

Housing as a Community Art

BY WOLFGANG GERSON

IN THE LAST LECTURE OF THIS SERIES, Professor Hiscocks gave us a wonderful survey of the needs for an Art Centre in Winnipeg, and I am sure that after his lecture all those present felt like going out and spreading the message so that this centre might soon become a reality. I felt more than usual that odd mixture of jealousy and pride which always overcomes me when someone talks about the problems of the free arts, which are somewhat different from those of our own art, housing and architecture. I feel jealous of the freedom the free artists have created for themselves, in the fact that the painter and the sculptor can work for themselves in their studios and present to the public afterwards. Whilst, on the other hand, we have to wrestle with clients. I pride myself that perhaps this is also the strength of our own art that by necessity it is so much more closely related to the daily life of the people, and for that reason does not get itself into the precarious kind of position of the free arts which Professor Hiscocks described to us in his lecture.

But that, too, is partly an illusion. Because although, of course, we must have building, must have shelter, as shelter is one of the primary necessities of life, and the shelter we are providing in this part of the world at the present time is probably of somewhat higher standard than that provided at other times; yet can it be called art? My answer is on the whole: No. In fact, I am sure many of you when reading the title of my lecture "Housing as a Community Art" found it a little confusing on two counts: 1) In the suggestion that housing is or should be an art, comparable at all to the arts of music, painting, or poetry; 2) In the suggestion that there could be such a thing as a "community art".

Art, it is said, is an act of personal intuition and genius, it is a gift and must spring from a personal act of creation. That is true but not quite. Housing is one of the utilitarian arts. It is a useful art, a commercial art, and a commercial artist, poor fellow, among artists he is considered to be an unclean person who is trying to make a living. It is the odd manner of thinking of our day which leads us to divide life into two very distinct categories: 1) Utility and 2) Art, but the two shall never meet. Our houses have become machines for living and our art must be the works of the pure spirit. My plea in this lecture is for a reconsideration of this dualistic spirit, for an art in which the utilitarian and the aesthetic aspects are at once complementary and inseparable. In that spirit, the art of housing must be one of the major arts of the future and the day.

To my answer whether there could be such a thing as a "community art" I would at the present just like to point to the Middle Ages, its cathedrals and its towns; to the early Renaissance, and, in particular, to the city of Venice. In modern times we find the equivalent in the smaller democracies of Europe: Holland, Sweden, Denmark and Switzerland, all of which have shown a remarkably high standard of housing and civic art since about the 1930's. In general, it can be said that high standards must mean a high general level of understanding, and a demand for high standards. There is, with other

words, no Michelangelo without the greatness of a Lorenzo de Medici, Julius II or Leo X, even though the former hated them all, and there is no Beethoven without the high cultural level of the Rasumovskies, Waldsteins, Ertmanns, Lichnovskis, Brunswicks, etc. That always has been and I suppose always will be the artist public relationship.

When we are talking about housing, we meant to start with the basic family unit, the house, the rowhouse unit, the duplex, the apartment suite; secondly, the residential land divided into lots; thirdly, the groups of housing units; fourthly, the residential neighbourhood in its total pattern of houses, streets, and all the facilities needed for the daily life of people: the elementary school, the shopping centre, the community centre.

Let me say a few words about the family housing unit first. It is difficult to talk about the house by itself because house and lot, its shape and size, its relationship to other houses in the group, their relationship to the street, the direction of the street, the type of the street pattern, the lay of the land, all these things are parts of one organism related to each other, influencing each other, and indivisible, and as such should in reality be planned together, which as you know they hardly ever are today. It is the art of the housing planner to know the function of the various elements, to know how people will use them and relate them to each other in the proper and most pleasing way. Even so, I like to analyze the house by itself first. Doing this, ordinarily the home planner is referred back to the study of family life, and he is told to make the physical plant fit the family pattern. That, of course, is very excellent in theory; in practice, though, very few basic variations of house pattern are possible because of restrictions of money, space and lot disposition.

Those providing houses have a tendency to think of the family as typical: father, mother and two children. But they do forget about family history, the various stages of family life which might be something like this: the married couple; the couple have small children — this stage is usually very aptly called the "crowded years"; children reach school age; reach social maturity; leave home. Finally, the circle is completed and starts over again. The couple are at home alone again, a somewhat different alone, though, than at the first stage. It is obvious then that flexibility must be one of the main features of a home plan, but it is also obvious that the flexibility cannot possibly take care of all these varying conditions. The neighbourhood, though, must take care of them all.

Apart from this "typical family pattern" so-called, there are of course a great many others that must be taken care of: father, and mother with grown-up unmarried children, the person living by him or herself alone, the young family with the mother-in-law, etc. The community must have enough flexibility of housing to provide for all of these conditions, not as makeshifts, but properly envisioned and planned; not as the attic space that some dear old lady rents out where you have to walk through her living room to get to your bath. Enough variation of space and accommodation within the neighbour-

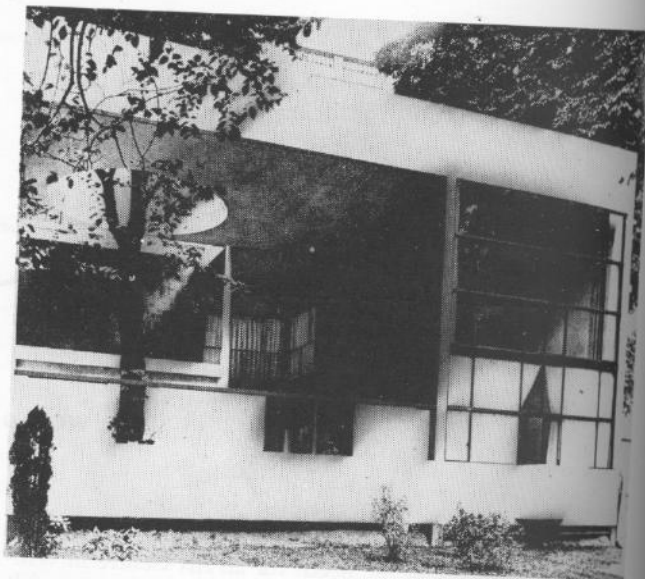
hood must be provided. This sort of flexibility of accommodation is at present neglected in the typical neighbourhood.

The next home planning factor I want to mention is *privacy*. Those of us starting off in Europe have been brought up in the understanding that privacy is one of the great assets (dearly bought ones) of civilization, and that there must be a very well balanced relationship, varying somewhat of course, with character and personality, between time spent alone and time spent in company, who and whatever that company. We believe privacy is a basis for all creative effort. This to us is one of the very primary considerations of house planning. Privacy between grown-ups and children; privacy for each child; privacy between man and wife; privacy for the family from the neighbour and the neighbourhood. The different attitude towards privacy is, I think, one of the first impressions of any European (not only my own) when he arrives on this continent. "There must be something wrong with him, you know; he wants to be alone". Many Europeans are the type that like to be alone. "He is not coming to our party; there is something queer". "Mrs Gerson, she never comes to our 11 o'clock coffee party. On the whole, she seems to be friendly enough. I wonder what she is doing all day alone".

And then there is the "picture window". I am never quite sure whether you are meant to look out of it or into it from the outside, whether you are supposed to be audience or "in the picture". I think that usually you are in the picture, because there is certainly not very much to see outside. I also am a great believer in open planning and an intimate relationship between home and garden, wherever possible. There is much too little use of outdoor areas in this climate. These should be planned so that maximum use can be made of them and with the proper provisions for some outdoor privacy, shelter, sun and shade where and when needed. And where large windows are used they should be protected from outside views, but should give as interesting a view as possible from the inside. This means much closer study of the relationship of home to garden, lot and street, and to the neighbour.

Ease of maintenance of the home is another important factor. On the whole, this is not badly taken care of in most modern homes. But there are certain fashions and traditions in middle class Western life which again belong to my early impressions of it (these, by the way, are eight years old now). The double dining area in larger homes is one. There is no reason why the dining space cannot be very closely related to the kitchen for service, and yet be private and proper enough for your occasional dining guest. But apparently the dining room must have a rug on the floor; that rug is going to be dirtied by the kids, and for that reason we must have a second dining nook in the kitchen. This in itself is not important but it is a symptom of the disease. It seems to be that in our standards (or some standards that I have noticed here) people are still forgetting that the modern home is run without servants, and usually without outside help. Our methods of living in the home, our standards of entertaining friends, of what we consider proper in terms of house furnishings and decorations, is still patterned too much on upper class British or European life of an era and social level in which servants were abundant and children were disciplined with patriarchal strictness, and tended with leisurely women's love and patience. Is that so today?

Architects, too, are sometimes to blame when they design a house as a work of art in the rather inorganic sense of that word. I do not believe in the rather static concept of this word, the place where you cannot move a chair without unbalancing, or cannot change the colour of a wall without ruining the concept. It is the slick, static kind of home that I suppose Evelyn Waugh was laughing at in "Decline and Fall", when he lets his architect say "The problem of architecture as I see it is the problem of all art — the elimination of the human element from the consideration of form. The perfect building must be the factory because that is built to house machines, not man. I do not think it is possible for domestic architecture to be beautiful, but I am doing my best". There again we come up against that



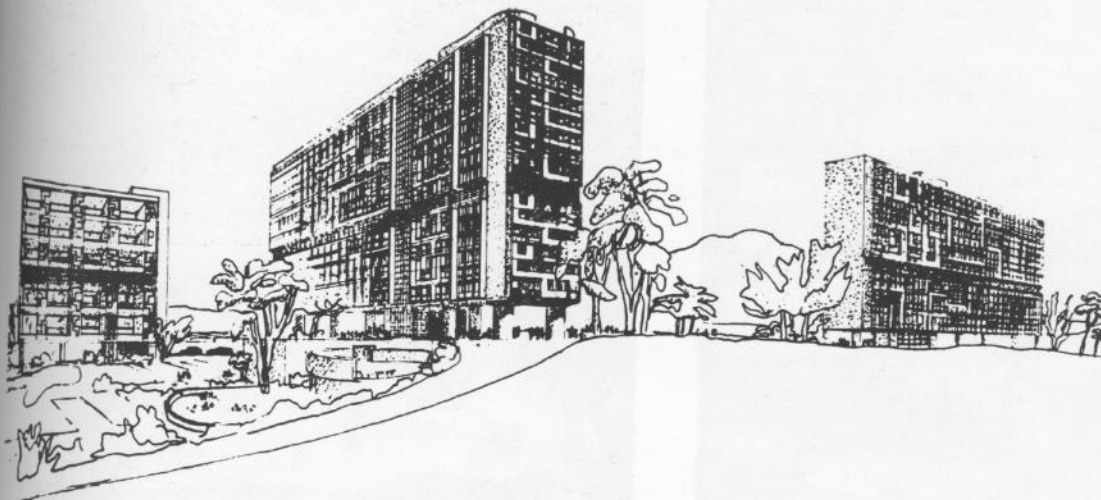
Pavillon d'Esprit Nouveau — Le Corbusier's early idea for a two storey house with courtyard garden which can be stacked to form apartment blocks.

duality of art and life fighting each other which I referred to earlier.

Out of these considerations of flexibility, privacy, and ease of maintenance we have developed a number of known house types. The one-storey house with or without basement is very much in fashion just now. It has no stairs and is easy to maintain. In its various "zoned" versions architects have attempted to solve some of the problems mentioned (flexibility, privacy, ease of maintenance). The so-called bye-nuclear house (what a horrible word that is) divides the one-storey house into two zones, making a definite separation between living quarters with kitchen and dining, and the separate bedroom wing. Other plans zone into separate suites for parents and children, with a kitchen utility core in the centre. This latter is a type of plan after my own heart (I believe in some distance between grown-ups and children). Recently, too, the split level home has become popular, and the two-storey house is still a useful and good unit. But the other day I read somewhere that in the city of Calgary in four years 8,000 houses were built and only three of them had two storeys. That seems an amazing record. Perhaps this was a misprint but it indicates the trend — or perhaps the fashion.

When in a Western Canadian city we are talking about family housing units, our mind nearly always slips into thought of the single house, in the suburban subdivision. On the whole, this is considered the ideal type of housing unit for family living, and for that reason there is almost nothing else provided for families with children. In our present method of zoning, apartment houses are almost totally provided along main traffic arteries, and in distinct downtown area. Lots on the whole are too small and there is no provision for children's playgrounds near. In other words they are definitely not meant for families with children. Reasons given for the one-family houses as the ideal unit are:

1. Maximum amount of privacy for the family (I would agree with this in theory, but although that is given as a major point, very little real use is made of it, as we have seen).
2. Close relationship to the individual garden and lot, with the possibility of private outdoor play areas for children. That, of course, is true if compared with the apartment, but the rowhouse and semi-detached can give the same amenities.
3. Natural noise insulation. If we are thinking of the manner in which most apartments today are planned and constructed, this, of course, is very true and a good argument.



This building concept stands at the other extreme

4. We often hear it said that we have so much land here anyhow is it not natural to spread out? This argument I do not agree with. It seems to me that in this climate concentration is better than dispersal.

While for a portion of the community the individual house on the individual lot most likely is the ideal housing unit, I do still think that within one and the same neighbourhood we must have a much more flexible choice of housing units. There are a lot of families for instance who do not like the burden of looking after a large garden, who would prefer to live in a well designed rowhouse unit, semi-detached house or even apartment if it were in a good and orderly neighbourhood away from traffic hazards. There is an ever increasing number of transient population. To our suburban pattern as a total, this more common use of other types of housing would be of great practical and aesthetic advantage.

As we are so used to the type of sprawling dot, dot, dot single house neighbourhood which we have growing up around all our Western cities that we think of them as the only possible method of modern housing, it may be worthwhile to consider the problem from another point of view.

Le Corbusier, architect, after a visit to the United States in 1936, published a report of his travels under the title "When the Cathedrals were White". In this report, he shows how the American city suffers from both the extremes of congestion and sprawl. He calls it "The Great Waste of our Time". To escape congestion in the centre of the city, to be able to see grass and trees and sunshine, people move out to the edge. Once they are there they bulldoze the trees, set the houses in tight straight monotonous rows with small front yards and back yards and create miles and miles of the same type of suburb. They spend two hours a day on railroads or in the car to get to and from work, and every one of us must work another two hours a day to keep going all this network of railroads, extended streets, sewers, waterlines, etc., and in addition of course we pay for it in our taxes. While we in Winnipeg do not have this condition, in the extreme of Los Angeles or New York or Chicago we do have it, and will have it worse if we do not take measures now to prevent it from spreading.

Le Corbusier's answer to the Anglo Saxon concept of the spread out residential neighbourhood (the horizontal Garden City) is what he calls the "vertical garden city". In his earlier projects he has shown how typical two-storey house units with small courtyard gardens can be stacked up in any number of storeys to form apartment blocks, or be set side by side to form rowhouses. His Unité d'Habitation at Marseilles which was finished some years ago is a practical example of a concentrated neighbourhood, with all facilities in one building. Sited on a large piece of park ground, this structure contains a neighbourhood of sixteen hundred people, with all the facili-

ties needed for the daily life of varying families. Provision is made for bachelor suites and suites taking families with up to four children. Included are, on the central floor, a shopping centre along a centre floor street, social rooms for assemblies and large parties, a small hotel, and a central maid service. If your mother-in-law comes to visit you, you can rent a room in the hotel and if you want a maid she does not live in the apartment but is right handy in the building. The roof has a nursery school with playground, a swimming pool and gymnasium and other sports facilities. As a building, it is an amazingly bold concept. The layout of the housing units and the manner in which they are fitted into the concrete frame, each separately to sound proof it from the other, plus the ingenious interlocking of two-storey apartments are a typical product of the cubist artist Le Corbusier. Whether as a social experiment this building is successful, whether this type of solution will solve the problems of civic sprawl that Le Corbusier hope it would, or whether it will replace it with some other evil, only time can tell. In any case, it has been one of the most stimulating efforts of our time, and is the most talked about building experiment of our day. But, of course, this building concept stands at the other extreme, and if used as a formula is liable to become as sterile and inhuman as all inflexible rules, which do not allow for natural social variations of peoples, families and their lives in groups.

The type of flexibility which I have in mind must be a flexibility within a definitely planned and controlled framework, and, in fact, is only possible within such a framework. Flexibility within a controlled framework sounds perhaps as a contradiction in terms. But it seems to me that periods and countries with a very closely knit society where everyone has an understanding of the necessity of certain social conventions, be that in housing or any other field, are also those that give the individual the most opportunity for self-development within this framework. I am thinking, for instance, of a country like Denmark and of its amazing standard of housing, housing in terms of the total picture, which includes a rational land policy, and good land planning.

In Western music, which of all the arts is the most formal, it has always been taken for granted that you have to compose within a framework of very restricting rules and means at your disposal — the thirteen notes, certain standard rhythms, certain rules of counterpoint and harmony, and of course your conventional forms of composition, and yet there is no scarcity of variation, and flexibility within, in fact the self-imposed limitation seems to be a maker of freedom.

Similarly within a framework of flexible controls, and with proper planning, it is possible to mix varying kinds of lower and higher housing units, perhaps even an occasional tower skyscraper, without hampering the workings of the neighbourhood, but on the contrary, helping the total pattern. As long as a proportional relationship is established between the height



A well designed apartment area

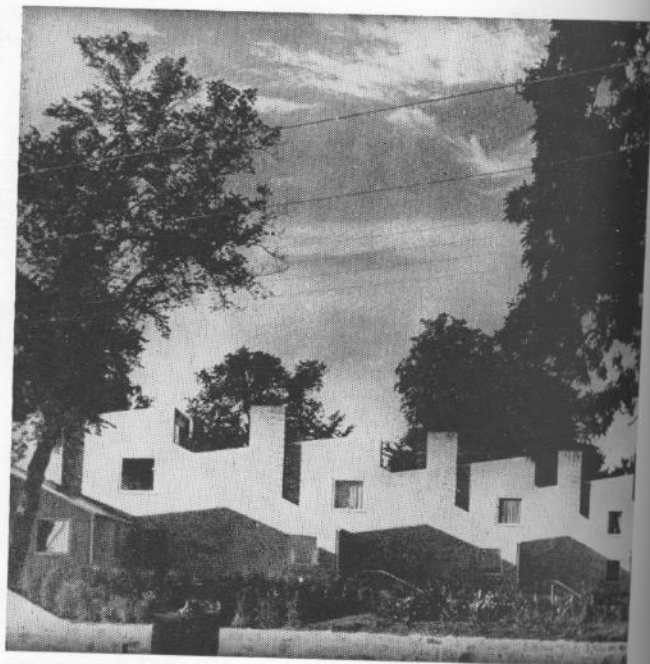
of the buildings, the number of families in them, on the one hand, and the spaces between them on the other, as long as social needs are carefully planned to allow for the right type of housing units in the right places, there is no reason why clusters or villages (if you want to call it that) of varying kinds of housing units cannot exist together, enhancing each other and clearly express the flexible, complex, and varying pattern of modern life.

In terms of architectural composition, such neighbourhoods would be just what we need in the prairies, creating the somewhat hilly skyline. The varying sizes of open spaces, getting larger where we get to groups of taller buildings, such as apartment blocks, and smaller and more intimate in the rowhouse and individual house areas. A real true humanization of the prairie city. If we then (as Professor Hiscocks already mentioned in his lecture) partially regain the rivers for public use making their banks into park strips (after all, they are the greatest features of natural interest that we have in this area), we could create one of the most livable and beautiful cities on this continent. (And never mind the climate). To the architect the challenge of man made beauty such as we find in Dutch cities or in Venice or even in Salt Lake City is greater than building in Vancouver, Rio or Naples.

I know you will say these are wonderful pipe dreams, but what about the land, how is it possible to get hold of it, what about the controls, do we want them, and how can we get them in a democratic society? As Bernoulli the Swiss planner says, "We have divided the earth crust into tiny little rectangles owned by separate tiny little hands". What do we do about it? The frustrations of planning. At the present, I can only say here that after the war in Britain the problem of land development control was felt to be such an urgent one by Conservatives and Socialists alike, that some definite solutions incorporated in a town and country planning act were arrived at and put into immediate effect. Whether these solutions are in a modified form applicable here, and what other solutions may be possible, is a question for legal and political specialists to answer. But it is obvious that at this point housing must become a community art; that the understanding for the necessity of this art must be spread through some medium or other right now. I should like to come back to this point later.

I was led to this last discussion because I asked you to consider the use of the single house on the individual lot from another point of view than the usual one which just says: It is the best for family living.

I mentioned cost of extended services, streets, etc., snow



A well designed row house area

removal and maintenance of roads which is so expensive in this climate. The cost of the house itself, the impermanency of its construction, its quick obsolescence, must be discussed. In relation to this I would like to give you a few figures with which you may be familiar, but which are not usually too well realized.

The average weekly wages as of March, 1954, in Winnipeg were \$53.65, making a yearly income of \$2,760.00. Under the somewhat improved conditions of the National Housing Act of 1954, loans can be given up to 90% of the most of a \$8,000.00 house and up to 70% for every \$1,000.00 above this amount. Interest is 5½%. The owner normally only qualifies for the loan if payments plus taxes do not exceed 23% of his income. With present cost of housing a \$10,000.00 house is the approximate minimum house that can be built under NHA building regulations. This including average municipal taxes means monthly payments of about \$74.72, which in turn means an income of \$3,898.20 to qualify for a NHA loan. Our average family earning was \$2,760.00. This, in fact, means that only a very small percentage of families, something like at the most 30% (I have not got the exact figures) can afford such a house.

These new houses will go through the filtering down process until in possibly twenty or twenty-five years they will reach the lower income levels. By this time the house needs more serious maintenance which the new owner cannot afford. He rents out rooms to be able to afford it. The house is going to go down and the area is going to be blighted (most houses in a neighbourhood are built in approximately the same period), and finally it will become a slum. This is a development which is not prevented by zoning. We can see it in many areas in our city, all the so-called areas in transition. One the condition is there it is an extremely difficult one to solve, but it must and can be prevented.

Our standards of construction must be more permanent, because once something is built it is never torn down, as the history of all temporary buildings shows (this one we are in, for instance). We cannot afford to do this in single house construction but we may more easily in multiple units.

Because of the breakdown of the filtering down theory in which old housing goes to those who cannot afford any other, the federal government has made provision for so-called federal-provincial projects, under Paragraph 36 of the Housing Act, for Low Cost Housing Developments with or without subsidized rent. In these projects the Dominion Government pays 75% of the cost and the Province the remaining 25% which can in turn be divided into 12½% to be paid by the municipality and 12½% by the provincial government.

Although this is an excellent method for a city to rehabilitate its blighted areas, no use has been made of it so far in Winnipeg.

We must think of all levels of housing to arrive at a permanent high standard. Areas of low standard always will be a burden on finances directly through lack of tax income and indirectly through breeding of social maladjustment, delinquency, and diseases. Co-operative methods of financing which have been so very successful in other countries may be very worthwhile investigating also. Very little has been done in that field.

Now I should like to discuss one more problem. This concerns the unimaginative and completely irrational T-square tyranny of lots. I have often felt that Sullivan's architectural slogan, Form Follows Function, should be changed into Form Follows T-Square.

I have sometimes wondered what American cities would have been like without the invention of the T-Square, and the set square. The long, narrow lot divided evenly along long, narrow straight street, city blocks, with even set-backs of houses set at even, narrow distances from each other always remind me of a man continuously playing Rimsky Korsakow's "Flight of the Bumble Bee". The poor man just cannot stop, and unfortunately never exhausts himself. In his recent book on "Planning Residential Subdivisions" Professor Kostka of our School gives some examples of how this condition can be alleviated, but not really remedied, by opening up spaces through set-back variations. It is one field in which very little study has been done. For a new approach to this problem, lot and street patterns must be considered together. This involves plastic thinking, seeing of relationships between house, lot and street, and a study of all possible variations. With the use of multiple housing, this problem too is simplified.

The believers in the small block gridpattern acclaim its simplicity of application, its orderliness, its convenient arranging and numbering of houses and the fact that it is easy to find one's way around as streets and avenues can be numbered. But it is clear to most planners today that it is a system derived from days without cars and that it does not function in our motor age. While there is no reason that a basic grid might not be kept at least in cities, in the plain, the scale of this basic grid must be increased considerably to allow for better flow of car traffic and isolation of slow moving residential traffic from the quicker, longer distance traffic. This in turn means improved conditions for the neighbourhood of homes, through which there will then be no through traffic (or only slow traffic at least) depending on the exact pattern chosen.

We are all familiar with the Radburn pattern of loops and cul-de-sac, which developed from the English garden suburb and Garden City pattern of Unwin and Parker, in an attempt to create a large building block within which there is safety from car traffic and privacy for the housing units.

In Wildwood Park we have an example of the use of such a pattern, and even though it is not complete and has a number of minor disadvantages which are due to its pioneering nature, it is on the whole a very successful step in the right direction. The new town of Kitimat, B.C. is totally laid out on this basic idea.

The car has given our cities a problem of a completely new order. It has established a new scale of movement which is in complete contrast to that other scale, our own human pedestrian. Of these two scales of movement we must today be very aware separately and in their relationship to each other. Driving by car from my home to the downtown shopping centre does not take me any longer than the walk to the local centre. Obviously cities and neighbourhoods must be designed to incorporate both these scales, and to take advantage of their interplay. Basically, all our towns are still outgrown and overgrown pedestrian cities. We are trying to get away from it but it takes a while. All true poets must see the wonderful possibilities that the interplay of these two scales can create; the low, intimate, human, deliberate and cozy scale of the small spaces in the town-village and the large quick monumental mobility of the large park speedway connecting these town-villages. I leave it to yourself to add this picture to the new prairie skyline I suggested before.

Although we started to discuss the house we have now come to problems of community planning and here I want to finish. Because in this art we are dealing directly with people and their needs, designing a neighbourhood is not like the painting of a picture, which once it is done is complete and though it may age a little will always stay the same. In housing the process of change is continuous, and in the art of planning we must remember this in order to create a better working, a more flexible and more pleasant physical background for our lives. In our type of society we must all be involved in this art.

To come back to the beginning statement of my lecture, there are no high standards without demands for high standards, there is no Venice without the demand to create it. But how are we going to create the demand, convinced as we are that it must be created? It seems to me that this can only be through continuous and early education in life. As part of their social studies the schools should introduce a course in the physical aspects of housing and community planning. I suggest that The University of Manitoba introduce a course in housing to be taught to teachers. I am not sure whether such a course exists at other universities but there is no reason why we cannot be pioneers.

If I may make one further recommendation as one not involved in civic politics — our town planning commission has done excellent work in spite of its limited powers. Equally good work is done by other departments of the city, but it seems to me that we must have a unified team of specialists including planner, engineer, housing specialist, architect and social scientist. These men working in the same department on an equal footing would come to conclusions, make their recommendations to city council and further have executive power. Once we have thus established public interest and demand and have a team of specialists executing this demand, housing will quite naturally become a community art.

The above was a public lecture given as one of a series at The University of Manitoba.