

THE MUNICIPAL ZONE SYSTEM.*

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Some of the nations of Europe, out of a wealth of unfortunate experiences in the rapid growth of industrial cities and the crowding together of the people in them, have evolved what is known as the "Zone System" for controlling the use and occupation of land.

The system had its origin in the deplorable living conditions which were forced upon the working people and poorer classes of Germany during the period of industrial progress that has absorbed the energy of the German people since the Franco-Prussian war, and during which old feudal towns have been transformed into metropolitan cities and the country side into a forest of factory stacks. The administrative machinery of the towns, confronted with new and perplexing problems due to the rapid increase of population, were for many years unable to cope successfully with the new conditions by reason of the manner in which land was held, its sudden rise in value, and the lack of any authority to interfere in any effective manner with the owner's disposition and use of it.

The swift progress of industrialism throughout the German States encouraged the rapid growth of industrial towns at a time when the social conditions and the manner of living of the common people were not conducive to either the morals or health of crowded communities; the workshop and factory drew upon the farm and rural hamlet for their labor and the working people, unable to obtain proper dwelling places, herded in caves, cellars, and unsanitary buildings like rabbits in a warren. The rapid increase of urban population offered a fertile field for exploitation by the great landowners who erected barrack-dwellings of many stories and rooms which were an improvement over the caves and cellars and into which the working people crowded. Although these dwellings marked much improvement in living conditions they still bred many evils from the too intensive occupation and to correct these and provide greater assurance of the public health and safety a multiplicity of building regulations were enacted by the municipal authorities.

Ministerial decrees were issued tending to enlarge the authority of local councils in matters relating to the erection and occupancy of dwellings; gradually the fact dawned upon the law makers that the power and prestige of the empire among the nations of the earth depended as vitally upon the health and efficiency of its working people as upon the courage and loyalty of its fighting men. By slow degrees, slow because opposed by the great landowners who dominated many of the legislative bodies, the ministerial decrees were enacted into laws granting broad autonomy to municipalities and enabling them to strike at the root of the evil of their housing system by checking the increase of the speculative value of land, such speculative increase in some cities having risen 400% in a single year. Municipalities were also authorized to purchase ground, to erect dwellings, and to loan public funds to societies for the erection of workmen's homes; much encouragement has been given to the erection of one-family houses, and home owning has been made possible among the working people.

The story of the industrial and social evolution of Germany is an intensely absorbing one, but we consider here, and that but briefly, only the manner in which the municipal authorities exercise the powers vested in them to regulate the development of private property. This is accomplished mainly through the employment of the "zone system," under

which the municipal department having charge of city planning, in establishing and extending the street system, also establishes the building lines, determines what percentage of the property may be built over and the arrangement of the buildings themselves, whether they shall be erected in solid rows, in pairs, or singly; also the distance between the buildings when built singly or in pairs, and the number of floors or stories. No appeal from the established regulations can be taken after the plans have been completed, examined, and finally approved by the several independent committees having jurisdiction. The plans frequently show three fixed lines in a block; the line to which the street is to be opened and improved, a line of restriction, a certain distance from the street line beyond which no building is allowed to extend, and an interior line fixing the boundary of the court yard or garden within which no structure is permitted.

The term "zone" as applied to the system is somewhat of a misnomer and misleading; although the general theory under which it is applied is, that the buildings should be lower and farther apart the greater their distance is from the centre of the city, the arrangement is not one of concentric girdles, as might be supposed, but a division into districts, irregular as to area and boundary and regulated in accordance with some local characteristic or special adaptability for certain classes of buildings; in fact, it sometimes occurs that a "zone" consists of a single city block, or even part of a block. True zones girdling the city would result in alternating rings of high and low buildings or a single indeterminate outer zone, regardless of topography or local conditions, and are considered unwise, if not impractical; so also are very large zones, or districts, since the application of absolute restrictions would prevent the establishment of local business and trade centres for the convenience of the people.

The system has undergone considerable modification since its introduction; keen judgment and great care are essential in determining boundaries and in imposing regulations which will permit property to be used for the purpose for which it is best adapted; although there was, and still is, considerable opposition to it in some instances, it is gradually producing the desired results, checking land speculation and inflation of values, discouraging the erection of barrack-dwellings, encouraging the erection of one-family houses, and making it possible for people of modest means to own their own houses.

Just as the industrialism and commercialism of Europe has created congestion and bad housing conditions, so are the same evils following in the wake of the tremendous activity along industrial lines in this country; the centralization of trade and the lack of adequate transportation facilities are, perhaps, the most powerful factors in producing a too intensive occupation and use of land; the desire to make property produce the largest possible income is a characteristic of landlords the world over, and tenement houses under lax regulations are splendid revenue producers.

Although the zone system as employed in Europe is the outgrowth of a long and persistently fought battle for the improvement of housing conditions, it has resulted in other economical and administrative reforms and it is along these lines that its application in the United States might also produce important results and be of great benefit. It would enable the municipal authorities to predetermine the character of improvement in any given area and, as the permanence of the improvement would be assured, very large economies in planning of streets, the construction of public works, and the conducting of general public service could be affected.

Under the zone system the permanent population of any given area may be determined with a reasonable degree of accuracy before a single building is erected upon it; with

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