

AICP STUDY GUIDE

Podcast

Episode 9: Civilization is Crumbling

And welcome friends, to the ninth episode of the VERY UNofficial AICP podcast. I'm Jonathan Miller, and thank you all so much for sticking around and joining me every week, really.

I hope everyone enjoyed their weekends, broke into fall with something pumpkin flavored - if that's your thing - and found some time to study a little bit for the upcoming exam. You have T-minus 42 days and counting y'all.

Last week we talked about two of the major developments that were pivotal in allowing the westward expansion: The Erie Canal, and the National Road.

This week, we're picking up with a watershed moment in planning. No, not those watersheds. I'm talking about the notorious tenements and the ensuing backlash of sorts. At least looking at it that way is a great way to try and remember it all.

So why wait, let's just jump on in.

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Imagine the 1850's in New York City: People are everywhere, housing is scarce, and sanitation isn't the greatest.

If you weren't aware, the early 1800's - specifically about 1820 to 1860 - marked a period of massive immigration. I'm talking population doubling every 10 years in New York. The immigrants during this time span were mostly Germans and Irish. In fact, it was about 5 million Germans, and of all of the immigrants in this time span, one third are estimated to be Irish Catholic.

All of those immigrants, or rather, just the sheer volume of people coming to New York, pushed housing to the limits. And frankly, the single-family homes just weren't enough. They needed density in housing, and what did they first build in 1855, wink wink? The first model tenement.

Now it turns out - around this time - many of the more well-to-do New Yorkers moved north, leaving behind their old rowhouses.

These rowhouses then, ended up being converted into tenement apartments where multiple families would live - at the same time. Seeing the need, several model tenements were built brand spankin' new.

One of the first of the new builds, called "The Big Flat," was constructed by - and I swear I'm not making this up: "The Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor." The Big Flat was six stories and in fact, was the largest tenement until the 1880's, and was restricted only to African-American families.

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Most tenements that were built around this time followed the same script. Five to seven stories with a building footprint of - usually - almost the entire lot, which at the time would have been about 25 feet

wide and 100 feet long, typically.

Now it doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize that if the building is taking up the entire lot and the tenement next to them is taking up the entire lot, then there really isn't much space between the two is there? No, there isn't.

These tight quarters made it so really the only rooms facing the street got any light or "fresh" air. I say "fresh" air because these tenements weren't exactly constructed with a lot of integrity. In fact, later real estate and tenement speculators built new tenements with really cheap materials and shortcuts, making them even worse. It's almost like without any building codes and regulations, developers could just build whatever garbage they wanted. Hmmm.

But, I digress.

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Anyways, no fresh air, and this was definitely a problem.

A lot of these tenements - like we talked about - were made for single-families, not multiple families. So, the buildings weren't equipped to handle the extra capacity, especially when you realize that to accommodate even more families, they started stacking extra floors on the existing ones.

More importantly though, sanitation at that time just wasn't where it is now. For example, sewer pipes often clogged and/or froze in the winters, causing massive backups.

I mean New York was seriously filthy, like standing water and waste - wait - no need to be crude to soften the blow. Shit, there was shit in the streets, in the cracks of the cobblestones; it was that kind of filthy.

So how did it get so bad and why didn't anyone do anything about it? Well that's a little outside of our scope here, but in short: There were lots of rich, more tenured citizens blaming immigrants and poor people, and corrupt politicians refusing to do anything about it.

Side note, if you live under a rock and haven't yet already, watch "The Gangs of New York" with DiCaprio and Daniel Day Lewis. It takes place in the Five Points - that's a real place - in 1862; a place in what's Lower Manhattan, and it was a hot spot for tenements. They actually did a really good job making life in New York in 1862 pretty accurate. The draft riots in the movie? That was a real thing too, exacerbated by the just squalid living conditions. Plus, Daniel Day Lewis does an amazing job with his character, and look out for the quote that the title of this episode was actually taken from.

Back to reality though. How did New York respond to the increasingly garbage conditions that came from these model tenements which were first built in 1855?

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Well, eight years after the first model tenement was built, the conditions were noticeably terrible. So terrible, that a group of citizens met with the Mayor to talk about it - along with other issues too. And a year later, the Citizen's Association of New York was formed.

Now since these citizen's had half a brain, they realized that they weren't exactly well qualified themselves to judge sanitation and pursue changes in that arena. In fact, they were so smart that they put together a Special Council of Hygiene and Public Health, and brought physicians on board to do the inspections and survey the streets and households. And in May of 1864, the Council of Hygiene and Public Health of the Citizen's Association of New York started a campaign of inspecting New York's streets and housing on a street-by-street basis.

To do that, they broke the city up into 31 districts and, street-by-street, inventoried and took notes on every household in Manhattan.

Here's just a couple stories of their findings from the New York Academy of Medicine's Center for History.

One story talks about an Irish family of three who probably all had typhoid fever. They lived in an apartment with six families in six rooms with two windows, and were close enough to a horse stable that the horse would apparently wander into their hallway.

Another story talks about a building called Gotham Court where there was only 275 cubic feet - not square feet - cubic feet of space per person. That's a space that's about 5 feet by 5 feet and 11 feet tall. I know people with closets bigger than that. Oh, and that includes space for all of their belongings too

Anyways, this report was the start of the conversation surrounding building codes, sanitary inspections, it was even partly responsible for the creation of the Board of Health. Unfortunately, this wasn't the end of the tenement, just the start of the evolution of the tenement, but we'll pick back up on that in a couple of episodes.

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Now, at the same time that residents were getting frustrated with the just plain nasty conditions of the City, there was a growing sentiment that tied parks and open air to health; and it wasn't inaccurate.

The tenements provided cramped living conditions and no fresh air, and subsequently saw epidemics of small pox and typhoid fever. And a result, the rich folks wanted out. So, queue Frederick Law Olmsted.

I won't go into too much detail about him, but in general, Frederick Law Olmsted - the father of landscape architecture - spent his life trying to incorporate natural landscapes into urban living. Olmsted's belief was pretty consistent throughout his life: Urban cities needed parks and nature. He even went so far as to say that symptoms of cities were "nervous tension, over-anxiety, hasteful disposition, impatience, and irritability."

So, it's no wonder that he was on board with a sentiment that was brought out in the 1840's for a grand park in New York. Olmsted supported the idea in order to provide a clean air refuge for residents, to satisfy the rich, and to help the poor.

And in 1857, after he and his partner Calvert Vaux won the design contest; Central Park was built.

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It's no wonder then, when Emery Childs purchased 1,600 acres west of Chicago that he reached out to Olmsted and Vaux to design the community. So, using his park ideals and pastoral design theories, Olmsted designed what is arguably the first suburb and the first unofficial garden city.

Now don't get it all twisted and confused, Riverside is not technically part of the garden city movement. That didn't officially start until 1898, but Riverside does share a lot of the same characteristics. Writing back to his wife, Olmsted said "the city as yet, has no true suburb in which urban and rural advantages are agreeably combined."

So in his design, the entire community centered around a main train station which provided easy access to Chicago. There was a reserved block for commercial uses, but that's really where the urban stops. The main feature in Riverside, the distinguishing characteristic if you will, was the curvilinear streets.

Olmsted and Vaux designed the roads to follow the contours of the land, and intentionally avoided right-angle intersections with the goal of creating open spaces for recreation and parks, and to provide scenic areas for all residents.

It was also really the first that incorporated an idea of how the private properties shaped the public realm. He wanted to avoid the walls which made stark delineations of properties common in England at the time, and instead insisted on soft lines like hedges and fences...because to him...the area between the houses and the streets provided a sort of transitional space.

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<https://nyamcenterforhistory.org/2019/04/25/finding-cause-in-street-cleanliness-the-citizens-association-of-new-york-report-of-1865/>

Riverside, Illinois

<https://www.fredericklawolmsted.com/riverside.html>

<https://www.pbs.org/wned/frederick-law-olmsted/learn-more/designing-middle-class-community/>

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/nation-world/chi-chicagodays-riverside-story-story.html>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Riverside,_Illinois