

Douglas Commission Hearings

Ian Shelley; CLCS/Art 120, Fall 2020

In preparation for their report, the commission travelled to 18 cities across the country to hear testimony from private citizens, experts, and officials on the state of American cities. I have downloaded to the drive a full pdf of volume 2 of the hearings (visits to Los Angeles and San Francisco). The others can be found scanned by hathitrust in the following link:

<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001107657>

Fully reading these hearings would be an even more daunting task than reading the commission's full report; however, since we are mostly interested in Jeh Johnson's involvement with the project, narrowing our search to those questions posed by Johnson could perhaps provide us with a greater sense of his contribution. While reading the testimony, we should look at what kind of questions Johnson asks, how he interacts with his fellow commission members, and how his questions relate to the content of the commission's final report. I believe this document could help illuminate his role in bringing a socially conscious perspective to the commission. It is important to note that, like the Douglas commission's final report, not all of the content from these hearings is related to social matters--in fact most of it gets into the weeds of zoning, neighborhood planning, cost analysis, etc. I highlight these socially oriented passages because I believe they are what made some parts of the report actually radical. Jeh Johnson's practices at Vassar and his later cofounding of the National Organization of Minority Architects lead me to believe that he may have had a big role in constructing the commission's social conscience.

Below are a few passages I pulled from the hearings, all from Volume 2:

On page 178 of Volume 2, Johnson asks Victor Palmieri (President of the Janss Corporation, a community developer in Southern California) about the integration of black families into his new development. Johnson questions the developer on both explicit and implicit segregation practices (i.e. explicitly discriminatory policy and underlying practices which discourage african-american buyers).

On page 216 Johnson has a very interesting conversation on beauty in city planning. This is a passage which highlights Johnson as an architect. He discusses the subjectivity of beauty--who defines the beauty of a green space in a neighborhood. He has a wonderful line at the end of his questions: "That isn't even clear-cut because in places in Pennsylvania the belching of the smokestack is beautiful to the people who need the work, and for whom it is a sign of prosperity" (218).

Of course, most of Johnson's questions are focused on the subjects of land development, building cost, and construction standards. Sifting through these discussions to get a better understanding of his views would be a lengthy, but certainly worthwhile task.