

AICP STUDY GUIDE

Podcast

Episode 18: Vicks Won't Fix This

And welcome to the 18th Episode of the VERY UNofficial AICP Study Guide Podcast. I'm Jonathan Miller and thank you so much for joining.

Well, we're officially back at it with the material. The past two weeks have been fun of course; covering the new process and getting some tips on the essay portions. While you're working on those though, it doesn't hurt to break every now and again to think ahead to the exam. So, that said, we are picking up where we last left off on our timeline.

Not too long ago, we covered the development of the tenements in New York. If you need a more in-depth refresher, you can always go back to Episodes 9 and 12. In episode 9, we covered the development of the first tenements in New York, how the migration of rich folk opened up the conversion of rowhouses to multi-unit apartments which inevitably packed the poorer echelons of society in like sardines, and of course, we covered the ensuing Council of Hygiene which made a report on the filthy conditions.

And that led us to our topic in Episode 12, where we covered the Tenement House Act of 1867 and 1879. Those tried to shore up some of the regulatory loopholes which created these disgusting monstrosities. Those failed of course, which led to Jacob Riis and his book, "How the Other Half Lived" in 1890. Now this book drummed up a lot of public support for improving the living conditions and eventually - in 1901 - the New York State Tenement House Act of 1901 was passed. And that is where we begin.

(2:00)

So, details on the New York State Tenement House Act of 1901 are actually pretty difficult to find. Most of what you'll find is related to, "law that banned construction of tenements." Well yeah, no shit, but digging a little deeper we find that the New York State Tenement House Act of 1901 did this by creating new laws or regulations surrounding what was allowed to be built and - more importantly - what wasn't.

What wasn't includes new tenements on 25-foot wide lots (which was the standard) and that, combined with another regulation - the requirement to include a courtyard with (and this is important) with access for garbage removal - created the scenario where tenements could only really be constructed on multiple lots.

It also included basic improvements to living conditions by requiring minimum size requirements, lighting, better ventilation, and indoor bathrooms. Fancy.

(3:07)

What really made the New York State Tenement House Act of 1901 effective though was the commitment to enforcement. In 1900, New York created the New York State Tenement House Commission and they created a Tenement House Department for New York City, and they were an integral part of enforcing the regulations on these new law tenements and updating the old law tenements. If you remember from Episode 12, tenements built before the Tenement Housing Act of 1901 were called old law tenements, while those built afterwards were called new law tenements.

Fun fact, the 1901 Act came at a time when the beaux-arts style was booming. So, you'll be able to see the old and new law tenements together, and distinguish the two by the amount of ornamentation.

The New York Tenement Housing Act of 1901 though - while it did a lot in terms of improving the living conditions from the physical housing aspect - didn't do as much in terms of population congestion. That was another issue.

(4:21)

It actually came about in 1907 when two women, Florence Kelley and Mary Simkhovitch (I'm probably butchering that but whatever). Anyways, they founded the New York Committee on Congestion and Population and who did they hire to be the first executive Secretary? A certain Mr. Benjamin Marsh. And if that name isn't familiar, it should be, and eventually it will be. Now this committee's mission was to try and find some solutions to overcrowding in the poor parts of the city. Why you ask?

Well, they believed that congestion was the cause of housing problems (which is not entirely untrue) and child labor and poverty. They put all of this together into an exhibit in 1908 which spent three weeks at the Museum of Natural History before taking a tour across the U.S.

Now this exhibit, well, it created a little bit of a stir. Cities all over all of a sudden became very interested in what they could do about congestion. And so in 1909, the New York Committee on Congestion and Population, led by Benjamin Marsh, put together in Washington D.C. the first National Conference on City Planning and Congestion. If you remember from our APA timeline, this was the first national conference on City Planning.

(5:55)

Putting together the first national conference wasn't the only thing on Benjamin Marsh's Agenda though. You see, in 1909 he also published - privately, not through the Committee - the first American book devoted to planning; "An Introduction to City Planning: Democracy's Challenge and the American City."

You see, Benjamin Marsh was really - at heart - a social reformer. It was the Progressive Era after all, and he focused largely on population congestion which he also viewed as a problem in the economy; primarily the high cost of land. As an advocate for the reduction of population congestion, he actually took some time and toured Europe to look at how housing was being regulated there. So, this book really pushed the concept of zoning, municipal control of undeveloped land, and land taxes.

Ok - side bar - remember Henry George and his 1879 book called "Progress and Poverty"? Well, Benjamin Marsh was a Georgist - as supporters of Henry George's economic theories were called - and Marsh advocated for these concepts of land taxes because ultimately he believed that these taxes and land controls would prevent overbuilding and subsequently, slums.

And these ideas? Well, they weren't so popular, and it didn't help that he was kind of a stubborn ass.

(7:36)

You see, Marsh was a highly critical person, and brash. Leading up to the conference in 1909 he was interviewed and made some pretty damning comments about D.C. like "it is a fact that there are many places in this city that are shameful. You have blind alleys and interior courts not fit for human beings to live in." This nature of his extended too to being unwilling to compromise - a quality that may be good(?) - and may be bad(?). Just depends on who you ask I guess.

Anyways, his ideas on land taxes weren't exactly popular with the business crowd - which should shock no one - but his uncompromising nature made problems and apparently rubbed people the wrong way. And some folks in the network of planners at the time began to sort of push him out of the profession. And that opened the door for our other Olmsted friend - Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. - to take over as organizer of the future conferences, but that will be for another day.

His work on advocating for zoning bore some fruit at least by eventually leading to the first comprehensive zoning resolution in New York City, but that's also for another day.

(9:05)

Well, it may not seem like much, but there is a whirlwind of stuff we covered, so sit back and relax: here's a summary. Picking up from where we left off with the tenements:

Some concerned New Yorkers put together a Committee on Congestion and Population and hired Benjamin Marsh to be the executive secretary. Under his leadership, the Committee held an exhibit which brought national awareness to the issue, so he organized a conference on the topic in 1909; The first National Conference on City Planning: The National Conference on City Planning and Congestion.

In 1909 he also published the first book on planning: "An Introduction to City Planning: Democracy's Challenge and the American City" This book focused heavily on the economic factors contributing to population and congestion and really pushed land taxes as a solution. This rubbed businesses the wrong way, and to keep the peace by playing the political game, planners sort of pushed him out. In doing so, Frederick Law Olmstead Jr. stepped up and became the new organizer of the national conferences moving forward.

(10:20)

Well, thanks again for joining me! It feels rough getting back to it, and we definitely hit the ground running with the Tenement Housing Act of 1901, The New York Committee on Congestion of Population, and Benjamin Marsh and the First Conference on City Planning - and the first book on City Planning.

If you have any questions that you want to follow-up on, feel free to reach out to me at theveryunofficialAICPstudyguide@gmail.com and I'll do my best to help out if I can. Also, can we get together and petition the APA to make Benjamin Marsh a National Planning Pioneer? In putting this episode together I came across their list and apparently he isn't one. The guy who organized the first conference and wrote the first book isn't a National Planning Pioneer? Really?

Regardless, our question for this week to see if you were paying any attention - hopefully you were - is:

"Where - and in what year - was the first National Conference on City Plan held?"

Anyways, please, pretty please, don't forget to subscribe to this podcast on whatever platform you use for podcasts, and feel free to sign up on the show's website so you can follow along with future episodes, help prepare for the exam, and supplement all of your other study regimens. And, go on and share this out with any planners you know too. And if you wouldn't mind leaving a review, it helps the algorithms send this podcast to people who would be interested.

Next week, we'll head back out west to talk about the U.S. Reclamation Act of 1902 and mix in some 1903 Public Lands Commission, and a 1907 Inland Waterways Commission. As a primer - if you need to - go back to Episode 14 to setup the role of Gifford Pinchot.

Thanks again everyone. 'Till next time.

Links:

New York State Tenement Housing Act of 1901:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_State_Tenement_House_Act

http://www.livingcityarchive.org/htm/framesets/decades/fs_00s.htm

<https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/tenements>

New York Committee on Congestion and Population:

<https://www.planning.org/timeline/>

<https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1381&context=theses>

National Conference on City Planning and Population Congestion:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20100706131047/http://www.planning.org/centennial/aprilpelcommentary.htm>

<https://www.planning.org/conference/future-previous/>

Benjamin Marsh:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_C._Marsh

<http://urbanplanning.library.cornell.edu/DOCS/marshpop.htm>