

Building the American city : report of the National Commission on Urban Problems to the Congress and to the President of the United States (Jeh V. Johnson contributing author)

Online version of report (also in library): https://archive.org/details/buildingamerican00unit_0/page/n15/mode/2up

Ian Shelley; CLCS/Art 120, Fall 2020

Any study of Jeh Johnson's involvement in the Douglas Commission should start with the Commission's final report, titled "Building the American City." At around 500 pages, a comprehensive reading of the report would require a lot of time and effort; unfortunately, as far as I can tell, no summary or compact analysis of the text currently exists in scholarship. However, the following observations should provide a jumping point for further investigation.

The report's main ideas are summarized in the introduction (pages 1-31). Some of the points discussed by the summary are: problems with unemployment and its disproportionate effect on people of color in inner city neighborhoods; discriminatory credit practices; redlining and segregation (the white noose of suburbs); the migration to cities and suburbanization. The authors perceived a shift towards greater racial stratification which, if confronted with repressive reaction, could prove to threaten the country. One of the key recommendations of this report was to consolidate urban planning by increasing the power of larger city governments; this could prevent bureaucratic overlap and create better, broader planning practices: "It takes a financially strong and structurally sound local government to deal fairly and firmly with these social problems [of poverty, segregation, civil rights, and civil unrest]" (9). Additionally, the commission recommended that states, as entities close enough to citizens yet adequately removed from local interests, should be given broader authority in planning urban development.

Throughout this summary, the Commission demonstrates a keen social conscience that belies all its discussion on zoning issues and land taxation. The very first section is provocatively titled “*The anger of the slum is that of a people disinherited from our society*” and discusses the contemporary state of “slums” and the urban poor in America. The Commission recognized that segregation and generational poverty were/are rooted in real policy rather than nebulous socioeconomic conditions. Furthermore, the Commission made an effort to visit impoverished neighborhoods and hear from disaffected inner-city inhabitants (see commission hearings) to better understand “Urban Problems.” The Douglas Commission was formed at roughly the same time as the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (also called the Kerner Commission) which was organized following nation-wide riots and civil unrest; the latter’s report was published to widespread acclaim before “Building an American City” was released. Understanding the political context surrounding the Douglas Commission is essential to understanding many of its recommendations.

The introduction is directly followed by comments from commission member David L. Baker which merit discussion (page 32). This page-long dissenting opinion illustrates the conservative political currents present within this progressive project, providing a striking pendant to the report’s findings. Baker takes issue with some finer points of the Commission’s recommendations and also takes a different stance on certain social issues; for example, Baker writes, “I am also concerned that the report characterizes local government as using zoning as an instrument for effecting or maintaining segregation. No doubt there are exceptions; however, segregation is primarily a product of socioeconomic conditions long rooted in the fabric of our society and it is unfair to suggest anything to the contrary.” While Baker’s views do not represent the majority, it is important to recognize the prevalence of his opinions in the 1960’s.

In this report, dissenting opinions, like those of David Baker, are labelled “Supplementary Views”. These short additions allowed commission members to propose ideas or recommendations that had not been approved by the group as a whole. These passages furthermore give us a better sense of individual contributions to the larger text.

Jeh V. Johnson signed his name to two such supplementary views: one on the taxation of land values (395-398) and the other on community advisory boards (353-354). Both opinions were also co-authored by three other members: Paul H. Douglas (the chairman), Coleman Woodbury, and Ezra Ehrenkrantz. Commission member Lewis Davis signed the views on community advisory boards as well. It would be interesting to investigate this group of commission members further, as it could give us a better sense of the environment in which Johnson was working (perhaps there existed a progressive coalition here?).

The following are some major points taken from “Supplementary Views on the Taxation of Land Values”:

- The increasing value of undeveloped land in America, caused by disproportionate taxation rates on land in comparison to rates on improvements and building, has created a class of wealthy landowners profiting off of speculation.
- The Commission members advocate taxation on this “unearned land” (land which had accrued value due to explosive population growth and urban development).
- The members seem to say that revenue from land taxation could be used for social welfare programs, or something of that nature:

- The revenue from the recommended approaches, if applied earlier, could have been used to “head off many of the troubles and class cleavages which we have suffered in our cities” (397).
- “We ask only that the men and women who make up society should be allowed to share in the increases in value which their presence and productivity have created” (398).

The parts of the report I read oscillate between recommending decentralization and centralization of government functions--there was no one clear message, for there were not clear solutions to America's urban problems. One of the main recommendations of the report is that the massive quiltwork of overlapping local governments had created a confused and stratified metropolitan structure; to fix this problem, the Commission recommended that metropolitan governments consolidate their functions. On the other hand, centralizing government functions can leave citizens feeling disconnected and disaffected. The chapter titled “Urban Services: Steps Toward Neighborhood Regeneration” (346) recommends that municipalities use a “little city hall” approach to metropolitan planning, in which some local government functions are decentralized to better connect with their communities. This method attempts to give inner city residents a louder voice in local politics (or perhaps just the illusion of a louder voice, because both work just as well to quell civil disorder).

I mention this chapter on neighborhood regeneration because it is followed by another of Jeh Johnson's supplemental views. The passage titled “supplemental views on community advisory boards” actually cites Jeh Johnson as its primary author (at least he is the first author listed). The authors explain the advantages of creating community/neighborhood advisory boards in inner cities, expanding on the little city hall approach. Johnson and his colleagues believed

that these boards would become citizen groups that could operate through the aforementioned city halls, giving inner city residents a “stronger sense of participation in urban government” (354). These boards would be “given limited power over city functions and agencies, and direct access to the power centers at city hall or at the top of the metropolitan government pyramid” (354).

The following are some questions that I have been asking myself, and are perhaps some ideas that merit further interrogation.

It is the question of access that seems most pressing here: do inner city residents *feel* connected to the governments which regulate their lives. Feel is a key word here, for too many policies have been aimed at giving the illusion of access to power structures--they permit residents to move a troublesome stop sign or petition to move a construction site. True access remains elusive. However, the illusion of access is an easy bureaucratic fix to systemic issues--people don't riot if they think they have power to make meaningful change within existing systems. So the real question is: *are* inner city residents connected to the governments which regulate their lives. The all too common answer to this question is no--a simple, flat “no”. I think this commission was asking LBJ's administration to do something about this lack of access; and LBJ left the pages of this report lying on his doorstep, unread and unheeded. However, this is all speculative, as I am not sure exactly which parts of the report the president opposed--this would also be an interesting question to interrogate further.