

Housing Conditions in the New York Region

Information Bulletin

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These Bulletins, published from time to time, are intended primarily for the information of news editors, editorial writers, members of the Association, and others particularly interested in the Regional Plan and planning. They permit of the amplification of Regional Plan proposals beyond what is practical in newspaper releases; an occasional resume of the history of some specific development, and a discussion of planning situations, projects and suggestions in which the attitude of the Regional Plan officially is reflected.

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Regional Plan Studies and Conclusions

(From a monograph by Thomas Adams in collaboration with Wayne D. Heydecker.)

The spirit in which the Regional Plan approached the complicated problem of housing in the New York Region is well expressed in the words of President Hoover, who, in the course of his address at the Conference on Child Welfare in Washington on November 19, 1930, said:

"Delinquency increases with congestion. Overcrowding produces disease and contagion. The child's natural play place is taken from him. His mind is stunted by the lack of imaginative surroundings and lack of contact with the fields, streams, trees and birds. Home life becomes more difficult. Cheerless homes produce morbid minds."

The housing problem is essentially social, but it cannot be solved without taking into consideration the economic factors with which it is inseparably associated. With this thought in mind the studies have been pursued exhaustively and are now presented as Monograph Two in Volume VI of the Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs. Excerpts from the Monograph, in sequence, are given below, affording an easy comprehension of the outstanding features of the studies.

The General Problem

The housing problem may be divided into two parts, one part being that which relates to securing proper conditions of land development, control of surroundings and distribution of residential growth; and the other that of securing more and better houses. The latter is usually mistakenly considered as the whole problem. It involves questions of construction, sanitation and internal arrangement of dwellings and questions of building finance in relation to economic return. In the solution of this part of the problem cities require good building ordinances and consideration of methods of financing the building of homes for various groups of the population.

The first part of the problem is, however, of primary importance in the sense that it deals with basic conditions. It involves the control of land subdivision and of densities and surroundings of residential areas by means of city plans, zoning ordinances and public acquisition of open areas for small parks and playgrounds. It is this part that has been largely covered in the Monographs contained in Survey Volume VII (Neighborhood and Community Planning). The two phases of the problem need to be considered together in any adequate plan for improvement of housing conditions, but in the Regional Survey and Plan we are primarily interested in the fundamental phase.

For the purpose of preparing a Regional Plan we are especially interested in the following matters:

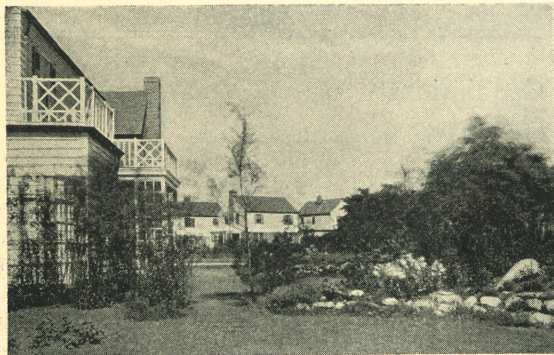
1. Social effects of bad housing.
2. Deleterious effects of land overcrowding and slum neighborhoods; relative advantages and disadvantages of multi-family and single family dwellings.
3. General economic aspects of the housing problem.
4. Conditions and trends of housing in New York City and Region with special regard to tenement housing.
5. Desirability of home ownership and the use of building societies.
6. Public responsibility for improvement of housing conditions and the problem of public aid.
7. Major needs in housing policy and finance.
8. Scope and value of housing improvement projects.

The Limitations of Statistical Inquiries

Statistics may give us some idea of the existence of a housing problem, but they do not tell us what it is. The problem of housing the very poor is so much involved with other social questions that it is almost impossible to draw any definite conclusions, even when the facts show, for example, that certain parts of the city containing very bad housing conditions are subject to a much higher death rate from preventable diseases than other parts containing good conditions. Comparatively good houses may be overcrowded, and this overcrowding may be as much a cause of infection as bad housing.

Absence of Results of Studies

Perhaps in no field of social investigation has there been more work done than in obtaining information regarding the housing of the general



In Suburban Areas Small Houses Can Be Combined with Attractive Surroundings and Space for Recreation. Witness the success with which this has been done at Radburn, "The Town for the Motor Age," near Paterson, New Jersey.

body of wage earners, and perhaps in no field has there been less progress toward the accomplishment of the ideals which investigations have revealed to be desirable. An important element that has conduced to lack of public action is, and always has been, probably in every country, the fact that the rights of property owners to exploit their possessions in their own financial interest is regarded as more important than the responsibility of such owners so to use their property that it will not cause injury to society. In general there is too much sympathy on the part of governments toward the maintenance of property values, even when these depend on profits derived from unhealthy and unsafe conditions of housing.

We know that the security of society depends on the security of its investments in property and all that this connotes in protecting the rights of the individual. But we are prone to deny in practice the truth that the stability of these investments themselves, as well as the general welfare of the community, depends more on the health and efficiency of the population than on the protection of rights of individuals to use their property as they like.

The conditions revealed in this and other reports show the direction in which improvements of housing conditions which are vitally needed can be obtained and the part they should play in all planning for the future. But much more effort must be made than at present to meet this need

by combined public and private action. The work of the New York State Board of Housing is an excellent beginning, but it is only a small beginning, considering the immensity and importance of the task to be performed. In modern democracies there exists, as in ancient autocracies there existed with dire results, popular ignorance or indifference instead of fiery discontent toward the evil results of bad housing. Elaborate studies may reveal what should be done. But to solve the problem requires what William James called "civic passion."

Social Effects of Bad Housing

The worst of the city slums is their extent. It is the slum neighborhood rather than the slum dwelling that is socially destructive. A bad house in a good neighborhood may be much more desirable than a good house in a bad neighborhood. It is the neighborhood quality that affects the lives of children most for good or evil, and the chief reason why good housing conditions are needed is to protect the growing child from injurious environment. The object of city planning is to improve neighborhoods of houses rather than individual houses.

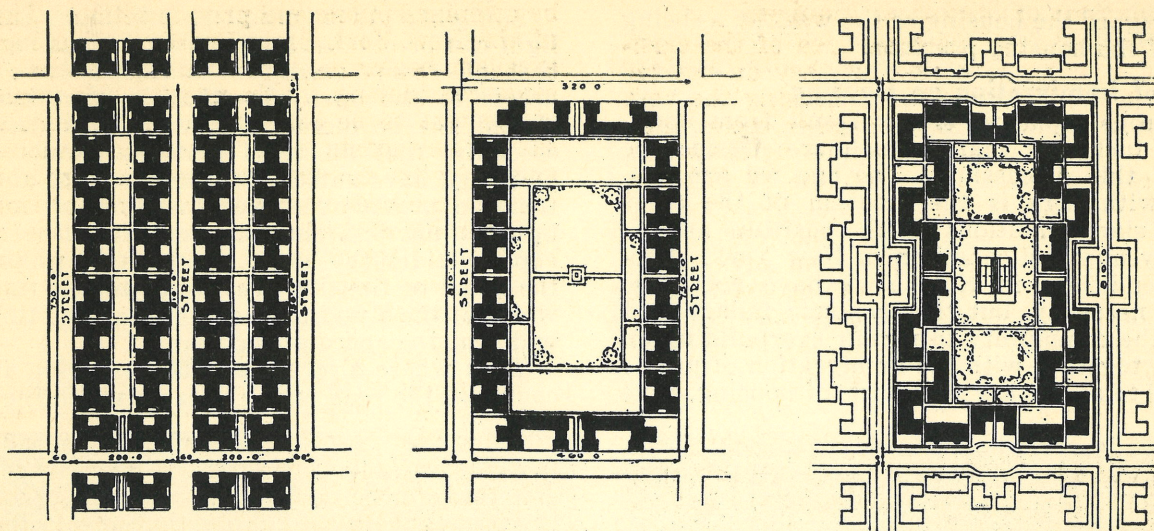
Bad housing in the main is haphazard city building, and its cure lies in more city planning with the right social objectives. No financial consideration should stand in the way of a city in providing the basic conditions necessary to make home life healthful for the family. Bad housing conditions lead to extensive sickness, social restlessness and crime. They cannot be considered to be necessary from a financial point of view because the cost of avoidable sickness and crime is probably greater than the cost of ameliorating the physical conditions that lead to them.

Health and Housing

A study of housing conditions having for its objective the discovery of whether there is any relation between housing and tuberculosis was carried out by the Health Department of Chicago in 1917. It was brought out that no constant and definite relations between housing and health were proved to exist and that it was difficult to prove direct relations by statistics. The report then proceeded to show that there were all sorts of indirect relations between bad housing and ill health, tuberculosis especially.

Crime and Delinquency

In April, 1929, the Children's Aid Society published the results of an investigation into juvenile delinquency conducted by the Baumes Commission. A part of a district below Third Street, east of the Bowery, in New York City, with a population of 220,000, was selected for the inquiry. It was found that in 1926, 819 boys and 107 girls between seven and sixteen years of age had come to the attention of the social agencies. No direct relation between housing congestion and degree of delinquency was found, but bad housing conditions had a distinct bearing on the extent of the latter. It was reported that "in four small blocks of wretched housing under an elevated structure 58 boys and girls, or nearly four times the average for the area, were reported



Courtesy of Bing, Stein and Wright

In Rebuilding Congested Areas There are Splendid Opportunities for Obtaining More Light and Air and Play Space If Blocks or Larger Units Are Developed as a Whole

Above are three diagrams indicating (on the left) how single blocks may be developed, and (on the right) how even better results may be obtained if a cross street is closed and two adjoining blocks developed as a unit.

as conduct problems during 1926." In an area devoted to commercial activities 58 gangs of boys who committed delinquencies were discovered.

The real emphasis of the report, however, as in reports on juvenile delinquency in London, was on the connection that was established between leisure-time activities and crime. Fully three-quarters of the population are in families with children under age. The provision of some means of outdoor activity for the leisure time of these children is essential to health and prevention of delinquency.

General Economic Aspects

We believe that bad housing is primarily the result of economic fallacy or of social error based on unsound economics and not on depraved social instincts or desires. Any complete solution can only be obtained by correcting the economic structure of society as a basis for correcting the physical structure of the city.

All phases of the housing problem in the New York Region have to be considered in relation to three grades of society having different levels of income. These are, first, the self-sustaining low income groups; second, the very poor, and third, the comparatively wealthy.

First Group: We first have the workers in trades, industries and professions, whose income normally is sufficient to enable them to pay the price of wholesome and agreeable accommodations. It is the housing of this vast self-sustaining part of the population that constitutes the main problem in the New York region. The fact that so large a proportion of this class has to live in unwholesome and unsanitary dwellings, in many cases in slum districts, and that so few are able to escape from overcrowded building conditions is the worst indictment of housing conditions in New York.

A prominent cause of past failure of attempts to improve slum areas is that they have not been directed to provide improved conditions for the

highest paid, but rather for the lowest paid workmen. By providing accommodations for those who have the means to pay for improvements, but lack the opportunities to get them, the needs of all other classes of society are indirectly met.

It should always be borne in mind that, even among those who can pay an economic rent, there are great numbers who can do so only for a used building. The building of new houses assists this part of the lower income groups indirectly, but never directly. New houses as a rule cannot be built to compete with old houses. When those who can afford to move from old houses into new houses do so, they set the old houses free for those who want improved old houses, but cannot afford new ones. The process in some respects resembles what happens in connection with the supply of new motor cars, and the effect this has in increasing the supply of used cars.

Second Group: We next have the very poor group who cannot pay for healthful accommodation in old houses and for whom new houses cannot be built upon a commercial basis at any time. The provision of houses for the poorest members of society in all countries and cities is to some extent a problem of obtaining amelioration of general social conditions. No self-respecting city can overlook the need of helping its poorest citizens, but public or private philanthropy, when necessary to be given, should have regard to all necessities of life and be organized so as to minimize its injurious effects.

Third Group: The comparatively wealthy whose incomes are sufficient to command the best quality of house and neighborhood without sacrifice of other needs form the third group. In so far as there is a housing problem associated with this group it relates mainly to the need of planning and zoning. The best and most healthful homes may be injured by proximity to unhealthful homes or neighborhoods, encroachment of business use and, in apartment districts, absence of adequate light and ventilation. Only in this indirect sense

can we regard the housing of the wealthy as being a part of the housing problem.

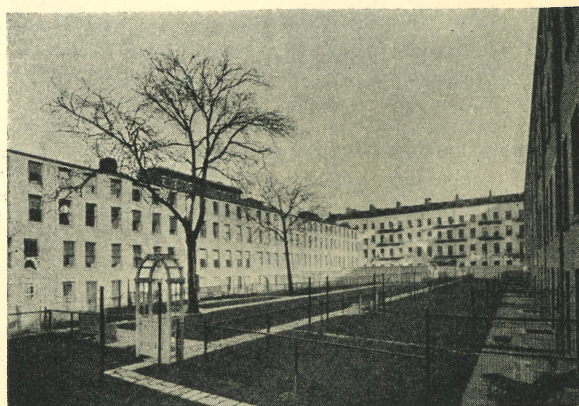
Effects of Immigration on Housing

Numerous economic effects result from immigration, including many which are outside the scope of this discussion. The one we are concerned with here is the creation of the overcrowded slum conditions which constitute an economically unsound condition in New York. Economic conditions in New York have not made slums a necessity, but the economic fallacy that it pays the community to permit overbuilding on the land, together with the immigration of people prepared to accept low standards of housing, have



Sunlight: As a practical minimum sufficient light can be obtained under restrictions requiring that all rooms used for habitation have direct access to the open air—that is, that buildings should not be more than two rooms deep, and secondly, that all front and rear walls of the buildings have sufficient space at right angles to them to provide for every window an angle of light of not less than 45 degrees. On the two exposed sides the latter requirement would have the effect of limiting the height to one times the width of the street on the front and one times the width of the space at the rear.

Thus where a street was 60 feet wide and the courts at the rear were the same width the build-



Renovation of Existing Buildings Sometimes Affords a Solution.

The "before and after" views shown above illustrate the effect of such a renovation project at the corner of Bleeker and Sullivan streets. Ample spaces with light and air are supplied to all the adjoining buildings.

caused slums to be created in spite of prosperity of the city and its comparative freedom from poverty.

The worst menace of the slum in undermining the prosperity of the city is due to its persistence from generation to generation as a chronic social disease in the civic body. While the immigration to which we have referred had a great deal to do with the creation of districts of old law tenements, which are the prevailing type of house in the worst neighborhoods of New York, it cannot any longer be regarded as a cause of maintaining these districts or of the inaction of the city in regard to the prevention of overbuilding and defective construction in new areas.

The Main Economic Factor

The whole regional survey shows that the main economic factor in promoting bad housing conditions is the overcrowding of land with buildings. We repeat that one of the worst evils in New York has been the building of tenements on rear lots, that excessive coverage of land presents the main difficulty in getting improvement of housing conditions and has given false values to land in residential areas and that in the long run overcrowded housing produces no economic benefit to property owners as a whole.

A Minimum Standard of Density for Health

Let us briefly answer the question as to what is the minimum density (in other words, the minimum space about residential buildings in relation to height) for purposes of health.

ing height would be limited to 60 feet. This is less than the ideal standard suggested in the Monograph dealing with Sunlight and Daylight for Urban Areas in Volume VII of the Regional Survey, but probably is the best minimum standard attainable in tenement and apartment house districts.

Through Ventilation and Recreation Space: Where the conditions required for light are obtained the requirements of through ventilation will be met. The same is true in regard to the space needed on private lots for recreation of the inhabitants. This space is required for health and safety no matter how convenient and satisfactory the public recreation space in the form of parks and playgrounds may be.

Open Spaces Ample

Two things have to be made clear at this point. The first of these is that if housing densities were lessened where they are excessive, the urban growth would not spread more widely from the center than it now does. The explanation of this is that there are ample open spaces for residence within a reasonable commuting radius to take care of all the population of the New York Region for a hundred years to come without any overcrowding.

The second thing is that the number both of population and of houses, and their increase, will remain the same whether they are spread more evenly on the land or are congested in one place and thinly scattered in others. The average density of houses within the commuting radius of

New York is no higher than it would be with a lower maximum density. For example, New York City has an area of 190,270 acres, with a population in 1930 of 6,981,927. This gives an average of about 36 persons or about 8.5 houses per acre. To increase this average to 50 persons or about 12 houses per acre would provide for a population of 9,536,000. If the present tendencies toward wider dispersal of population and industrial functions become stronger, New York City may never reach this number within its present boundaries.

The Need of Better Quality in Small Dwellings

Considered in the abstract, the small dwelling is much superior to the tenement as a place in which to live. But this satisfaction is lessened when we come in contact with the examples of

For the smallest type of dwelling row houses of good construction are better than separate single houses of poor construction.

In Queens there is much need for strengthening the building and zoning regulations. Within the last few years there have grown up in Queens thousands of cheaply constructed frame dwellings crowded too closely together for this type of building. These have been erected under the present building code and zoning ordinance, and more of the same kind will continue to be erected unless additional requirements as to side yards and front yards and better construction are speedily adopted. In some parts of Queens large areas have been covered with poorly constructed frame houses that are nothing more than wooden boxes. Ade-



Springsteen and Goldhammer, Architects.

A Number of Very Successful Projects Have Been Carried Out Under the New York State Housing Board.

The above view showing the interior garden of the Amalgamated Apartments in the Bronx evidences the careful planning of these projects.

small dwellings that are being erected in outlying parts of the city. Unfortunately, also, land is not being planned and developed with local improvements in such a way as to obtain the full economic benefit of the small as compared to the multi-family house.

Single and two-family houses of the cheap kinds that are being erected in parts of the city are defective in construction and therefore costly to maintain; they are too often erected in low-lying, badly drained areas; they lack labor saving devices, as compared with new tenements; they are too scattered and add more than is necessary to the distances and inconveniences of travel, because of mis-planning of subdivisions, and they too often have as great, if not greater, risk of fire than tenements.

These defects can be remedied by building law administration, by better house planning, by regulation of land development and by the adoption of methods that will secure a better balanced distribution of industries and transportation facilities.

quate building and zoning regulations could have prevented their erection and now could prevent their repetition.

Varied Conditions Outside New York City

The four hundred-odd municipal areas outside New York City and within the Region include a great variety of types of community, each having a peculiar housing problem. At one extreme there are residential districts that probably have no equal anywhere for good quality, and at the other there are tenements and small houses in which are to be found conditions of the worst kind. Even people of substantial means in these groups frequently acquiesce in bad conditions. Therefore much of the bad housing is unnecessary because it is the result of bad custom rather than inability to pay for good housing.

The population of the Region outside New York City, according to the 1930 census figures, is, in round numbers, about 4,500,000, and this is expected to grow to 9,722,000 by 1965. Whether this growth will be attained or exceeded will de-

pend largely on whether the quality of housing provided in the outside areas is so much better than that within the city that it counter-balances the advantage which the latter possesses in more rapid and cheaper means of transit.

In general the greatest need outside the city, as in the suburban areas within it, is to control new housing developments, and by preventive measures to secure the erection of dwellings with space for light, ventilation and recreation, whether they are apartments or single family dwellings.

Handicaps to Home Ownership

Home ownership in the New York Region has received a serious setback by reason of inferior single family house developments. The absence of proper control of these developments, with the results we have seen in Queens and other districts, has discredited the individual small home in many respects compared to more crowded but better constructed quarters in apartment buildings.

The increase of building and loan associations, with the protection they afford to purchasers, is one of the best means of securing the desirable increase of home owning and the wider distribution of population in single family dwellings.

Public Responsibility for Housing Conditions

Where housing conditions have become defective, it must be due to the neglect, at one time or another, of the public authorities, who alone have the power to take effective measures to prevent such conditions. The most urgent duty of government bodies in connection with housing is to prevent the inception of bad housing in new areas, for this can be most easily and economically accomplished.

Public neglect in connection with new housing developments consist both in the failure to seize opportunities to encourage good building and to prevent bad building.

The existence of slums is primarily the result of imperfection of government. The blame cannot be fairly placed on what the committee of the New York Legislature, appointed to study tenement houses in 1853, called the "natural and fearful result of the rapacity of the landlord in every crowded city, unrestrained by conscience." This "rapacity" is nothing more than natural selfishness, which in varying degree and form lies at the basis of all private enterprise. When the form it takes is likely to produce bad social results, it should be controlled by government. No reliance can be placed on its being controlled by conscience. Its bad performances are the result of community indifference which permits persons to obtain a vested interest in unwholesome housing. When these vested interests are once established, as they now are in New York City, they become a force behind legislative indifference.

Public Aid and Private Enterprise

While public inaction and injurious forms of private action exist as complementary forces in maintaining bad conditions, we find that a great part of the improved housing that has been carried out in recent years has been the result of better forms of private enterprise.

These private projects have been pioneer efforts in good housing and have not been carried out on a strictly commercial basis. As time goes on, however, and such projects become less experimental, it will be possible to carry them out economically in respect to cost of land and improvements; the investment in them will become more secure, and the necessary limitation of dividend will be less of an impediment to raising capital.

Whatever objections there may be to public aid, it has to be admitted that in some circumstances no housing improvement is possible without it. The difficulty is to obtain the improvement without doing more harm than good. When it is



Courtesy of New York State Board of Housing

By Contrast This View Shows the Outlook from the Former Home of One of the Present Amalgamated Apartment Tenants.

necessary to grant public aid, it should be given as a last resource after other means of supplying accommodation have failed, and it should be given in a form that will assist rather than impede private operations in house building. It may be accepted as an axiom that the best way to supply new houses for those who can pay for them is by private enterprise, subject to adequate government control.

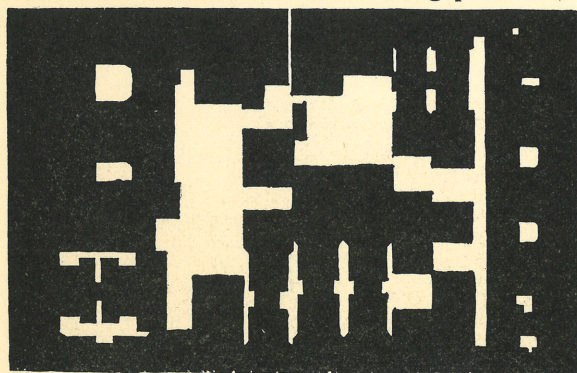
The General Need

In general it appears that if cities in the Region were to make and carry out the laws that are necessary to obtain proper planning and development of subdivisions; to prevent injurious speculation; to improve restrictive and public health laws requiring owners to maintain dwellings in a healthful condition; to provide more ample play space, particularly in overbuilt areas; to encourage home ownership and the private building of small dwellings; to regulate building finance; to spread transit facilities into undeveloped areas; and to prepare and carry out comprehensive city

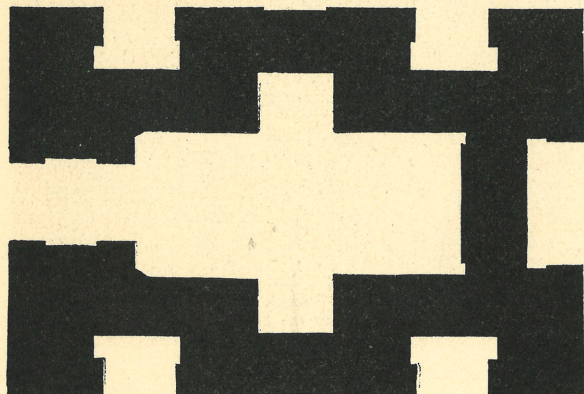
and zoning plans, they would do more to solve the housing problem than by public building, tax exemption, or subsidy.

Moreover it appears that in the absence of proper control and the exercise of foresight in planning, involving intelligent and timely government action, there seems to be no escape from the uneconomic methods which other countries have had to adopt to solve the evils of haphazard housing developments.

It is not believed that it is practicable to secure such perfection of law and administration as will result in the solution of the housing problem, but



1. Coverage of Typical Block in Area Adjacent to Site of Amalgamated Dwellings.



2. Plot Coverage, Amalgamated Dwellings, Lower East Side, Manhattan.

Courtesy of New York State Board of Housing
At the Root of New York's Difficulty Is the Almost Universal Overloading of the Land with Buildings.

The contrast between the typical block (above) and the Amalgamated Dwellings development (below) affords striking proof of the conditions with which we have to contend and the solution of one phase of the problem.

every act of the state and local governments that proceeds with proper regard to the above logical needs will help toward a solution and lessen the necessity for resort to unsound remedies.

Objectives

1. Adequate control of the planning and development of new subdivisions.
2. Prevention of the erection of new dwellings and tenements that do not conform to reasonably good standards of health and safety.
3. Prevention of excessive density of buildings devoted to residence and protection of their surroundings against invasion of injurious buildings or uses.
4. Prevention of occupation of houses unfit for human habitation and of the renting of such houses.

5. Giving of more encouragement to building and loan associations, private individuals and others through state boards of housing so as to stimulate erection of new houses, increase of home owning, and establishment of new industrial towns and model suburbs.

6. Municipal purchase and development of land for housing purposes.

Education of Public Opinion

Majority opinion determines the state of law, but not always the state of law that is best for the majority. Intelligent action in securing both effective law and effective administration depends less on the existence of needs and wants than on a proper understanding of how they can be met. In the matter of housing it is extraordinary how inconsistent, in important respects, the law is with the welfare of the majority. That this is so in regard, for instance, to the overcrowding of land with buildings used for residence is proof of the need of education of the mass of the people to enable them to understand that they have only to exercise their power to get satisfaction for their social wants in the matter of spacious and healthful means of shelter.

Three Things Necessary

In the matter of housing, three things are necessary for the purpose of education, each being complementary to the other. The first need is the existence of housing associations, consisting of leaders of public opinion and social workers, having as their object the promotion of public welfare, and as their method the presentation of facts based on ample investigations and a sound conception of civic economy.

The second need is organized effort to assist the re-conditioning of defective houses, and in giving instruction and guidance within the homes regarding the means of making and keeping them healthful. The third need is the creation of object lessons in good housing.

Housing Associations

New York has not been without leadership in housing improvement. The activities of the various groups referred to in this report (Monograph Two) include the Tenement House Commissions, The National Housing Association, and the state bodies set up by former Governor Alfred E. Smith and by other leading public officials. But there is urgent need for more coordinated effort in making studies along the lines begun by the New York State Board of Housing, of more courage and aggressive action in promoting enforcements of the laws, and of more strenuous advocacy of legislation that will be effective in improving housing standards. There are wide fields awaiting inquiry in regard to the possibilities of low cost housing, the types of houses most desirable, the housing standards that are necessary for health, the degree to which residential districts should be centralized or decentralized, the scope and limitations of both private and public enterprise, the responsibilities of manufacturers toward the housing of their employees, and the financial measures necessary to promote house building.