

SOME REMEDIES FOR OVERCROWDED CITY DISTRICTS.

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THE growth of true civilization, the extension of education, and evolution of a better race, constitute national progress. As cities contain the greater part of the population of any country, they are always an important field for social reform.

The development of cities is a gradual process. As in natural life, where this development altogether ceases, arrest and decay inevitably ensue.

In civic improvement it is important to place qualitative before quantitative progress. Lavish expenditure on large municipal projects is not always a proof of finer civilization.

There are many reforms rather than innovations, which when adopted in crowded city districts materially improve them. Being economical, they are specially suited for those cities where extension of the civic area is difficult, and taxation high.

Decentralization of housing for the *very poor* is not easy to carry out, owing to their tendency to crowd together,—the tendency which creates slums in all cities,—the expense of demolishing these, and the difficulty of dislodging those who help to make them.

The liberty of the subject is a fact in English law, even to the extent of allowing him to prefer an insanitary to a sanitary environment. While this liberty exists, a class will exist in the crowded poor districts of cities, indifferent to insalubrity, harmonising with their surroundings, and sunk in ignorance. Even when change means improvement this class abhors it.

Improved dwellings without surveillance in their case are but a waste of public money, unless the individuals are prepared for improved surroundings. This class is next to the totally submerged and homeless, which is the lowest stratum.

It is to their habits that much of the demoralization which results in slum districts is due. And the saddest fact in the overcrowding of cities is that, owing to city rents and the tenement house system, many artisans and factory employes, in order to be near their work, are compelled to dwell with the vagrants and non-workers, that hang on the

outskirts of all cities. Elimination is a pressing need. For this reason, as well as its economical superiority, the decentralization of industries, or removal of factories outside the city area, is to be advocated as a remedy for congestion, that is likely to benefit the deserving classes, and eliminate them by a gradual process from the lower strata of society, which could be then separately dealt with.

It would also lessen other adverse conditions besides overcrowding, remove smoke, give spaces for improvements, and lessen noise in the crowded districts in which most factories are now situated.

Manufacturers and consumers would find that work done in pure air, under improved physical conditions, would be of better quality. The employes having the advantage of working apart from the smoke-laden atmosphere, and nerve-excitation of the city, would be in a better position to execute good work.

They would likewise, even if compelled to live still in the city, enjoy for part of each day the advantages of rural surroundings and change of atmosphere.

The axiom of an eminent authority on civics —“From the every-day world of action arises a corresponding thought-world also,” applied to this remedy proves its importance. A thought-world or mental atmosphere depends to some extent on environment, especially among those whose mental development is not high. Physical surroundings affect thoughts. Thoughts make individuals, and affect their work.

It cannot be doubted that the thought-world of those working in rural factories is truer and simpler than the mental atmosphere prevailing in crowded city workshops. And many of these latter can be transplanted without financial loss, though the difficulties are twofold. First—want of means of transit for workers, and second—the possibility of vacant city premises being left unlet, a prospect which is less substantial as an objection on closer inspection.

Neither difficulty is mountainous. Each dwindles to the size of the proverbial molehill on patient analysis of facts.

They can both be overcome by mutual co-operation—that co-operation which is the welding force of all social reform.

It is to be regretted that the want of public co-operation between various companies in all cities often hinders that continuity of action which spells progress in social and other reforms. Rival designers and want of harmony in the designing of civic improvements, more often hinder their realisation, than assist elimination and “survival of the fittest.”

Mediocrity is always numerically strong, and numbers

rule in municipalities. The decentralization of industries, however, is a point of reform where the most hard-headed financier can meet the civic idealist, and the success-standard of both be preserved. Both economy and common-sense, health and that "general fitness of things" which can harmonise even modern cities, would suggest themselves as grounds for this reform.

The difficulty of means of conveyance for workers between city and factory is connected with the question of wages to some degree, yet does not hinge on it.

As regards tram-companies—the supply of workers' cars, depending on the relation between demand and supply, will not fail when needed. Passengers make trams as well as trams passengers.

The slight additional tax on the wages of those unable for a daily walk to the suburban factories is an argument that cannot be weighed against the advantages of suburban factories remote from dwelling-houses for manufacturers, consumers, and employes. The more normal life, lessened temptation to extravagance, and the substitution of a daily prospect of trees and fields for the grey monotony of city streets for the latter, are worthy of consideration in these democratic days, when the power of a majority may rule the fate of a nation.

As regards the question of financial loss to the owners or city premises.—

In most cases the factories are in crowded and poor districts where space is valuable, the neighbouring housing accommodation being overcrowded. When vacated these sites would afford spaces for club-rooms, popular gymnasia, restaurants, and other ways of remedying the overcrowding of the inadequate housing accommodation and supplying its deficiencies.

In cases where the spaces are large and the district and surroundings suitable for improved housing accommodation, they can be utilised by public or private companies for block dwellings with modern improvements. Generally speaking, however, the erection of new dwellings close to old rookeries tends to reduce their influence as a lever of environment for the tenants.

The same law applies to them as to the human individual. New habits are more easily formed in new surroundings, and the best of block buildings are soon injured by careless tenants. Hence the advisability of erecting new housing accommodation at some distance from the old tenement houses.

In districts where these exist vacant spaces can be utilized as valves for congestion in the shape of the clubs, gymnasia, or popular restaurants mentioned, which should exist in all such districts.

Good management and a knowledge of human idiosyncrasies, to which might be added a delicate appreciation of the beautiful quality called Irish pride, which may be found in the poorest districts, can make these congestion valves popular among those for whom they are intended. They could be made an economic means of preparing the inhabitants for the better housing which, when the legislation is fully alive to its importance, will replace slum districts in all cities.

Education for improved environment in the case of the very poor is, at present, necessary to ensure its permanence and the adaptability of the individuals.

Here the metaphysician and educationist can aid the civic reformer, as all work of social amelioration can only act as leavening influences by a contact with individuals. This can be gained by the establishment of these centres in crowded districts. Improved individuals result in an improved environment, and the converse is also, though not equally, true.

Superficial reformation is directed against effects and therefore evanescent radical reforms aim at causes.

Therefore, improvements of this economic nature, as well as lessening overcrowding, would be a practical reinforcement of the Licensing Laws in combating the habits which exist in overcrowded districts as a resultant of them.

In Dublin, as in other cities, expansion is not uniform, Villadom expands southward and westward, while within the city large areas are overcrowded with the housing accommodation of the poor, ancient, unsuitable and insanitary.

Relics of an historic past in the shape of the old residences of the statesmen, orators, or wits, that made Ireland famous, are preserved not by a grateful nation as relics of former glories, but by the enterprising tenement-house landlord or agent, with, in too many cases, less regard for the comfort of the tenants than the amount of weekly rent that can be made out of each house.

Originally designed for one household, and unsuited for many, these are of a sort to make a civic economist shudder, yet many employed in crowded factories or shops during the day are compelled by lack of other accommodation to live in such one-room tenements.

The greater the density of overcrowding is, the greater is the rent charged in some districts. Consequently an underground cellar kitchen may be let to a family of six persons for a rent which would procure a sanitary dwelling in a block building, if such were available.

Those unable to pay a rent of 5s. or 6s. a week are the chief sufferers by the system. A family of two persons may live under perfect physical conditions as regards air-space in a room as large as a modern ballroom, where the cubic feet

of space for each is so much above Professor Huxley's lowest minimum average as to make an arctic temperature, while an underground room in the same building may be the wretchedly overcrowded home of an unskilled artisan or labourer, with possibly a family of six children and a wife. The cubic air-space for each individual in the latter case is so much below the standard of the Local Government Board Model Bye-Laws for overcrowding, as to be detrimental to health and conducive to speedy physical deterioration, yet no equalisation of matters is possible in the present state of the Public Health Acts.

Such an instance is the rule rather than the exception, and exists in many parts of the city. Hence the wisdom of calculating overcrowding density by number of persons per room instead of per acre.

Tenement-houses are defined in Section 29 of the Dublin Corporation Act, 1890 (52 and 53 Vic.) as houses —“Not being common lodging-houses occupied by members of more than one family, and in which the average rent charged to the occupiers shall be less than 7s. a week, and the lowest rent charged to any occupier shall be not more than 5s. a week.”

These dwellings of the poor are legally exempt from the model bye-laws of the original Public Health Act of 1875, which relate to the overcrowding of “common lodging-houses.”

The enactments about “lodging-houses” in the Irish Public Health Act of 1878 occupy twelve sections of it. Though comprehensive, from various causes they fail to exactly meet the need of the very poor in crowded city districts.

Even the most paternal of English Public Boards finds a difficulty in always harmonising with local authorities. Hence it will be seen that the power of the local authorities being so great, it is important that they should be enlightened and unbiassed, and devoted to the best interests of the people they represent.

Objections are sometimes made to clauses in English Acts, quite as necessary if not more so in Ireland as on the other side of the Channel. The social reforms needed are generally the same in all large cities, and owing to national characteristics a greater, instead of a less stringency of application and minuteness of detail is needed in dealing with the Irish poor than those of other cities.

An extension of the application of those clauses of the Public Health Act relating to the overcrowding of houses, and their stringent enforcement in the case of the tenement houses, might effect a much-needed reform.

It is a question for the legislature whether an additional clause setting apart one room as a common recreation or club-room in all houses let on the tenement system, would not

bring them under police regulations and the operation of the comprehensive bye-laws in the English Public Health Act which relate to "common lodging-houses."

As dwellings for the poor, the latter are few and far between, while the tenement houses of all cities are many and various.

The clauses relating to tenement houses in the Dublin Corporation Act of 1890 (Section 29-30) are very brief compared to those relating to Theatres, or other matters less important than the housing of the poor. Bye-Laws as to tenement houses have been made by the Corporation under the Act.

The Public Health Act and its various amendments being admirably comprehensive as regards hygienic laws, it is to be regretted that a legal technicality hinders its full application to the homes of the city poor.

Local authorities have subjective local interests, vested interests are strong, and it is well known that reforms, like truths, filtering through various channels, sometimes lose their original colour.

"Love of the welfare of the State," in modern municipalities is often a second consideration to the joy of internecine party strife, or personal interests. Hence the difficulties attending such questions as the cheaper acquisition of slum areas; not the smallest of the obstacles to extending improved housing.

The extended Poor Law regulations, improved supervision, and the enforced setting apart of a common sitting-room in each tenement house, accommodating three or more families, would lessen congestion and increase comfort. The question arises—improved housing in cities being insufficient and progressing very slowly, where would the very poor go, in the event of overcrowding clauses being strictly enforced?

This can be best answered by some acquaintance with the actual conditions under which some of these live. It would be found that even homelessness is preferable to some of these wretched abodes on both scientific and sanitary grounds, and that could have a State remedy.

With an amended poor law there may be found possibilities of giving truer aid to those who are the flotsam of humanity, than allowing their continuance in the freedom which for them under existing conditions means degradation and ignorance.

Outdoor relief given on condition of certain standards of order, and possibly the use of some training schools in industry, would lose the character of a dole, and be an incentive to further effort. It is necessary that relief should aid industry, instead of increasing pauperism.

The closing and detenancing of old houses unfit for habitation in this city is a work making steady progress under

the Public Health Act of 1878, and the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890 (53 and 54 Vict. c. 70). It is carried on under local authority.

Section 30 of the latter refers to "any dwelling-house which appears to be in a state so dangerous or injurious to health as to be unfit for human habitation."

Many tenement houses in poor districts of Dublin come under this description after the *laissez faire* regime of the average landlord and tenants of such dwellings have worked their way for some time.

The work of demolition goes on, though not so quickly as it might were there more block buildings ready, and saves many of the very poor from disease and death, but an overcrowding clause for the adjacent houses is urgently needed.

It has been found that the innate conservatism of some slum dwellers is a trait so deeply rooted as regards everything connected with improvement as to make them prefer the old insanitary rookeries, if permitted, to the modern comforts of block buildings.

A combination of law, diplomacy, and wit, can alone combat this mixture of obstinacy and ignorance, and is required by all officials dealing with the Irish poor.

The overcrowding of these tenement houses causes the general physical deterioration, apathy and indolence that result in demoralisation. The influence of surroundings on character, especially when, as in average cases, hereditarily weak and plastic, and under the grinding heel of poverty, is a factor in the making of the citizens of a State that their parliamentary representatives are bound to consider, so the rapid extension of all city housing schemes is the pressing necessity of modern days, and city housing grants the best State economy. These latter obviate the necessity of charging higher rents for rooms in new dwellings than is exacted in the old insanitary houses, though an increase in thrift and temperance, if such were obtainable, would enable many tenants to afford higher rents.

Extended education and the careful supervision which should go with improved housing, may effect this wider improvement.

The co-operation of the shareholding public of all cities with slum areas (and what city has not?) in buying waste plots of ground in crowded districts—an anomaly that frequently exists—or renovating old houses, to let on a system which prevents overcrowding, raises the standard of the tenants, and improves the surroundings, is a plan for civic rehousing on a sound basis. It is also a work of the truest philanthropy and a practical form of patriotism, increasing the comfort of the poor and renovating old districts of the city, otherwise doomed to decay.

The block system of rehousing is the one generally adopted in cities for obvious reasons, though from a scientific standpoint the separate cottage system, as at the workmen's cottages, Battersea, is superior, and the death-rate lower than in the London block dwellings.

There are several London companies engaged in this method of rehousing besides the Peabody Dwellings Co. which is a trust, and can afford to let at lower rents than the others who have to make a dividend; and in this city the Artisans' Dwellings Company, the Association for Housing the Very Poor, and the Guinness Buildings are on the block system. It has advantages of economy of space, compactness and facilities for supervision. Objections often urged to the system are the risk of infection by intercommunication between various families, the common staircase and the height of the buildings. These drawbacks are unavoidable where ground-rent is high, and for the very poor block buildings possess an advantage over the single dwellings, were such practicable, as supervision over the tenants can be maintained, which with the lax and ignorant is always necessary. Diplomatically carried on, such supervision is always valuable as a means of keeping up the standard of the tenants and buildings.

As regards the ideal of both artistic beauty and sanitarian utility, there can be no question about the superiority of the Meath buildings in the Coombe district of this city, which form a model village, intensely appreciated by the artisan classes, securing for each family comfort and privacy.

Yet, where a large tract of ground is not available, and the families to be accommodated small, and in receipt of less wages than the artisan class, the dwellings of the Association for Housing the Very Poor are both picturesque and suitable, though the susceptibilities of some of the very poor might prefer another title.

The buying up and renovation of old houses, a plan adopted with success in York, where the overcrowding is very great, as well as Leeds and London, is an economic and safe investment.

In the north of England, where the mining population is greatly overcrowded and domestic life at a low ebb, this plan of improving separate tenement houses, letting them on certain conditions to the poor, and collecting the weekly rents by lady visitors who look after the standard of household efficiency, is a field with great possibilities of development, and has been tried in this city by the Trinity College Tenement Company and the Alexandra Guild Tenement Company. It is a plan worthy of extension and improvement, providing both improved environment and the supervision necessary to secure its permanence.

Landlords mindful of the healthy condition of their property and comfort of the tenants, working with an objective ideal, are, if some approximation be made to this ideal, exercising a salutary influence on the surroundings by the mere force of example.

In congested districts the struggle to keep up the level of the property is stronger in proportion to its small size, and it is difficult to alter an old architectural design. It is chiefly by spacing out interiors, introducing something of harmony and beauty, with modern improvements, and then keeping up the standard of the tenants, that the benefits of this scheme are seen.

The observance of certain rules as a condition of tenancy eliminates the deserving from the non-deserving and thriftless class who dislike improvement.

The latter often return to their old insanitary dwellings, and the improved dwellings benefit.

The rapid development of the housing problem, and the public appreciation of the connection between bad housing and racial deterioration, intemperance and poverty, calls for the extension of all rehousing schemes.

Those chiefly affected by the overcrowding, as well as other adverse conditions in the homes of the city poor, are children. Under existing conditions in some districts it is remarkable that the juvenile death-rate is not higher.

It is possible to make economic improvements in crowded districts for the benefit of the juvenile inhabitants, which would at small outlay lessen overcrowding, supply some of the beauty lacking in the surroundings, and some of the opportunities for development not available in a one-room home.

It is unnecessary to enter into the question as to how far heredity influences character, and the exact position occupied by environment as a formative power, though certainly true that many qualities resulting from impressibility to environment are attributed to heredity.

Inherited tendencies and capacities can be either eradicated or cultivated by the surrounding influences of childhood.

Even the children of criminals, by being shielded from criminal influences, and receiving good ones, develop into good citizens.

It will be remembered that Darwin states, that the moral qualities to a great extent depend on what constitutes environment. The importance of good surroundings in early life cannot be over-estimated, and in order to be effectual as a moulding influence this improved environment should, as far as possible, be continuous.

Thus, in the case of a district where the overcrowding density is high, and consequently lazy demoralization

prevalent, it is a process resembling that of Sisyphus, to provide good and educative influences for these children for a part of each day and consign them during the remaining portion to surroundings which often undo good influences, or in which no opportunity of pursuing education is obtainable (which is the case in the tenement housing system). One environment reacts on the other, and development is difficult.

An examination of the elements of a city child's environment in such districts, reveals the elements needed to counteract adverse tendencies. [More of Plato's system, with facilities for "imitating brave, sober and honourable men, and the like" is especially needed in the sordid surroundings of mean streets. Some of the Greek eye for beauty and its moral significance, the love of harmony and order, ought to be inculcated in these districts for those who are heavily handicapped by their surroundings in early years.

The school garden system of America, which is said to be a nerve-sedative for hooligan tendencies, is not practicable in crowded districts, but there are other methods of lessening overcrowding and introducing counteracting influences to those of the surroundings.

Juvenile institutes or clubs for use after school hours would fulfil both purposes. One house among twenty set apart as an institute in these poor districts, would relieve the congestion in the small homes during the winter and be of great benefit to the juvenile population.

In these institutes useful tastes could be cultivated, good habits formed, and recreation provided. With intelligent supervision and persevering and tactful work in the realm of human consciousness, a transformation could be effected in the most crowded districts among the individuals preparatory to more permanent improvements. It is well known that gradual work like this, even on a small scale, from a centre within a district, results in more success than more expensive schemes working from centres without districts. It is a fact that hinges on a universal law.

A few remedies have been here indicated for the adverse conditions which make crowded districts in all cities—the conditions that hinder that harmony of design and systematic organization which are necessary to obtain a nearer approach to an ideal city.