

Charles Abrams, World wide Housing Expert, Dies

By Murray Illson /23 February, 1970

Charles Abrams, the urban planner whose views have had a major effect on housing here and abroad, died of cancer in his home at 18 West 10th Street yesterday. He was 68 years old.

As one of the world's leading housing consultants, Mr. Abrams had helped nearly a score of countries formulate basic housing policies. He was once described by Architectural Forum as "perhaps the foremost housing consultant in the United States" and on another occasion was called the "champion of the urban dweller and the pedestrian."

A man of demonstrated energy, Mr. Abrams had throughout his career combined positions as an official or consultant in private, governmental and international agencies with university lecturing.

He taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1957 to 1965 and in 1968– 1969 took a leave of absence from Columbia University, where he was chairman of the Division of Urban Planning, to fill the Williams Professorship of City Planning at the Harvard University School of Design.

Pulitzer Prize Nominee

He was the author of numerous books, pamphlets and articles dealing with land, housing, planning and racial problems. For three years Mr. Abrams was housing columnist for The New York Post, where he was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. His articles, which appeared from 1947 to 1950, exposed real estate abuses and shortcomings in city, state and Federal housing policies.

Mr. Abrams developed his interest in housing and urban planning through the practice of law and the ownership of property in Greenwich Village, where he pioneered in the twenties and thirties in preserving and renewing the character of buildings and streets. He lived in the Village for more than 40 years in the high ceiling brownstone on West 10th Street.

When W. Averell Harriman was Governor of New York, Mr. Abrams was a member of his cabinet, serving from 1955 to 1959. When he resigned as chairman of the State Commission Against Discrimination, it was said of him that his political foes and his warmest friends could unite in calling him a zealot.

But Mr. Abrams said that this was not 100 per cent true. Rather, he described himself as “a practical planner who becomes a propagandist when it's necessary.”

Fought for Aged

Until he resigned as chair man of the State Commission Against Discrimination he had spent two years bringing land lords, employers, places of public accommodation and others into line under applicable laws prohibiting discrimination. Later, he sought to ease job discrimination against the elderly.

Mr. Abrams, a Democrat, was appointed by Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia to a non salaried post on the city's Slum Clearance Committee in 1934. He resigned three years later and then served for three years as consultant to the United States Housing Authority and the Federal Public Housing Authority.

In the mid-1940's when the Liberal party was organized, Mr. Abrams joined it and became one of its State vice chairmen. In 1946 he was named counsel to the State Joint Legislative Committee on Housing and Multiple Dwellings.

Conservative Republicans in Albany used to denounce him for what they called his “socialistic” aims. They reduced the antidiscrimination commission's budget after he became chairman in 1956.

It was then that Assembly Speaker Oswald D. Heck characterized Mr. Abrams as “a zealot.” Governor Harriman immediately identified himself as “a zealot” also and declared that he wanted all New Yorkers to show “zeal, not moderation” in the fight against discrimination.

Mr. Abrams was born in Vilna, Poland, on Sept. 20, 1901, the youngest of four children in an Orthodox Jewish family. In 1904 the family emigrated to the United States and settled in the polyglot Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, where they lived in a cold-water flat across the street from the father's pickle and herring stand.

In a profile in The New Yorker magazine three years ago, Mr. Abrams remembered his father as a “noble” man who comported himself in such a way that “even the sale of miserable pickled herring became somehow a courtly and humane transaction.”

While a student at Eastern District High School in Brooklyn, young Abrams helped supplement the family income by working part-time as a lamp lighter for the Brooklyn Union Gas Company and later as a full-time Western Union night clerk.

After graduating from high school, Mr. Abrams took evening courses at Brooklyn Law School and was admitted to the bar in 1923.

Partnership With Botein

With money borrowed from Arthur Garfield Hays, whom he had earlier served as a law clerk, Mr. Abrams opened office in partnership with an other young lawyer. The partner, Bernard Botein, later became presiding justice of the State Supreme Court's Appel late Division for New York and Bronx Counties.

After joining Mayor LaGuardia's administration in 1934 and serving as counsel to the American Federation of Housing Authorities, Mr. Abrams was credited with laying the groundwork for the laws and procedures for public housing in the United States. Subsequently he was to become the much sought-after international expert on housing and planning.

In June, 1964, the M.I.T. Press published Mr. Abrams's book "Man's Struggle for Shelter." It was described as "the first authoritative eye witness report on the explosive problems of the world wide migration to the cities."

The book drew on Mr. Abrams's 11 years of observations, beginning in 1953, as an adviser for the United Nations, which had asked him to make worldwide study of urban land problems and policies.

In 1954, Mr. Abrams was named chief of the United Nations housing mission to the Gold Coast (now Ghana). After that he participated in United Nations housing missions to Turkey, Pakistan, India, the Philippines, Bolivia, Ireland, Japan, Nigeria and Singapore.

At the invitation of the individual governments, he advised Puerto Rico, Israel, Barbados and Venezuela. He also served as housing consultant to Jamaica, W.I., under the auspices of the International Cooperation Administration, and Colombia under the auspices of the Pan American Union.

Two problems that Mr. Abrams encountered continually in his United Nations missions in underdeveloped countries were slum clearance and squatting.

Slum-Clearance Advice

As to slum clearance, he warned that demolition of old housing should follow, and never precede, the construction of new housing. "The worst aspects of slum life," he said, "are overcrowding and excessive shelter cost. Demolition without replacement intensifies overcrowding and increases shelter cost."

With regard to squatting, which he defined as "the trespass of desperation," he recommended that authorities temper legality with reasonableness, providing squatters with water and sewage facilities if possible while making provision for them to gain ownership of the land eventually.

Books by Mr. Abrams also were credited with having strongly influenced a generation of housing and planning officials. His "Revolution in Land" (1937) was hailed by Lewis Mumford as this century's most important book in its field and the most significant study of land problems since Henry George's.

In 1946 Mr. Abrams's "The Future of Housing," a study of housing in the United States, was a dividend book of the Book-of-the-Month Club. "Urban Land Problems and Policies" (1953), a United Nations report, was issued in three languages and had several printings, and "Forbidden Neighbors" (1955) was termed "a landmark in the work of measuring the Goliath of housing segregation" in America.

Not long before his death he finished work on a new book, "A Glossary," a glossary of planning terms, with commentary.

Lindsay Task Force

Mayor Lindsay appointed Mr. Abrams in November, 1965, as chairman of a 14-member task force to draw up recommendations for combating the deteriorating housing situation in the city. In January, 1966, the task force issued a report proposing a single city housing administrator to have jurisdiction over all capital expenditures involving housing and urban renewal. As a result of the proposals, the New York City Housing and Development Administration was created.

Among Mr. Abrams's citations were the annual award of the League for Industrial Democracy (1954), the Brotherhood Award of the Catholic Interracial Council (1959), and the S. L. Strauss Memorial Award of the New York Society of Architects (1965).

He was a member of the American Institute of Planners and the American Society of Planning Officials, and an honorary associate of the American Institute of Architects.

Mr. Abrams leaves his wife, the former Ruth Davidson, the painter; two daughters, Judith and Mrs. Abby Baratta; brother, a sister, and three grandsons, all of New York.

A funeral service will be held at Frank E. Campbell's, at Madison Avenue and 81st Street, at 2:30 P.M. Wednesday.