

a. DANGERS WHICH THREATEN THE HISTORIC

ENSEMBLES IN THE AMERICAS.

Introduction.

The excellent "introductory Report" prepared for the Symposium by Mr. François Sorlin expresses clearly and directly the problems of preservation in historic centers and also the points of view of those of us searching for the best means for their preservation. Therefore the responsibility remains to me of explaining some of the points in common and some of the distinctions between European circumstances and the American and the means being presently explored for safeguarding and the enhancement of historic centers.

First, and with regret, I cannot claim to be an expert in the preservation problems and methods in the twenty-one Latin American nations. Time would not allow correspondance, among others, with Dr. Mario Buschiazso of Buenos Aires, Argentina, the undisputed Latin American authority. I worked with him ten years ago in the development of plans for the successful program in historic San Juan undertaken by the Institute of Culture of Puerto Rico. My treatment of the Latin American problem in this paper must be considered as inadequate and superficial.

The nature of historic centers in the Americas.

Since the urban settlements of the Americas did not take significant form until the end of the 16th century and since the conquest of the native population was rapid, walled cities developed only where the predatory European nations and their pirate navies attacked each other in the Carribbean in the vicinity of the routes to and from Panama. Only two such walled cities remain virtually intact, Cartagena, Colombia, and Old San Juan, Puerto Rico. Havana, Cuba, and the city of Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic were also walled and today, as in many European instances, boulevards have largely replaced the ring of fortifications. Else-

where in the Americas, the historic center is less well defined at its edges. However, the center of the center was clear enough. This forms the subject of this brief report.

It must be emphasized that a substantial number of settlements in all the Americas were carefully planned in advance. For instance, in 1509, King Ferdinand of Spain was giving instructions on town settlement to Diego Colon. Hernando Cortes was sent a letter by Charles V, in 1523, giving instructions on town location, who, in his "cedula" from Burgos and other communications, gave instructions on town design including the location of the "plaza mayor", churches and public buildings. Such instructions were finally codified by Philip II in 1573 in the "Recopilacion de Leyes de los Reinos de las Indias". By this time, there were approximately 200 Spanish cities in all America and most of them had some sort of planned center about the plaza. Later Spanish city forms became more precise. But Latin American cities still retain the historic plan although frequently all but a historic church on the plaza has been replaced by modern buildings.

In North America, settlement was slower but there being no planning regulations similar to the "Laws of the Indies", the French, English and Dutch settlements (which were the major ones) showed great individuality. However, the gridiron plan is predominant and ubiquitous in all the Americas. It was the easiest and most natural way to subdivide a new site-vide the Bastide towns. But the gridiron, unless selected squares are reserved for plazas or public squares, does not anchor the town center in one place. The end result is similar to the unplanned city. Historic buildings occur sporadically and the center of the settlement, even over a period of several hundred years is difficult to identify. In such instances, scattered historic buildings, without a protective ensemble of other historic buildings, can be treated only as individuals and are outside our thesis.

In North America the major settlements of the East Coast and the Gulf of Mexico were established by the middle of the 18th century. The highly distinctive planned cities of:

- Philadelphia (1682), New Orleans (1722), Williamsburg (1782), Annapolis (1695), Montreal, Canada (1665-1678), Savannah (1733), New York (1625), among many others -

had identifiable and sophisticated central features. The major unplanned or partially planned cities like Boston (1630), Quebec, Canada (1660), and Baltimore (1729), also had their identifiable centers. What remains in Boston and Baltimore are the mutilated fragments of the old street systems and occasional, scattered remnants of fine historic architecture, usually buried, as also in New York, in a forest of skyscrapers. That these unfortunate circumstances are now threatening London and Paris is tragic and shocking.

In 1791, Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant designed Washington, D.C., the capital of the United States. This plan established several geometric centers for public buildings but no architectural form for these. New early 19th century cities which grew up in the paths of western migration frequently combined the L'Enfant radial design element with the gridiron pattern as he did. Thus we find Buffalo, New York, Indianapolis, Indiana and Detroit, Michigan, and others with elaborate ground plans but no set town center. It was not until the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries with the growth of the civic pride and the influence of various cultural stimuli that elaborately designed government centers appeared as in Cleveland, St. Louis and San Francisco and elsewhere. These, in today's terms, have become for their communities, the equivalent of the Place de la Concorde in Paris and are being preserved.

In the smaller cities and villages of all the Americas, the town center is the plaza, the square and the green. These take many distinctive forms following local custom, historic tradition and local inventive ingenuity. Perhaps the most beautiful, least documented and subject to the most danger of extinction are the several hundred to be found in New England, the five northeastern states in the United States. These scattered, charming village centers have few friends and are being demolished with speed to provide widened highways, filling stations and parking lots for the automobile which has many friends. It is a curious anomaly that in history conscious New England there is no concerted move to save one of its greatest cultural contributions, the "New England green", with its unique, handsome and varied architectural groupings. However, village preservation is a topic in itself.

New preservation programs in the United States.

In the United States major preservation efforts are underway in several important historic town centers. A few of these are selected for discussion as they involve interesting experiments in preservation method and may be useful to the symposium discussion. While important new federal historic preservation legislation was enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1966, it is too early to know how long it will take to become effective. However, for a number of years the U.S. National Park Service in the Department of the Interior has financed a scattered inventory of historic buildings. This inventory has covered perhaps 12 to 14 percent of historically important buildings in the country and did not involve places, districts or centers.

For our purpose it adds little to our knowledge of methodology as much more scientific inventories have been made and maintained in several European countries. However, more recent

work by this Department in register historic landmarks has included a few historic centers such as in New Orleans and Savannah. In determining their importance to the nation a review of elements and areas was made. However, the identification was merely a confirmation of established historic and architectural values. They are not part of a funded preservation program.

The U.S. National Park Service has acquired and restored, as museums, two historic small village centers which do not compare in scale with government work done in some Latin American countries as at Ouro Preto, Brazil, Antigua in Guatemala and Tasco, Mexico.

Up to 1966, the department of the Interior has no assigned responsibility for historic preservation in cities except for selected monuments of high national historic interest. Now the responsibility is enlarged to maintain a national register of historic and architecturally important buildings, sites, places and districts. Since these may be anywhere, we can expect an enlarged awareness of central city historic values where they remain.

Equally important will be the new matching grant program to states for "the preservation for public benefit of properties that are significant in American history, architecture, archeology, and culture". Our main concern is whether or not the Congress will quickly pass the appropriations for the 32 million dollars authorized by the 1966 Act. Speed in several instances is essential.

Another potentially useful new Federal program will be through the Department of Housing and Urban Development which has in the last five years in its urban renewal program sponsored several interesting central city preservation projects in Philadelphia, Providence, Savannah, Salem Massachusetts and others. Involved was the making of scientific inventories, land use planning related to preservation, restoration finance and building reuse studies. Work is well advanced in some of these.

Another new Federal preservation law in 1966 provides a rounding out of Federal governmental responsibilities through the Department of Housing and Urban development. Here again grant funds are available to states and local public bodies for the acquisition, restoration and improvement of areas, sites and structures of historic or architectural value in urban areas. Since such funds are available primarily to areas of blight and deterioration, regardless of use, and since major city center preservation problems have involved areas in poor condition, we can anticipate positive action programs in several areas with efforts similar to those in the Marais in Paris, resulting from those Federal grants.

Up to now, however, center city preservation efforts have been largely local in nature, protected in large part through various forms of historic zoning by-laws or ordinances and sponsored by private groups, associations or foundations. Of these the earliest ordinance (1927) was established in New Orleans, Louisiana, to protect the "Vieux Carré", laid out in 1722 and consisting of a superb 44 blocks of 3,000 extraordinary buildings and fine open spaces. A special commission is charged with the administration of the zoning ordinance. In general the "Vieux Carré", and its many hundreds of fine historic buildings have been well guarded by well supervised standards but in recent years it has been inundated by heavy traffic and the intrusion of incompatible uses including the threat of an elevated superhighway along the Mississippi river front. The nation has been aroused by this threat and plans are underway to prevent it and to produce stronger regulations.

In Savannah, Georgia, another historic city of two square miles in area and at least 1,000 historic buildings the 20 of the 21 original squares are well protected but there is no historic zoning or planning. Only the strong and very successful efforts of the Historic Savannah Foundation, a private group, which has raised funds for a revolving building acquisition fund has succeeded in saving the city center. The program, about seven years old, is successful as has been a similar and equally spectacular one in Charleston, South Carolina. In Charleston, there has been the advantage of a strong historic zoning program also. Both these cities owe their preservation success to positive citizen action and private funds.

The preservation of Beacon Hill in Boston, College Hill, Providence, R.I., and Society Hill, Philadelphia, are again largely through private efforts. These are all largely residential areas close to, or within, city centers. Beacon Hill is truly in the heart of the city. In each instance private corporations are responsible for financing and maintaining strong legal covenants running with deeds of sale while the historic districts are well protected with historic zoning ordinances. Public funds have not been available until recently for the removal of substandard buildings but in both Philadelphia and Providence federal and city urban renewal funds have come to rescue in the last five years.

The above instances are cited as examples of ongoing programs in which success is evident although there are still many unsolved planning problems. It is safe to say that American city planners are seldom trained to consider historic preservation of city centers as major parts of their plans. But successful conservation and restoration in the areas cited above and others have raised land values, increased tax revenues from the areas and added prestige to the communities. All of these have influenced

business and government leadership who are particularly impressed with the rapid rise of tourism in historic areas and the many new hotel and restaurant businesses that flourish therefrom. These very practical considerations, for all of their drawbacks, are the lifesavers of the economic feasibility of much central city and city center preservation.

The situation in the other American countries.

In Latin America, the effort is also bearing tourist fruit. San Juan, Puerto Rico, has used commonwealth funds for acquisition and restoration work under very stringent zoning laws of the Institute of Culture. Here architectural standards are closely supervised. In Mexico, the same can be said of several cities but Mexico City has lost much of the attraction of its major colonial center through heedlessness and questionable redesign. In many large South American capitals there is little left. Caracas and Bogota are examples. In Lima, Peru, both public and private efforts in the central city are showing excellent results. But earthquake, fire, revolution, and modern development coupled with scarcity of funds that must be used to meet desperate economic contingencies place historic areas in continuing jeopardy.

In Canada, efforts on the part of the City of Quebec and of citizen's organizations are showing results in the old city. In Montreal, only limited results are discernible from public action in the one remaining central area. Restoration in Halifax is moving ahead although it appears controversial.

It is difficult to summarize the new world in a few words. Progress in the United States is perhaps the most encouraging part of the report.

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