One of the most pressing and challenging problems facing the nation today is urban blight and its steady insidious spread, like a cancer of the culture eating away at the cores of our cities. The present Federal Administration has made it known that it intends to spend millions, or billions, of dollars to wipe away this national scourge. But it takes more than government funds to effect a permanent cure. We have witnessed many slum clearance projects built over the past twenty years in many cities across the country, and in most cases, the results have been merely to move slum tenants from one, two, or three-story old slums to multi-story new slums.

**THE HUMAN SIDE OF URBAN RENEWAL** is a study of the efforts and results of citizens groups, with or without enthusiastic city hall support, to rehabilitate specific neighborhoods in Baltimore, Chicago, Miami, and New Orleans. Some of these projects originated from city hall, as in the case of the Baltimore Pilot Area; others originated through the formation of citizens groups, as in the case of the Hyde Park-Kenwood areas of Chicago. In all cases, some form of citizens group was needed to effect improvement in the neighborhood. In many cases, the groups have had actually to force action from city hall in the form of new zoning and the enforcement of building codes.

The Baltimore “Pilot Program” showed that there is a ripe field for rehabilitating the attitudes, and therefore the lives, of the residents of slum and blighted neighborhoods, but it also showed that the task is a great deal more complicated, and success far more elusive than anyone had anticipated.

In all projects under study gains were made—a general cleanliness replaced filth and trash by the tons was removed.

By the time the last honey wagon rolled its stench-laden way through Coconut Grove in January 1951, 482 Negro families had added bathrooms to their houses. Pit toilets were wiped out. Residents stopped drinking the contaminated water of their shallow wells (use of well water became illegal except for irrigation, sprinkling, air conditioning and fire fighting). And tons of filth, refuse, trash and junk, stock-piled in backyards and unoccupied property as the least troublesome method of disposal, had been carried off to city incinerators.

After the clean-up, one aged Negro told Mrs. Vririck, “my house smelled so sweet I didn’t wake up. I was late for work.”

In general, changes in attitude were far greater in those families who owned, or were buying, a home in the neighborhood. These families needed and received the advice and, sometimes, money from such citizens groups as the Fight Blight Fund in Baltimore and the Back of the Yards Credit Union in Chicago.

“Landlords are the other side of the coin. Where homeowners have a built-in incentive to improve their neighborhoods, most (absentee) landlords have a built-in incentive to perpetuate the slum.” A new neighborliness and a new awareness of civic responsibility were awakened in many residents in the areas under study. The success of rehabilitation depends in great measure upon this lasting change of attitude, but to effect this change, the program must “attack a host of non-housing problems from loan sharks to juvenile delinquency.” However, in no case, with the possible exception of the back of the Yards area in Chicago, was the cause of blight removed. Slums are still profitable. “We must find a way to make them financially disastrous to their owners.”

This does not mean that because rehabilitation does not cure every social ill, business sin, political shenanigan and ordinary cussedness, it is more or less a failure. The gratefulfulness of slum dwellers for simple results like good plumbing and the absence of rats, the friendliness of neighbors who have struggled together, the aspirations of children and the raised horizons of parents—these things alone make rehabilitation worth while.

While **THE HUMAN SIDE OF URBAN RENEWAL** deals only with the rehabilitation of existing neighborhoods, OUR HOUSING JUNGLE AND YOUR POCKET-BOOK deals with actual slum clearance and new housing for slum dwellers. Mr. Steiner explains in simple clear language what a slum is and how a particular one came into being. One chapter explains in some detail the high cost to the tax payer of maintaining city services to slum areas. Both books stress the problem of race prejudice in slum and blighted areas in the North, as well as the South. **OUR HOUSING JUNGLE AND YOUR POCKETBOOK** shows race prejudice at work in relation to the northern Negro problem: how the white speculator uses the Negro to create Negro ghettos at great profit to the speculator and at great expense and social harm to the Negro.

Mr. Steiner stresses the importance of home ownership on the part of the slum dweller as a necessary part in the rehabilitation of the human spirit. He explains how his own corporation, set up to provide low-cost housing for slum dwellers, suffered through the red tape of F.H.A. on one such housing effort, and how later efforts by-passing F.H.A. have been able to provide low-cost, long-range financed housing. Mr. Steiner outlines the additional time, duplication of work, etc., which resulted in higher costs to the project and, thus, to the eventual occupant.

The problems of mortgage financing of low-cost housing is critical. Practical experience on the part of builders—ourselves and others—convince us that a Federal program cannot effectively “deal with this problem. In fact, there is a serious question as to whether the Federal government should even attempt to. According to Steiner’s system the low-cost, cooperative or apartment-type units are sold to the occupant on a low-interest, long-term loan basis. This returns a small profit to the corporation which allows the corporation to undertake additional housing projects. The book places up the need for community, state, local lending agencies, and private citizens to awaken to their own responsibilities. The slums cannot be wiped out by merely expecting the Federal government to do the work and spend the money; the problem can, perhaps, best be handled by local effort.

Both books emphasize the need for human rehabilitation before any concrete results can be shown in either slum clearance or in neighborhood rehabilitation. Both are clear, concise, and extremely informative. They should be read by all who are involved, or who are about to become involved, in the expanding urban renewal program. The reader will be impressed by the complexities of the task. However, these books will help to make the eventual success of our efforts a little easier to attain.

—John Conron

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