

Talk given before the
Detroit Language Teachers
Association - 1955

DETROIT UNLIMITED

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Tonight I hope that you are stimulated by what I have to say so that when I'm about halfway through my talk you're just provoked enough to think about leaving, but don't. And if you don't leave, perhaps in the second half I can entertain you a bit with some slides showing what could be one of Detroit's most important and ambitious plans for the future.

Since you as a group of language teachers in our public schools, represent a professional area we commonly term cultural -- and since this evening I shall be using the word culture many times, let me first carefully define this word as it will be used or there'll be good reason for much eyebrow raising. For tonight, let us assume that culture is "the enlightenment and refinement of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training and association."

With this definition in mind, let us examine the problem of raising a city's cultural level.

For the purpose of the examination, I should like to approach the problem from two different directions - one relating to your profession, and one relating to mine - and see if we can show a connection between the two. To begin, let me offer the proposition that "a culture can only exist when all persons in a community contribute either by participation or as a spectator. This contribution must be given freely, and must be encouraged and influenced without any trace of rancor by those more talented."

Now, who are "those more talented?" Well, the group here tonight should fall within this category, and I'd say that perhaps 99% of you do. According to our proposition, this then throws a rather large responsibility upon each of you since it means that you as teachers must provide a good share of the guidance and instruction which will shape the attitude of from 50 to 80 percent of our future citizens toward culture. That's a big task and one that I fear sometimes is accepted with indifference as regards the student, the subject and particularly the teaching method.

As to this teaching method, we all realize that the term culture as we are using it tonight is often connected with the word "highbrow." However, we all know of child and adult classes in our schools, libraries, and museums where these highbrow subjects are being taught, discussed, and most important of all, enjoyed by people from all classes of our society. Truck drivers, lawyers, carpenters and bank presidents may all be part of a common group seeking after cultural knowledge voluntarily. What is the factor that makes this non-captive audience so eager and receptive? Is it the subject or is it the class? Both of these play a part, but I think the most significant factor is the instructor who can take these items and couple them with a high personal interest to turn a stuffy, highbrow subject into a delightful, enjoyable course of instruction. These successful instructors impart a vital quality to the culture they teach and this is sensed and responded to in turn by their class. Here, in my opinion, is the key to the success or failure of any study of culture.

Since I am not qualified, to discuss this topic of cultural teaching in any detail, let me briefly take one phase that I know you are all concerned with -- that of the introduction of materialism into the educational systems, particularly the secondary schools and colleges. There's much confusion for the cause of this and there is in many cases doubt of its having occurred.

To admit that it exists to the degree where it may relegate the the teaching of culture to an educational back seat is a serious mistake. The exposure of our high school and college students to culture must be even more pronounced now at a time when the acquirement of material things seems so important to them. We cannot afford an attitude that admits of cultural failure in any shape or form.

Furthermore, I don't think we can use this excuse of the encroachment of materialism as a legitimate explanation for the diminishing enrollment in some of our cultural courses in high schools and colleges. To get information, as it were, "from the horse's mouth," I visited four high schools to talk to counselors about the problem. The feeling was unanimous that there was no specific trend toward a more materialistic curriculum. True, the languages are no longer required for entrance to most universities. But all this has done is to show the language teachers how important their approach and teaching method is. They are now educating on equal terms with the electives in art, literature, drama and music, and as such must compete, and not merely sit back and use the term "materialism" as an excuse for lack of student interest. You should not think of the problem as "stopping a decline", but of "raising a standard."

In each school visited, there was always an outstanding class in the cultural area that was pulled up by its own bootstraps and made an exciting thing to the students who were lucky enough to be enrolled.

At one school, where the parents of the children were rather well off and where nearly 3/4 of the graduates go on to colleges, Latin had been having a rough time. A lady teacher with a new, fresh, and interesting approach stepped in and in one year has turned the teaching of Latin into a flourishing business.

(Elaborate if possible.)

At another school, an alert and sympathetic music department has for eight years held annual Symphony Series. The students purchase their own tickets for five concerts and attend programs by visiting orchestras as a group. In addition, this school has 80 people enrolled in a music literature and music appreciation course where it's not even necessary to know one note from another. This, in a 1500 student institution with a live, interested music department.

Perhaps most impressive, however, is the case of the creative dance classes at a school located in one of the poorest sections of the city. A young and talented instructor has made these dancing classes so popular with students, who certainly are in dire need of material things, that her classes are filled to capacity as quickly as they are offered.

The above examples only serve to point up what we already know. A subject taught well, in an interesting manner, will be well attended and well learned, be it materialistic or culturistic.

I have expressed a great deal of concern here tonight, and have mildly condemned what I call the indifferent approach to the subject of education.

I'm concerned because I, myself, am now seeing what a lack of the basic cultural knowledge normally covered during the high school years can do to professional persons. After being out of high school 15 years, I am beginning to see and feel how my own education was lacking culturally -- how it is generally deficient because of that extra something that would have made Latin, or English literature, or music appreciation vital and inspiring courses of instruction.

To drive home my point, let me take a hypothetical case and show how this cultural emaciation can occur.

Johnny Sliderule had wanted to be a civil engineer since the eighth grade when he watched a new wing added to his school. So when he got to high school he took the regular technical classes and his counselor and instructors knowing that he wanted to take engineering in college gave Johnny additional science and math classes when possible in place of electives in literature, languages, music, and other cultural classes. Since Johnny's experiences with these "extra curricular" classes had not been particularly rewarding, he didn't object at all. So when he was graduated from high school with high scholastic honors, Johnny already had an extensive background in technical and scientific

subjects, but he wouldn't have known an epic if it hit him in the face, and he probably never even heard of Gaul, let alone know that it was divided into three parts.

Well, we say, this isn't too important since Johnny doesn't have to know good literature, or define the ablative case, or even have to know that there is such a thing as a bass and treble clef. He's going to be an engineer. Not only that, he'll probably pick up some cultural subjects in college so we won't worry about it.

Johnny goes to college and already impressed with the idea that the study of culture is not too important, and being something of an introvert as so many engineers are -- he fails to full realize the cultural opportunities of college life, and instead devotes himself to becoming as technically proficient as he possible can.

Thus, upon graduation, Johnny, although by now an exceedingly capable person technically, has still none of the cultural training and background that is needed to make the complete man.

But, we say it still isn't important since Johnny is an engineer -- he isn't interested in literature, in languages, in music, in the social sciences as they relate to people and culture -- he doesn't have to know them. But I say that is wrong! Without these things that have to be given to people like Johnny by people like you, Johnny is no better off than the guy who operates a 100 ton press in an automobile plant eight hours a day, five days a week. Without that awareness of culture, of social refinement, of social and cultural responsibility toward his fellow citizens, he can make no effective use of his wide technical background than could the press operator. Thus, in Johnny our secondary schools

and colleges have taken a promising young man and developed him into a human calculating machine, unable and often unwilling to analyze or interpret the results of his technical decisions.

I hope I have shown two things in this discussion of your profession and our culture. First, that the major responsibility for making culture mean something to our future citizens, rests with the professional educators. Second, that you as educators must become more conscious of the important role cultural subjects play in the future lives of all your students -- and you, yourself, must find better and more effective ways of impressing students, parents, and other educators with this fact.

Now that we have taken a look at what your profession - education - can do to improve cultural standards in our city, let's see what my profession -- planning as an engineer, architect team - is doing.

Let me first offer a second proposition -- "Culture can only exist where there are people, and then only where there are people who will nourish and support this culture without being forced to do so."

Detroit has had an unfortunate history culturally for many reasons, ~~some~~ of which are very clear cut. Perhaps the two that are most responsible are first, a long history of physical force, and second, the early establishment of industry. From the time of its settlement by Cadillac in 1701 until the Pacification Ball at Woodworth's Hotel in 1815, Detroit was a focal point of trouble and the scene of many bloody battles. Then, only short years

after peace had been declared between Great Britain and the United States, industries began occupying a prominent place in the development of Detroit.

As early as 1833, Detroit had a flourishing shoe factory, and with the start of iron mining in the upper peninsula in 1846, Detroit soon had its first rolling mill and railroad car plant. These events established a pattern for our city which has continued until the present day.

Thus, fighting and war first tended to bunch the citizens for mutual protection, and then industry as it expanded and diversified its activities geographically tended to separate them. So no real opportunity was given this relatively young city of Detroit to develop the central traditions and history that are the life-blood of any culture.

This is further borne out by a few chronological news flashes which relate the growth of industry and culture in Detroit as compared to other areas of the United States and the world.

1831 - In Detroit weekly paper Democratic Free Press and Michigan Intelligence was issued. This publication was the predecessor of the Detroit Free Press -- In Paris, Victor Hugo published his Hunchback of Notre Dame.

1870 - Fire alarm system installed in Detroit. --

Metropolitan and Boston Art Museums established.

1881 - Peninsular Stove Company organized by James Dwyer, establishing Detroit as the nation's center for the stove industry.

Sarah Bernhardt appeared at Booth's Theater in New York.

1903 - Ford Motor Company incorporated in the state of Michigan. -- Enrico Caruso made his American debut in the Metropolitan House in New York City.

I have perhaps picked examples which give a darker picture of the cultural development of Detroit than was actually the case, but you can see, I think, that the emphasis in our city was and is placed primarily on the development of strong industries. The pattern did not stop at 1903, as I did in my comparisons, but has continued right up to the present day.

Let me repeat that the need of industries to obtain large parcels of inexpensive land early forced the population growth pattern out and away from the heart of the city before any strong ties could be formed to this heart, and before an indigenous culture could be developed which was strong enough to attract people back to city's core for their cultural needs.

Briefly, and perhaps a little bluntly, that is how I feel Detroit has earned the reputation of being something of a hick town, where culture is something too highbrow for the guy who puts his eight hours over a hot forge and wants to relax after work with a bottle of beer while he watches television or reads the sport pages.

Now, if we are going to improve the cultural situation in Detroit, it stands to reason, if our second proposition is true, that we must somehow put people back in the area where our cultural facilities are already available. We have this choice or else we must rebuild these facilities elsewhere. In Detroit, there really isn't any "elsewhere" since the downtown and the area north along Woodward Avenue are the only places equally accessible to all residents of the city. Then too, we find that already all of the legitimate theaters, the large, complete shopping and commercial facilities, the art institute, the main library, our engineering center, one of our large universities, the Masonic Temple, and all of our larger and better hotels are placed in this very area. Therefore, it appears very logical to attempt to rebuild the inner boulevard area and transplant a segment of our population there rather than transplanting and rebuilding these facilities elsewhere.

In rather simplified form, you can see how the thinking of our city planners has brought us to the concept of a completely different type of downtown community. By providing people of all classes the essentials of suburban living located within minutes of downtown areas and our cultural centers, we provide existing cultural facilities with a ready and responsive participating group which they do not have at present. Thus, we can now begin to think in terms of expanding our legitimate theater activities, our museum activities, our music activities; we can locate within walking distance of our theaters and auditoriums enough people to fill these auditoriums for all types of cultural activities.

The concept of a revitalized downtown has long been a factor in the long range planning for Detroit, but it was only in the late 1940's when major slum clearances were ordered that this concept began to show signs of actually being carried to completion. Among those areas marked for clearance was one that I should like to use as an example of what can be done if a proper planning approach is used. This area is located on the east side of downtown about a mile from Woodward Avenue. It's bounded on the North by Gratiot, on the east by the Grand Trunk Railroad, on the south by Lafayette, and on the west by the route of the proposed Hastings-Oakland Expressway which follows the route of the present Hastings Street. This plot of land, nearly 130 acres in size, was at one time before the turn of the century a middle class residential neighborhood. After 1900, however, the expansion of industry and housing to the west bypassed the area and it soon began degenerating. Soon after World War I, it had definitely assumed the role of providing housing of a secondary character and in the roaring 20's this Gratiot area was the scene of almost unrestrained lawlessness and violence. Even after the bootlegging days, when finally the blind pigs and the west-end red light district were rooted out, crime was as prevalent as defective plumbing. Prior to 1929, the area had its own depression as evidenced by the decline in property values which began in 1927. Vacancies increased and there was a progressive lowering of rentals. The depression days forced people to double-up in quarters where money was not available for even normal maintenance. Living standards and real estate values continued to drop. In some parts of the area property valuation decreased by as much as 60% between 1927 and 1933.

So here we can trace the complete degradation of an ordinary neighborhood into a complete slum. And this is what the Gratiot-Orleans area remained, a complete slum, until it was leveled in the late 1940's.

At the time of its leveling, hopes were high that the property could soon be developed as the planning commission had envisioned. But city officials were to find they had a white elephant on their hands. Everyone wanted something done, but no one seemed to be able to come up with a workable scheme financially, architecturally, or otherwise. So after several years of false starts and unkept obligations, the situation had reached an impasse; and in 1954, Mayor Cobo and the City Council appointed a Citizens Committee to investigate the matter and come up with specific, workable recommendations. The committee chaired by Walter Gessell, and composed of such prominent people as Walter Gerhke, Foster Winter, Walter Reuther, and many others retained a team of three architects and with funds the committee itself raised, prepared a complete master plan for the complete redevelopment of the Gratiot-Orleans area commonly known as the Gratiot Redevelopment Plan.

The thoughts and ideals of the committee are perhaps best expressed in this quoted paragraph from Mr. Gessell's letter of recommendation reporting on the committee's findings to Mayor Cobo and the Common Council. Quote - "Our Committee is convinced that a successful program - for now and in the future - is completely dependent upon the city obtaining an integrated residential community of the most advanced design, of the highest possible standards. A community that on a completely competitive basis can

attract back to the heart of the city people who are finding their housing in the outlying sections of the City and its suburbs. Anything short of attaining that objective would be of dubious value from both an economic and social point of view." End of quote.

We can see that these recommendations fall completely within this concept of a new downtown community and we're now beginning to think in terms of how to get people back to the cultural centers of the city.

To describe what we as architects, engineers, and planners feel can be done with an area such as the Gratiot-Orleans development, I would like to use some slides showing the master plan conceived in conjunction with the Citizen's Committee. (Lights out).

Slide #1 - Map of area showing downtown, the civic center and the redevelopment area.

Slide #2 - Aerial photograph of the same area.

Slide #3 - Ground photo of the Grand Trunk RR along eastern boundary of the property.

Slide #4 - Ground photo showing cleared area with downtown Detroit in the background.

Slide #5 - Colored plan showing complete master plan.

Slide #6 - Aerial view of the model.

Slide #7 - Plan of back to back and through unit plan.

Slide #8 - Perspective view of back to back and through unit plan.

Slide #9 - Plan of six family court unit.

Slide #10- Perspective view of six family court unit.

Slide #11- Perspective view from tower units.

(Lights on)

Here in the Gratiot Redevelopment we see an attempt, by broad planning and thinking to reverse the trends which threaten the very life of our great urban centers. Here too exists the connection between the approaches to the problem of raising a city's cultural level. I have dwelt on your responsibilities as instructors in a cultural area and I have reviewed one small part of the architect, engineer, planner activity in the same area.

I hope I have shown how the human calculating machines we often graduate from our high schools and colleges are many times not equipped culturally to conceive and plan such things as must be planned if our city is to mature. You, as educators, therefore, must equip these future citizens now, with the cultural tools they will require. It must be part of your responsibility to examine your own interest in the subjects you teach; examine your interest in the students of your classes - the raw material you work with; examine your methods of presentation and try to make them bring the study of culture a new life and vitality. And, after you have done this, you must realize that every word you say can and should have a beneficial and inspiring effect on those who hear them.

Thus, only by a welding of intelligent planning, which provides the method by which we can enjoy a better way of life and education, which teaches how to live a richer and fuller life, can we begin to achieve a true "Detroit Unlimited."