

**THE HOUSING PROBLEM:  
A SUMMARY OF  
CONDITIONS AND  
REMEDIES**

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The Housing Problem: A Summary of Conditions and Remedies by James Ford

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**JAMES FORD**

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## THE HOUSING PROBLEM

A SUMMARY OF CONDITIONS AND REMEDIES PREPARED  
TO ACCOMPANY A HOUSING EXHIBIT OF THE  
HARVARD SOCIAL MUSEUM IN MAY, 1911

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RECENT housing surveys, especially in English and American cities, have disclosed conditions of living needlessly bad. The dwelling-places in which men spend at the least their eating and sleeping hours, in which women and children spend often half and sometimes all of their time, are for millions of people congested, dark, ill-ventilated, unsanitary, combustible, ugly.

### CONGESTION AND HEALTH

Congestion is currently defined as of two types: (1) the overcrowding of buildings upon a given land area, and (2) the overcrowding of individuals within rooms. Land congestion limits the circulation of air and the penetration of light and sunshine to apartments, especially of the lower floors, and increases the probability of spread of fire. Room congestion reduces the supply of fresh air available to tenants and often renders privacy impossible, thus creating an environment favorable to immorality at moments when inhibition is weak.

Health dangers growing out of unimproved dwelling conditions are:—

(1) The easy spread of all contagious diseases where many individuals daily make use of common entrances, halls, toilet conveniences, and water supply.

(2) The especial liability to tuberculosis where buildings are so constructed that sunlight does not have access to every room, where ventilation is poor.

(3) The increased likelihood of infection from typhoid fever where toilet conveniences are shared by many or are improperly flushed; where refuse and filth remain uncovered and accessible

to disease-carrying insects or animals; where surface drains and polluted brooks or rivers abut on dwellings; where out-houses, stables, or cesspools are close by streams, hydrants, or wells.

(4) The moral contagion, chiefly, but not exclusively, operative upon the adolescent boy and girl, where in congested districts the social vices are easily discovered by the inquisitive, and may become matters of current morbid discussion or of experience.

#### DIVERSITY IN LOCAL HOUSING PROBLEMS

Housing conditions vary widely from city to city, and from nation to nation. In America, for example, tenement houses are largely built of combustible material, creating a greater fire risk than is common in European cities. New York, Boston, and many French and German cities contain block dwellings many stories in height, thus rendering acute the problems of light and ventilation. Philadelphia, Chicago, Milwaukee, London, and Birmingham have comparatively few tall tenement houses, but suffer from bad repair or from room congestion. New York City has the air-shaft as a typical problem. Other municipalities have been cursed with the back-to-back tenement. In Glasgow and Berlin the one-room tenement is still frequent. Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Pittsburgh have been deficient in public water and sewage systems and have been forced to deal with yard hydrants, surface drains, and yard privies. The materials available for use in house building also vary from locality to locality. Materials of varying fire and weather resisting qualities are used — wood in America and New Zealand, brick in America and England, limestone in France — each affecting the security of the occupant in a different way. Land configuration, land values, racial traditions, and imitative architecture also interplay in the production of characteristic local problems.

#### CAUSES OF BAD HOUSING CONDITIONS

The social causes of evil housing conditions may be traced not only to the cupidity, apathy, or ignorance of landlord or of builder, but also to the lack of adequate social control of land and buildings. Under modern conditions the speculator may buy cheap land and hold it unbuilt upon for a rise in value, or he may erect

unsafe houses and demand whatever rent competition will allow. As immigrants and the rural classes swarm to the cities, business and industry grow and encroach on the dwellings of the well-to-do. The wealthier classes move farther from the business centre and their homes, erected for single families, are made over and filled by many families of the working class. Immigrants of each race gather their own kind about them. Open space is utilized for further building; more families join the group; and land values, due to presence of large population and the money-earning potential of the land, rise. Tenants' rents in turn are raised in so far as the conditions of the market will allow. The number of rooms rented to a family is diminished, or lodgers are taken, until each city or town may boast a congested Italian, Jewish, or other immigrant quarter, an "Acre," a "Ghetto," a "Little Italy." The supply of desirable dwellings is so small that the majority of population are forced to content themselves as tenants to the property owner with unsatisfactory and even dangerous conditions. The fluctuating demands of industry and the monopoly of land render the erection and ownership of homes impracticable to the majority of men. Thus a variety of social facts, the unrestricted private ownership of land, the uneven distribution of wealth, the influx of rural population to cities, immigration from foreign lands, racial and class gregariousness, the greed of landlords and builders, ignorance and low standards, the lack of social foresight, all interplay in the production of haphazard inconvenient and ugly cities, and of congested slums.

#### THE HOUSING PROBLEM AND THE SUGGESTED REMEDIES

The housing problem is concerned with the question: How may society best provide that each individual family unit may have a home that shall be self-contained, private, sanitary, open in every room to sunlight and fresh air, safe from fire and collapse, and yet at a rent consistent with income, — a house that shall be artistic and hygienic, a home environment which shall be, if not actually constructive, at least not destructive either of body or character, and at a rent no higher than is paid for the slum tenement of today? How may each family have a dwelling pro-

vided with every requisite upon which modern science is agreed? The suggested solutions for this, as for every, social problem cover a wide range from specific, concrete, local remedies to sweeping social reconstruction, in which the housing solution plays only a minor part. Aside from general and less tangible remedies, indicated by the terms "education," "industrial partnership," "good government," "socialism," there remain many measures of existing social practice, the efficacy of which may be tested.

Alleviative or essentially curative measures take the form of repair and management of slum dwellings: remodelling old buildings, cutting new windows, clearing yards and courts, cleansing, whitewashing, disinfecting, replacing defective water and toilet facilities with approved plumbing. Private enterprise may insure proper usage of old or remodelled tenements through the establishment of rules for tenants, inviting care of their homes and the common premises, especially by means of remission of a portion of rent for prompt payments, long tenure, and infrequent repairs; through the appointment of women rent collectors, who may serve the tenants in sympathetic advisory capacity, especially in matters relating to house-keeping; through the provision of instructed janitors or caretakers. Public action adds to this programme general sewage systems, the collection and disposal of garbage and wastes, inspection of buildings by competent officials, and the enforced alteration, vacating, or demolition of unsanitary buildings. The administration of fire and police departments, prisons, hospitals, and asylums is probably in part evidence of the limited efficacy of these measures in actual social practice.

Measures chiefly preventive in character are concerned with the future dwellings of the city and include experiments aiming at the discovery of the cheapest forms of durable and artistic construction, the erection either by private or public capital of "model" dwellings; legislation governing the structure of buildings to be erected, the height, arrangement, materials, fireproofing, size of rooms, courts, yards; city-planning provisions determining the location of residence sections, types of buildings to be erected in different quarters, the area of land to remain uncovered, the width and direction of streets, the reservation of segregated



areas for factories, the reservation of parks and of other land for future city needs; movements for the distribution of present and future city population to suburbs or the redistribution of population and urban manufactures to industrial villages.

To the preventive programme may be added schemes for the taxation of the economic rent or "unearned increment" of land, designed to appropriate for society the enhanced values of land which the presence of population creates, thus minimizing land speculation. Aside from its fiscal value, the social appropriation of the economic rent of land is urged on the grounds that it would serve to throw idle lands into use, to stimulate building, and thus to increase the number of available tenements and to decrease congestion. The rents to be paid by tenants are expected to fall to the lowest point consistent with a fair lessor's profit because of the increased competition of landlords; public funds disposable for general improvements will be augmented by the land tax.

There remain the programmes of land nationalization and of socialism; the former involving much the same ends as the tax upon the economic rent of land, but by means of public operation; the latter involving public ownership and operation of all industry as well, hence controlling the location, erection, and management of both factories and houses.

#### PRIVATE ALLEVIATION OF HOUSING CONDITIONS

Housing conditions within modern speculatively built towns can be materially alleviated either by public or by private effort, especially by means of inspection, repair or demolition of houses, and by education of tenants. Philanthropic societies have often organized to purchase or manage unsanitary areas. A notable American example is the Octavia Hill Association of Philadelphia, copied, with some necessary local modification, after the method of Miss Hill in London. The work of the Association consists in purchasing and repairing small unsanitary dwellings in the poorest quarters of the city, and in acting as agent for owners of slum property, receiving a commission of 7½ per cent on the rents collected. The Association employs women rent collectors who instruct the tenants in cleanliness, in housekeeping, and other

matters, aiming thus to raise their standards of living. At the end of the year 1910 the Association owned 83 houses, value \$109,500, and managed 186 other houses, dealing with over 500 families. The Association has been able to pay 4 per cent dividends on invested capital and has accumulated a small reserve fund, demonstrating "the possibility of overcoming bad conditions, and yet receiving a fair financial return."<sup>1</sup>

### LEGISLATION, INSPECTION, AND REPAIR

Public action, to render the existing slum less dangerous to physical and moral health, begins in "health acts," the provision of public water supply, public sewage systems, and the regular collection of refuse. Modern cities or states usually go further and frame health laws, governing the minimum sanitary conditions of existing dwellings. In America the inspection under these laws ordinarily falls as an additional task to existing health or police departments. New York City, stimulated to action by the most appalling conditions of congestion to be found in America, — due largely to peculiar land formation, — has passed a tenement house law unexcelled in its thoroughness, and has created an official Tenement House Department concerned with the exclusive problem of housing. This Board, though still inadequately equipped with inspectors of old tenements, has in the years 1902-08 received and investigated 275,000 complaints. It has caused 2290 rooms to be vacated, 39,000 windows to be cut in dark rooms, 3,700 school sinks and 2300 privies and cesspools to be removed, 26,700 water closets to be provided and 358,000 to be cleaned and repaired. The Board has required the building of 55,700 new fire-escapes, and has ordered improved fire protection in more than 180,000 other instances. Other forms of cleaning or repair have been effected in over 500,000 cases.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Annual reports and leaflets of the Octavia Hill Association, Philadelphia, Pa.

<sup>2</sup> Fourth report of the Tenement House Department of the City of New York, pp. 262-265.

## DEMOLITION OF SLUMS

In Great Britain the reports made by Government officials on large unsanitary areas have in many instances resulted in the razing of districts, several acres in extent, under the direction and at the expense of the municipality. On some occasions the areas thus demolished have been left open and developed as public parks. An American instance of the same practice is that of Mulberry Bend in New York, a notorious district of 2 $\frac{3}{4}$  acres, which in 1895-96 was torn down and made over into a municipal park. In other instances only obstructive buildings have been removed; remaining structures being repaired for further use. Examples of this practice in Boston, Massachusetts, and in Birmingham, England, show the possibilities of vast improvement in sanitation and in amount of air and sunlight rendered accessible to tenement dwellers, with comparatively slight public expense.

## PUBLIC REBUILDING OF DEMOLISHED AREAS

Another method, more sweeping in its nature and characteristic especially of British cities, is the demolition of slums and the erection by the municipality of new buildings on the same land to rehouse the displaced population or its equivalent. Thus the London County Council in 1891 spent \$1,600,000 in the purchase of fifteen acres of land in the vicinity of Boundary Street, Bethnal Green. On this territory 5719 individuals were found to be crowded, at an average of 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  persons per room, under conditions dangerous to health and public safety. The area was torn down and new model tenements were erected at a cost of over \$1,460,000 providing for 5380 persons.<sup>1</sup> Many schemes of this sort have been carried out by London, Liverpool, Glasgow, and other British cities. This method, however, has been found very expensive and not altogether satisfactory. The displaced population merely increases district congestion at the time of dislodgment and does not in large proportion return to the new dwellings when finished. A further difficulty with this system lies in that a

<sup>1</sup> London County Council, "The housing question in London," 1855-1900, pp. 190-213.