

CITIZENS' HOUSING AND PLANNING COUNCIL OF NEW YORK, INC.
20 West 40th Street - Longacre 3-5990

Committee on Planning Problems

MATERIAL FOR CONSIDERATION IN REGARD TO POLICY STATEMENT ON DENSITIES
IN HOUSING PROJECTS

Quotation from a letter to Mr. Robbins, from Jose Luis Sert, dated August 30, 1950

"...In our recent work for South America we have come to a general formula of using both low and high buildings and trying to eliminate wherever possible what we have called "intermediate heights". We consider low buildings those up to three floors, or maximum four floors, which do not need elevators. In some climates the height should not be more than three floors. It may be possible in New York to make four floors the limit for walkups. We consider as intermediate heights those ranging from five to eleven floors, let's say, where a good system of vertical transportation is not economical.

"The composition in plan using these high and low buildings makes a more attractive and better neighborhood. The high buildings look over the low ones and the higher they are, the less land they will occupy and the bigger the spacing between them can be. If these high buildings are properly located and oriented, they should not disturb the low buildings, and the organization of the low blocks with the high ones can result in interesting space forms. The presence of the high buildings in the same neighborhood will increase the density which I think is desirable in a great many cases, especially in neighborhoods located nearer the center of the city where the cost of land is higher. The lower buildings benefit from this, as space is liberated for playfields, etc.

"We know only too many examples around us of the disagreeable space forms resulting from the use of intermediate heights such as six to nine story blocks for the whole housing project, or else those housing projects that have adopted heights that only differ in two or three stories, such as six to nine or nine to twelve. The difference in this case is not big enough to create a real variety, and the space forms between blocks continue to be of the canyon type.

"I think, in agreement with the majority of members of our committee, Fresh Meadows is the best example we can refer to around New York. The grouping, of course, can be improved and each site will suggest a different arrangement. But in general, we have found out through our work that this variety obtained by really high buildings contrasted with walkup row housing offers the greatest possibilities. Some general standards could possibly be outlined by a more careful study of this problem as it refers to the particular conditions of the New York Metropolitan area..."

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Quotation from the minutes of the Committee on Planned Development of 12/11/51

"Discussion of the High Densities in Public Housing Projects; Mrs. Stark read a letter to Mr. Cruise stating CHPC's objections to the high densities in Vladeck Houses Extension. Mr. Ratensky, who had objected to CHPC's position, attended this meeting to explain the Authority's point of view. He explained that in computing density for Vladeck Houses Extension, street areas had been excluded because they were not being closed and had they been considered, the computed density would actually be lower. Because street areas were excluded and because of the numerous park areas nearby, the Housing Authority feels the density is not as

bad as it appears to be. Mr. Ratensky felt that CHPC's position was tantamount to saying there will be no new public housing in high land-cost areas. He pointed out that there is no standard density figure and density must be related to land cost. PHA has ruled that the cost of land and development cannot exceed 20% of the entire project cost. In New York City, this figure was raised to 25% and other administrative rulings permit averaging vacant land sites with slum clearance areas. Even so, it is still very difficult to build federal projects particularly in Manhattan because of the high land cost.

"Concerning the proposed public project in the Manhattantown area, Mr. Ratensky said that the proposed density is rather low, which is commendable there, even though many of the original site occupants cannot be rehoused in the new project. The public project is to have 1800 units compared with 3400 low-income families now in the area. Mr. Moscovitz suggested mixing high and low buildings in the private projects. Mr. Sternau had suggested the same high density in the public project as in the private development so that more of the present site occupants could be rehoused and because he feels that low-income families need the advantage of remaining in this accessible area even more than higher income families.

"Mr. Sert stated that high density was not the most serious problem. High density in itself is not bad if open spaces are carefully planned. In fact, he feels that planned high density is the only solution in cities. Density in itself is not objectionable and the overextension of New York City will be more disastrous. Two prime factors which are closely related are the relation of the population and city services and sufficient open space to house people comfortably. A balance must be reached between the two. If the result is good, it is good regardless of the resultant density figure. Consequently, each project site presents its own problem."

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