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Self-Help or Imposed Beneficence? The Central Problem of Project Renewal

Project Renewal is the massive program aimed at a comprehensive approach to eliminating slum neighborhoods which has been ratified by the Israeli government, the Jewish Agency and Jewish communities throughout the world as a partnership to this end.

The program which as yet is in the formative stages has many pitfalls to avoid. In the past, in Israel as in other countries, prior attempts have had many shortcomings because of planners insufficiently involving those most affected - namely, the people living in the neighborhoods being rehabilitated.

Preliminary discussions with Project Renewal officials within the Jewish Agency and various levels of government indicate at the least a great deal of awareness of the need to plan with, and not for, people.

The following article, prepared by a Fellow of the JIFS appeared in Ma'ariv, October 15, 1978. It is a vivid reminder of the complexities facing neighborhood renewal projects coupled with the potential positives and negatives inherent in any approach which admittedly is based upon good will and intentions and too few instances of success in the past.

Who Creates the Slums?

by

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In the beginning, there was the preconception. And this preconception was sacred and stood apart from reality, and apart even from the truth. And whenever it encountered actual facts, these were swept aside so that the preconceived notion could continue on its reckless path.

And this is the preconception: There are two camps in this country. One comes from countries that are modern, industrious, competitive, energetic and enlightened. The other comes from countries which are traditional, feudalistic, primitive and that have yet to see the light of progress. The first camp is learned, diligent and inventive. The second is boorish, indolent, passive and fatalistic. The first is strong and rich while the second is weak and poor. The first is white. The second is black.

This is the prevailing sociological opinion in this country - the outlook of Archie Bunker. And the formulation above shocks you - not because most of you do not think that way, but rather because I've chosen to cast aside the usual euphemisms ("weaker strata," "immigrants from Asia and Africa," etc.) and tell it like it is - the way it is spoken of, both on the Ashkenazic streets and on the non-Ashkenazic streets.

This preconception is even to be found in sociology textbooks about Israeli society. The so-called scientists in their ivory towers seek not only to fortify their own positions but are also concerned with furthering this notion and fostering its dissemination. Open the books and see it with your own eyes.

Herein lies the great tragedy. The various welfare agencies cause great damage to those who come to them in need of assistance. Although these agencies are sometimes supportive, more often than not they harm rather than help. And the suspicion arises that these agencies were created to further the interests of the strong and the rich rather than those of the poor, because the latter are certainly not aided by them.

Let us look at some concrete examples. Nowhere do we witness the damage done by welfare agencies to those needing their help more so than in the matter of housing. We are well aware of the mishaps and failures of building carried out under public auspices and have often cried out against slum clearance which creates new slums in place of the old ones - slums very often worse than the ones they were meant to replace.

However, the message has still not gotten across that, in essence, the system of public building by dictate from on high, through the aegis of centralized bureaucracies, is at the root of the problem. This problem

will not be solved by improving the methods of centralized control; but rather by stopping them altogether and turning them over to the local authorities - namely, the residents themselves.

"Alas, who will help these wretched, oppressed people? They themselves?" This is the typical reaction that I hear when the subject is discussed. Why do people respond this way? Their response is in keeping with the pre-conception described above - that these wretched, downtrodden people are also stupid, lazy, and lacking in all initiative and, without the aid of the "white man," will go to ruin. There is no greater error.

I have been doing research in poor neighborhoods in Israel for the past ten years during which I was constantly in the field and came to know, at first hand, the internal workings of the neighborhoods. In the course of my work, I found incontrovertible evidence which totally disproves the preconceptions discussed above.

In every case in which the residents of poor neighborhoods were left to their own devices, and no efforts to "assist" them were made, the neighborhoods were, in the course of time, gradually renovated until they were turned into model success stories. On the other hand, in every instance in which attempts were made to assist the residents and place them into housing projects, the problems worsened until reaching a stage beyond hope of repair.

I said "in every case" and I exaggerated. I should have said "in almost every case" for there are some exceptions. However, it is precisely these exceptions which teach us the hidden dangers of coercion from above on the lives of the residents.

For example, a Yemenite community was evacuated against its will from a neighborhood to which it was very attached. However, because this community happened to be particularly cohesive and strong, it escaped being pressured into tenements and received instead new one-story housing. This is one example of successful relocation. But this proves that, had this community not stood up for its rights and dignity, they would have been forced into tenements - this indeed was the original plan - and we all know what happens to tenements.

In the course of my work, I've examined dozens of localities, among them renovated areas that became slums as well as formerly rundown areas that were turned into show places. I will not exhaust the reader with descriptions of these areas, some of which are known to the community as nests of crime and neglect. The Katamon area in Jerusalem, for example, was synonymous at one time with social abandonment and neglect. Today it is a show place, peaceful, tranquil, and humane. However, precisely that area of Katamon, Katamon Tet, which was renovated as a result of a dictate from above, remains

a rundown slum. What was meant as a solution to the problem turned out to be nothing of the kind. Even here, it must be noted, the situation is now improving thanks to the initiative of the local residents themselves.

It is difficult to find a building in Katamon today - with the exception of Katamon Tet - which has not undergone rebuilding. It is difficult to believe, in passing through this area, that the homes one sees today were once tiny hovels. However, when one looks at pictures of the original structures, the changes are immediately evident. One of these original buildings contained four tiny apartments, all entered through a common hall. One of the ground floor apartments was then doubled in size, and a garden planted around it, and it now can be entered directly by a door from the courtyard. The other apartments remain unchanged. We can imagine what Katamon must have looked like in the days when all the apartments were like this. That is, tiny rooms whose total area was no more than forty square meters containing a small cooking area and a detached toilet without a bathtub.

Another house which can be seen today was originally basically like the one described above except that it was longer, had two entrances and had eight apartments. The extensive renovations undertaken are immediately obvious to any observer. Countless other examples of expansion, redecoration and renovation like this are to be found among this "wretched" populace.

Lest it be said that it is only those residents of the ground floors who are able to carry out such improvements, we can find many examples of expansion by those living in upper stories as well. When there is co-operation among the tenants of a building, as there is in many cases, originally miniscule dwellings can be turned into grand homes. Those who question the veracity of what I've written are advised to visit the house standing opposite Denmark School in Jerusalem. However, they had better hurry, because very soon the trees will obscure the decorated verandas, and they will not believe that these "welfare cases" accomplished what they did without the assistance of any governmental body. It was done with their own hands and through the cooperative efforts of the tenants.

The examples mentioned above, which could be multiplied many times over were it not for the limitations of space, should be compared to the block tenements of Katamon Tet. On Shimon Bar Yochai Street, one sees all too well the government's answer to the problem of housing - a grossly ugly, ill-kept tenement which creates a condition much worse than the one it was meant to alleviate. This is the creation of our welfare state.

There is a valley in the Kiryat Yovel area, in the bottom of which were built asbestos houses, usually referred to as the "asbestonim." In the course of time, small, primitive houses were built around the asbestonim. The neighborhood continued to develop until it was decided to solve the problem of the asbestonim.

It is true that many of the asbestonim are abandoned, and many are run-down and in a terrible state of disrepair. However, there is also the house of the Ben Dayan family, a neat, well-kept home in excellent condition. The Ben Dayans are satisfied with their housing, and would like to add on to it "if only they will let us." They have lived there for seventeen years and are content. And like them, there are others who live in the asbestonim albeit the fear of evacuation notices hovering over them.

Near the asbestonim stands a fine looking two story home. Who built this lovely building for the "primitives"? The answer is "the primitives built it for themselves!" What is today a fine home not too long resembled archeological ruins. In this very area, one can find house after house, expanded, restored, redecorated, and renovated - all as a result of the labors and initiative of the residents themselves.

There are, of course less elaborate examples than those described above, but they are nonetheless dear to their owners and they did not cost the government a cent in taxes. As opposed to these shining examples of self improvement, we see the horrible block tenements of Stern Street, the monsters of Kiryat Yovel. The forced evacuees of lovely little abodes have been herded into tenements like those on Stern and this neighborhood is being transformed into a symbol of wretched, filthy, grotesque low grade housing.

These are the solutions which the agencies concerned with housing recommend to us.