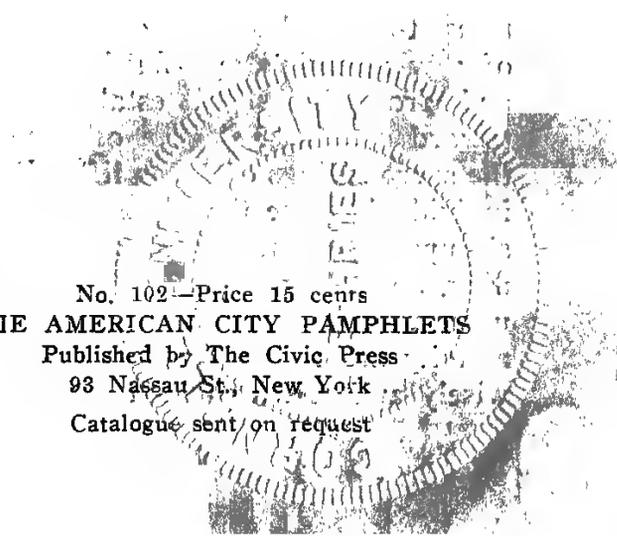


HOW TO ORGANIZE A CITY PLANNING CAMPAIGN

By Frederick Law Olmsted



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By Frederick Law Olmsted

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[1914]

HOW TO DO IT! Do what? How to organize a city planning campaign.

Last winter I rashly promised the patient and long-suffering editor of *THE AMERICAN CITY* to write an answer to that question, and now I must redeem the promise, though I strongly suspect he is a much better hand at organizing a campaign than I am. Such a campaign is, after all, largely a complicated piece of publicity work, a matter of convincing the right people of the importance of certain ideas as motives for action. That is the job of an editor. It is also the job of an advertising agent. It is also the job of a politician. A man who is skilled in organizing publicity campaigns, and in getting things put through, could give far better advice than I about how to organize a campaign so as to give "punch" to city planning ideas, if reasonably well up on the ideas themselves.

Perhaps, after all, a good deal of the difficulty in pushing forward the cause of city planning lies in the vagueness, multiplicity and divergence of the ideas for which it stands in the minds of different people. To mention only three ideas, everyone will agree that good city planning should contribute toward more sanitary, convenient and economical housing conditions, toward the more efficient movement of raw materials and finished products to and from industrial establishments and toward a greater degree of comeliness in the surroundings of urban life. But no two individuals place the same relative emphasis upon these three aspects of city planning, no two are equally open to argument upon all of them, and no two if aroused to activity are equally well equipped to speak wisely and convincingly upon all of them.

Again, in no two cities are the problems presented by the various aspects or phases of city planning equally important, equally pressing, equally difficult. No city progresses on its course of physical growth and improvement by means of a one-hoss shay that is equally weak and equally strong at every point. One city may be, like Metropolitan Boston, far advanced in the planning and acquirement of parks, but deplorably in need of a systematic development and control of main thoroughfares; and another, like Washington, may have laid out and may be boldly extending an adequate system of main thoroughfares, but have almost wholly ignored the need for parks in the outlying districts through which these thoroughfares run; a third, like Cleveland, may have proceeded in the most systematic and far-sighted manner to provide for the grouping of its chief public buildings and its principal railroad station so as to form a worthy city gateway and civic center, but yet have failed to grapple seriously with the obviously impending problem of rapid transit for the city and its suburbs. Even in respect to streets alone there is a sharp contrast of conditions between those places in which it has become the general practice, whether as a result of comprehensive planning or the unconscious interplay of social and economic forces, to lay out a large proportion of the streets and lots of a size and shape adapted to economical and satisfactory housing of the single family type, sometimes to the neglect of adequate thoroughfares; and those places where the effort to provide for through travel has so completely gridironed the land with wide streets as to make minor local streets practically impossible and force the develop-

ment, sooner or later, of deep multi-family dwellings.

In view of these local and personal differences, it must be obvious that the main points of attack can hardly be the same in any two campaigns for the advancement of city planning. The program must vary with the local conditions and needs, and the human elements involved; its success depending on persistency of purpose guided by that opportunism of method which is the mark of successful politicians.

The Basic Idea of City Planning

We come back again to the purpose which is thus to be kept persistently in view: What is the basic idea of city planning held in common by those approaching the subject from the various points of view of the transportation engineer, the social worker, the highway engineer, the architect, the landscape architect and the city administrator? What is it that distinguishes the attitude of each from the attitude he would occupy if he were not inspired by the city planning ideal?

This basic idea of city planning is the clear recognition of the fact that no one can accept responsibility for any smallest element in the complex unit that we call a city without participating also in the joint, undivided, and complete responsibility for the future excellence or inferiority of the city as a whole.

This joint responsibility is one which can not be shifted, even though our knowledge and powers be inadequate to the task of meeting it with complete success. Our judgments are halting and our outlook upon the future is short and uncertain, but whatever the future has in store for our cities will result inevitably from what, as a whole, we do and leave undone. It is a responsibility so large and so indeterminate that some people hide from it, ostrich-like, in the dust of their personal affairs, fenced within the limits of their well-defined and exclusively personal responsibilities, while others with their eyes open disregard it for selfish ends. Those who see the responsibility clearly and want to meet it as well as they reasonably can are impelled toward two distinct kinds of service, both of which must be recognized in any city planning campaign.

The first kind of service is directed toward bettering the coördination between

the multifarious lines of activity in making and executing plans which affect the physical city. By lines of activity I mean to distinguish one from another such matters as the laying out and construction of streets, the selection and improvement of parks and playgrounds, the location, design and construction of public buildings, of sewerage and water supply systems, of street railway lines, of rapid transit lines, of railroad and waterway terminals both for passengers and freight, and of the control of private building operations under the police power. In all of these and many other lines, planning and execution of plans are bound to be active in many quarters as long as a city is alive; even when the planning is fragmentary and is done with little consciousness, there is a unity in the results. The better coördination of these innumerable lines of planning activity is sought with a view to avoiding any wasteful needless conflict between them. It is also sought with a view to understanding their scope and probable effect considered as a whole: for the purpose of judging in which of the existing lines there is most need of additional effort; in which, if any, the effort needs to be given a different direction in the interest of the city at large; and finally what new lines, if any, need to be developed in order to secure the best results for the city at large.

The second kind of service is directed to bettering the defects in planning that are made apparent by this coördination and centralized scrutiny. Without this second kind of service the first would be a relatively barren academic function. Without the first kind of service the second would not have the characteristics that distinguish city planning from the unrelated, un-unified planning of diverse parts existing within a city.

Two Groups of City Planning Advocates

It is at the point of passing from the first kind of service to the second that differences of opinion as to the purpose in view are apt to arise among people interested in the advancement of city planning. These differences are due not merely to the personal and local variations and uncertainties above referred to, which lead some to lay great stress upon the subject of the thoroughfare system, others on the subject

of local street layout and building regulation, and others again on the rapid transit situation; they are due also to a more general difference in mental attitude which seems to divide city planning advocates into two groups. I will call these groups, somewhat arbitrarily, "central" and "departmental."

Those of the "central" group are keenly alive to the thought of the city as a single great controllable unit, are eager to realize the immense constructive possibilities which the city planning idea presents to the imagination, and feel that those who are absorbed in working out the routine grist of plans for each of the various lines or departments of city development now in progress take a narrow, jealous, uncoöperative attitude toward those in other lines and are lacking in imagination and creative power. It seems to those of the "central" group that merely to bring these departmental workers into better coördination, to fit patiently together a sort of patchwork general plan composed of all the fragmentary departmental plans, to point out contradiction and discrepancies to be found in this patchwork and gaps that need new patches to fill them—that merely to do this is a useful sort of clerical job, but that it is not constructive city planning in the large sense. They feel that it will not become so until some one central person or board with a powerful constructive imagination *originates* a plan dealing with all departments, but having that unity of character, that individuality and that forceful projection into the future which characterize all great works of creative imagination. They do not often go so far as to say that it must have the kind of unity which is given to a work of art by the control of a single master mind, but that idea is not far over their horizon. They look forward first to the making of such a really creative plan, not finished in all its details, of course, and not beyond probability of change, but in its broad lines complete; and, second, to the imposition of this plan upon the departmental planners to guide and control their elaboration of the details, somewhat in the way a charter is imposed upon a city by the legislature as the representative of sovereignty. Those of the central group seem to feel that if a so-called city plan commission does not propose to become the author (or employ some

expert to become the author) of a city plan which can thus be handed down as a charter to control the future detailed work affecting the physical city, it is taking a small view of its functions, and is belittling the real scope of city planning.

Curiously enough, the "departmental" group, with which I must class myself, feel that it is the "central" group who take the smaller view of city planning. We feel the plan for a city to be a matter so big, so complex, so much a growing and expanding thing—which if healthy and successful must develop so constantly year by year through centuries of life—that its unity must depend on causes far transcending the authorship of any one man or group of men. We feel that, if well done, the task of coördinating all the more important fragments of past and present planning for the innumerable elements of a city into a harmonious and self-consistent patchwork general plan is large enough to tax the powers of any city planning commission; and that there is very real scope for creative imagination in analyzing the deficiencies of such a plan as a whole and in stimulating and guiding the contributors of the fragments each to revise and improve his own part in the direction indicated by that analysis. We believe that if the group of people from whom the local initiative in city planning matters takes its rise, be they official or volunteers, permit themselves to devote their energies to working out for themselves the several parts of the general city plan (beyond what is absolutely necessary by way of example for educational purposes), they run grave danger either of dissipating their energies upon a limited number of the absolutely unlimited details that clamor for attention, or else of failing to maintain that correspondence with the hard facts of the situation which distinguishes real planning from dreams.

The diversity of the various lines of work that make up the complex strand of city planning demand such an enormous diversity of technical training and experience that it is wholly impracticable for any one man, or even for any small group of men, to assume with success the sole authorship of a complete plan. The delegation of special lines of planning to specialists, to study from the specialist or departmental point of view, is just as necessary as is the complementary process of

studying the combined results of the work of all of them from the central and unifying point of view of city planning.

The central unifying agency will do its essential unifying work more effectively if it keeps itself free to the utmost possible degree from the burden of designing the several parts of the plan; and it is quite certain that the several parts can be designed better by specialists acting under the criticism, control and creative stimulus of a competent central authority than they can be by a central jack-at-all-trades.

An Analogy Which Does Not Hold

The "central" group will say that the best way to get a good plan for a building, no matter how complex, is to have a single designer in charge who may employ various specialists to assist him, but yet remains the creative designer to whom the others are but advisers and amanuenses, and they urge that the same principle holds good in planning a city. It does not so hold, in my opinion, for this reason: No matter how big and complex a building may be there are limits both to its size and complexity, and also to the period during which the plan remains plastic and subject to change; whereas there are *no* limits of space or time or subject matter that fix the bounds of responsibility for those concerned with the planning of a city. Even in a very complex building, as one involving a large mechanical plant where economy of operation becomes a largely controlling factor of the design, the theory of a single responsible creative designer with collaborating assistants becomes very much attenuated, and in city planning it squares better with the facts to recognize that there are and must be many responsible creative designers at work upon the several parts of the plan, even though they have the counsel, guidance and control of a central coordinating agency. This central agency is not their master, but a fellow designer who has his own special function in the organization.

Not only as regards this matter of the "central" versus the "departmental" conception of city planning organizations, but as regards other debatable points, it will help to clear thinking and therefore to wise decisions to keep in mind the distinction I pointed out between the two kinds of service that must be rendered in the advance-

ment of city planning; the first being to better the coordination of the diverse lines of planning, the second being to improve the planning in the several lines. Without the first the second is not really city planning; without the second the first may be barren of practical result, although it contains the vital essence of the city plan idea. But the two require very different kinds of campaign.

*The City Plan Office of the Future**

I will state, then, my conception of the status of city planning toward the attainment of which we should direct all our present efforts, however we may guide them in detail to conform to local and temporary conditions.

There will be some official body charged with the prime responsibility for the custody, interpretation and amendment of the city plan. Whether the official head is single or multiple, there will be a staff of assistants, and we may call the body as a whole the City Plan Office.

In its function as custodian of the city plan, this office will have accumulated very extensive archives. These records will relate to the entire physical environment of the people; not merely to the visible aspect of the streets, of the public squares and parks, and of the public buildings, but to the locations, grades and other essential facts about all the sewers, conduits, pipes and subways beneath the surface of the streets; all the poles and wires and other objects above the surface; all railways and other special means of public transportation; all catchment areas and waterways, from those which furnish the city water supply, and from the smallest gutters that take the first rush of storm water discharge, through reservoirs and ponds, sewers, ditches and canals, to rivers of the greatest flood capacity in the region, and finally to every piece of land and every building and improvement thereon, both public and private.

In a place full of progressive and active-minded people the number of ideas proposed for physical changes in the city will have been almost countless in the course of a generation or two, and the number of these which upon deliberate consideration

* Some of the following paragraphs were embodied in an address before the National Conference on City Planning at Chicago, May 5, 1913.

will have won their way to acceptance as worthy of execution when opportunity shall permit, is bound to be very great. Some of them, coming in conflict with ideas embodied in the earlier efforts at city planning and being regarded as the more important, will have displaced these earlier ideas or compelled sufficient modification of them to remove the conflict.

Records of all the ideas deemed worthy of really serious consideration as parts of the city plan will be embodied in the archives of the City Plan Office, and one of its most important functions as custodian will be to maintain a system of classification, filing and indexing that will make these records useful, so that every new project coming up for approval and adoption as a part of the general city plan, and every proposal for actual immediate execution, may quickly be brought into comparison with every previously accepted project with which it might conceivably be in conflict. The most fundamental part of the records of a city plan office will be surveys of the existing situation, topographical, social, economic and legal.

Improvements and changes, as they pass from the state of expectation to the state of fulfillment, will be stricken off the list of plans and appear upon the surveys. Other changes, unplanned and unexpected, will occur, and must be entered on the surveys as new facts to be reckoned with.

In its second function, as interpreter of the city plan, the office will be charged with the duty of reporting upon every project under discussion, as to whether it is or is not harmonious with the whole aggregation of accepted and approved projects forming the general plan; and, in case it is not, pointing out the discrepancies and suggesting how to overcome them, either by abandonment of the current project, or by altering it, or by altering the previously approved plans with which it happens to conflict.

This brings us to its third function, as amender of the city plan. Here its main duty will be to recognize the march of unforeseen events, whether fortunate or unfortunate; to compare the hard facts and obvious tendencies of the times with the forecasts and suppositions forming the basis of every feature of the plan, and, if clearly necessary, alter the plan to square with the new conditions.

This office will have the defects as well as the advantages of a permanent official position. It is apparent that one of its most vital duties is to exercise a strong initiative in extending and improving the plan confided to it. It should be constantly studying the future in a manner which will disclose important contingencies that have not been adequately provided for in the projects already adopted into the city plan, and as it becomes aware of these contingencies it should take the initiative in securing plans for meeting them, calling upon the appropriate city departments to devise the proper plans in consultation with the City Plan Office, and securing the advice of outside experts when needful. I conceive that it will be in respect to this matter of exercising an active initiative in looking ahead for trouble which is not forced upon it, that any permanent official City Plan Office will be weakest, and here chiefly that it must forever be supplemented by volunteer efforts, spurred on by the criticism of dissatisfied enthusiasts, and occasionally lifted from its accustomed moorings by a wave of popular interest in the subject that will put new men into office. Unofficial busybodies must be relied upon to disturb the peaceful routine of the office by such jolting episodes, and to see to it that sufficient spasmodic creative energy and imaginative power are put forth to keep the plan well ahead of the march of events.

But no amount of spasmodically applied imaginative power and sound judgment in planning will be of much avail if the resulting conclusions are not brought to bear with a monotonous regularity of routine upon all the daily and weekly municipal operations to which they are related. That is the job of the employes of the City Plan Office in collaboration with all the executive departments.

A City Survey the Basis for a Plan

Assuming the general purpose of the movement to be such as I have described, there are many intermediate steps that must be taken before city planning in any locality will have reached such a highly organized condition. The order of the steps will vary according to circumstances, and as the way at first is steep and difficult, more like scrambling up a crag than marching up a monumental staircase from one

completed terrace to another, it will often be necessary to get some handhold on steps above before the footing is secure on those at the bottom. Yet whatever course be followed, certain steps must be surmounted sooner or later in every case, and a brief enumeration of these may be helpful in laying plans for local effort.

The basis for a city plan must be a city survey covering information as to four classes of fact: (1) The facts of the physical environment of the people of the city; (2) the social facts concerning the people themselves and the reactions between them and their physical environment; (3) the economic and financial facts as to the resources of the community and the possible means of bringing those resources to bear upon public improvements; and (4) the facts as to the legal and administrative conditions which must be reckoned with in any attempt to control the physical environment.

The most important records as to the past and present physical environment are graphic records, mainly in the form of maps and plans. The first step is to compile the available existing records in possession of various official bodies, municipal, state and national, the most fruitful sources usually being the engineering bureau or bureaus of the city and of the county, the assessors, the registry of deeds, the U. S. Geological Survey and the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. Other important sources for such data are the public service corporations, especially the railway, electric light and telephone companies, which not infrequently prepare for their own use better maps of a city than the public officials have at their command. Insurance maps are often useful and much more closely up to date in some respects than the public records. Occasionally private surveyors or map publishers as a matter of commercial enterprise have compiled maps of considerable value. In most American cities it will be found that the best of the existing maps and plans are very defective, both as to the accuracy of the general map framework (technically known as the horizontal and vertical control) and also as to the completeness and reliability of the detail. It is necessary to make the best of what there is at the start and arrange for systematically improving the records in both of these respects as fast as practicable.

The group of data, roughly covered by

the term Social Survey, begins with the records of population, obtainable from census returns, national, state and municipal, including the distribution of the population by local subdivisions so far as shown by the records, and the changes which have taken place from period to period. Where the distribution by local subdivisions has not been systematically regarded in the general census returns of successive periods, an approximate distribution can sometimes be made by comparison with local voting lists, tax lists and school census lists, and further analysis of the population by nationality and otherwise is often very enlightening.

A study of the relation of the people to their environment involves a series of special investigations. These vary in their relative importance according to local conditions, and many of them have usually been considerably advanced before any systematic grouping of the results into a city survey is undertaken. One of the most important deals with the housing situation; on this subject the publications of the National Housing Association are most helpful. Intimately allied to this in character and importance is a survey of the physical conditions under which the principal industries of the community are pursued, dealing with the distribution and character of factories and industrial plants. Different in character technically, but closely related to the housing and industrial surveys, is a survey of the transportation conditions. This includes not only the street railways and other local means of passenger transit, together with the passenger terminals for long distance travel, but also the freight facilities. Other special surveys relate to the social efficiency of the fixed physical equipment for water supply, for the disposal of wastes, for storm water discharge (including provision for flood dangers, if any), for public recreation through parks and playgrounds and otherwise, for public education, and for other municipal functions. Every one of these lines of investigation, but especially those dealing with transportation and housing, will throw light upon the qualities and defects of the street plan, and in connection with every one of them it is important to consider what English town planners embrace under the convenient word *amenity*. *Amenity* embraces all those qualities in the physical environ-

ment which tend to make it pleasant and agreeable.

Some sort of economic and financial survey of a community's present and prospective resources is essential as a basis for a useful city plan, even if it does not go beyond a rough consideration of the extent and rate of possible expenditure for public improvements. But really it ought to be much more searching. It ought, among other things, to analyze the basis of the community's prosperity with a view to shaping the city plan toward the enhancement of its natural opportunities.

The devising and the gradual execution of any city plan must be done under complicated limitations and administrative conditions imposed by law. Some of these either cannot be or ought not to be altered and must be closely regarded, while others stand needlessly in the way of progress and call for alteration. The legal and administrative survey therefore forms the fourth essential branch of this preliminary work.

Upon the basis of as good a survey of the whole situation as the circumstances permit, the next step is to forecast the probable future growth and to define the more important problems to be met in planning its control, and the third step is to seek out tentative solutions of these problems. Both in recognizing the existence of the problems and in devising plans for meeting them, an enormous amount of work will have been done in every city in a more or less fragmentary way. The chief function of city planning in this connection is to compile the results of this work, to search out and define important problems that have been overlooked through lack of system, and to get the proper people at work devising tentative solutions for each of these problems. The fourth step is to collate and compare the promising projects, to pass judgment upon them, and by a process of selection, elimination and mutual adjustment to weld them into a unified, self-consistent and wise general plan of procedure to be put into execution as opportunity permits.

And then keep everlastingly at it, as previously described.

Physical Accomplishment the Final Step

The final step, which takes us out of the realm of planning into that of physical accomplishment, comes about through three

distinct methods, each complementary to the others. Much can be accomplished through the voluntary action of individuals, inspired by the ideals of the plan and impelled by the force of public sentiment. Indeed, many of the aims of city planning are attainable only if such a spirit of idealism is widely felt as a moving force in the community. The second method is compulsion, by means of the police power, a force which is of the utmost value in dealing with recalcitrant citizens, but which can under no circumstances do more than fix a minimum standard already outstripped by the ideals of the community. The third and most conspicuous method is through the expenditure of public funds raised by taxation, for the acquirement of lands and rights in land and for the construction of public improvements.

I do not know how much this article will have helped those who want to advance the city planning idea in their own local communities. Their first task is to kindle an enthusiasm for the possibilities of deliberate and comprehensive city planning in the minds of a reasonable number of fellow citizens selected for their good judgment and force of influence. If some of them are directly concerned with some of the lines of planning which are to be combined into city planning, so much the better. If some are city officials or political powers and can be sincerely interested, so much the better. This group must fortify its interest and enthusiasm by increasing its knowledge, and communicate sufficient of the enthusiasm and knowledge to others by the ordinary methods of publicity to win support for such steps in advance as it may seem expedient to urge upon the community.

Each distinct action of the long campaign should have as an immediate and palpably attainable object some definite improvement in the city planning organization, be it a legal amendment, an increase in the annual appropriation to the city engineer for surveys and plans, or even the mere preparation and publication of an educative report; but whatever the immediate and temporary object of the campaign may be, it ought to be presented as but a means of approach toward the inspiring ideal of city planning—to insure that every single thing done from year to year in altering the city shall contribute to make it a better place in which to live and work.