

CHAPTER VIII

THE URBAN RENEWAL PROCESS

When *St. Louis After the War* (1,2) was published in 1918, it hinted that perhaps at some time in the future the city would have to assume the responsibility for the quality of its housing. Cities had so recently assumed responsibility for the planning of their physical structure, that it comes as no surprise that this "hint" for assuming responsibility for a matter customarily left completely to private enterprise, fell on deaf ears. It was ignored completely except for a few curious scholars.

When Charles Mulford Robinson wrote *Modern Civic Art* (3) in 1903, there was no thought of public responsibility for the condition of housing. He said:

The tenement we have with us yet, and it seems too much to hope that we shall ever be without it,

. is not the slum, in an improved form, a necessary evil of city life?

In his book, *The Width and Arrangement of Streets* (4), Robinson included a chapter on "The Platting of Minor Residence Streets for Humble Homes." There was an awareness of the problem. Robinson was to say:

Social problems are to a large degree problems of environment. This with increasing positiveness is the conclusion of modern scientific study into the depths of sociology.

The tiny but growing sensitivity to the problems of the poor and their housing was to be cast aside for awhile, however. The 1920s were a period of growth and expansionism and of boosterism. You measured the success of a city entirely by the rate of its population growth, not by the quality of life for its inhabitants. The poor or unfortunate were to be content with the crumbs that fell off the table. The devil was there to care for the hindmost. In such an environment parts of older cities, not built or planned too well anyway, began to deteriorate and, almost unnoticed, slums and blighted areas began to spread through the older parts of cities.

Harland Bartholomew noticed. He had always had a deep social concern, a wide empathy. He had been poor; he knew what it meant. During the 1920s, he had not been able to find anyone interested in looking into the problems posed by poor housing.

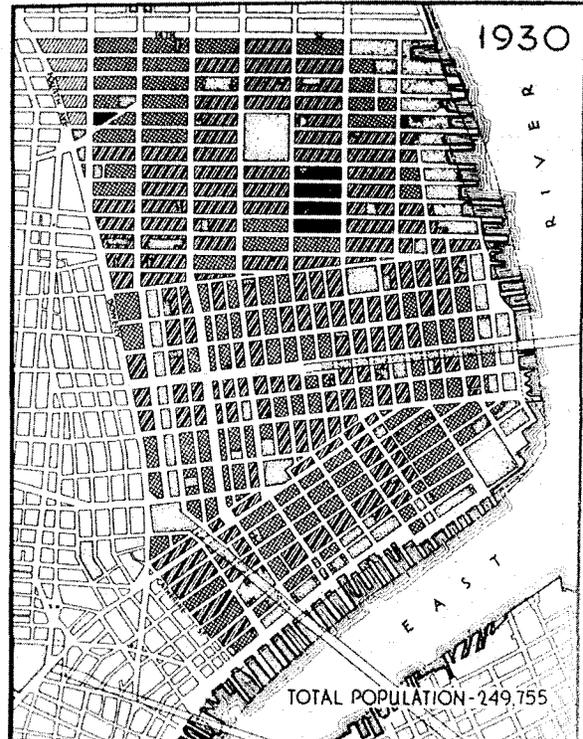
The Great Depression that started in 1929 changed the national attitude toward

such matters. No one would challenge President Roosevelt when he said that one-third of the nation was ill fed, ill clothed and poorly housed, and that something should be done about it. In 1937, Congress passed the first Federal Housing Act (5) as a means of improving housing by building public housing projects.

PLANS FOR THE LOWER EAST SIDE, NEW YORK CITY

As the largest and one of the oldest of American cities, New York City was

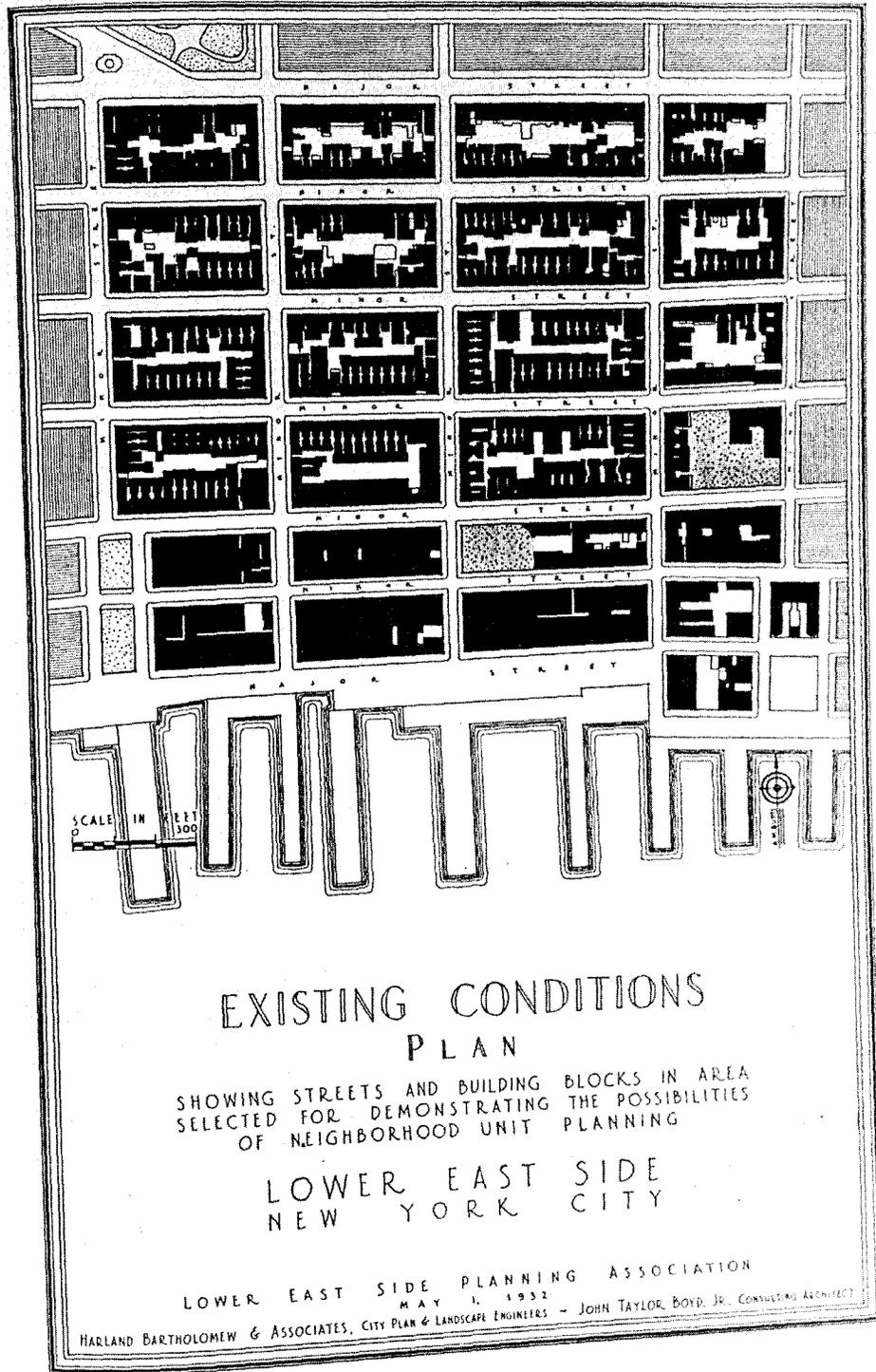
among the first to feel the effects of the deterioration of its residential areas. One of the worst of the city areas was the notorious Lower East Side, bounded by East 14th Street, 3rd Avenue, Bowery, Boyard, Market, and the East River. This was perhaps the nation's most extreme example of unsound social conditions. It had been used for generations for the largely temporary residence area for immigrants. The total area was slightly less than 900 acres (1.4 square miles) of which a bit more than one-third was in streets. In 1910 the Lower East Side contained 532,000



LEGEND
 ▨ LESS THAN 250 PERSONS PER ACRE
 ▩ 250 TO 499 PERSONS PER ACRE
 ▤ 500 TO 749 PERSONS PER ACRE
 ▥ MORE THAN 750 PERSONS PER ACRE
 □ NON-RESIDENTIAL AREA

Figures 1 and 2. These charts forcefully illustrate the tremendous decrease in population that has taken place in the entire East Side area. In 1910 the population of the district was 531,615, and the figure for 1930 represents a decline of 53 per cent from the high point of 1910

65 New York City was the first to be hit by the problems of poor housing and blight. Flight from an area such as the Lower East Side was a dramatic symptom. The Lower East Side had lost almost half of its 1920 population by the time of the 1932 study.



66 Many important groups and agencies were concerned about the Lower East Side, its people and its problems. Many had tried to rehabilitate buildings or to tear down the bad and build anew. None of these actions had seemed to do much if any good.

persons; by 1930 this had declined to 250,000, that is by 53 percent. Severe problems of the area had caused the formation of the "Lower East Side Planning Association," which included eleven savings and loan associations, several banks and title companies, the East Side Chamber of Commerce, and several settlement and community councils. The association engaged Harland Bartholomew and Associates to investigate the area and make recommendations. The contract was dated October 14, 1931. The report was made May 6, 1932. (6)

The report includes four parts: studies and plans for major streets and for transit detailing how these affect the area, a study of land and building use and value (and of trends in these), and a preliminary proposal of how the area might be rebuilt (the last part of the report being made in collaboration with John Taylor Boyd, Jr., Consulting Architect). The various studies and plans were carefully coordinated with the Regional Plan of New York and Environs (7) and with the work of the New York City Planning Commission.

The conditions were desperate. Mortgages were becoming greater than land and building values. Causes were the rapid depreciation and obsolescence of buildings due to poor design, bad maintenance, obsolete conveniences, and inadequate light and air. Immigration had ceased and the original purpose was gone. The area had a bad reputation; the garment industries had moved. The rapid transit and automobile had opened up better residential and industrial areas elsewhere.

The report divided the area into a number of "neighborhoods." A typical neighborhood was selected and studies were made as to how it might be rebuilt. The area selected had 60 acres and overlooked

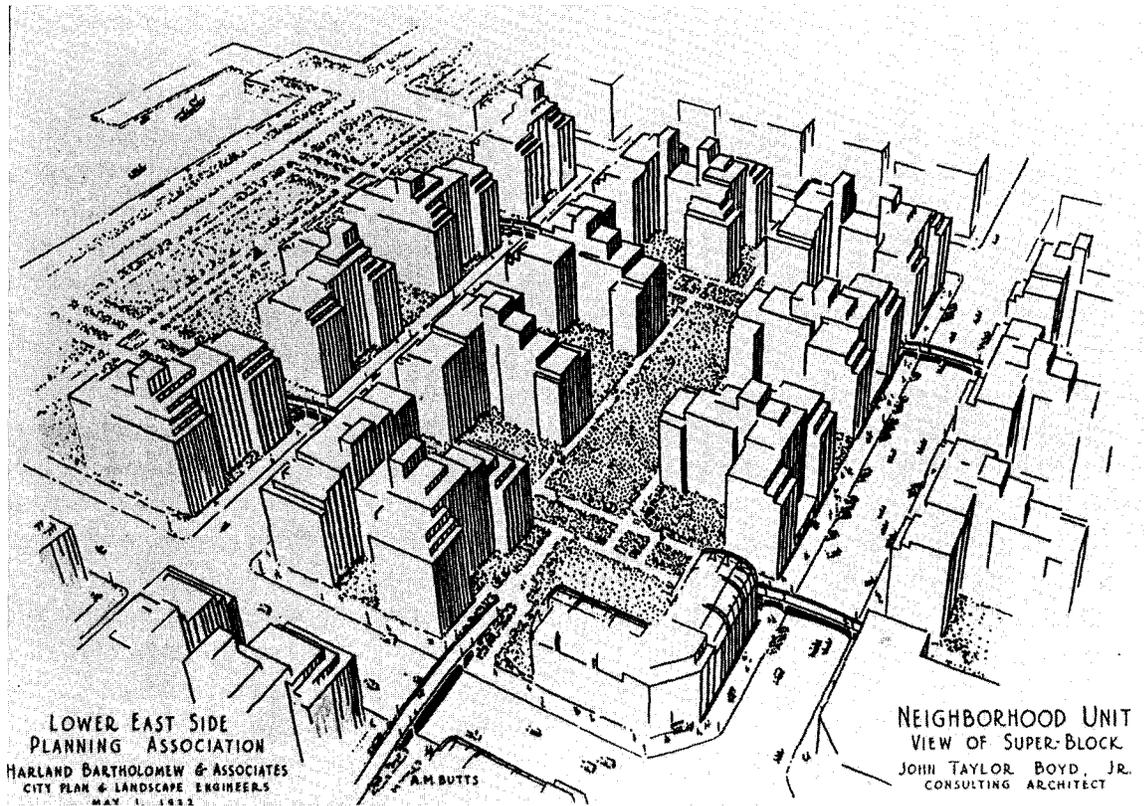
the East River. It contained 15,000 people. It could be rebuilt for the same population with 12 story buildings or with 18 story buildings for a population of 26,000 people (10,800 apartments). By closing a great number of streets, large park areas would be created with vistas of the river. Pedestrian overpasses would interconnect homes with the parks and parks with schools, stores, and other community facilities.

To Harland Bartholomew the key here was the environment. The report stated (page 15):

Satisfactory environment is the first prerequisite of good dwelling areas, and the present conditions in the Lower East Side are outstanding examples of the fact that good environment cannot be achieved by uncontrolled building development on small lots, constructed merely in response to short-lived speculative demands.

To get at the problem we had to be able to deal with it by "neighborhoods" not lots. Large scale rebuilding had to be the answer. "New and renovated buildings are . . . postponing a more precipitous decline but are not generally sufficient in number to maintain values..." Needed here were great Housing Corporations, perhaps funded by public and private interests--something of a new venture in the field of financing and building. It was not just an isolated problem. There was some labor union interest and activity, such as that of the garment industry unions.

The Lower East Side is not the only area faced with conditions of the character above described. Other sections of Manhattan Island, areas in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx are facing similar conditions. Other large cities, such as Philadelphia, Chicago, and St. Louis, possess large areas similarly afflicted. Smaller cities will sooner or later be confronted with this same problem, varying in



67 The answer seemed to be to approach the problem by "neighborhoods." Tear everything down and build a new area large enough to create its own environment, with parks, pedestrian ways, light, air and amenities. This was the approach suggested in 1932. Obstacles to such a course, including those of scale and relocation, were tremendous.

proportion to the degree of speculative practices and unsound methods of city growth.

The report also stated that:

While this is the most involved and difficult of all the problems which American cities have to face, there would seem to be no good reason why we should admit that blighted areas and slums are the inevitable concomitants of the growth of large cities and that our business initiative and our governmental machinery are incapable of dealing successfully with them.

URBAN LAND POLICY, 1936

The Works Progress Administration, as a means of putting people to work, financed urban research projects. Most of the architects and engineers in the St. Louis area were out of work. Harland Bartholomew persuaded the City of St. Louis to establish a WPA project to undertake significant research, which culminated in the report: "Urban Land Policy for Saint Louis," published in 1936. (8) In 1876, the Missouri Constitution had been changed and St. Louis was made a city-county with boundaries engraved in the document. While a threefold expansion was allowed

for, the boundaries were too close-in, too confining. By 1930 growth had gone far beyond.

The WPA research included population trends. These were alarming. Almost two-thirds of the city was losing population and those areas near the downtown were losing heavily. This had a far greater impact than it would have now because of the real conviction people of that era had that population growth was the criterion for urban success.

For one of the first times anywhere, the research study analyzed the income received and the costs of city services for the various parts of the city. Tax revenues were estimated for each part. Municipal costs were allocated by tracking down fire calls, street repairs--a separate formula being used for each service. While no one proposed that each part of a city should pay its own way, it was shocking to find the heavy subsidies required to provide municipal services to the slum and blighted neighborhoods and to find that this was paid for by the central business district and the better quality residential areas. An identical study in Des Moines, Iowa shortly after the St. Louis study (9) showed the same thing. Bad housing was very costly and was being heavily subsidized.

Proposed Program

From this research, it was quite evident that the problem was getting worse quite rapidly. What could be done about it? For St. Louis, an eight-point program was proposed:

1. **Revise the zoning ordinance** and map to be in scale with land use needs. St. Louis had had an unfortunate zoning history. The first ordinance passed in

the early 1920s had been declared unconstitutional because the city had not been granted the zoning power by the state. When the power was granted, the second ordinance was very badly compromised before enactment by the Board of Aldermen. Intrusions of all types permeated the city's residential areas as a result, many built in the interregnum between ordinances.

2. **Enforce sanitation, fire and building laws.** The City of St. Louis was (and still is) notoriously lax in the enforcement of its building regulations.

3. **Eliminate the smoke.** People who did not live in St. Louis in the 1930s do not know what air pollution really is. There would be a dozen or so times a year that at noon on a clear day we could not see the street from the Harland Bartholomew and Associates office on the ninth floor of the Louderman Building at Eleventh and Locust. The Missouri Botanical Garden proposed to move to its Arboretum property at Gray's Summit 50 miles away. The city was heated with soft coal. The smoke was awful.

4. **Enact a minimum standard housing code.** This was a new type of law being developed in part by the American Public Health Association. If passed, it could be applied to existing as well as new buildings, enforced retroactively, which, it was then believed, could not be done with zoning regulations.

5. **Rehabilitate existing buildings wherever possible.** It was thought that this could be done by enforcement of the housing ordinance, although financial assistance

programs turned out to be needed also.

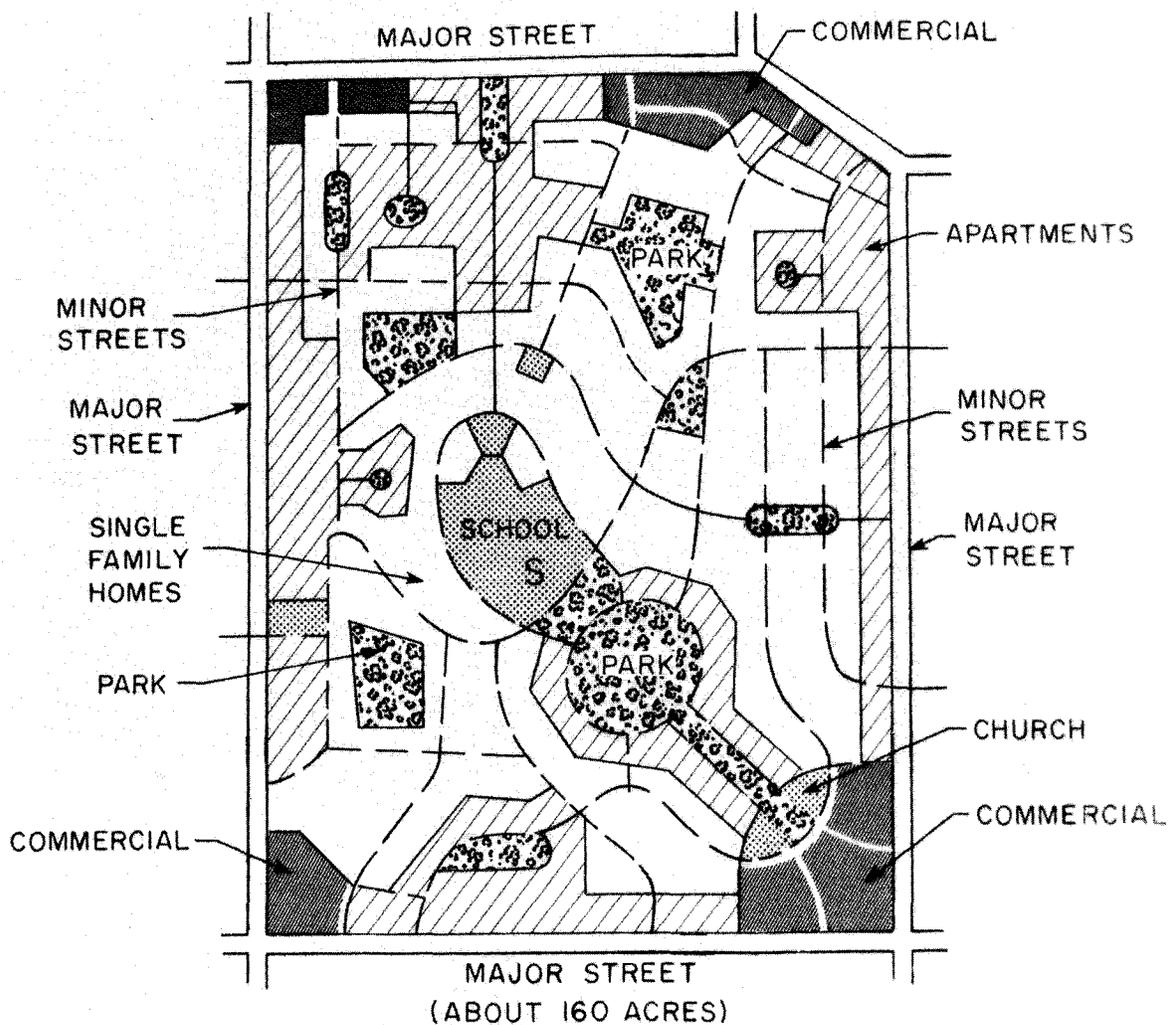
6. **Remove unsafe and obsolete buildings.** Buildings that were unfit for human occupancy (and there were thousands of them in St. Louis), and that could not be rehabilitated, would be required to be removed.
7. **Organize the residential area into neighborhood units.** In the 1929 Regional Plan of New York, Clarence Perry advanced his neighborhood concept for the organization of the residential areas of cities. This was later followed by a book on the same subject. (10) In its planning work in various cities, Harland Bartholomew and Associates had recognized the neighborhood principle to a certain degree, but had not expressed it with Perry's clarity and perception. The neighborhood unit was to be the area tributary to an elementary school, about a square mile in the typical residential area of a midwestern city. Bounded by major streets, the neighborhood would have the school and an adjacent neighborhood park as its center. Shopping facilities or secondary schools would be at the corners where the major streets intersected. There would be a neighborhood organization, similar to those J. C. Nichols had in the Country Club District in Kansas City, or the neighborhood might even have a legal organization and certain powers, as now provided in the Honolulu city charter. The Urban Land Policy of 1936 recommended that all of the St. Louis residential area be organized this way. A map was even included in the report showing boundaries of the neighborhoods.

8. **Low cost housing should be built** in the older residential areas. In the worst of the slums in and around the downtown, land would be bought up, old buildings removed, and new low-cost housing built by the Housing Authority established under the 1937 federal legislation.

Reaction to the Report

The central message of the Urban Land Policy report was that the city must accept responsibility for the quality of its housing. The report charted a path for doing this and warned of the dire consequences that would result from continuing past policies. The report was only partly implemented. The zoning ordinance was not amended; building laws were not enforced. Smoke was eliminated; a minimum standard housing ordinance was enacted but not enforced; some buildings were rehabilitated and tens of thousands removed; only a very few and relatively feeble neighborhood organizations were created and these more to fight than to help the city government. Virtually all of the public housing was located in the older slum areas. When the report was written, the population of St. Louis was 800,000; it is now 400,000. The price of ignoring most of the recommendations of this study has been truly fearful.

At that time (1936), there was no disagreement with the proposal that the slum areas close-in to the downtown all be devoted to low-income housing. Neighborhoods were conceived to be all of the same or similar income levels. The poorer families were to be in the center of the city, with middle-income neighborhoods beyond them, and with the high-income neighborhoods beyond that. A similar arrangement of population density was accepted also, that is, the more money you had the larger your lot.



PERRY'S DESIGN FOR A NEIGHBORHOOD UNIT FOLLOWING HIS SIX PRINCIPLES

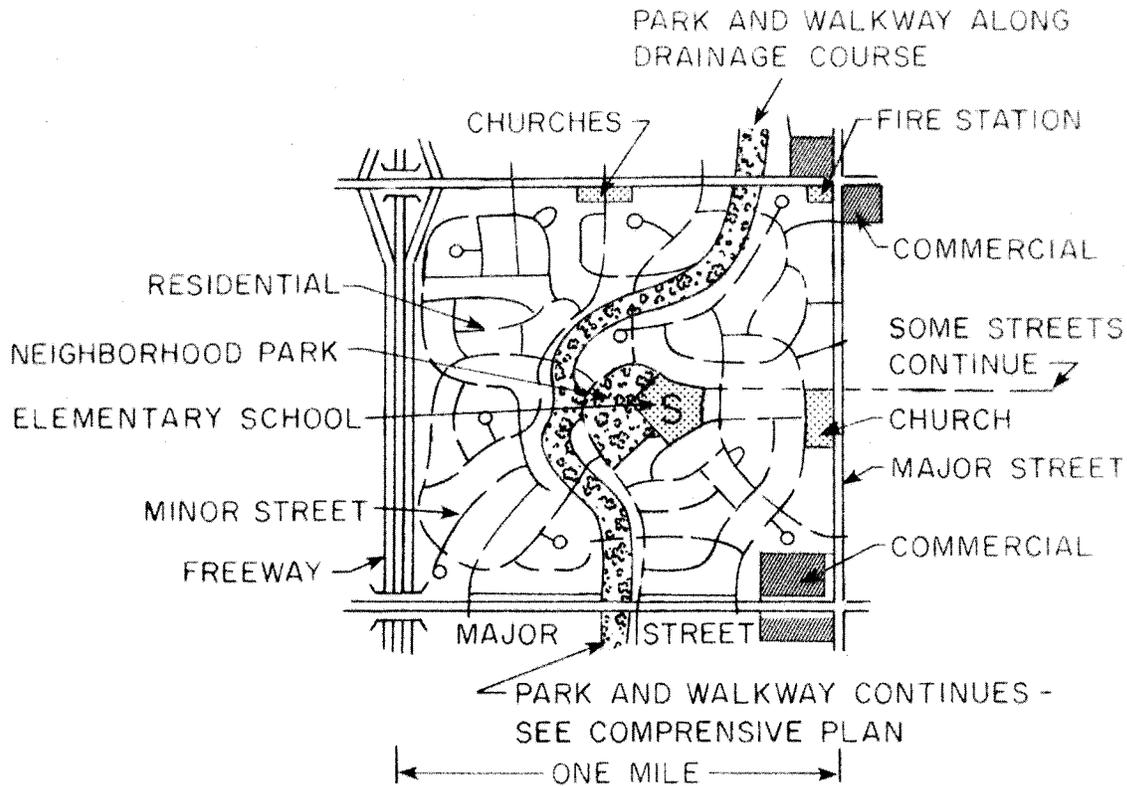
68 This is adapted from a similar diagram included in the *Regional Plan of New York* published by the Russell Sage Foundation in 1927. Clarence Arthur Perry was on the staff of the foundation. The motivation was to find a means to protect residential areas from the noise and fumes of heavy traffic.

Proposals for other arrangements and for mixtures of densities and income levels in the same neighborhood were to come later.

Harland Bartholomew made many speeches and wrote many articles explaining the findings and conclusions of the Urban

Land Policy study. In one of these (11), he showed how a city's residential area could be placed in three categories:

1. Satisfactory areas to be protected;
2. Blighted areas to be rehabilitated; and



STANDARD "NEIGHBORHOOD UNIT" USED
BY HARLAND BARTHOLOMEW & ASSOCIATES
FROM THE 1969 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF NORTHFIELD
TOWNSHIP, ILLINOIS (CHICAGO NORTH SHORE SUBURBS)

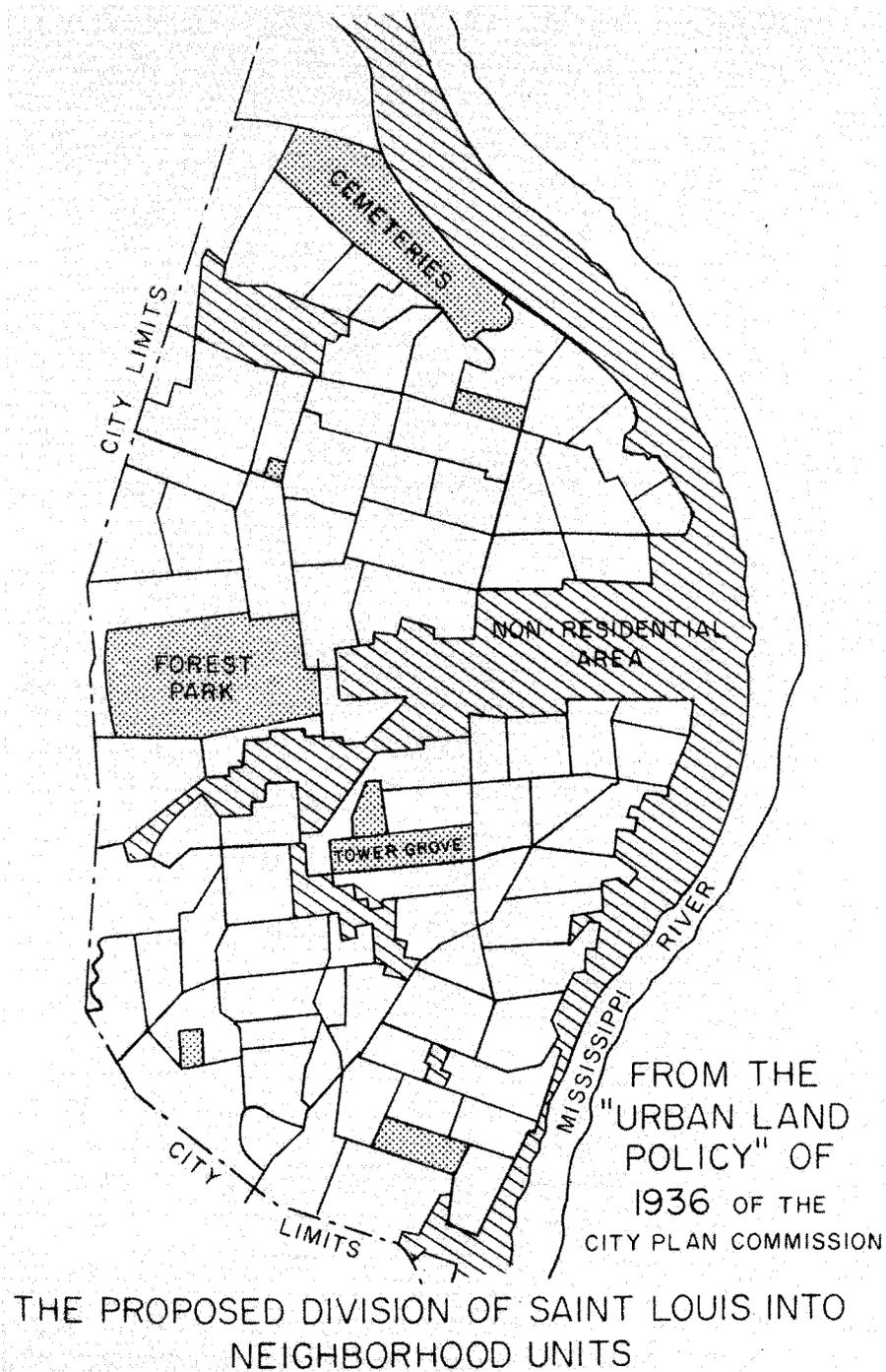
69 By the late 1940s, Harland Bartholomew and his associates had accepted Perry's six principles for the design of the neighborhood unit and began working out a diagram applying these to circumstances more typical of the middle-west and west where the firm was active. This example is from a 1969 comprehensive plan for a north shore Chicago suburb.

3. Slum areas to be cleared.

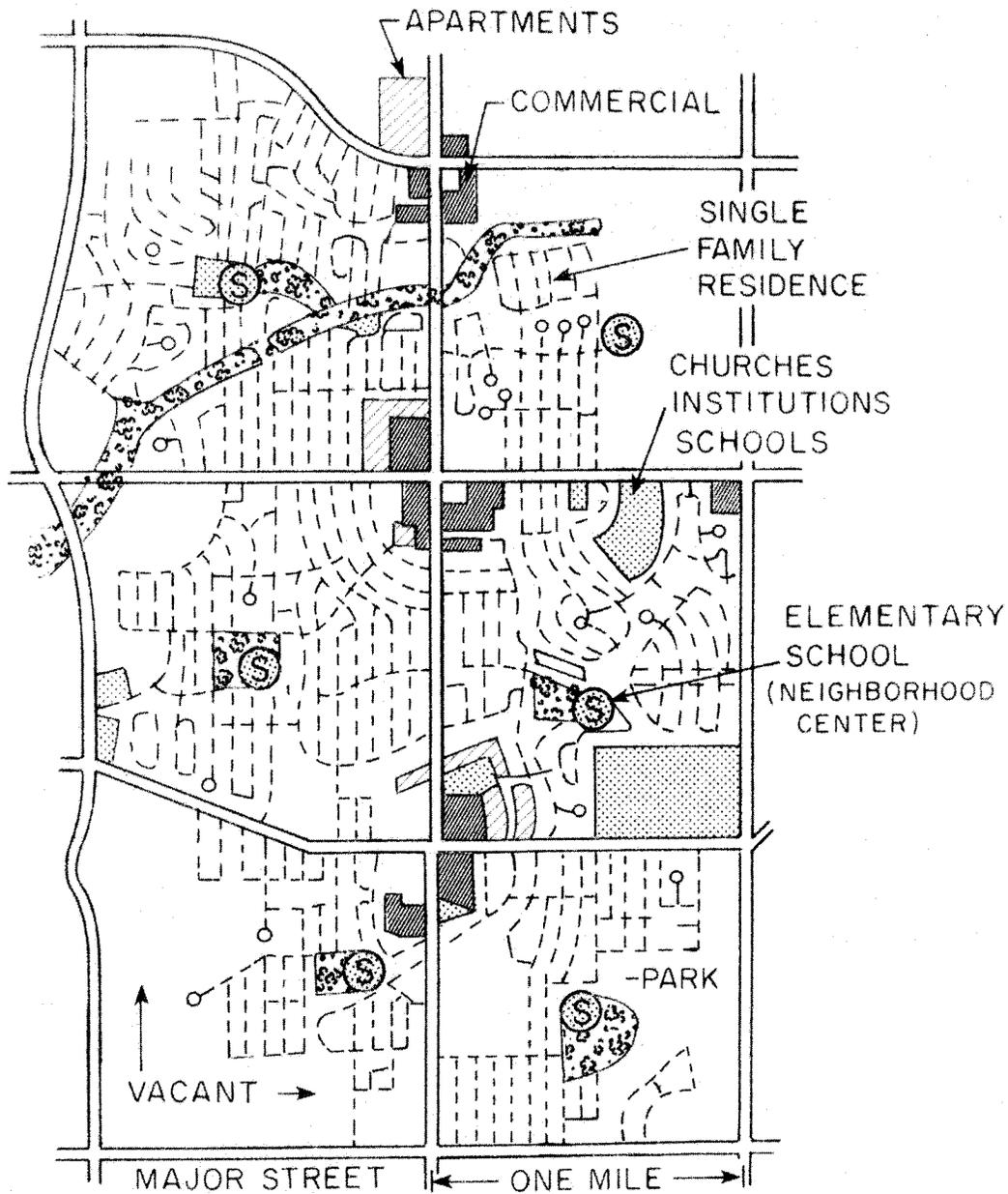
Criteria determining the characteristics of each were outlined. Measures to be undertaken to accomplish each of the three purposes were proposed. Particular difficulties were encountered in devising the measures that would enable the slums to be cleared.

**THE PROBLEMS OF
SLUM CLEARANCE**

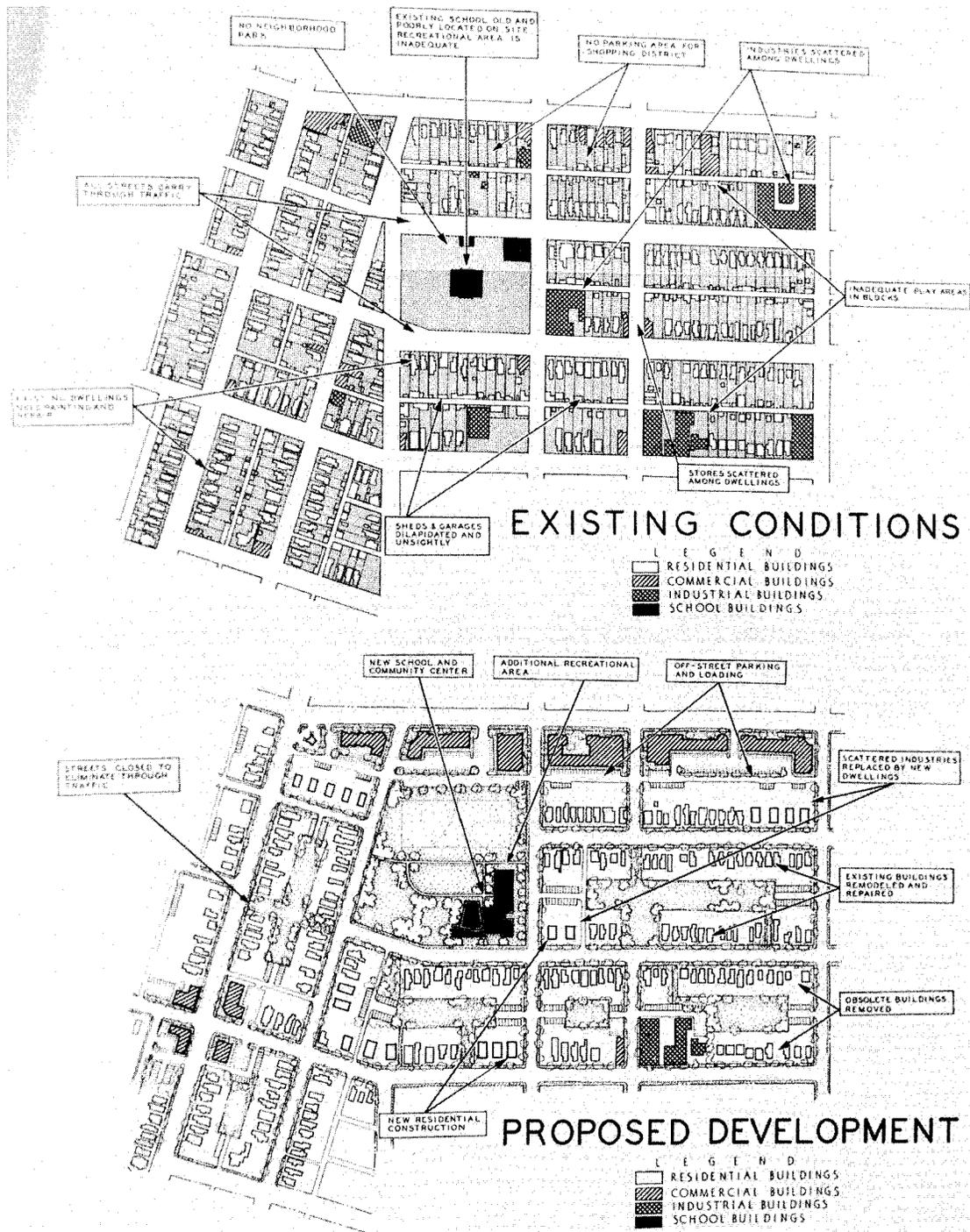
How were we to clear the slums? Public housing could not be the sole answer, as some land should be used for a different purpose than low income housing, and in addition, we would never be able to build so much public housing. Harland Bartholomew picked out a representative



70 The "neighborhood principle" was applied to existing as well as future residential areas, the idea being to incorporate as many elements as possible into the existing one. Based upon systems so successful in the J.C. Nichols Country Club District in Kansas City, the existing neighborhoods were urged to organize and sponsor their own improvement. City governments should promote and foster such activities as a part of an overall scheme for housing improvements, Bartholomew recommended.



71 As staff members of Harland Bartholomew and Associates left the firm to become directors of planning or to go into their own practice elsewhere the "Perry-Bartholomew" neighborhood unit principle was carried far and wide. A part of the Land Use Map of Plano, Texas of 1985 shows six neighborhoods in various stages of evolution, probably resulting from the work of Marvin Springer. All conform with the diagram shown on Illustration 68.



72 Many plans and sketches were prepared to enable planning commissions and city officials to visualize what might be accomplished under urban renewal programs. This example in Hamilton, Ohio was prepared two years before the urban renewal program was first authorized by The Housing Act of 1949.

MISSOURI LAW 353

slum area in central St. Louis, large enough, perhaps, to be a "neighborhood." The staff of the plan commission, assisted by some of the WPA workers, then made plans for rebuilding this area. Costs were estimated. A concrete example was put together to talk about. (12)

Harland Bartholomew knew that the big insurance companies were interested in investments in large real estate projects. They were interested in St. Louis but most of them were New York corporations with charters limiting this type of investment to the state of New York. Discussions with them proved of great value, however. Gradually it became apparent that there were two sticky problems blocking the path of slum clearance:

1. **Land assembly** could not be accomplished by negotiation. The rebuilding unit had to be large enough to change the environment over a fairly wide area and hundreds (sometimes thousands) of properties were involved, many of which would not or could not sell to a redeveloper. Someone had to be able to condemn the land and how could private land be condemned for a private not a public purpose?
2. **Cost of assembly** turned out to be very high. Worthless slum land and buildings were more expensive than you might think. Obviously, the obsolete area should be reused for purposes and densities specified in the comprehensive plan and not much land so situated could be reused for high-rise luxury apartments or high-rise office buildings. Somehow the process would have to be subsidized.

Harland Bartholomew had noticed that some private corporations had the power to condemn land. The railroads and public utilities did this. If a public utility needed to put a pipe line through your back yard you could not stop them from doing it. They could condemn the easement and go ahead. Perhaps, he thought, we could create a redevelopment corporation that would be similar to a public utility and which, under restrictions and with approval by the city, could be allowed to condemn land in legally designated "blighted areas" of the city. The redevelopment corporation then would be allowed to build a new project on the newly assembled property, meeting the requirements and the recommendations of the comprehensive plan. The redevelopment corporations would be a new type of public utility.

This would take care of the problem of assembling the land. But what about the cost problem? The cities did not have any money; the federal government had money (it printed it) but no power to give (grant) any to a private corporation, no matter how worthy. At this point, the results of the income-cost study became valuable. Slum areas did not pay much in taxes; they cost a lot to operate. If they were removed the city would be better off, enough better off, perhaps, that it could afford to, say, eliminate all local taxes on improvements for ten years and perhaps levy them at only 50 percent for another 15 years. Surely, after 25 years the project could pay full taxes. Legislation of this type was outlined. Then Harland Bartholomew found a strange ally.

Public housing was anathema to the real estate people; in part because they were led and encouraged by Herbert S. Smith,

Reconstruction and Rehabilitation for St. Louis

Written for St. Louis COMMERCE

By

HARLAND BARTHOLOMEW

Engineer, City Plan Commission



MR. BARTHOLOMEW

PRIOR to 1870, cities in the United States grew very slowly. At that time there were but three cities having a population of 300,000 or more persons—New York, Philadelphia and St. Louis. Since 1870 our cities have witnessed a degree of growth unexampled and unapproached in any other period of world history. This growth was partly natural, but was caused largely by the rapid development of industry which concentrated for the most part in the cities.

The rapidity of industrial development, as well as of urban growth, continued almost unabated until the first full year of depression, 1930. After that date industry contracted and the rapid growth of cities came to an abrupt end. The 1940 census shows for the first time only a slight population

plenish urban populations because rural areas also are no longer reproducing their own population (the southeastern section of the United States alone excepted, and

(5) Cities are now overpopulated from an employment standpoint.

All of this background is essential to an understanding of the current problems of blighted districts and slums in cities. However, certain other factors also must be taken into account. When cities first started to grow rapidly there was no marked physical expansion of the urban area. This occurred more or less gradually and uniformly. Since 1920, however, the advent of and widespread use of individual automobile transportation suddenly expanded the potential physical area of cities about 1000%. This

trial purposes. After growth stopped we had difficulty selling them at all because of small demand for houses, and no demand for commerce or industry.

With such vast areas now open for residential use because of automobile transportation, it is clear that people who have a choice in the matter will prefer a large lot for their home in an outlying area to a small lot in the city. They will also prefer, as a rule, a new house with modern conveniences to an old house which lacks some or all of such conveniences.

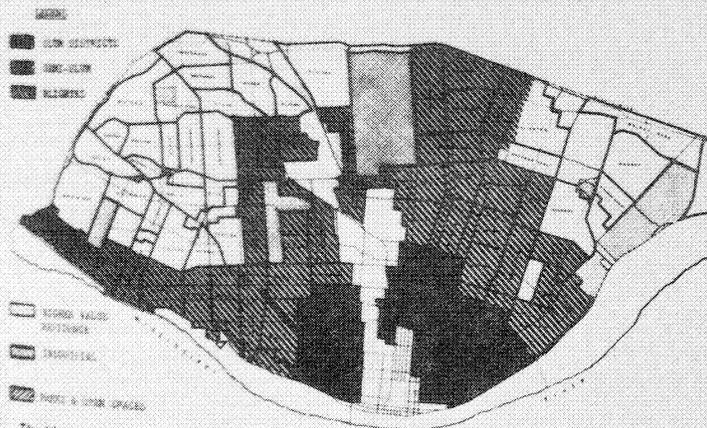
Cost of land is always a potent factor. Lots in the suburbs are cheap and taxes are low. Choice lots are not always available in the city and taxes are reputedly high.

Of still greater importance, however, is the matter of environment. Where all the houses are new and where many lots are unimproved, there is a feeling of openness and spaciousness as well as good character, while in the city there is a feeling of crowded conditions and certain antiquity. There is less confidence in the future of city areas, both as to living amenities as well as of soundness of investment.

These comparisons are well known to all. The advantages are not all one-sided, however. Time is a factor which will limit the extent of urban expansion. It always has in the past and will in the future, no doubt. The great majority of people will not spend more than a total of one hour in each day for transportation. General economic conditions will also play a major role in this matter. If times are good, there will be expansion of the urban area. If times are bad, there will be little or no expansion and even considerable contraction to save transportation costs.

Because cities grew very rapidly and then suddenly ceased to grow appreciably, we find three separate, more or less distinct residential conditions in any large urban area. Close to the central business district is an area of old obsolete residences that have outlived their usefulness. It was once potential commercial or industrial property but it is no longer such. It can be used only as park land or for some form of dwelling purposes. This is the slum area that needs RECONSTRUCTION.

(Continued on Page 11)



The black and shaded areas of this map have been pushing out gradually. Mr. Bartholomew suggests some of the ways by which the trends may be reversed.

gain in some cities and an actual loss of population in several cities. There are many indications that the arrested growth of cities is not a temporary phenomenon, but that this is probably a permanent condition. These indices are:

- (1) That national population is approaching stabilization due to the long, steady decline in the birth rate;
- (2) Foreign immigration has practically ceased;
- (3) Urban populations do not reproduce themselves;
- (4) Rural areas cannot longer re-

came only a short time before urban population growth came to a virtual standstill. Thus cities came face to face with the problem of an excess of area and a marked decrease in demand.

The rapid growth of cities over a period of 40 or 50 years created the misapprehension that this growth was a natural and permanent condition. We built and moved into new houses continually farther out into the country. So long as growth continued we could sell our older houses at a fairly good price for use as residences or occasionally for commercial and indus-

director of the National Association of Real Estate Boards, in this opposition. Their opposition was weakened by their lack of an alternative. Public housing people could say, "We can clear the slums and house the poor. Both need to be done. Ours is the only way to do this." When Harland Bartholomew explained his proposals to them, they saw in them the alternative to public housing they were looking for; they took the lead, went to Jefferson City, and got the law passed in 1943 (Missouri Law 353). Urban renewal was started.

This was not the only approach, however. Other cities were struggling with the problem and particularly Cincinnati, where the problem aroused the interest and concern of Robert Taft, U.S. senator from Ohio. Then Harland Bartholomew was engaged shortly after the war to bring the comprehensive plan of Washington, D.C. up-to-date. Washington contained dreadful housing conditions, some within the very shadow of the Capitol itself. A federal act was passed giving the District of Columbia authority to clear its obsolete areas and to sell the land to private redevelopers, at a discount, with federal monies making up the difference. A court challenge was overthrown by the U.S. Supreme Court. (13)

The District of Columbia legislation formed the basis for the first federal nationwide urban renewal legislation, the Federal Housing Act of 1949. (14) In this federal act, the land subsidy -- the real key to urban renewal -- was to be paid two-thirds by the federal government and one-

third by the city, but the city's part could include services, land, or public improvements. With this legislation, urban renewal was on its way. It had been a long path from the WPA project, to the Urban Land Policy report of 1936, to Missouri Law 353, to the Federal Housing Act of 1949, but the acceptance of the city's responsibility for the quality of its housing had led to the city's ability to rebuild itself--to replace the old with the new. While many were involved, without Harland Bartholomew's pioneering studies and his ability to discern just where the problems were located, a workable solution would have been longer coming and might not have been so responsive to the need.

73 This 1937 magazine article was the first time Harland Bartholomew had tried to classify a city's residential areas. This showed the parts of Saint Louis that were: (1) obsolete; i.e., had to be completely replaced, (2) blighted; i.e., had to be rehabilitated, or (3) satisfactory; i.e., had to be protected. He tried and tried to tell this story, but it fell on deaf ears, which is one reason why the population which was 850,000 in 1950 is now 390,000 (1990). Never had a city paid so high a price for ignoring the advice it had paid for.

FOOTNOTES

- VIII-1 *Problems of St. Louis*, City Plan Commission, 1917
- VIII-2 *Housing in St. Louis*, Lawrence Weiller, Secretary, National Housing Association, 1916
- VIII-3 *Modern Civic Art*, Charles Mulford Robinson, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903
- VIII-4 *The Width and Arrangement of Streets*, Charles Mulford Robinson, Engineering News Publishing Co., 1911
- VIII-5 See *Summary of a Housing Program For The United States*, Housing Officials Year Book, 1935
- VIII-6 *Plans for Major Traffic Thoroughfares and Transit Lower East Side New York City*, Prepared for Lower East Side Planning Association by Harland Bartholomew and Associates, 1932. Printed, Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis, Mo.
- VIII-7 Committee on Regional Plan of New York and Environs. See *American City Planning*, Mel Scott, page 199-293.
- VIII-8 *Urban Land Policy for Saint Louis*, City Plan Commission, 1936
- VIII-9 *Comprehensive Plan for Des Moines, Iowa, 1937*. Manuscript copy in Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis, Mo.
- VIII-10 See *Housing for the Machine Age*, Clarence Arthur Perry. Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1927
- VIII-11 See *Reconstruction and Rehabilitation for St. Louis*, St. Louis Chamber of Commerce, 1941. Manuscript in office of Harland Bartholomew & Associates, Inc., St. Louis, Mo.
- VIII-12 See *Plans for Rebuilding Webster Neighborhood*. Manuscript in Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis, Mo.
- VIII-13 *Berman v. Parker*, United States Supreme Court, 1954
- VIII-14 Housing Act of 1949, Public Law No. 171, 81st Congress