

The Devil Has a Plan

An imaginary conversation between a villainous City Manager and his friend, the devil. Excerpted from "Why Create Slums" published by Economic News, Great Barrington, Massachusetts, March, 1961.

C. M.: "This is a far too lovely city. True, the effects of that fire you kindled a few years ago were striking, but they haven't lasted very long."

Devil: "I have a plan that will be more devastating than any fire, but the effects will not be apparent at once. It will breed new vandals that will perhaps in the end destroy present civilization."

"What is this plan?"

"Simply this. Arrange with the tax assessors to raise the assessment and therefore the taxes on any building that is repainted or remodeled, or improved in any way. This will create an older dilapidated area into which the poorer families will move. In a decade or two their children will become competent criminals and racketeers."

"Is that all there is to your masterpiece of evil calculation?"

"By no means. In addition to taxing all improvements heavily you must reduce the taxes on land values, especially in the slum areas. Even when buildings are in danger of collapsing they will not be replaced, as slumlords hold their property for speculation on the future growth of the city."

"I am nearly convinced, but could you think of ways of extending slum

areas more widely and quickly?"

"Well, I do know of a subtle modification. In England when a property becomes so dilapidated that it is no longer used, taxes are canceled altogether. Slumlords in England have developed a hell that lasts for a lifetime, corrupts children, and damns earthly hopes."

"Then why not try the same scheme here?"

(With dignity) "I think you know me well enough to realize that neither lack of boldness nor any fondness for humankind have impelled me to suggest no more than I have. We must remember that you will be coming up for reelection in a few years. If you introduced a completely new idea you might encounter resistance."

"I see that you are right, but do you have any further proof of the soundness of your scheme?"

"Yes, the cities that have applied the opposite of my plan have no slums worthy of the name, and new construction is greatly encouraged. It also encouraged industry. Strangely enough even the landlords benefited because land values rose. There is the proof. Apply it and we get the slum hells we want, reverse it and slums are eliminated in a few years at no cost to the community."

"A luxury building boom on the Upper East Side where land values are zooming as the neighborhood changes, is costing the city thousands of units of much-needed housing—and millions of dollars in tax revenues," said Dale Wright in an extensive article in the New York World-Telegram of April 10th. "Landlords are buying brownstones and tenements—and small businesses—at market prices, evicting tenants wholesale with State Rent Commission approval, then holding or selling the land as its value goes up."

There is both a city and state law governing this but "nine out of ten lawyers" don't know about them.