

HOUSING IN DUBLIN.

FATHER ANGELUS, O.M. Cap.

A TRANSFORMED AREA.

The Housing question in Dublin is a many sided problem and its consideration must to a large extent be coloured by a person's outlook or interest. It will be approached from a very different angle by the owner of slum tenement property, the social worker, or the person interested in Civic improvement.

It must be admitted that much has been done towards dealing with this question, yet the problem has not been solved, only the fringe of it has been touched.

In a City where so many families live in single rooms, many in basement kitchens, where parents and children of both sexes have to sleep in one apartment, there is no need to stress the urgency of providing other accomodation for the poor who are forced to live under such conditions, but, what is the remedy?.

It is easy to say, build houses, build more houses, and continue building them, easier said than done.

In any building scheme there are many points that have to be considered, many obstacles that must be overcome. The best intentioned Housing Committee or City Manager is confronted with difficulties that thwart the best endeavours. I have no sympathy with those who have nothing but criticism and blame to hurl against those who are doing their best, and that in the face of difficulties of which their critics know very little.

In providing new houses, there are three considerations that must be borne in mind - the sites on which to build - the class of houses to be built - and the rent for which they can be let to the tenants, this must be within the means of the people to be provided for, and at the same time the scheme must as far as possible be made a sound economic proposition.

SITE: VIRGIN SOIL OR CONGESTED AREA.

As to the site on which to build. Should this be virgin soil on the outskirts of the City, or should it be a congested area within the City?. In favour of selecting the virgin soil site, it is advanced that this can be acquired at far less cost than an area of the same extent within the City, where many interests have to be bought out and huge expense incurred in clearing the site. In two building schemes within the City, the cost of obtaining and clearing the sites worked out in one case at £ 4625: 0: 0d per acre, and in the other at £ 4975: 0: 0d per acre.

The principal objection to the virgin soil site is that the worker requires to be within easy reach of his place of employment. Bus or tram fare to and from the City is a big drain on the family budget.

It is only within recent years that this plan of building on the outskirts has been adopted by the Corporation. But it is interesting to recall that in 1913, Dr. Lorcan Sherlock, Lord Mayor stated that "if houses were built on the outskirts of the City the tenement house question would settle itself". Earlier still in 1903 a Conference presided over by the late Mr. Timothy Harrington, Lord Mayor declared unanimously that "the most desirable

remedy for the state of things existing in the City is to build at first on the outskirts, cottages or self-contained buildings, and to procure cheap means of transit to and from the City for workers, which the Committee believes will not be difficult to arrange with the Tramway Company and Railway Companies".

HOUSES, COTTAGES OR FLATS.

With regard to the class of houses to be built, the choice seems to rest between self-contained cottages of three, four or more apartments, and flats of a number of storeys approached by a common stairway.

At the present time the tendency within the City is definitely in favour of the flats. The chief reason for this, is that in the case of flats, three or four rents according to the number of storeys are derived from the same amount of ground space that would produce only one rent if occupied by the self-contained cottage.

Personally, I prefer the self-contained cottage, as being a real home, as distinct from a mere dwelling place. Still I am not so prejudiced as to be unable to appreciate the reasons that have led to the adoption of the flats, and I readily admit that those recently erected are a vast improvement on those built some years ago.

When commencing this article I had not intended to express my views on the Housing question in general, but meant to refer to improvements that have taken place in the district in which I live.

A TRANSFORMED AREA.

Church Street has been so completely transformed and improved, that those who knew it in even the recent past, would not recognize it to-day in its altered appearance. This improvement is most marked in that portion of the Street opposite the Capuchin Church, where what is known as the Church Street and Beresford Street Scheme has completely transformed the area.

I think I am not making too big a claim when I say that the improvements effected ^{here} are chiefly due to the Capuchin Fathers, who have been always in promoting not only the spiritual and moral welfare of the people of the district, but have also interested themselves in their material comfort.

The Capuchins were directly responsible for the improvements that began in 1890, when Father Columbus erected the Father Mathew Hall. Later on Father Nicholas obtained possession of the area extending from the Hall down to the Church. This was a very insanitary area, with a number of courts and alleys of ill-repute. It is now occupied by an extension of the Hall and by the garden attached to the Capuchin Friary.

The Capuchins too were the driving force that moved the Corporation to undertake the scheme above referred to. The Capuchin most prominent in this connection was the late Father Nicholas. It might be said of him that he for years haunted the City Hall, interviewing Lord Mayors, Aldermen, Councillors and officials of the Corporation. He presented petitions, statements and plans, and often appeared before the Improvements Committee, and the City Council, sometimes alone and at other times leading deputations. In spite of many delays and disappointments, the perseverance that was characteristic of him eventually met with success. In urging on this project Father Nicholas received valuable aid from Mr. W. Coffey,

ex Lord Mayor, then Alderman of Arran Quay Ward, and also from the late John G. Sullivan, Patrick Tobin and others.

CHURCH STREET AND BERESFORD STREET SCHEME.

This dealt with an area of over three acres in extent. In the month of January 1912 the Improvements Committee submitted a Report in which it stated that an inspection of the area showed "that the conditions of human existence in all the courts and passages comprised in the area are most deplorable. Apart from the insanitary conditions of the houses on the boundary streets of the area, the place is honey-combed with narrow lanes and courts occupied by several families. (The older residents of Church Street will remember such places as Kane's Court, Wards Cottages, Thunder Court, Eliza Court, etc.) These lanes and court-ways are close and narrow, thereby shutting out the necessary light and air required for healthy conditions of human existence. The houses situate in these places have no back-yards, and in some instances there is only one convenience for several families."

Incorporated in this Report was a certificate from Sir Charles Cameron, Medical Officer of Health, stating that:

"The area was insanitary and that all the houses, courts and laneways were unfit for human habitation, and that the evils connected with same and the sanitary defects in such area could not be effectively remedied otherwise than by an improvement scheme, for the re-arrangement and reconstruction of the streets and houses within the area."

After the necessary Local Government Board Inquiry, at which I gave evidence, Compensation Courts etc., the scheme was undertaken and carried out. The result can be seen in the altered condition of the area. The street has been widened, the old tenement rookeries have been replaced by self-contained cottages: the narrow lanes and alleys have disappeared: and the wide open spaces lined by rows of lime trees give the place quite a continental aspect. The occupiers of these houses deserve to be congratulated on the great care they take and the taste they display. The little gardens in front, and the flower boxes on the window sills make the houses clean, bright and cheerful looking. In the whole City I do not know any scheme that is more successful, and I regard it as a credit to the oft abused old Corporation that carried it out, and to the occupying tenants who keep their homes so splendidly. I rank it far away above anything of its kind in any other part of the City. I deeply regret that the present Housing Authority, in their recent scheme, which was in reality only the completion of the former one, did not carry it out on the same lines. Instead of pretty self-contained cottages, it has erected barrack-like flats, that lack the real name of a home.

THE CHURCH STREET DISASTER.

The undertaking of this Church Street and Beresford scheme, is sometimes, erroneously attributed to the sad occurrence known as the Church Street Disaster, but this did not take place until 1913, when the scheme was well in hands.

On Thursday night September 2nd 1913, at about nine o'clock, two tenement houses in Church Street, almost directly facing the Father Mathew Hall, collapsed with scarcely a moments warning, burying in the dust and debris over a score of men, and women and children, - seven of whom were crushed to death beneath the ruins. The memory of the heroic action of one of the victims - Eugene Salmon - a poor working boy of seventeen years, deserves

to be preserved. He had rescued all the members of his family, except one sister, eight years of age, and while the walls were creaking and swaying, before the final crash came, he went in once more, at the call of the sister who was dear to him, but it was his last errand. Both he and the little one were dashed to death beneath the falling walls.

The Father Mathew Hall has never been put to better use, than on that terrible night, when it was converted into a refuge for the poor people cast homeless on the street, many of them mourning for their dead. Here they were housed and fed, until rooms were provided for them, and they were enabled to make a fresh start in life. Some of these people are now living in the new cottages, near the scene of the terrible disaster.

WHAT MIGHT BE STILL DONE.

Having thus dealt with this Church Street and Beresford Street scheme, and that in warm approval, I would like to point out, what seems to me, might and ought to be done by way of further improvements in this area.

- (1) This scheme included the area, from Mary's Lane to Stirrup Lane, and did not embrace a small area extending to North King Street. Mr. P.C. Cowan, Local Government Board Inspector, who held the Inquiry on this scheme expressed his opinion that it should have included this area. This place has since remained untouched. Perhaps the present Corporation might consider undertaking its improvement.
- (2) Upper Church Street, from North King Street to Constitution Hill urgently calls for attention. Approached from the wide thoroughfare opposite the Kings Inns, this portion of the street presents a most neglected appearance. A scheme should be undertaken that would embrace, on the West, the area from the Broadstone Station, to North Brunswick Street - if it would not extend to North King Street, and on the East deal with the area bounded by Church Street, Coleraine Street and Lisburn Street.

LOWER CHURCH STREET.

This portion of the street from Mary's Lane to the Quay, has been very much improved. The top part of it, from Mary's Lane to Chancery Street is included in what is known as the Mary's Lane and Greek Street Scheme, now partially completed. It is intended to erect here, another block of flats, the same as those already built in Mary's Lane. Once more may I express my regret, that this area was not given the self-contained cottages. I will be sorry to see Church Street fronted, and the old, old Historic Church of St. Michan overshadowed by a building suggestive of an American Sky-scraper.

From Chancery Street to the Quay has been greatly improved on both sides. On the East, the widening of the street by the putting back of the railings surrounding the Four Courts, has been a distinct advantage. But why is the gable of one of the buildings left in such an unfinished and unsightly state, that could be removed at small expense?.

The improvements on the West side, are for the moment, to some extent marred by the incompleteness that marks them. Smullens Court directly facing Chancery Street, and three old houses that stand jutting out, from the new shops are veritable eye-sores, but these defects will be remedied in time, as they are probably due to some delay caused by legal technicalities. I am hoping to see Chancery Street extended through Bow Street to Smithfield, and if I am not too optimistic, I would like to see the venerable old Church of St. Michael's hoary with the age of centuries, standing out boldly on its own grounds.

To conclude, much has been done and done well in this area of the City. Its whole appearance has been changed and improved. Whilst recognising and admitting this, I must confess to experiencing a certain feeling of regret at the passing away of all the land-marks that made old Church Street, and that now are only memories of the past.

The present inhabitants of Church Street appreciate all that has been done for them, and manifest that by the splendid manner in which they keep their houses, homes, that are models of cleanliness and brightness. It is to be hoped that the further improvements necessary to complete the good work will be carried out in the near future.

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