"A Practical Visionary:" Critically Examining Charles Abrams' 1960 Mission to Dublin with the United Nations

Popular scholarship and larger cultural awareness surrounding 20th century urban history and the devastating impacts of urban renewal often centers American developments and famed leaders; events such as Jane Jacobs' fight against Robert Moses to save Washington Square Park from the Lower Manhattan Expressway take center stage. This focus presents a narrow look at the expansive history of urban renewal, ignoring its global impacts and other major figures—one such figure is Charles Abrams.

Born in Tsarist Russia, now Poland, in 1901, Abrams immigrated to Williamsburg as a child. His father a pickled herring vendor, Abrams' upbringing within the borough's close-knit Jewish community deeply informed his planning ideology. When he later worked for the LaGuardia administration after taking night school law courses, he astonishingly discovered his neighborhood was labeled as a slum.[1] This event presents an apt look at Abrams' fundamental ideology; throughout his career, he celebrated dense working-class immigrant neighborhoods like Williamsburg as models rather than wastelands. Beginning with an apprenticeship to Arthur Garfield Hays of the ACLU, Abrams' success in affordable housing, desegregation, social welfare spending, and community-centered policy made him a prominent public intellectual and engaging academic.[2] At a time when cities were faced with extreme disinvestment and larger cultural denunciation, Abrams became a unique champion.[3]

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[1] Scott Henderson, *Housing and the Democratic Ideal: The Life and Thought of Charles Abrams* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 10. In fact, given the cost, Abrams never actually earned a BA and went straight to law school via night coursework.

[2] In 1965, Abrams was appointed to be chairman of the Urban Planning Division at Columbia, and, directly prior to his death founded its Institute of Urban Environment.

[3] Charles Abrams, *The City is the Frontier* (United Kingdom: Harper & Row, 1965), 16.

Despite his triumphs, parts of Abrams' extensive legacy remain complex—particularly within the realm of urban renewal. The later part of Abrams' life was dedicated to international work, taking him out of his beloved New York and on United Nations "missions" to create urban renewal plans for cities across the world including Ankara, Caracas, Lagos, Singapore, and, notably, Dublin. His only European trip, Dublin presents a compelling choice of inquiry. In 1960, Abrams collaborated with the city government to develop a controversial redevelopment for the city's central area—which came to have fundamental impacts on the city decades into the future.

Here, Charles Abrams' UN work in Dublin provides an important opportunity and case study to examine the larger urban renewal movement and the global impacts of American urban policy. Thus, the aim of my thesis is to explore the tension between Abrams international and domestic work, while focusing on the troubling dynamics of UN "slum clearance" missions. Here, I pose two main research questions. First off, how did Abrams' work in Dublin conflict with his experience in American urban policy and influence Dublin's development in the decades proceeding? Secondly, how did UN missions like Abrams' impose harmful, paternalistic notions of "modernism" to cities like Dublin via controversial mechanisms of "slum clearance?"

In terms of research planning and logistics, in the first portion of my work this summer, I intend to explore Abrams' larger planning experience and personal history to contextualize his time in Dublin—bringing light to an understudied and incredibly interesting figure. As detailed in Scott Henderson's 2000 biography, little record documents Abrams' life beyond his own political works.[4] In a New Yorker profile from 1967, one of the few glimpses into Abrams outside of the policy realm, Abrams is described as a "champion of the urban dweller" and

[4] Henderson, 8.

"practical visionary."[5] An oral history interview a few years prior finds Abrams, with a distinctly-Brooklyn accent, decrying the racist federal lending mechanisms of the Roosevelt administration—years ahead of his contemporaries. In the interview, Abrams briefly speaks of his plans to write a memoir, which unfortunately went unfinished upon his death in 1970.[6]

Decades later—with renewed focus on the lasting impacts of the urban renewal movement—it is impossible to know the extent of Abrams' renown or influence had circumstances differed. Much of Abrams' life, particularly his work abroad, lacks academic scholarship. Thus, I hope to use Dublin as a case study to examine Abrams in action. Here, building off of Cornell's Abrams Papers I have been able to access via Columbia, I intend to use the Dublin City Council collections, as part of the Dublin City Library and Archive, to connect American and Irish urban renewal. In addition to many of Abrams' own published works, I am eager to use personal correspondence and documentation in Dublin to explore Irish urban renewal through a distinctly American figure.

Next, to situate Abrams' work within Dublin's larger history, I plan on exploring the city's planning movements and urban growth following independence in the second portion of my research this summer. The cultural center of urban Ireland, Dublin presents a unique opportunity to explore an untraditionally "European" and postcolonial city. Building off of secondary literature including Andrew Kincaid's 2006 *Postcolonial Dublin: Imperial Legacies and the Built Environment,* Michael Bannon's "Forty Years of Irish Planning: an Overview," and Mary Daly's 1986 "Irish Urban History: a Survey," I hope to set the context for Abrams' brief time there. A foundational look at Irish urban history, Daly explains the lack of modern urban history research given cultural valuation of landscape and rural identity, as well as tensions

[5] Bernard Taper, "Profile: A Lover of Cities," *The New Yorker,* February 1967, 40.

[6] Charles Abrams, interview by Bluma Swerdloff, Columbia Center for Oral History, Columbia University Libraries, 1964. Describing his eventual death, in a personal letter, he wrote, "when at last my bones fail, they will rest on the Lower East Side streets on a final walk with a few students." Notably, against Jewish tradition, Abrams requested to be cremated rather than buried given the "value of urban land" (Henderson, 226).

regarding British influence in Dublin's built environment.[6] Building off of secondary research, I intend to focus on the Irish National Archives to contextualize Abrams' 1960 work with Dublin and larger Irish history. Here, will situate Abrams' time historically by engaging with Dublin's planning and architectural archives, located at the Irish Architectural Archive, as well as Trinity College's 19th and 20th Century Irish Political Papers collection.

Lastly, I intend to designate the majority of my research this summer to directly examine Abrams' UN "mission" and its larger impacts on Dublin's urban history. While little secondary literature exists specifically regarding Abrams' visit, it is briefly mentioned in Bannon's paper, as well as Erika Hanna's *Modern Dublin: Urban Change and the Irish Past, 1957-1973.* Denouncing Abrams' description of Dublin as a "Victorian slum," Hanna explains the clash that occurred as Abrams and other reformers applied orthodox, international planning methods to a "distinctly Irish urban landscape."[7] Additionally, I intend to challenge existing scholarship focusing on Irish identity and independence as the sole motivation for a turn to modernism via "slum clearance." Focusing on Abrams' UN work specifically allows me to frame Dublin's push to modernize from a global perspective of larger urban renewal movements, and explore the harmful, paternalist dynamics of UN "slum clearance" missions. Here, I hope to explore this complex dynamic, and contrast Abrams' largely admirable work within the US with his troubling urban renewal efforts abroad.

[6] Mary E. Daly, "Irish Urban History: A Survey." *Urban History Yearbook* 13 (1986): 63.

[7] Erika Hanna, *Modern Dublin: Urban Change and the Irish Past, 1957-1973,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 36.

Abrams' official UN report—the central focus of my inquiry—can be found in the National Library of Ireland. In addition to their archives concerning Dublin's history, I plan on accessing the Dublin City Library and Archive, which holds the Dublin City Council collections; there, I will focus on the City Council meeting minutes and Planning archive collection. Further, I have found two folders in the National Archives of Ireland focused specifically on Abrams' urban renewal project in Dublin. I have been able to get in touch with almost all of these organizations, as well as a professor at Trinity College Dublin focusing on Dublin's 20th century history who is interested in my research. Here, I am eager to focus specifically on the language of renewal and modernization as imposed by the UN; I intend to examine how Abrams and other officials disguised destructive clearance projects with notions of modernity and pseudo-progressivism to impacted communities.

Therefore, relying entirely on Irish sources, I will be able to bring a critical and detailed lens to Abrams' time in Dublin, examining the tension between Abrams' valued efforts within the US and promotion of controversial "slum clearance" projects abroad. Officially coining the term "socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor," I am eager to bring light to an understudied and complex figure within the global urban renewal movement—while also focusing on the unique dynamics of postcolonialism and modernization in a city like Dublin.[8] As cities around the world seek to reckon with the controversial history and impacts of the urban renewal movement, Abrams' 1960 mission to Dublin presents a compelling opportunity to engage a series of dynamic and topical research threads.

[8] Henderson, 208.

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