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SUBURBAN COMMUNITY
PLANNING

BY

PERCY E. NOBBS, M.A., F.R.I.B.A., R.C.A.

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PERCY E. NORRIS, M.A., F.R.I.B.A., R.C.A.

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FOREWORD

The subdivision of residential suburban property as we have seen it in the older countries, and as we have known it in our own, is not a subject charged with romance. Sooner or later something had to be done as a contribution to the better building of our cities, something less wasteful and hideous in its results; some method that would not completely banish art, design and social amenity from the domain of its operations. Some of the results of rabid individualism are by way of convincing us that nothing is so anti-individual and anti-social as crude individualism itself. Civilization—the word itself—really means progressive development of the social sense.

As a matter of fact, something different and better has been born, largely due to a quite humble movement called in the Old Country "Co-partnership Housing." A group of artisan builders under the guidance of Henry Vivian, M.P., conceived the idea of acquiring a large piece of land, planning a group of houses as a *composition* with gardens, playgrounds, public hall and other amenities, and occupying the houses, not as owners of the individual houses, but as tenants and partners in common ownership. Later, such groups have become a powerful factor in building up the Garden City.

The project had certain social advantages of a very solid character, and the considerable advantage that in case of moving each tenant was responsible only for a number of shares, which could be held as a sound investment, or be easily transferred. The movement has spread very widely in England, Germany, and other European countries, and quite recently the Governor of the State of New York has recommended something like it as a State policy for solving the problem of New York housing.

From the successful experimentation of these societies, which have been, by the way, largely assisted by State credit, there has come into being a policy to make housing a subsidiary social science as part of the larger science of town planning and as a new phase of the art and science of architecture. Areas are being planned as residential units, not as mere bunches of houses each occupying a certain area, and

there breaking off its connection with the rest, but as social and architectural compositions each house with a definite relation to the whole—like the items of a composite picture—and each dependent on certain common or public amenities, such as parks, recreation areas, public garages and central heating.

This new thing has a sound philosophy behind it, social, artistic and economic. A group of houses so planned induces and promotes social amenities and possibilities of neighborhood friendships such as mere rows of houses seldom even suggest. Architecturally such a group of houses makes a composition possible with the addition of pleasant park areas and open spaces, which, while not private to the individual, are private to the group. Economically, such grouping represents a considerable saving to the individual in land acquisition, legal charges, the borrowing of money and the use of common amenities, just as a wholesale transaction in common trade reaps advantage over the retail.

Mr. Percy E. Nobbs here sets himself the task of expounding a scheme for suburban community planning. His sympathy with the co-partnership ideal is obvious, but for the benefit of those who are not familiar with it or convinced of its soundness, he also presents other methods of financing the project which he thinks may reach the same goal of community planning.

Mr. Nobbs has a definite class of requirements in mind and he makes no pretense in his scheme of catering to low-paid wage earners. He has simply applied a co-operative method which originated with this class to a higher grade of social requirement.

ALFRED BUCKLEY,
Editor, *Town Planning*.

Suburban Community Planning

PERCY E. NOBBS, M.A., F.R.I.B.A., R.C.A.

Community Planning

Community planning, in its modern applications, is very closely, but not inextricably, related to the co-partnership housing movement. It is due entirely to this movement that it has been shown to be financially possible that a playground or a tennis court may be shared by a group of occupiers who could not individually afford anything of the kind, where such occupiers live on the moderate scale denoted by the six or eight-room house. Of course the squares of London and Edinburgh and many other cities have for a century or more been exemplifying such sharing of garden amenities by the wealthy, and every village common shows that there is nothing inherently modern in the idea.

These remarks are designed to show how easy it is to arrange for community use of playgrounds, tennis courts, garages and heating stations under co-partnership, provided you can get the co-partners; but there are several other ways of getting a similar physical result in the development of property by means of financial policies to which our people (of the Montreal district for instance) are more accustomed.

For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with the intricacies of co-partnership in house-owning, a brief description of this principle on which the financing of our houses and playgrounds can so readily be achieved will be found later on herein.

We now proceed in the light of the results of co-partnership to the consideration of what is, in the opinion of the writer, a better way of parcelling out the land within a block into lots, than is general here.

The Site

Design is inevitably a synthetic expression of an inter-relation among (1) requirements, (2) characteristics of materials, and (3) technical methods. Where a building scheme is the subject of design, the site is one of the material elements, and what you can, or what you can't, do with the site, are characteristics of that element. These "cans" and "can'ts" which have to be distinguished from the "shoulds" and "mights" are either economic or legal inhibitions.

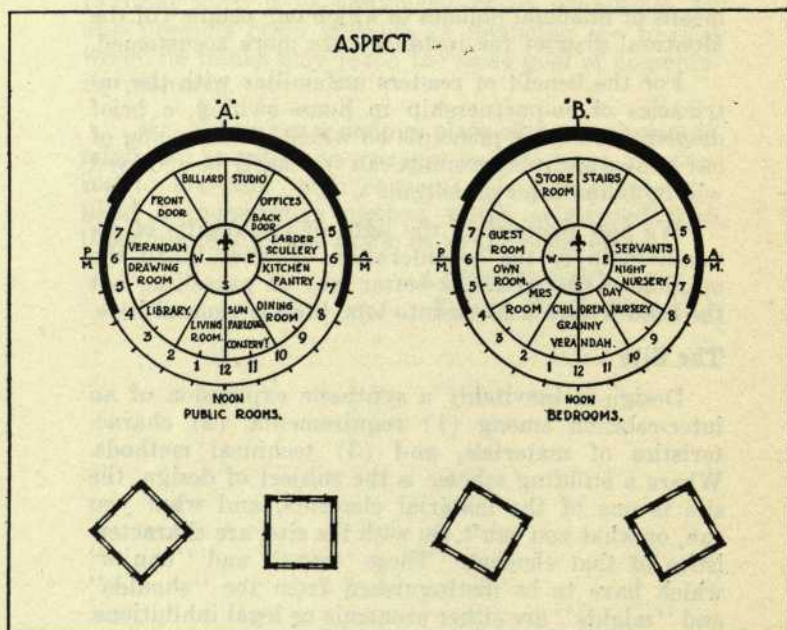
Thus, the very system on which land is held, and the regulations to which its use is subject, bear fruit both in the plans of cities as they exist today and in the shapes of the buildings that grow upon the blocks and the lots into which the city subdivides itself.

Land Tenure

Now, there are certain systems for regulating the use of land which, when combined with certain methods of holding or hiring land, are inauspicious, or even pernicious, in their results. That must be abundantly clear to those of us who take any interest in public health and social well-being, or who have had opportunities to realize and appreciate the abomination of desolation that characterizes the periphery of Montreal and many other great cities, at points where mere accretion, as distinct from organic growth, is allowed to take place.

House Planning

Our business of the moment is with one form of real estate only—Houses (small ones, for brain workers), of the kind the majority of the staff of any great teaching or financial institution are interested in. We must take the internal organization of these houses more or less for granted, as containing a



general place to have one's being in, and a place to eat, and another to prepare food in, and accommodation for a maid, and three bedrooms, one big enough for two persons, and a den or study. The kind of houses often built on land costing \$1.00 or more per square foot. Such houses can be both built and heated most cheaply while preserving essential amenities when constructed in groups of three, four or five.

What we are concerned with however, is not the detailed plan but the disposition of such houses so that *all the rooms get sunshine some time in the day* and at the best time with respect to their uses and so that all windows have pleasant outlooks, the back views being as good in their way as the front views. And furthermore, when there are enough such houses under consideration we are concerned with the investigation of the possibilities of joint or common services for heating, for garaging, and joint or common accommodation for playing and for exercise. What we are very specially about to concern ourselves with are the questions: What do such ameliorations and amenities cost? Need they cost anything?

Sunlight

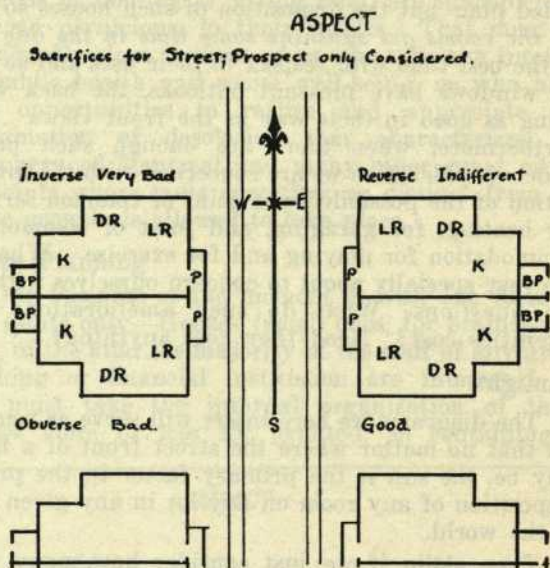
The diagrams we here insert will serve as reminders that no matter where the street front of a house may be, the sun is the primary factor in the proper disposition of any room on any lot in any given part of the world.

Then again if we just consider how many good houses are ruined in use and value by bad ones alongside (bearing in mind that there are as many kinds of goodness and badness in houses as in men) our minds will be opened to the possibility that these things may cost very much less than nothing, even after the necessary hire of brains has been suitably paid for.

Most of the subdivision now in effect on the island of Montreal is rather unintelligent, and decidedly extravagant; furthermore, a gridiron plan has been almost accidentally imposed upon the city, without respect to the varying contours of the land between the mountain and the river, and once started in that area it has been continued over half the island, in defiance of the path of the sun. That more natural and studied methods of subdivision have been initiated at a score of points, and by a dozen planners, is perhaps not as well known as it should be.

Some Subdivisions

I confine myself to some subdivisions which approximate to community planning in this locality, and to undertakings with which I have been directly concerned. It is thus possible to speak with fuller and more detailed knowledge of the condition involved in the cases under review than by dealing with more admirable examples under the handicap of partial information.

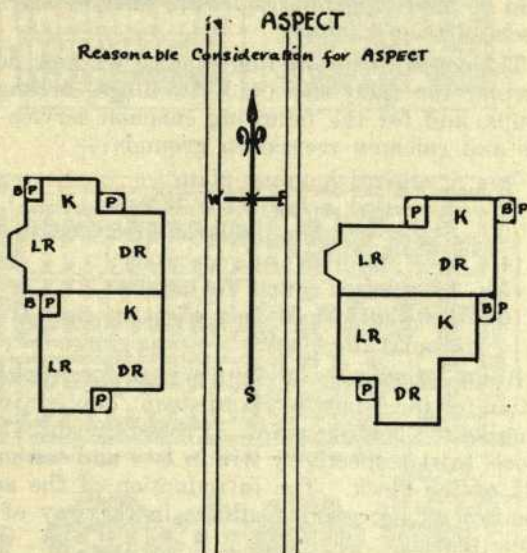


In illustration of the general principle of community planning, some theoretic diagrams are reproduced. These show that it is often possible by a little arrangement to secure playing space within the block, to say nothing of grouping in place of lining of the houses.

We now pass to the consideration of an odd shaped parcel of land, with difficult levels, an orientation at cross purposes with all its boundaries, and having little in the way of views, but that little quite worth making the most of. It will be noted that these houses have a distinctly least architectural or service side to the lane. They do not, however, show to one another any sides not quite as good as their fronts. Their discourtesy to their neighbours outside the group is not of a very pronounced kind, and certainly no worse than what they receive. That is to say, the

group, as such, supports the values of its constituent members.

The next subdivision is one for a very difficult piece of steep land, with quite magnificent views. It



is obviously desirable that this should be enjoyed from as many windows as possible. The houses are arranged so as to admit of considered views over the roofs of those below and also between the houses. As the slope is steep, and to the south-west, it was not difficult to obtain a fair and equal distribution of sunshine. The placing and shaping of the houses in this scheme are controlled so as to reasonably safeguard each occupant against eyesores. Again, if a certain similarity of character is thus attained in the houses, this would tend to sustain value where vain repetition, on the one hand, or a heterogeneous patchwork of materials and traditions, on the other, would have a contrary effect.

Queen Mary's Gardens

We now pass to the consideration of the intentions which underlie the Queen Mary's Gardens Scheme at Hampstead, as set forth by the promoters.

The block of land for which this community building scheme has been planned is situated in a suburb to the northwest of Montreal, and is bounded on the north by Thurlow Road, on the South by Queen Mary Road, and on the East and West respectively by

Northcote Road and Merton Road. It comprises about 240,000 square feet, divided by the original subdivision of 1912 into thirty-six (36) approximately equal lots which, under the original regulations, could be used only for residential purposes for single or semi-detached houses.

The community building scheme we now describe provides for forty-one (41) dwellings, arranged in groups, and for the following common service buildings and common recreation grounds:—

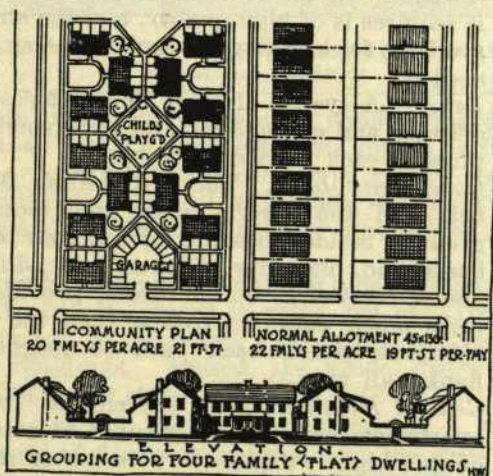
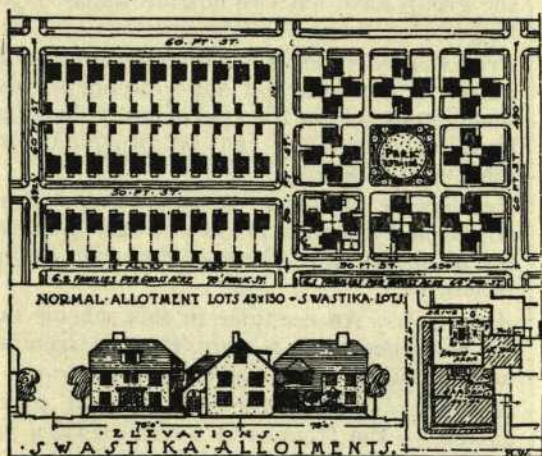
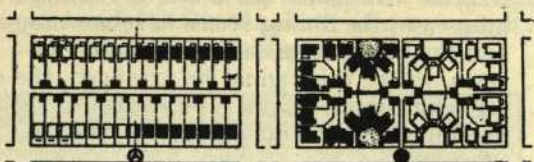
- (1). A central heating plant;
- (2). A central garage (for 36 cars);
- (3). A wet weather playground or loggia;
- (4). Two children's playgrounds;
- (5). Two tennis courts for adults;
- (6). A twenty foot belt of lawn and trees all around the block.

Besides these, a site is provided for a small fire station for the Town of Hampstead. This conveniently masks the heating plant. Protestant and Catholic schools exist respectively within two and ten minutes walk of the block. The introduction of the autobus promises all necessary facilities in the way of rapid public transit.

Were the originally proposed development to take place there would be on this land thirty-six (36) self-contained houses, most of them in semi-detached pairs. These houses would probably vary in size, appearance and cost to a degree undesirable in the interest of the average owner. Each would have had far more garden and yard than most of their owners would have found it convenient to keep in good order. Each would possess its own heating furnace and coal stove. Many, if not most, would have garages, involving internal driveways and pavement crossings, and about half of the houses would front to the North. All this entails waste of several kinds. Furthermore, no individual proprietor could feel security on the score of neighbouring buildings supporting his investment. Repetition by speculative builders would be not only possible, but probable, over much of the area. Intermittent construction over a period of years would further deter the full realization of values.

The community building scheme now proposed requires the removal of the original restriction as to detached or semi-detached houses, and the substitution of control through by-laws, and an Architectural Commission. By the scheme herein described, the fol-

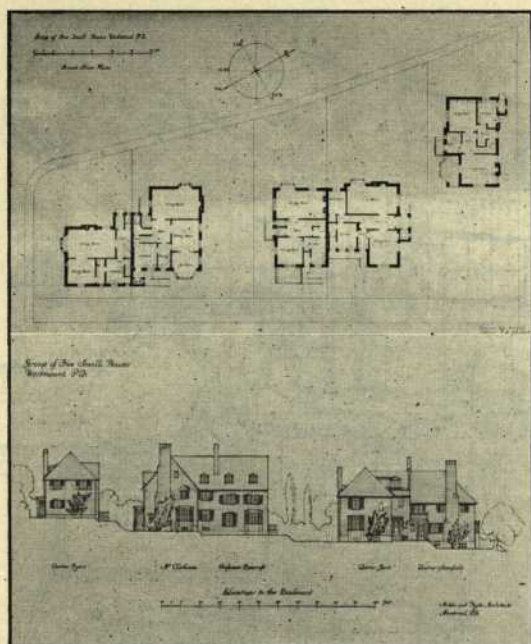
lowing advantages accrue over and above the common services above referred to.



Examples of Community Planning. Diagrams from 1925 Transactions of the American Institute of Architecture

1. *Prospect.* Every house has an equally good outlook, back and front.
2. *Aspect.* No house has a North frontage. In most cases the dining rooms have morning sun, and the living rooms afternoon sun. In a few cases, where this cannot be arranged, the dining and living rooms are *en suite*, so that sunshine can provide each, both morning and afternoon.
3. *Heat Losses.* Generally, the smaller houses in the group have but two outside walls, and the larger ones three, for heat losses.
4. *Professional Services.* Architectural and Engineering services and superintendence on a scale impossible in the case of individual small building operations can be provided for a scheme of this size.
5. *Responsible Builder.* An advantage of construction by such a project is that a contractor of ability and adequate financial strength is assured.
6. *Amenities.* An occupier in this scheme takes up residence with a completed environment, and is assured as to his surroundings.
7. *Gardens.* Each house has a small private garden to the front, and a small service yard in rear—enough to keep tidy.
8. *Garages.* In the central garage what paving it requires is of high quality, and the street is available for bringing the car to the door when needed.
9. *Lanes.* A system of open lanes enables good delivery and garbage removal to be conducted through each service yard gate.
10. *Community Land.* The surrounding 20 feet belt and the several play and recreation grounds, besides ensuring light and air to each house and place for children and adults to amuse themselves out of doors, provide outlooks much more interesting than the usual suburban street, back yard or 'neighbours' flank wall view.
11. *Central Heating.* The convenience of an apartment house can be secured in a scheme of this kind, without extra cost over that of running individual heating systems, and with far greater efficiency, provided the extra initial outlay is faced.

12. *Economy in Construction.* Great saving can be effected by the reduction in (1) Overhead costs; (2) Materials bought in large quantities and (3) Standardized joinery and fittings—fully 10% in this case.



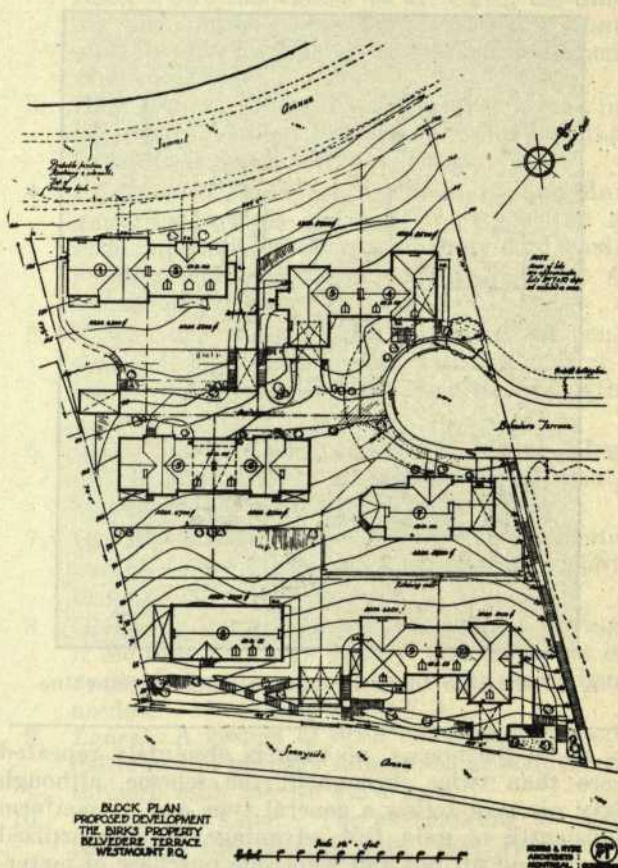
A Subdivision to Secure Community of Sunshine
A Westmount property

As to the houses, no plan is absolutely repeated more than twice throughout the scheme, although sixty per cent follow a general type and all conform sufficiently to gain full advantage of standardized joinery and fittings and wholesale purchase of materials.

By such a community building scheme every house gains the fullest support in value, not only from the character of its immediate neighbours, but from all nearby buildings. *Indeed, the whole district and adjoining blocks stand to profit.*

In the Queen Mary's Gardens project a general uniformity of character is aimed at by the scale of the structures, the types of windows and woodwork, and similarity of roof material. The individuality of the several groups of houses is dependent on variations.

within limits, of the roof form and the walling. The general types of the houses proposed are based more or less upon the old French tradition in the Province—a thoroughly acclimatized style—but the layout and equipment are essentially modern.



The cost of the houses with prepared land averages \$12,100.00 for each house, and ranges from \$9,100.00 to \$14,900.00.

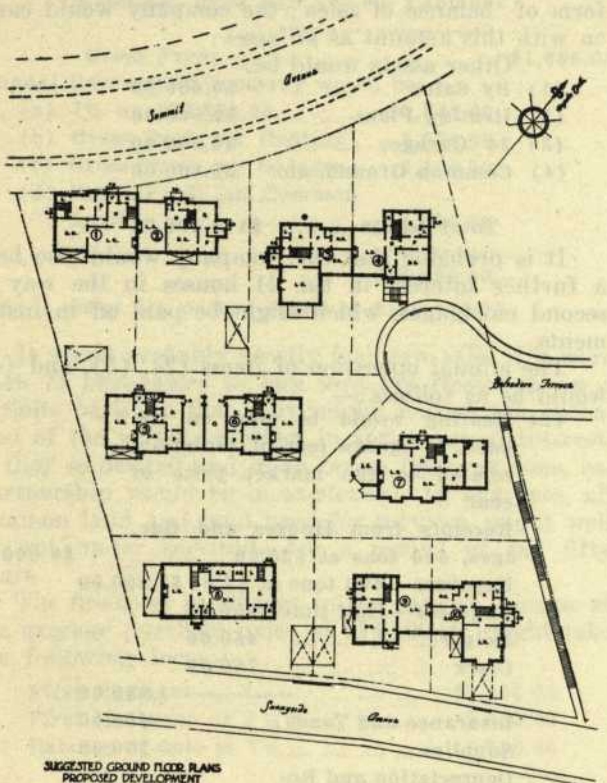
I.

Company Procedure

One method of procedure would be to form a company which would have the following functions:--

- (a) Purchase the land.
- (b) Act as proprietor for all construction contracts.

- (c) Sell the houses on completion.
- (d) Own and operate the garage units.
- (e) Own and operate the heating plant.
- (f) Own and operate the common land, garden belt, tennis courts, playgrounds, paths, etc.



SUGGESTED GROUND FLOOR PLANS
 PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT
 THE BIRKS PROPERTY
 BELVEDERE TERRACE
 WESTMOUNT RD.

Scale 1/4" = 1' - 0"

WILLIAMS ARCHITECTS
 ARCHITECTS
 100 N. 2ND ST.

Expenditure

| | |
|---|--------------|
| (1) 41 Houses with land at 25c per ft., improved with walks, gardens, etc., and including Architect's Fees..... | \$496,400.00 |
| (2) Heating Plant; (outside houses) building land and fees..... | 39,500.00 |
| (3) 36 Garages with paved yard and Architects' Fees | 36,500.00 |
| (4) Common Land, Walks, Tennis | |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Courts, etc., including land, construction, preparation of ground and Architects Fees | 22,800.00 |
|---|-----------|

Total \$595,200.00

The profit in the sale of the houses would be 10% and as this profit would, to a large extent, take the form of 'balance of sales', the company would carry on with this amount as an asset:

Other assets would be:

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| (1) By Sales | 50,600.00 |
| (2) Heating Plant | 39,500.00 |
| (3) 36 Garages | 36,500.00 |
| (4) Common Ground, etc. | 22,800.00 |

Total Assets \$149,400.00

It is probable that the Company would also have a further interest in the 41 houses in the way of second mortgages, which might be paid off in instalments.

The annual operation of items (2), (3), and (4), would be as follows:—

- (2) Heating would be sold on the basis of square feet of radiation, related to the market price of coal.

| | |
|--|------------|
| Receipts from Houses and Garages, 400 tons at \$20.00..... | \$8,000.00 |
| Expenses—400 tons at \$7.00 | \$2,800.00 |
| Engineer—Half time | \$750.00 |
| Helper..... | 450.00 |
| Clerk | 750.00 |
| | 1,950.00 |
| Insurance and Taxes | 400.00 |
| Supplies..... | 200.00 |
| Depreciation and Repairs | 1,000.00 |
| | 6,350.00 |
| Gross Profit..... | 1,650.00 |

Garages

| | |
|---|------------|
| (3) Receipts, 36 at \$150.00 per year | \$5,400.00 |
| Less 15% for vacancies | \$810.00 |
| Insurance and Taxes | 400.00 |
| Repairs and Depreciation..... | 790.00 |
| | 2,000.00 |

Gross Profit \$3,400.00

| | |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| (4) Common ground, etc. | 22,800.00 |
| An average charge of say | |
| \$100.00 per year would be | |
| made in this account 41 x | |
| 100.00 | \$4,100.00 |
| Maintenance—Half time of | |
| heating plant staff 1,950.00 | |
| Materials, tools, etc. 500.00 | 2,450.00 |

Gross Profit **\$1,650.00**

Annual Revenue of Company would be:—

| | |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| (a) 7% on \$50,600.00..... | \$3,542.00 |
| (b) Gross Profit on Heating.... | 1,650.00 |
| (c) Gross Profit on Garages.... | 3,400.00 |
| (d) Gross Profit on Common | |
| Land | 1,650.00 |

\$10,250.00

This is about 7% on the assets of \$149,400.00

It would probably greatly facilitate sales if it were open to purchasers to buy into the Company on a definite basis, so that they might control the operation of the various services in their mutual interest, if they so desired and in so far as this was done, co-partnership would be in existence. In any case, all common land and land used for services, might well be put under servitude for a period of say fifty years.

The financial conditions in the case of a house at the average purchase price of \$14,100.00, might take the following form:—

| | |
|-----------------------------|------------|
| First Payment | \$3,000.00 |
| First Mortgage at 6½% | 8,600.00 |
| Balance of Sale at 7%..... | 2,500.00 |

\$14,100.00

Annual payments by Purchasers:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--------|
| Heating Service..... | 170.00 |
| Gardens and Common Ground ... | 100.00 |
| Interest on first mortgage | 559.00 |
| Interest on balance of sale, paying | |
| off principal \$2,500.00 in 18 | |
| years | 250.00 |

\$1,079.00

or about \$90.00 per month.

So far, so good. We are probably all agreed that

it would be pleasanter, healthier, and in the long run cheaper to live within a community planned group such as this, than in a row of semi-detached houses, or in a detached house, with backs to look at, back yards to look into, and possibly at the mercy of that crudity in a neighbour which the kindly Santayana assures us may represent, "the beginning, not the absence of taste," and which may, besides offending our sense of what a neighbour's place should be, hit us between wind and water, should we desire to sell out.

We have seen how a scheme of this kind would work out on current speculative practice and may infer that success or failure would depend on the finished houses being disposed of within say 18 months. We have also noted that there is a substantial saving in building forty houses together, as against forty houses, one by one.



II.

Co-partnership Method

Under the alternative of co-partnership there would be two difficulties in floating such a scheme. The first, that of finding here forty householders imbued with enough companionable spirit, we must assume as overcome. The second would be the lack here of that central organization which in England facilitates the financing of co-partnership ventures and economizes in the professional services involved. We must assume an institution able and willing to lend the money to the co-partners.

In a co-partnership scheme for such a project, no person would at first hold more than say \$2,000.00,

among the tenants in proportion to their rents, and credited to them as capital until such time as a tenant's holdings equalled the cost of his house. After that the tenant receives his dividends in cash; that is to say, he pays rent to himself for a house he had every advantage in building cheaply by co-operation and which he can dispose of through the company. Now, in the present case, with houses averaging, say \$12,000.00 to build with land and renting at say \$1,720.00 per year or \$144.00 a month, (including heating and other services), the tenant would own his house in the co-partnership sense, that is to say, begin to pay himself rent in twenty-four years time.

By taking scrip for shares, instead of a deed for a particular house and lot, the tenant averages the risk of removal with his co-partners. The value of his accumulated savings is thus kept up and is readily transferable—an excellent thing for a professor or the servant of a company doing business in a dozen cities, for such people are liable to transfer or to be transferred.

It is nearly twenty years since the writer predicted that in this country we would sooner or later have to sacrifice our individualism on a common altar—the community heating plant, with advantage to be taken of \$7.00 per ton slack coal, as against \$17.00 a ton for a mixture of slate and anthracite. That time is visibly nearer.

III.

Apartment Method

A third rather obvious way of handling a scheme of this nature would be to deal with the whole thing as if it were an apartment house spread out over a garden, renting the average house at the average rental of—

| | |
|--|------------|
| Cost of \$12,000.00—Interest at 7%.... | \$840.00 |
| Maintenance | 240.00 |
| Service | 270.00 |
| Taxes | 250.00 |
| | <hr/> |
| | \$1,600.00 |

or about \$135.00 per month.

With the first method, speculative building and sale, the difficulty is to deal equitably and sanely with the services and the common land at that time, probably fifty years hence, when the houses become obsolescent, and the whole block of land may possibly be put to better and therefore more profitable use.

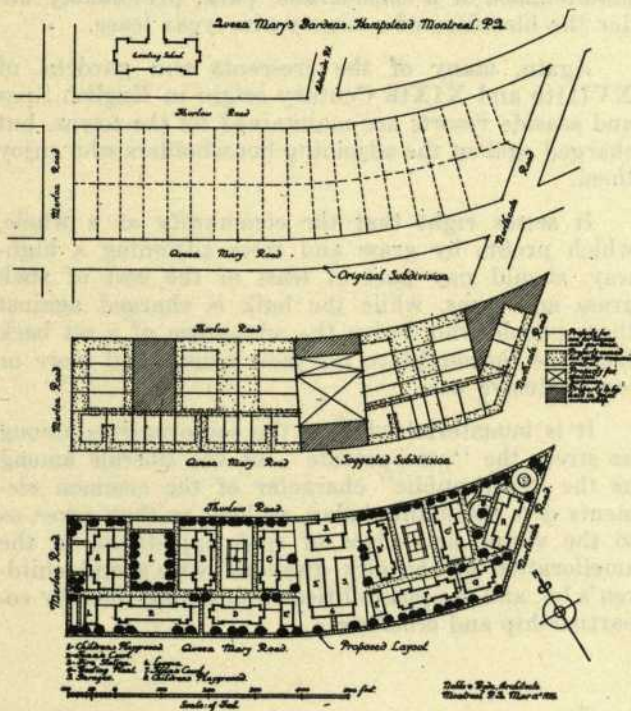
In the case of co-partnership the Society or Company can be trusted to know very well how long the advantages of mutual support of values within the group can counterbalance change in the character of neighbouring blocks, and when they no longer do so, can wind up and cash in.

If run on apartment house lines, it is obvious that the company owning the block might have a good thing if it so arranges matters that the block was dealt with as a whole, after a period of years, and if the group of houses are never allowed to become a slum.

IV.

Long Lease Method

A fourth method presents certain advantages. If the owning company rented on a fifty year basis with ten year renewals thereafter, the danger of disintegration and changes within the group, through the idiosyncrasies of individual ownership would be avoided, the right time could be seized for putting the land to a different use and the problem of the



common land and of the sites for the heating and garage services would solve themselves.

Conclusion

In closing, a word on the maintenance of community land and services.

The playgrounds and services of a scheme, such as we have been considering, present certain difficulties as to finance, maintenance and ultimate disposal, simply because we are not educated in the use of common land and its ownership, as our forebears in Western Europe have been from time out of mind.

The squares, crescents and gardens of London, Edinburgh and Bath, and many Spa towns, constitute, not public parks, but community gardens, shared by the owners of property fronting on the square, crescent or garden across the street. Hard by Hyde Park there is a block of land surrounded by self-contained five-storey houses in contact. Each has a tiny back yard or garden, but they share use and maintenance of a considerable park, presumably under the blessings of a ninety-nine year lease.

Again, many of the crescents and gardens of XVIIIth and XIXth Century origin in English Spas and seaside resorts are maintained by the towns, but charged against the adjoining householders who enjoy them.

It seems right that the community as a whole, which profits by grass and trees adjoining a highway, should pay part at least of the cost of such grass and trees, while the bulk is charged against those people who derive the advantage of a set back from the thoroughfare for their houses and more or less exclusive use.

It is immaterial whether the conservatives among us stress the "semi-private", or the liberals among us the "semi-public" character of the common elements of a community plan, so long as they agree as to the virtue and place of such expedients in the amelioration of the city dwellers' wife's and children's lot, and the possibilities of obtaining them by co-partnership and otherwise.

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Introduction

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