Investigating the CHPC Archives

The ABC of City Planning: Not Just For Children

In 1937, Mayor La Guardia’s Committee on City Planning produced a small book for children, titled The ABC of City Planning, intended to instill understanding and enthusiasm in children for the city’s built environment. CHPC has preserved a copy of this adorable text, which for modern audiences is more than just an amusing diversion: it offers a unique insight into a New York City of a different era. Below, a few highlights, then a full reproduction of the text.

The Elevated in the E stanza refers to New York’s first form of rapid transit, first operated in 1868. Its demise in Manhattan was ushered in by cleaner, quieter, faster underground subways - the most notable destroyed line being the Third Avenue El, torn down in 1955 and replaced only by the already existing Lexington Avenue line and bus routes.

Omnibus, meaning “for all” in Latin, is the linguistic predecessor to what we know simply as a bus; it was originally the term for a horse-drawn stagecoach that ran along a fixed route, holding around 15 passengers. The ABC praises the modernity of the motorized omnibus!

In the 1930s, Mayor La Guardia championed a WPA-built system of retail and wholesale food markets in an attempt to eradicate 15,000 food pushcarts, which were considered unsanitary nuisances and sold everything from peaches to “damaged” eggs. Vestiges of the municipal markets can be seen in the Essex Street retail market on the Lower East Side, La Marqueta in East Harlem, and the Gateway Center, a new retail development at the old wholesale Bronx Terminal Market in the South Bronx.

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F. H. Laguardia
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FOREWORD

CITY PLANNING is not for “Adults Only”. Children of all ages can understand the necessity for a finer, better, safer and more convenient city. Unless they do understand it, and it becomes as fundamental as the ABC, we can never hope to make our city the healthful, happy home it should be for our children and our children’s children.

LAWRENCE M. ORTON
Secretary, Mayor’s Committee on City Planning.
A—is for AIRPORT
Where airplanes are bound.
They must have a clear space
Where they can ground.
B—is for BRIDGES
That join land with land,
They help us to travel
But must be well-planned.
C—is for CITY,
In which we all dwell,
Where we work, sleep and play
And try to keep well.
D—is for DOCKS,
The nation’s front door,
What strangers see first
When they land on our shore.
E—is the ELEVATED
That must be torn down.
The nuisance it creates
Isn’t good for our town.
F—is for FREIGHT,
  Bringing things which we need—
  So to railroads and trucking
  We have to pay heed.
G—is for **GAMES**,  
We all like to play  
In fine parks and playgrounds  
Where we spend the day.
H—is for HOME,
The place we keep neat,
With large sunny windows
Facing the street.
I—is for INDUSTRY—
Factories and stores,
(But kept in their places,
Not right at our doors.)
J—is for JUMBLE
Caused only by Man
Who recklessly built
Without a good plan.
K—is for KNOWLEDGE
Which surely does show
Just how our great city
Must prosper and grow.
L—is for **LAND**
That used to be green,
But now it's all pavements—
So let's keep them clean.
M's for MUNICIPAL MARKETS
Where good, clean food we buy.
They help prevent our living costs
From rising up too high.
N’s for NEW YORK,
And also for NICE—
To make New York livable
Is worth any price.
O—is for **OMNIBUS,**
And the nickel you pay
Transports you for miles
In a most modern way.
P—is for PLANNING,
The thing we must do
To make a fine city
For me and for you.
Q— is for QUIET,
For which we should care
Almost as much as
For sunshine and air.
R—is for ROADS
Over which we must ride,
It's best, then, to make them
All smooth, safe and wide.
S—is for **SUNLIGHT**,  
We need it for health.  
For plenty of sunshine  
Means more than great wealth.
T—is for TRANSIT,
A system of travel.
The mix-up we have
We now must unravel.
U—is for UNION,
That makes us all strong,
And helps us to push
City Planning along.
V—is for **VALUE**
Not measured in wealth.
Planners think wisely
Weighing comfort and health.
W—is for WINDOWS,
That let in the light,
And make homes and classrooms
Both healthful and bright.
X—is the CROSSING
Where often we’ve seen
People breaking through traffic
When lights are not green.
Y—is for YOU
To work and to plan,
To make New York City
As fine as you can.
Z—is for ZONING
That marks off the land,
So that homes, schools and factories
Are properly planned.