Creating Good Residence Neighborhoods By Planning

City planning in almost every phase of its wide, modern meaning has taken root in the public conscience. Greater civic efficiency is becoming the keynote of municipal affairs. In a thousand respects the comprehensive work of this association is gradually evolving a beautiful city of form, symmetry, and convenience, scientifically designed for the greatest good of the moral and physical life of its people, as well as the greatest economic development of its industry. No one can over-estimate these self-evident results on every hand in our cities.

Indirectly, all this work and planning assists in the creating of good residence neighborhoods. Yet home surroundings are so vital to the moral and public life of every citizen that the theme of my talk is a plea for the aggressive, more direct, practical things that you and our municipalities today may accomplish for the creation and maintenance of good residence neighborhoods by planning.

In studying the reports of more than twenty commissions for a city plan of various cities at home and abroad, it seemed to me direct plans and suggestions were made for almost every other phase of municipal life except the actual creation and permanent safeguarding of residence property.

Much has been written relating to the proper regulation and construction of streets for residence property; an unlimited number of laws have been passed relating to plumbing, the thickness of walls, fire-proofing and the character of building materials; the greatest thinkers and best landscape engineers in the country have given a lifetime to the creation of beautiful drives and magnificent parks for residence sections; architects and artists have produced individual homes, beautiful in their conception. In fact, the whole movement of the country today is in encouragement of more beautiful individual home surroundings.

No American city lacks its scores of magnificent homes and its multitude of individually attractive cottages and upon these achievements rests the civic awakening of today.

Yet I repeat, practically nothing has been done as a community or as a municipality to directly create and maintain good residence neighborhoods, and the history of the residential development of every city in our country illustrates the ineffectiveness of the municipality up to this time in meeting this problem.

A few comparatively small good residence neighborhoods have been provided in every city by the occasional real estate development. The period over which the building restrictions in these areas extend is generally of mere nominal duration in proportion to the life of the city, and the very lack of any extensive restricted area often causes the restrictions
upon the more progressive sections to prove a boomerang and their destruction. Many restricted additions, most promising in the beginning, become financial failures upon account of the incongruous mass of injurious surroundings; and the more carefully the restrictions are drawn, the more wrecking they sometimes become, in the end, to the owners of the land.

City control in good residence neighborhoods has practically ended with the boundary lines of the street and the boulevard; and today, with only an occasional exception, the individual owner in our residence neighborhoods does whatever he pleases upon the property which he owns, without regard to the interest of his neighborhood or his community. In no phase of our social life is the welfare of our people so disregarded as the flagrant abuses endured in every residence neighborhood. No pirate or vandal over wrought more havoc on his victims than the good residence sections of an American City today accept with complacency.

I can conceive how in the industrial and business centers of a city, we might regard this as one of the necessary evils in the commercial growth; yet I do not understand how a nation of home-loving people such as ourselves, has not been aroused long ago to the saving of the surroundings of their homes.

I wish to again make it clear that I do not underestimate the effect and the assistance in the creation and maintenance of good residence neighborhoods of the broad city planning of today; yet I do maintain that a comprehensive creation and safeguarding of these neighborhoods has received practically no attention from the community or the city itself.

Every real estate man is familiar with the economic burden carried by a city in the abandonment of residence districts. They stand as a menace to the growth and improvement of the city. The remarkable fact is that nearly all of us have come to feel that the successive rise and decline of residence sections is unavoidable. I believe that during the present year at least one-half billion dollars will be lost to the home owners in our cities by the decline of residence neighborhoods.

A broad, general plan as applied to subdividing for residence property is generally undreamed of at the right time in the city’s growth. Subdividing must necessarily correspond to the development of the city, and the growth of every American city is industrial from the very beginning.

The factory, the railroad, the business house, first command the locations most desirable for their particular uses. Even the wealthiest men of the city simply get the ground that is left for the home and the family.

It is not as easy to anchor residence districts as it is business centers. The location of a depot, sky-scraper, railroad yard, factory district, main street, and the natural congestion in one small center all combine in holding the business district to a certain degree. The residence centers, by their very nature are most susceptible to injury, and they are so much more easily shifted that there has always been a lack of permanency. This is largely unavoidable in the early growth of a large city; and it is probably only after the future of a large city becomes evident that we can expect any broad plan for the permanent establishment of certain residence sections.
Theory and philosophy proclaim as the greatest factor in our lives the influence of the home and its surroundings; yet in city building as a municipality we are willing to sacrifice the home and its environment to the aggression of any money-making institution.

Cities will vote a bonus to secure factories, will donate large tracts of land to acquire new packing houses, stockyards, or soap factories; but who ever heard of an American city setting aside a large tract of land and offering a bonus for the location and preservation of attractive homes.

In how many of our American cities does the son retain the home of his father? Most American boys and girls have few traditions gathering around the homes of their youth, and develop little home sentiment, because the industrialism of their cities really made their parents nomads in their own community.

Is there not need for direct planning? Is there not need for municipal control, when the owner of the most beautiful residence in a city is helpless to prevent the erection of an undertaking establishment or a laundry at his side, an unsightly rear of a flat at the corner of his block, the erection of a tall warehouse protruding to the very street line beyond him, cutting off the air, sunshine and view for his family and children? These are only typical of the inevitable encroachment in almost every residence section today.

And to you, the planners of the cities of today and of the future, I wish to outline a plan for protecting and maintaining a good residence neighborhood, which I am evolving on 1,000 acres in Kansas City. It is proving efficient in many ways. I hope that in the near future, discouraging and hopeless as it may now seem, the cities of our country will exercise much of this same control in safeguarding the surroundings of the homes of its citizens. In referring to my work in Kansas City, I speak only of creating and maintaining residence neighborhoods, comprising no residence which costs less than about three thousand dollars. Up to the present time we have not provided neighborhoods for the laboring man; yet many of the safeguards we are effecting would be equally efficacious for the protection of his humble cottage, and as easily within the range of municipal control.

It was a long step from my first advertisement, which read “25 foot lots, 90 feet deep; no city taxes; no restrictions,” to advertising which pictured “spacious ground for permanently protected homes, surrounded with ample space for air and sunshine, among flowers, grass and shrubbery, all expressive of the owners ideals of beauty, health and comfort.”

One of the aims in creating residence neighborhoods should be to keep every home close to nature and provide as wide a range for the cultivation of the soil for garden, grass and flower purposes as possible. Every neighborhood should be gardenlike in its character – every child should through his early environment learn to appreciate the beautiful. Efficient platting should encourage individual effort of every owner to produce desirable landscape effects and create a home fitting to the surroundings.

In our early development we were afraid to suggest building restrictions; now we can not sell a lot without them.

The old plan in our city had been to restrict only deed by deed, as the lots were sold; and if a depression came before the property was all marketed, the remaining lots were conveyed with no restrictions whatever. These restrictions would expire in different years,
In our development the restrictions for twenty-five year periods are made a part of the plat that is recorded, the same as the dedication of the streets; and every purchaser has the opportunity to know the restrictions upon all the property in his neighborhood. The restrictions all expire in the same year. Every part that is to be reserved for business, school, church, play grounds, parks, or any purposes other than residence uses, is clearly indicated upon the plat.

The power is placed in the majority of owners of each of our additions to extend their restrictions for additional periods of twenty-five years. I believe this particular feature is unique, and overcomes a court decision in our state that building restrictions can not be made perpetual.

Our whole territory is logically divided into neighborhoods, and with the exception of specific places reserved in the very beginning for business uses, it is restricted entirely to the erection of single residences, excluding not only the flat and apartment but also the duplex house.

The most rigid construction is applied to the exclusion of any commercial use of the land set aside for residence purposes. Is not the greater public good of sufficient importance that an individual should be assured by his municipality that the home he has erected for his family may be surrounded by residences, and that these residences may be harmonious to his.

No one factor contributes more to the certain decline of residence property than the constant and insidious encroachment of commercial and semi-commercial property.

Now long will we chance the surroundings of our homes to the private and selfish interests of the real estate speculator? How long will we hazard the environment of our children to the mercenary and varied interests of the shifting ownership of the surrounding tracts of land?

Throughout our holdings the space we set aside in our plats on record for the $3,000 cottage is sufficiently removed from the houses of greater cost to prevent any disparagement in the cost and size of homes in their respective neighborhoods; the entire district is characterized by conspicuous balance and symmetry in home grouping, the costly homes, with spacious grounds being protected from the proximity of the less pretentious ones. The scale of cost is changed at the rear of the lot, thus avoiding any variance in the required cost of homes in the same street.

A building line is established on every street varying from fifty feet on the shorter lots to one hundred and fifty feet on the lots of greater depth.

We do not object however, to the residences being set back a greater distance than the building line, nor do our restrictions prohibit overhanging ornamentations of residences extending beyond this line.

We have rather discouraged the grand and classic plan of Baron Hausemann, so generally adopted in Paris, requiring rigid and extreme uniformity; we feel that the value and charm of residence property is enhanced by the romantic variety in every residence, and
with pleasant and accidental surprise in every street. We have endeavored to encourage the alternation of the narrow with the broad front house, and have even considered the recessing of alternate houses several feet further from the street line.

We believe that the virtue of the building line is an assurance to the community and the neighborhood of ample room for air, sunshine and effective landscape treatments, of one thing we are sure - that the city should guarantee to the individual owner the projection of no other residences beyond a reasonable building line. The constitutionality of the power of the city to condemn the building lines has favorably decided upon in the State of Missouri.

Throughout our entire property we have permitted no lots of less than fifty feet in width, and $3,000 residences, and much of our ground is restricted to tracts of two hundred feet or more with residences restricted to $25,000. I am inclined to believe that the fifty foot unit is too small, and that for houses of even $3,000 cost, the lot should be at least sixty or sixty-five feet in width. I believe it is better to have more width and less depth, so as to provide proper side building line restrictions. It is wonderful how much ten or fifteen additional feet of ground spade at the side will add to the charm of a home, giving ample setting rather than the appearance of a mere crowded collection of houses. I believe that the power could be constitutionally placed in the municipality to require a certain number of feet of open space to exist between every residence. It seems to me this could be done either under the police power for fire protection or for sanitary reasons. Surely no municipality should permit the building of residences on less than fifty feet frontage.

We have never sold two lots adjoining one another unless we had an agreement that the houses built upon these adjoining lots would not be duplicates. There is not a ‘Builders Row’ in all of our property; and right here I might add that I think every city should have a law prohibiting the ‘Builders Row’. Such lack of individuality oppresses and stultifies the citizen. Who would attempt to proscribe the same uniform of dress for every man, woman and child in the block.

The restrictions definitely state the direction each lot fronts, and the principal frontages of a residence erected thereon must correspond to the frontage of the lot. Any residence erected on the corner lot must present a good frontage on both streets. Misfrontage and the key lot evil unless carefully safeguarded are a danger in every good residence neighborhood.

Second only to the damaging influence of the encroachment of business property in a residence neighborhood is the ill-placing and unsightly appearance of outbuildings. We even go so far in almost all of our property as to require the outbuilding to be of the same style of architecture and material as the residence to which it belongs. In every case we specify within a reasonable limit where this outbuilding must be erected.

Many beautiful homes face an unsightly garage or barn. The costly effective lawn is often ruined by the neighboring outbuildings. On corner lots the outbuildings should be set back a reasonable distance from both streets.

In almost every residence neighborhood in every city one of the common abuses is the acquirement of property by a single purchaser of land extending through the block, and the facing of his residence on one street and his out-building on the other. This should be
most carefully prohibited. The city should exercise control in the placing of outbuildings in residence neighborhoods.

In the filing of our plats a right of way is reserved along the rear of the lots for the placing of all poles and underground pipe lines.

We have never provided space in any of our properties for the obsolete alley, for the obvious reason of cleanliness.

In the creation of food residence property we are certainly appreciative of the successful campaign of the American Civic Association against the billboard. I am proud to say that Missouri was the first state to accomplish any legislation against the billboard, and in every plat we file, the right is granted to the city to prohibit the erection of any billboards exceeding three feet square.

In a persuasive way we have done all within our power to encourage good architectural design. However, every real estate development has found this an exceeding difficult matter to handle, unless they erect the residences themselves; and I hardly wish to make so bold as yet to suggest the extension of the power of an art commission to control the design of each individual residence, although I believe this would be of immense value.

To this art commission however, should be entrusted the rendering less conspicuous the incongruous water plugs, the obtruding hitching post, the fire alarm box, the mail box, the provision of appropriate standards to carry the name of the street, an easily legible plan of numbering the houses, the softening and harmonizing of colors in the street improvements and the elimination of ugly fences.

It is not reasonable to assume this civic control through an art commission upon the theory that a street does not belong to the adjoining property owners but to the city and state at large?

In our early development we hesitated to suggest the rigid establishment of grades, creating cuts and fills in order to give future generations easy access through the city; now we never sell property until the streets are completely graded and improved.

Every municipality should have a law preventing the sale of property upon streets which are not graded. The mere establishment of the grades, as is now common in most cities, is always subject to change by a few influential lot owners, to the injury of the street for the city as a whole. Future generations should not be required to climb steep hills and force their teams to suffer in their heavy hauling over steep grades; and the city should require every neighborhood to carefully comply with the diagonal or circular, or easy line of travel as a part of the city plan as a whole.

In the beginning we did not feel we could afford to set aside the low and broken lands for parks and boulevards; now, under the direction of the noted landscape architect, George E. Kessler, we are paying enormous prices for the privilege of affording our customers these parks. Straight streets are some times needed today, but their monotonuous use, without artistic consideration of the ground or local circumstances, is to be condemned. The waving line of streets is more picturesque; but the straight line is more monumental; neither one nor the other should be abused, but both should be appropriately used.
In order to immutably establish our residence section we deeded to the city for park and boulevard purposes more than one half million dollars worth of land.

We have recently adopted as a design for ornamental street lights, through the suggestion of your good secretary, Mr. Watrous, the Washington D.C. model; and we have found the city as a whole extremely appreciative of this improvement over the old, inartistic post, common to our city.

We used to believe the road must be the shortest between two points; now the longer we can make it with curves, the more trees we can preserve by winding the drive, the more rocky ledges we can have along the way, the more it appeals in a home district. We especially plan in our development to preserve every vista and pretty view – a glorious sunset, a glimpse of a stream or forest landscape.

In some places to control a stream for sanitary or aesthetic purposes, we acquired large tracts of low land.

To further establish the tone of our property, we have leased to a Country Club one hundred eleven acres in the center of our land, absolutely without rent, for a period of twenty five years, the only cost to this club being the maintenance of the grounds, the erection of attractive club houses, and the payment of the general taxes during the term of the lease.

We established our own nurseries and planted more than 15,000 trees. We placed our own stone crushers and macadamized our streets from the rock that was on our properties. We have never offered a lot until every street improvement was complete, and every purchaser has a guarantee for several years of these improvements. As far as possible all underground pipes, etc., are laid in advance of paving.

We do not scatter our development. It is not easy to close the gaps in residence property. We do not burden our purchaser with unexpected future improvement taxes. We bind ourselves to protect and restrict all the surrounding property for several blocks for long terms of years. We try to provide every convenience that our purchaser will want ten or fifteen years from this time. We make our poorest property our most attractive instead of our most neglected; and turn down our sales unless a man will buy a piece of ground large enough to give a good foreyard, and yet restrict him so his rear and side lawns are almost as beautiful as his front lawn.

From the very beginning we offer prizes for the most beautiful lawns, and lay as much stress upon the fifty foot lot as we do upon the grounds of ten acres or more. We also have prizes for flower box contests and treatment of the parking space between the sidewalk and street - a vital problem in every city.

A fund is created in each addition by which all vacant lots are kept constantly mowed and in good order and not allowed to become objectionable, to the people who have built their homes on adjoining tracts; and these lots are sowed in clover and bluegrass or gardened.

We are all familiar with the frequent appearance of vacant property in residence neighborhoods. In most cities up to the present time there is no law to prevent the offensive dumping ground being maintained in a good residence neighborhood, unless it becomes unsanitary. Municipal control is gravely needed in every city in this respect.
We have provided constant maintenance of the paving of our streets by which any hole is paved immediately and tax bills only issued by the city, once a year. This prevents the practice so common in most cities of allowing the street to become in generally bad condition before any repairs are made.

We have separated all of our sanitary and storm sewerage so as to avoid the open, ill-smelling corner catch basins so common in most cities.

Often to make a winding road so as to avoid the monotonous rectangular blocks, and create lots of irregular lines, we have spent, thousands of dollars in laying the road through the rougher sections of our land.

Favorable public sentiment and the active co-operation of your citizenship are absolutely essential to the creation of any good residence neighborhood. One of the strongest factors and one of the greatest encouragements in the creation of our residence property has been the work of our local improvement association. This association provides refuse wagons which at a nominal expense haul away monthly, all accumulated trash of each corner, and has also provided snow plows which quickly clean the way after every storm. The city could provide this same service far more effectively, and over a large territory, and assess the cost per front foot in the same manner as the charges for the constant maintenance of the streets.

The extension of the power of the municipality as an entity is constantly increasing and entering new fields, wherever it proves practical and beneficial. At first this was largely extended under the police power of the city, and its successful advance against most bitter opposition, foretells the extension of the right of eminent domain, by which the municipality for the public interest and public good may go much further in extending its control of the creation, development and maintenance of residence property along the lines I have indicated. The youthful cities of the west particularly have an excellent opportunity of assuming a wise regulation of all these vital matters.

In our city we have a law by which the Board of Park Commissioners can condemn lands for boulevard purposes, and in this condemnation place an absolute restriction on the abutting property as to its use and character of buildings, including the building line and many other phases I have mentioned. This has been done through due process of law, and the property owners are given the proper hearing in the court as to damages and benefits; and while up to the present time the power has only been exercised in connection with the adornment and beautification of a boulevard, I can see no reason why in the future it will not be extended to cover property facing upon any streets owned by the community.

It is difficult to foresee to what extent this municipal power may be extended. It is certain that the attitude of the people toward this governmental interference is changing rapidly, and wherever the community and the public gave a far greater interest than the individual it seems to me that the power vested in the municipality should be so construed as to provide proper laws for the creation and maintenance of the property rights in a residence neighborhood and this power and plan constantly expanded to meet changing conditions in our civic growth.

Every American city, if not given the power to purchase land beyond its limits, should surely have the right to control the platting and improving of land, the establishing of
grades and character of the development, when it is clearly recognized that within a comparatively short time this same territory will be included within the city limits.

Frankfort, Germany, during the past few years has gone beyond the city limits and acquired immense areas of land. It has then included this territory within the city limits, and absolutely controlled its development the same as a private owner; and today this city has over $26,000,000.00 worth of municipally developed land.

Dusseldorf and Cologne have done the same. During the past summer a civic meeting was held in Dusseldorf at which all the cities of Germany displayed their latest improvements in municipal departments. This included model gardens, model residence neighborhoods and the model street, as well as exhibitions of efficient sewage, drainage and other municipal utilities.

American people instinctively love their homes, and if we so handle our residence neighborhoods as to appeal to their sense of beauty and feeling of securing in the surroundings of their families, they will respond in a remarkable way.

More than 500 of our purchasers combined this past year in purchasing shrubbery and flowers for their homes on a wholesale plan, a remarkable illustration of the present widespread enthusiasm for beauty in home surroundings. These people plant for a succession of bloom the year around, and the sincere adornment of beautiful homes.

Cities are beginning to compete with one another in the ascendancy of the beauty of their residence sections, and with this emulation, assisted by municipal control, the residence districts of our great cities within one hundred years will be the beauty spots of the world. And those cities that lead in beauty will just as surely and more rapidly attain industrial and commercial supremacy.

There is no more delightful work than creating a city. The most highly civilized peoples of the world have centered in the cities. The very words city-citizen-urban, derive their meanings from the same Latin words which indicate refinement, enlightenment, civility and courtesy.

The man who works for his immediate neighborhood receives less applause than the man who enters the service of his state or federal government; but after all, that man who strives to make the real home life of every man, woman and child of his neighborhood happier, has the greatest of all professions.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) – Speech JCN009
Arguably Jesse Clyde Nichols (1880-1950) was the single most influential individual to the development of metropolitan Kansas City. Moreover his work, ideas, and philosophy of city planning and development had far-reaching impact nationally – so much so that the Urban Land Institute has established the J.C. Nichols Prize for Visionary Urban Development to recognize a person or a person representing an institution whose career demonstrates a commitment to the highest standards of responsible development.

Nichols' objective was to “develop whole residential neighborhoods that would attract an element of people who desired a better way of life, a nicer place to live and would be willing to work in order to keep it better.” The Company under Nichols and his son, Miller Nichols (1911- ), undertook such ventures as rental housing, industrial parks, hotels, and shopping centers. Perhaps the most widely recognized Nichols Company developments are the Country Club District and the Country Club Plaza Shopping Center, reportedly the first shopping area in the United States planned to serve those arriving by automobile rather than trolley car.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) contains both personal and business files concerning J.C. Nichols' private and business life. Included are personal correspondence, family related material, and speeches and articles written by him. Business and financial files pertain to actions of the Company, including information about different developments and the securing of art objects; and printed materials produced by and about the Company.