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UNIVERSITY INTRAMURAL CORRESPONDENCE

Univ. of Pennsylvania
Community planning

To: Chadbourne Gilpatric
From: William L. C. Wheaton
Date: May 26, 1958
Re: A Program in Urban Criticism

JUL 15 1958 GA 8092 EP 28

Following up your suggestions regarding the development of a program on urban criticism I have jotted down a few ideas for purposes of further discussion.

I am sure that it would be advantageous to hold a small, one-day conference of the persons who have contributed most in recent years to this field. Among these would be: Lewis Mumford, Grady Clay, Jane Jacobs, Fritz Gutheim, Catherine Bauer, and Holly White, perhaps others should be added. Such a meeting would be helpful in producing ideas as to the most fruitful kinds of action which might be encouraged.

I. The Present State of the Art

A. Popular writing on urban development.

At the present time there is virtually no popular writing on the art of urban design. Lewis Mumford's columns in The New Yorker and Grady Clay's regular articles in the Louisville Courier Journal are the only regular features that quickly come to mind in this field. In addition, there are certain publications which from time to time do publish articles on cities, they include such magazines as Fortune, Holiday, and The Saturday Evening Post.

Popularly written criticism and commentary are common in several related fields. Although most newspapers have art and music critics very few have architectural critics. The New York Herald Tribune once employed Fritz Gutheim in this capacity but seems to have dropped the experiment.

Less closely related is the real estate page found in almost every metropolitan newspaper. Presently real estate pages are characterized by the extensive use of boiler plate, chiefly trade association releases, with almost no writing worthy of the name. Nevertheless, the concern of the real estate page with urban development presents some possibilities.

A few of the best papers have correspondents who regularly deal with problems of metropolitan growth and development from the political and economic standpoint. Bob Bordner of The Cleveland Press had a half page regularly for many years. Joseph M. Guess of The Evening Bulletin (Philadelphia) is another example. Until quite recently The Baltimore Sun had a correspondent concerned chiefly with urban renewal and development. With these exceptions there appears to be little regular newspaper or magazine writing on the problems of urban development and particularly on the problems of improving the design of the urban environment.

B. Professional Publications.

An almost equally unhappy picture is presented when one looks for thoughtful criticism among publications appealing to the professions concerned with urban development. These include architecture, city planning, landscape architecture, and possibly, real estate. The Architectural Forum and The Architectural Record have wide circulation among architects. Fairly regularly they publish articles written by such persons as Mumford, Jacobs, Gutheim, and Bauer. This group might be extended to include a number of well known architectural critics who also write for the architectural press. The quality of most of this writing leaves something to be desired and certainly does not start from any foundation of systematic thought about the design of urban areas.

The publications in landscape architecture are of relatively little significance. They consist of the Journal of the ASLA, the small magazine published by Jackson called Landscape, and publications produced by the Park and Recreation Associations. Perhaps one should include the American Planning and Civic Comment as a journal which is partly concerned with landscape and partly concerned with city planning problems. The Journal of the American Institute of Planners is another journal of limited circulation which occasionally features articles of the type under consideration here but it certainly does not give the topic adequate treatment. (347602)

A very different picture is presented by publications abroad particularly in England. There the Architectural Review and The Architect's Journal, the Town Planning Review, and the Journal of the Town Planning Institute in England offer far more extensive coverage than would be the case here. The Italian and German architectural presses give far better treatment to the problems of urban design than do the American.

II. Improving the Quality of Criticism

One of the most pressing problems is to improve the quality of the criticism in both the popular and the professional press. Consideration might be given to this as a major objective in the next two or three years, prior to attempts to extend the coverage of work now being published. Some possible lines for action are suggested below.

- A. To develop some ideas on urban aesthetics. The work of the Rockefeller Foundation in supporting the Lynch-Kepes research project at M.I.T. is a beginning. Similar work at the University of Pennsylvania is now going forward. Similar grants, made to one or two other schools, might help to stimulate some new ideas, standards for criticism, and approaches to the aesthetic problems of our cities. They would generate wider popular discussion and interest writers in the subject. The universities which have the greatest potential appear to be, in addition to M.I.T. and Penn, Harvard (Jacqueline Tyrwhitt), Yale (Christopher Tunnard), and California (Catherine Bauer).
- B. Another means for stimulating American interest in the problems of urban design might be to bring distinguished foreign critics to the United States. Penn is bringing Rasmussen to the United States this Fall. It might be advantageous to establish a program to bring over other persons of corresponding talent and reputation who have written extensively on urban design. Shepherd of England stands out particularly as a man who could make a real contribution here. Perhaps one of the Italians deserves equally important consideration.
- C. The professions concerned with urban development now lack a journal which would call attention to this field. One of the great publications in this field in the English language world is the Town Planning Review, formerly edited by Gordon Stephenson and published at the University of Liverpool. Stephenson is now at the University of Toronto and might have an important contribution to make to such an effort. A program to launch such a program in the United States and to carry it on for a three or four year period could stimulate greater interest among the professions directly concerned. Such a journal need not be a popular journal of mass circulation but could be one serving the role of the Kenyon Review, the Partisan Review and other small journals in literature.
- D. An alternative or perhaps an additional step to improve the quality of criticism of urban design would be to provide supplementary grants to existing publications to enable them to expand their coverage and improve the quality of their writing in this field. The Journal of the American Institute of Planners might well devote a section to urban design over a two or three year period if it received financial support for this purpose. Similar grants to journals in the field of architecture and landscape architecture would stimulate attention and thought and might also serve a secondary purpose of attracting some new critics into the field of urban design.

- E. Another possibility would be a program to bring back into writing concerning urban design some of the very limited group of people who have done well in the past but who are not now principally concerned with such writing. Lewis Mumford writes very little currently although he has a tremendous reputation in this field. Catherine Bauer, one of the most talented of our critics of cities has done relatively little writing in this field in recent years and might be attracted back into the field. It is suggested below that efforts also be made to attract new talent into the field.

III. Steps to Extend the Coverage of Critical Writing on the Design of Cities.

In addition to the above approaches, intended to improve the quality of critical thinking about urban design, attention should be given to the problem of expanding the circulation of comment on urban design to the broader public which is ultimately affected by the quality of our cities. A number of possible means for bringing the topic to the attention of the broader public are suggested below.

- A. Conversion of writers with interest in this field. It may be possible to discover persons now engaged in newspaper and magazine writing who have some interest in the arts and in urban development and who might be induced to devote more attention to problems of urban design through supplementary training, conferences, or other incentives. Consideration should be given in particular to the problems of city hall reporters who regularly cover urban development programs, to real estate editors, to art critics and where they exist, to architectural critics.
- B. It may be possible to develop and recruit new talent from among the younger newspaper writers and the journalists. This might require something like the Nieman program of graduate study for newspapermen which has been conspicuously successful in improving the quality of journalistic production. Another possibility would be a simple program of scholarships for graduate study in the university centers concerned with urban design which scholarships would be limited to students with proven writing ability and a journalistic or critical aspirations.
- C. A series of conferences on the problems of urban design organized to attract and interest journalists might be of value in stimulating interest in the field and in producing greater efforts on the part of the relatively limited number who have done any writing in the field to date.

- D. Although the real estate pages of our major newspapers are among the most dismal sections of modern journalism, the very present low quality offers possibilities for decisive improvement. The typical newspaper real estate section now consists to a very large degree of boiler plate circulated by National Trade Associations or government agencies or the crude releases of local real estate associations and real estate brokers. Presumably the real estate editors use this material for lack of any other material. Would it be possible to produce boiler plate for the use of real estate editors but of higher quality and focusing attention upon urban design problems? A modest experiment of this type might gain wide circulation and readership among people who have an active part in the development of cities.
- E. Consideration might also be given to other ways in which trade associations would be used to increase interest in urban design and improve practice by operative builders, contractors, and the like, who participate in urban building.
- F. Television and movies present additional opportunities for focusing mass attention on the problems of urban design. It would be possible to develop a series of TV programs and a series of short-run documentary films on the urban landscape. These are of course relatively expensive types of activity and would involve large amounts of money as compared with some of the other ideas above.

These suggestions are certainly not exhaustive nor may they be the best possible approaches to the problem raised. A conference of some of our outstanding critics might help to produce additional suggestions and establish priorities.