions which feed poverty, bigotry and war, the vision of a new society expressed in *The Radical Papers* cannot be fulfilled.

DOROTHY HEALEY†

THE CITY IS THE FRONTIER. By *Charles Abrams*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965. Pp. xii, 394.

There is no royal road to urban salvation. The ills of the city are many and varied, as diverse as their causes, and their cures. Cities suffer from slums, rats, dirt, disease and crime; from racial and class divisions; from overcrowded, inferior and segregated schools; from discrimination in housing and employment; from traffic congestion, air pollution, despoliation of parks; from dullness, ugliness, planlessness, sprawl; from financial crises, dwindling tax bases, loss of industry, the flight to the suburbs, the hard residue of poverty. We have not really met these problems. The rapidity of the urban revolution has overwhelmed us; we have not acknowledged its scope or its implications.¹ We have neither fixed responsibility nor conferred power where it is needed. We deny our local governments self-rule (and their jurisdictions overlap); state legislatures are largely anti-urban (despite the reapportionment decisions); we are afraid of our federal government and will not let it act directly (although we use some of its money); we retain a stubborn faith that free enterprise will furnish automatic solutions.² The only governmental device we tolerate to any substantial degree is urban renewal.³ That is not enough.

† Spokesman for the Communist Party, Southern California.

1. We may begin to move in this direction, however. As this is written (July 15, 1966), the Illinois National Guard is moving into Chicago's most depressed Negro ghetto to quell rioting and looting. Similar disturbances are occurring in Cleveland, New York and Jacksonville.

2. See ANDERSON, *THE FEDERAL BULLDOZER* (1964).

3. "Urban renewal" is seldom used today in its broad dictionary sense. The words usually import a contemporary device for remaking slum areas or restoring older sections that are deteriorating. A "local public agency" (usually a city) prepares a renewal plan providing for acquisition and clearance of some or all of the area; the cleared land is sold at vacant land prices to private redevelopers, or public or private institutions (or on occasion even to other governmental bodies such as school boards or public housing authorities); the federal government meets two-thirds (in some instances three-fourths)

Charles Abrams makes these points and many others in *The City is the Frontier*, in which he attempts to survey the entire range of urban problems. It is a penetrating and provocative attempt and no one has higher credentials than its author.⁴ The book, however, is less a treatise than a compilation—one might almost say a scrapbook—of comments, criticisms, essays, prophecies, snatches of history, and personal recollections. It is vigorous and often brilliant but lacks form and not easy to digest. Perhaps the subject is simply too large to be organized neatly into chapters or to be nailed down by titles, headings or indices. Nevertheless, what Mr. Abrams says is worth listening to.

The book began as a study of urban renewal, and a grant was made for that purpose. Although the urban renewal program became merely a take-off point for the more general urban study, it remains a major topic in the book. Mr. Abrams equates urban renewal with slum clearance (I would give it a broader definition) and is critical of it. He says that it should not be used unless there is an adequate supply of good housing that the poor can afford (there never has been, to my knowledge). He suggests that it is immoral to dispossess the poor to favor the well-to-do, and holds that the success of an urban renewal program is measured not only by the profits of developers and the increase of the city's tax base but by its social consequences as well. While he recognizes the renewal program as "an important tool for cities" that "deserves continuance and expansion," he does not rate it highly.

I would evaluate urban renewal differently. Since it is a tool, not a philosophy, it can be used well or poorly. When it works, it replaces bad housing with good housing and saves neighborhoods from becoming slums.⁵

Of course, even when used well, urban renewal is no panacea. It cannot solve the housing problems of the poor, or end segregation, reform the tax structure, or cure the chaos of local governments. It is

of the cost; the city pays for the balance, but may do so in part through non-cash credits, i.e., expenditures for public improvements and schools (even private schools) within the area.

4. Mr. Abrams is an internationally known housing consultant. He was chairman of New York's State Rent Commission and Commission Against Discrimination. He is now Chairman of City Planning at Columbia University. He is the author of several definitive books, notably *FORBIDDEN NEIGHBORS* (1955).

5. There has recently been a tendency to romanticize slums as being picturesque and individual, probably as a reaction to the sterile high rise public housing units that institutionalize poverty. One hears much about the picturesque decaying buildings of Greenwich Village. However, few slums that really deserve the name have the charm attributed to Greenwich Village—if indeed Greenwich Village does.

no substitute for an enlightened public housing program. It is only one of a multitude of tools needed to solve the problems of urban living. But it can be a very useful one.

As to morality, it is true in the short run that demolishing slums reduces the housing available to people of low income. Rich people seldom live in slums. Even when relocation is careful and humane, it may merely mean that the poor who have been displaced are favored over the poor who have not been displaced. And since the new housing built on the cleared sites is usually more expensive than the old, the former occupants of the area can seldom afford it.

But in the long run the poor do not necessarily lose all or even most of the housing consumed by urban renewal. To the extent that units demolished are replaced by new dwelling units, the occupants of the new units will have vacated other quarters; the filling of these vacancies in turn leaves still others available; the ultimate residue, while the least desirable of the remainder, should still be better than the cleared slums and may come within the reach of the least affluent. The trickle-down method of housing the poor may be less than ideal but it does supply dwellings.

Moreover, demolition and relocation seldom proceed at such a rapid pace as to unbalance the housing market. Slum dwellers are not a notoriously stable population and those who move involuntarily at any given time because of a renewal program are apt to be far outnumbered by those who move, voluntarily or otherwise, for a multitude of other reasons. While no one likes to be moved against his will, it is easy to exaggerate the impact of slum clearance upon the housing of the poor. In any case, it hardly benefits the poor when still another neighborhood deteriorates into an impoverished ghetto.

Urban renewal has been used with marked success in two pioneer Chicago projects that I had thought were well-known in the housing field.⁶ The first was the clearance of one hundred acres of the city's

6. But about which Mr. Abrams has been curiously misinformed. His footnote 14 (page 98) confuses the conservation of the Hyde Park-Kenwood area in the vicinity of the University of Chicago with the earlier and entirely separate slum clearance program sponsored by New York Life Insurance Company at Lake Meadows, several miles to the north; it ignores the sequel to Lake Meadows, the neighboring and highly successful Prairie Shores project. Mr. Abrams implies that the redeveloped housing in Lake Meadows is racially segregated and says that a nearby "luxury unit" (actually part of Lake Meadows) "has not rented too well." In fact, the vacancy rate throughout Lake Meadows and Prairie Shores is virtually zero and is about as low in Hyde Park. Moreover, all the projects have been successfully integrated. The white-Negro ratio remains fairly constant, at about 25-75 in Lake Meadows, 75-25 in Prairie Shores, and 50-50 in Hyde Park-Kenwood.

worst slums which had surrounded a leading hospital; these were replaced by an attractive high rise complex, including apartment buildings of interracial occupancy, a shopping center, a school, community facilities and ample open space. The hospital has expanded. While this program began in the early '50s and the relocation procedures left much to be desired, I do not think one needs to apologize, even to former slum dwellers, for the replacement of intolerable slums with decent dwellings.

The other project was not slum clearance. It was a neighborhood conservation project, yet another facet of urban renewal. The area surrounding the University of Chicago was aging and sections were seriously deteriorating. If left to the free market, there was little doubt that the area would soon have become another slum, an extension of the Negro ghetto. The program called for selective clearance of the worst properties, but not more than 20% of the area; redevelopment of the cleared area by private developers, public housing authorities, schools and other private and public institutions; and rehabilitation of the remaining 80%. The theory was that blight spreads; that selective but limited surgery would stem future blight, permit the organism to recover and avoid the need for massive slum clearance. So far it has worked. Values are rising; vacancy rates are down; there has been considerable investment in rehabilitation. The racial balance has been constant for years. Although the economic level has risen, there is still some public housing, much middle income housing, and good representation of those of low income. The objective of being the first "stable, interracial community of high standards"⁷ seems to have been achieved. Diversity has not disappeared; even the marginal businesses that used to survive only by paying low rents in dilapidated buildings have now been housed in a unique shopping center.⁸

Of course this was not achieved by urban renewal alone. The project was able to draw upon the resources of a great university whose existence was at stake, an involved and articulate populace, unique neighborhood organizations of strength and viability, and the devotion of private and public efforts to the improvement of properties and the

7. This was the stated goal of the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference, organized in 1948 when the racial character of the neighborhood began to change. It seemed rather visionary then. See ABRAHAMSON, *A NEIGHBORHOOD FINDS ITSELF* (1959).

8. Harper Court, a neighborhood project, organized under the aegis of the Small Business Administration and financed by neighborhood investors, leases space at low rentals to artisans, artists, art suppliers, potters and other enterprises more noted for color than solvency, while it charges economic rentals to its commercially more viable tenants.

maintenance of standards. Urban renewal, however, was an essential ingredient.

Much more needs to be done. There must be a far greater commitment of funds, effort, and imagination. Mr. Abrams has issued a call for action on many fronts, for new goals, for new solutions. In order to respond to this call, however, it is well to know the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the tools we have.

EDWIN A. ROTHSCHILD*

* Member of the Illinois Bar.