
Affordable Housing

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C. Wright Mills' emphasis on "history, social structure and biography" goes more broadly and directly to one's mind and heart. For, while a little Welsh boy has matured and learned something in half a century, I am subjectively aware that Catholic priests still seem more than a little odd. Though I know a very good one—as anyone who is prejudiced is prone to say—Father Paul Drobin of Utica, New York is not sufficient to offset a more generalized feeling, undoubtedly ingrained since the age of five, which tells me that the priesthood represents a particular form of pretentious authoritarianism.

One understands he is not dealing with objective truth here but, rather, early socialization and its longer term implications. Furthermore, while I now find Irish men and women interesting and fun, especially in their rather lyrical, earthy and picturesque telling of stories, I also know I feel that they might be somewhat more prudent. What else would a Welsh puritan think?

One could go on. Inspection of self is endless; one's effort always unfinished within the depths of an inner-frontier. But a hint concerning direction is all that is needed. For, whatever the detail, the broad outline is clear. The prejudice of others is often a problem—and one is aware that between Welsh and Irish in the United States its intensity and consequence were never as severe as between black and white. Nonetheless, additional reflection on beliefs integrated within self allies us with the probing honesty of a Lincoln Steffens and, in a slight re-working of Pogo, one is more able to confront an essential enemy knowing that most often "they is us."

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THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CIVIL ENGINEERS has released the proceedings of a conference sponsored by its Urban Planning and Development Division. The conference, which was held in December, 1989 at Florida International University, the State University of Florida at Miami, was dedicated to the theme, which is also the title of the report, *Affordable Housing: A Challenge For Civil Engineers*, (New York: American Society of Civil Engineers, 1990).

Some scholars raised in the liberal arts tradition may on occasion forget the efforts to ameliorate social conditions by specialists in other fields. For this reason, and because of the real need for their expertise, their efforts should be applauded and heeded when they address subjects such as the present one.

The twenty-five papers of this meeting discuss "ways the civil engineer might be the catalyst to implementing changes in both policy and building design

which would improve housing affordability." A wide range of matters was covered dealing with energy cost, design, city planning, needs in developing countries and building techniques.

Of particular interest to economists, public finance specialists and others concerned with society's quality of life is the endorsement of land value taxation by William T. Flynn, F., ASCE. His paper, which is laced with vast practical experience, is entitled "How to Engineer Affordable Housing." It begins with the following abstract:

The programs which put home ownership within reach of most U. S. households had taken shape in the New Deal era and flourished after World War II until about 1970. The reasons for the rapid trend away from affordable housing are essentially economic; they have their roots in the way communities penalize building owners to obtain the funds necessary to provide for our common needs. An alternative method is proposed.

He says that while about two-thirds of U. S. households, by using 25% of their incomes, could purchase homes during the 1950s, only 50% could by 1970, and by 1981 only 10% could. Many households today must allocate 35% of their income to this purpose.

The situation of renters has also deteriorated. Many poor households now pour more than 50% of their incomes into rent. He points out that between 1973 and 1986 the real income of young married couples declined by 14% while their rents have climbed by the same percentage. The association of these figures with homelessness is obvious.

He relates land values and therefore housing costs to publicly provided improvements in utilities and services, the very stuff of civil engineering. It is by now an old saw that if the increases in land values associated with the Washington D. C. subway had been publicly captured, the bonds issued for its construction would have been self-liquidating.

The author cites conclusions similar to his on the usefulness of land value taxation in the report produced under Senator Paul H. Douglas (once president of the American Economic Association) and by Walter Rybeck, a former assistant of Congressman Henry S. Reuss and now director of the Center for Public Dialogue. The publications are: *Building the American City*, final report, National Commission on Urban Problems, Paul H. Douglas, Chairman, (Washington, D. C.: Draeger, 1969). Walter Rybeck, "Affordable Housing: A Missing Link." (Report by the Center for Public Dialogue, 10615 Brunswick Ave., Kensington, MD 20895, \$10).

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