OUR PEOPLE AND
THEIR CITIES

A Background to Urban America's
Conference to Improve the Quality
of Urban America

Washington, D.C.

September 11, 12 and 13, 1966
Preface

In preparation for Urban America's conference, "Our People and Their Cities," a series of round table discussions were held. Each considered one of the four principal themes of the conference. To provide background for these discussions, Urban America asked Frederick Gutheim, its conference consultant, to prepare position papers outlining the qualitative and design issues of the conference themes. Subsequently, in the light of the discussions, Mr. Gutheim revised these papers and they are presented here to assist those attending the conference.

If such a document is to serve, it must obviously be provocative to a degree, raising questions rather than providing answers. Deliberately challenging, the papers are hardly a statement of orthodox opinion. It should be clear that the background papers are not intended to relate directly to the talks delivered to the conference. We hope that both the background document and the conference presentations contribute to the main conference effort: the discussion sessions, in which the conference will give voice to its understanding of urban problems.

Urban America acknowledges with gratitude the contribution of those who, identified in the body of this document, attended the pre-conference round tables. It should be clear that they are in no way responsible for the substance of this document or the opinions expressed.

Stephen R. Currier
President
Urban America

August 12, 1966
Preface

To encourage participants in Urban America's conference, "Our People and Their Cities," to think about the often elusive qualitative aspects of the urban physical environment, the present volume has been prepared. It grew from preliminary papers written as background to round tables convened by Urban America in the preparatory stages of conference planning. These discussions and those who participated in them, as noted below, contributed substantially to the present manuscript. I also wish to acknowledge the contribution of my research collaborator, Mr. Ivars Gutmanis, and members of the Urban America staff. In the conventional phrase, these individuals are in no way responsible for the opinions expressed or other deficiencies that may be found here.

Participants in Urban America's pre-conference round tables were:


Frederick A. Gutheim
Conference Consultant

August 12, 1966
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In the perspective of one year, perhaps the most important thing the much misunderstood White House Conference on Natural Beauty did was to focus attention on the city here and now. Previously we had tended to think of city improvement in the context of long-range comprehensive planning, the results, if any, being likely to benefit some future generation. We had concentrated on the large elements of the city: its highway system, for example. One consequence was that it was never very clear whether the highway was responding to the city, or the city responding to the highway. In sum, people who were dissatisfied with the city as they found it lacked anything very concrete or specific they could do about it.

The White House Conference has been unfairly and mistakenly derided for espousing "beautification"—which was misinterpreted as planting ornamental shrubs and flower-bedding (although just why this is not a badly needed part of our urban surroundings wasn't said). Nevertheless, in fact, the conference spent most of its energy in a gigantic clean-up effort—to abate environmental pollution, the visual anarchy of billboards, auto junkyards and roadside litter. Its more positive activity was concerned with measures to improve roadways, waterfronts, parks and the natural environment, and to introduce order into the man-made environment of buildings and townscapes. In these neglected fields it produced an outstanding series of recommendations for remedial action, an astonishing number of which were translated almost immediately into legislative and administrative action, or implemented by business firms, cities and private individuals and groups. The Washington conference's call for broader action stimulated nearby 40 state conferences on natural beauty, with varying agendas and outcomes, a movement that is still continuing and the results of which have still to be appraised. Judged by any standard, it would be difficult to cite another White House conference that had more striking, immediate and far-flung results. If ever a single national event marked the turning of a corner in public policy, it was this.

While the large issues of the natural environment occupied much of the attention of the conference, it both considered how these affected the natural surroundings of cities and a range of further issues of distinctly urban import. It was this part of the conference that attracted the attention of Urban America, and provided the opportunity to explore further these neglected aspects of the city; and to consider them, in the spirit of the 1965 Conference, as objectives entitled to reasonably immediate action rather than simply long-range planning.

In his speeches at the University of California and elsewhere, and in his Message of February 8, 1965 to the Congress, President Johnson enunciated the major themes that were later pursued in the White House Conference on Natural Beauty that met in Washington on May 24 and 25, 1965. In the wide scope of what we can now consider in the aggregate to be a successful effort to reorient the American people to the quality of their environment, urban factors received
a high position. The President recalled the admonition of Thomas Jefferson who wrote that communities "should be planned with an eye to the effect made upon the human spirit by being continually surrounded with a maximum of beauty." "We have often sadly neglected this advice in the modern American city," President Johnson noted. "Yet this is where most of our people live. It is where the character of the young is formed. It is where American civilisation will be increasingly concentrated in years to come." He urged that "A concern for the enhancement of beauty must infuse every aspect of the growth and development of metropolitan areas. It must be a principal responsibility of local government, supported by active and concerned citizens."

The ensuing White House Conference on Natural Beauty extended and advanced the President's program. A distinguished audience of nearly 800 involved the leadership of many business and professional groups and many localities in the pursuit of these objectives. The conference itself yielded many specific recommendations for action that substantially influenced new legislation and the programs of many Federal departments.

In his response to the Conference the President said, "Natural beauty, as you and I conceive it, is the world we live in. It is the environment in which we were born, and grow to maturity, and live our lives. It is more than a rich source of pleasure and recreation. It shapes our values. It moulds our attitudes. It feeds our spirit, and it helps to make us the kind of men and women that we finally become." Then the President continued, "Urbanization is another modern threat. More and more our people crowd into the cities, cutting themselves off from nature. Cities themselves grow and spread, often devastating the countryside. And in every corner of the land the Nation builds, and builds, and builds--highways and restaurants, factories and neon signs. And far too often we find the marvels of progress, only to find that we have diminished the life of man." And he responded with the New Conservation, "To restore as well as to protect--to bring beauty to the cities as well as to keep it in the countryside—to handle the waste products of technology as well as the waste of natural resources."

In the published report of the White House Conference, beyond its many recommendations that have already been acted upon, there are additional opportunities. These merit further consideration. We must also see the importance of continuity of effort. This has already been established in the work of the many state-wide and local conferences that have been held in response to the White House Conference, and to the many programs of business and professional societies who have recognized the issue.

A movement of this kind has foundations. Prior to the White House Conference a mounting chorus of critical opinion had been heard. More than a decade ago Lewis Mumford was writing in The New Yorker, "The original core of almost every American city is by now a clotted mass of antiquated buildings." An increasing flow of books commenting unfavorably on the deteriorating urban scene appeared from such authors as Peter Blake, Lawrence Halprin, Ian Nairn, Christopher Tunnard and William H. Whyte, Jr. Improving the physical environment became one of the bipartisan "Goals for America." The authoritative report of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission put special emphasis on the urban environment, and warned that the more recent suburbs no less than the urban core increasingly compromised the hope for a seemly city. Nor was this concern for surface appearance only. Led by Jane Jacobs, many who saw the
social and economic problems of the city expressed in its physical appearance, warned that efforts to reconstruct the physical environment must begin with a consideration of the underlying human purposes of cities. Equally they must contemplate the social consequences of urban renewal and comprehensive urban design. Thus it was natural these strong contemporary feelings should have found expression in the White House Conference. And it was inevitable that a large share of the recommendations that flowed from the Conference should have dealt with improving the quality of the urban environment. This complex task is overdue. It has now been removed from the oblivion to which the impossible, the unimportant or the irrelevant have been consigned. It has been accepted as a right and proper concern and activity of government at all levels. But we have equally acknowledged that it must enlist the cooperation and initiative of every citizen.

The majority of the recommendations from the White House Conference proposed some form of government action. Yet the appearance of our cities is fundamentally dependent upon a multitude of private owners, the design and care of their private property, their behavior on foot and in automobiles, the conduct of private business and the pursuit of private enjoyments. Daily we are confronted by litter and vandalism, raucous advertising and bad manners in architecture, the inhuman scale of much urban engineering, the threat to human survival posed by polluted air and water, the pressures and tensions of urban noise and traffic hazards, the collected junk in disfiguring piles and the distributed junk along the roadsides. To be sure, some of these difficulties are due to the right things being in the wrong places, or to conflicts that ought to be reconciled. Some are breakdowns in police regulation. Some represent gaps or lags in modern technology. In many instances not enough is being spent for public services, especially of municipal governments. In others, the money is not being spent for the right things. Overcrowding is frequently the result of insufficient facilities or service. The failure to keep things in balance is in many cases the result of our lack of recognition of the resulting effect on our surroundings, or past timidity in demanding a high standard in our urban environment. What must be done is now clear enough: we must formulate an unmistakable positive demand for a good urban environment in specific detail, and see that this demand is reflected in the market and in the ballot box. No single action by any government or any private business or individual is going to correct the deeply rooted and complex shortcomings in the appearance of the modern city. It will take sustained action in the schoolroom and the pulpit, in the press and by service clubs, by local governments and political parties, in universities and on television.

A national conference helps spotlight the problem, aids in understanding it, builds toward consensus, and lets everybody see just what his part is in reaching the goals everybody wants. It sets the problem in national terms, to allow national organizations, national news media, national government to come to grips with it. Because it is part of a nation-wide movement, each locality tackles its own job with greater vigor. It can learn something of value from the experience of other cities, and it can contribute what it has itself learned. Perhaps most important, in a problem as much talked about by specialists as this one, only a conference can give meaning and definition to something as elusive as the quality of the urban environment, the values of urban design, such fragile elements as appearance and beauty, at once obvious and subtle, which everyone wants and on which no one agrees.
In the urban aspects of the White House Conference Urban America has seen an opportunity to explore further a particular segment of what President Johnson has called "the New Conservation." It both responds to this challenge in a more specialized conference, and it continues the efforts inaugurated a year ago and destined to be extended in the future.

We are to be concerned with the quality of life in cities, and with the urban physical environment. Urban design is one means to advance these objectives. We intend to examine the qualitative aspects of housing, the environmental architecture of office buildings and industry, urban transportation and the design and planning of institutions and facilities for recreation, culture and leisure. It is these aspects of the city which--if unwittingly--shape the human predicament: the choice of jobs, of friends, of recreations; the richness or the poverty of life; the splendor or the drabness of it. In this way human beings--individuals, families, communities, whole metropolitan populations--are constantly being shaped by their physical surroundings. They may think no more about it than fish do about the ocean, or than birds do about ornithology--and ecology. Yet indifferent as they may be to their physical surroundings, cities are for people. Indeed, as Aristotle and Shakespeare, and such modern urbanists as Lewis Mumford and Henry Churchill have observed, cities are the people.