

A Partial Diagnosis and an Incomplete Remedy

MAN'S STRUGGLE FOR SHELTER IN AN URBANIZING WORLD, by Charles Abrams. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, Cambridge, 1964, 307 pages. \$7.95.

Reviewed by PHILIP H. CORNICK

THIS volume is concerned with the problems created in urban areas by the influx of rural dwellers, who have abandoned their dwellings, such as they are, in sparsely populated areas, hoping to find more interesting lives in a city. But their insufficient skills provide no base for adequate earning power, so if they cannot find a little publicly or privately owned land on which to squat, and a few five-gallon oil cans and cardboard or wooden packing cases out of which to improvise shelters, their only other available course is to join the numerous street sleepers.

In Calcutta, we read, some 600,000 people sleep in the streets. Census figures for Bombay show one in every 66 homeless, while another 77,000 people live under stairways, in cattle sheds, on landings, or in similar spaces. In Lagos, Nigeria, a street sleeper may watch a shop at night, keeping others away, and thus earn a nightly threshold.

In this startling presentation of facts and near-facts, the author collaborated with the Joint Center for Urban Studies of M.I.T. and Harvard University. In his capacity as housing consultant to the United Nations and related agencies however, he had laboriously collected housing data for 13 Asian and African areas, including: India, Pakistan, Singapore, Turkey, the Philippines, Ghana, Nigeria, Bolivia, Colombia, Venezuela, Barbados, Jamaica and Puerto Rico. In some places reliable statistics are almost non-existent and hard to come by. The term

"near-facts" is therefore not intended as a slur. And there is no one to whom the reader could more dependably turn for the educated guesses required in such cases.

One proposal made for providing urban homes for the transplanted farmers and herdsmen was to employ western contractors experienced in the mass production of low-cost housing. They produced multiple dwellings all right, but the people for whom they were intended couldn't pay either the rent or the purchase price.

Since most of the urban arrivals, aided by kinsmen and neighbors, had built their former houses and had selected, assembled and transported the building materials, it was assumed they could do the same in the city. But since they had not previously had to provide facilities for personal hygiene, and since they had neither the means to buy them nor the skill to install them; a water closet, complete with water and sewer connections, was installed on every lot before it was sold. Because of variations in the climate, individual skills, and accessibility of building materials, a very flexible "roof loan" plan emerged. This made any self-help builder who had completed his walls to a specified height, eligible for a small loan sufficient to provide labor and materials for the roof.

The author seems to take particular pride in the rapidly growing Middle East Technical University in Turkey established in 1956. By 1963 it had a student body of about 2,100 and a teaching staff of some 300, 65 of whom were non-Turkish nationals. Approximately 10 per cent of the students come from other Middle Eastern and African countries, but most of the operating cost is provided by the Turkish government. Eventually there may be 12,000 students enrolled in engineering, architecture, planning and

administrative science classes. Let us hope faculty members will remember that help is required for large masses of self-respecting workers so low in the income scale that they would be regarded as paupers in western countries where training is offered in these professions.

Mr. Abrams prepared for his career with an earned law degree in 1922, and was admitted to the bar in New York the following year. He has specialized in the practice of real estate law, with emphasis on federal and state public housing laws. He also held an appointive office in New York state and city governments, having to do with rehousing, rent control and race discrimination. In the middle thirties he lectured on housing and real estate problems at the New School for Social Research in New York. But he found time to teach in the planning schools of the University of Pennsylvania, M.I.T. and Harvard, as well. When the United Nations needed an experienced man to study the problems which seemed to afflict every newly emerging nation, he was a logical choice. His *Revolution in Land* (Harper Bros. 1939) had been designated by Lewis Mumford the first noteworthy book in that field since 1879.

While his latest volume contains primarily a wealth of information about under-developed nations, there are also a number of observations on local domestic government and revenue. For

instance, the author inveighs repeatedly against the general property tax as though it were a major consideration in the housing shortage. That peculiarly American institution, spawned after the collapse of our first nationwide land boom during the 1830's, drew the fire long ago of Dr. Edwin R. A. Seligman. Four American states, among them New York and Pennsylvania, today use as their main source of local revenue a tax on real estate alone; and no longer attempt to list and value on the same roll with it, every horse, cow, chicken, clock, finger ring, three-legged table, share of stock and every other item of tangible and intangible personal property. Most other states have followed at varying rates of speed in the same direction.

Mr. Abrams contends that nothing without an income should be taxed. That is, he would move toward the British property tax and exempt all vacant lands and unoccupied houses. He seems unaware of the recent census bureau study which reveals that practically all real estate is notably underassessed, with vacant lands more flagrantly underassessed than other realty. Despite this evidence he appears to believe that the tax on vacant land is also a contributing factor to our housing shortage. He does not even ask whether a tax on rural land might help reduce the pressure of population on urban housing.

Robert Tideman, executive secretary of the Henry George School of San Francisco, linked liberty to land, and was quoted extensively by Harlan Trott in *The Christian Science Monitor* of July 27th. As a parent of one of the 800 young people who went to Mississippi to register Negroes for voting, he cited an instance where a landowner of a vacant lot protested when a crowd gathered there, after which the protesters moved to the street and were arrested. He believes they should not have been prevented from assembling there since streets are paid for by general taxes. Public school expenses are usually paid out of local property taxes, and studies show that the assessment of land is inadequate in many southern states. This explains why they are so poor that they desperately need federal aid for schools. "The civil-rights revolt calls for sharper focus on the land question," Mr. Tideman emphasized.