

Sites for Housing Schemes

Considerations which Should Influence Selection



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HOUSING SCHEMES AND THEIR RELATION TO THE PEAK LOADING.

Housing is one of the major problems which will have to be faced and solved in the immediate post-war years.

Plans for doing so are already under consideration, and the Housing Commission is inviting and receiving the active collaboration of such bodies as the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board, the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, and the State Electricity Commission.

That is as it should be, for that co-operation from all the authorities intimately associated necessarily with a Housing Scheme is an essential to success is obvious from the results which have attended the badly co-ordinated efforts in several countries overseas.

Far too often in Britain, for instance, County, Urban and Municipal Councils selected sites which, while admirable in themselves, were far removed from all the normal amenities of civilised life such as water, sewerage, electricity, gas, transport.

Many of such schemes were in consequence big financial drains on the councils con-

cerned, while of course the houses were loaded with charges which defeated the objects Parliament had in view in passing the various Housing Acts.

While abroad in 1938, the Chairman of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board (Mr. H. H. Bell) investigated several housing schemes from the point of view of transport, and his remarks on the subject are as valuable to-day as when they were written six years ago, and should be ever present in the minds of the members of the Housing Commission if the mistakes made in Britain are not to be repeated in Melbourne.

Mr. Bell wrote:—

“Since 1919 the British Parliament has passed a series of Acts dealing with housing, the various objectives being to provide for general housing needs, for slum clearance, for the demolition of unfit houses, for the provision of finance so as to encourage private enterprise to build houses, and for town planning. The administration of the Housing Acts brings with it many duties to all County, Urban, and Municipal Councils. These include the laying out of the housing estates, the planning and construction of the houses,

the control of direct labour schemes, the management and control of the houses, their maintenance, the administration of the conditions of tenancy, and the collection of rents. Similar Acts were passed in relation to Scotland. The progress made in attaining the objectives can, however, be quite well illustrated if I confine my quotation of figures to the returns furnished by the Ministry of Health for England and Wales. In 1919 the number of houses was a little under 8,000,000. Between that date and the 31st March last 3,666,014 new houses were provided, 1,010,806 by Local Authorities and 2,655,208 by private enterprise.

It is one thing to construct and plan housing schemes, and thereby bring a greater measure of sweetness and light into the lives of those hitherto compelled to live in congested areas; it is quite another to plan them so that their situation does not react unfavorably on the economic situation of those whom the schemes are intended to benefit. In this connection it appears to me that in too many cases the vital factor of transport occurred only as an afterthought; that enthusiastic town planners shied away from the question of transport so that they could give untram-

melled play to their notions of small self-contained satellite towns on the borders of large cities; they had no adequate realisation of the way in which places for houses and places for industry must of necessity be related together. The result of this lack of thought was that an altogether unfair burden was placed upon the local transport system, called in at the last moment to provide transport for housing schemes varying from anything from 6 to 8 and 9 miles from the centre of the parent city and from the industrial localities.

I saw some of the housing schemes at Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Generally speaking, these housing schemes had in reality become small, self-contained towns with complete social amenities—shopping centres, cinemas, recreation grounds—and consequently, except on special occasions, and outside the necessity on the part of the workers to travel to and from their work, there was practically no necessity to leave the estates. The result has been to saddle the transport system with heavy morning and evening peaks, but with next to no loading during the off-peak period and in the late evening. Nothing can better illustrate this point than the experience of Birmingham.

ham. Since 1919 that city has provided no fewer than 45,000 houses under the various Acts, and the housing estates are situated $6\frac{1}{2}$ and 7 miles from the centre of the city. Transport had to be provided, and the General Manager of the Corporation Transport Department (Mr. A. C. Baker), after a short experience, found himself in the unenviable position of having 80 per cent. of his rolling stock standing idle throughout the day. One instance is typical of all the housing estates services—73 vehicles required up to 9 a.m., after that hour until the evening peak, 13 buses. Between 7 and 9 a.m., 112 buses on the Outer Circle service are taxed to their utmost capacity; after that until 4.30 but 26 buses are required.

It is, therefore, easy to understand how this matter of peak loading in reference to these housing estates is having an adverse effect on the finances of the undertakings concerned and also on traffic congestion in the particular cities at those times. To many people in Birmingham the increase in the workman's fare to 7d. was an intolerable burden, and it has been reduced to 5d. At that figure it is quite impossible to make any of the routes serving the housing estates pay;

in fact, Mr. Baker, speaking at the annual conference of the Municipal Tramways and Transport Association of Great Britain last year, confessed that he thought himself lucky if he could manage to get operating expenses from such routes. To meet this position two remedies have been suggested—(1) the imposition of a flat fare, or (2) a subsidy from the rates. Neither, in the discussions which have taken place during the last two years at transport conferences, appears to be favoured. Mr. R. Stuart Pilcher, the General Manager of the Manchester Corporation Transport Department, pointed out that in the United States there are 165 tramway undertakings and 245 bus undertakings which charge a flat fare of 10 cents, and that such a fare of 5d. in Britain would be quite prohibitive. On the other hand, Mr. Frank Pick, the Vice-Chairman of the London Passenger Transport Board, has said that "the flat fare is indeed only possible in the modern expanding town if the municipality accepts responsibility for the transport system. . . . Yet it is not by any means clear that to charge transport on the rates in part and make travel cheap is not the most equitable and satisfactory way of distributing the cost of a local passenger transport service."

We in Melbourne have travelled beyond those expedients, for the Tramways Act enables municipalities, or conveniently situated groups, to obtain extension of existing tram routes by guaranteeing the losses on such extensions for a period of five years. The remarkable growth of Camberwell and Caulfield under this system within the last 20 years demonstrate the equitable nature of the arrangement. Extensions which were beyond the capacity of either the Prahran and Malvern Tramways Trust or the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board, or which could only have been constructed at the expense of the passengers in other municipalities, were made possible by the financial guarantees given. In the end Caulfield and Camberwell profited exceedingly, the growth in each case being such that the additional rates received amply recouped those councils for any sums paid either to the Trust or to the Board.

With but few exceptions, all these housing estates in Britain have been given Diesel bus transport, as it is this vehicle alone which at present can keep the losses on such unprofitable services within reasonable proportions. I have dealt at some length with this question

of housing and peak loading because there is an obvious lesson for us here in Melbourne. In the examples I have cited. It is that municipalities should take every care before authorising housing schemes in the outer suburbs to consult first those charged with the duty of providing transport. It is next to useless to embark on a housing campaign if the housing scheme decided upon is remote from existing transport routes. In considering suitable housing sites the first, and not the last, consideration should be their suitability from the point of view of transport. Economical transport can now be guaranteed with the Diesel bus, and I am free to confess that my recommendation to my Board to place an experimental service of such buses in operation in Bourke Street and to Nicholson Street and Northcote was in part inspired by the knowledge that such buses would, with their reasonable fares, assist materially the workers to live outside the congested inner suburban areas in surroundings more healthy and congenial to themselves and their families.