

Olmstead Jr. vs. Marsh

Gateway Lecture 9/15/10

The historical setting

- Early 20th century
- Rapid industrial growth, immigration
- Power concentrated with a few corporations
- Poor living and working conditions in cities
(1890: Jacob Ris, How the Other Half Lives)
- Worker unrest, organizing, woman's suffrage movement
- A fear of Socialism and Communism
(e.g. Bolshevik Revolution in 1917)

Role of Planning

- Progressive Reforms
- Wage laws, factory inspections, fines for negligence
- City power to councils from mayors (for “efficiency”)
- Progressive Planning against the “Rising Tide of Socialism”

City Planning

- City Beautiful Movement
- City Efficient Movement
- Just City Movement

Why did these progressive reforms emerge?

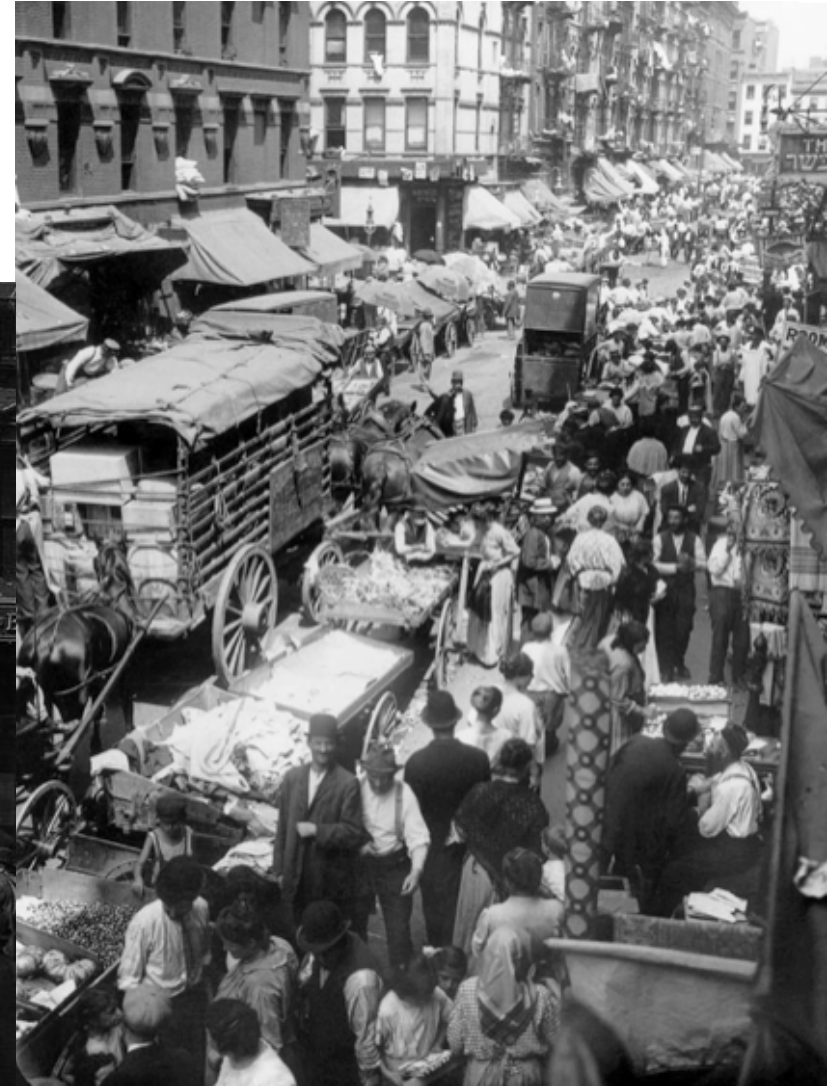
What is to be done?

- Problem: **Congestion** in Cities
- Second National Conference on City Planning and the Problems of Congestion, New York, 1909
- Two views: **Olmstead Jr.** and **Benjamin Marsh**
- These views illustrate a central tension in the field of planning

Congestion



Lower East Side, NYC, circa
1910



Hester St., NYC
circa 1900

Olmstead Jr.

- A city is the complex interaction of economic forces, social impulses, physical elements
- Left to itself, “evils” such as congestion will become intolerable and cause people to move out. Thus it will reach a natural equilibrium on its own. (old attitude)
- Planning must intervene to prevent this course of events (new attitude)

3 Elements of City Planning

- Means of **circulation** (the most important physical factor)
- **Public** spaces
 - Central institutions (city hall, municipal offices..)
 - Decentralized institutions (schools, playgrounds..)
 - Special institutions (hospitals etc.)
- **Private** spaces

What is to be done?

- Treat means of circulation as one system
- Placement and design of public spaces:
 - Central institutions placed centrally
 - Coordinated placement of decentralized inst.
 - Special inst. placed considering future “tendencies”
- For private spaces:
 - Street plan (fixes size and shape of buildings)
 - Taxation (influence landholder behavior)
 - Zoning, policing and building codes (structure, fire, health)

And...

Keep it beautiful

Marsh

- Congestion arises from the protected privilege of owners and the exploitation of workers
- It is fundamentally an economic problem with economic causes
- It is also an administrative problem with administrative causes

Economic Elements of Congestion

- **High cost** of land: builder anticipates congestion and charges a high rate, the owner crowds, tax assessor charges a higher rate, owner crowds more
- **Wages** are **low** in relation to cost of housing
- **Concentration** of factories and offices
- **Speculation** on land, weak **taxation** of landowners, but strict taxation of workers
- **Location** of immigrant families who want to live together and cannot afford “American standards”

Administrative Elements

- Weak building standards
- Lack of supervision of living standards
- Inadequate taxation

What is to be done?

- Recognize the **rights** of city residents “to leisure, to health, to care in sickness, to work under normal conditions, and to live under conditions which will not impair his health or his efficiency” as much as protecting private property
- Ensure adequate and affordable housing and transportation for the working population

How?

- Require employers to raise wages (minimum wage)
- Set building and housing standards
- Limit the areas in which factories can locate (to ensure leisure and home life)
- Affordable public transportation (to influence population distribution)
- Enable cities to acquire land to achieve these purposes (require selling, eminent domain)

Similarities

Differences

- Scale / Devolution of Power
- Specific Interventions
- Meaning of Congestion
- Regulation
- Taxation
- Rights
- Control over the “Private”
- What is “Private” and “Public”?
- What is the purpose of city land?
(increase land value, or something else)

Why was one successful and the other not?

Public Interest

- For Marsh: The “Working Class” interest is what planning should serve.
- For Olmstead Jr. : There is a broader public interest.
- So, how does the planner know?

Rights to the City

Is there such a thing as rights to the city
separate from constitutional rights?

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