

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RJB-3

A View From The Twin Cities

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Saugus, Mass. 01906  
January 20, 1973

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs,  
535 Fifth Avenue,  
New York,  
New York, 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte,

The twin cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul form one of the nation's most natural metropolitan areas. With some extraordinary help from Bill Rodgers, of the University of Minnesota, I was able, in a very brief time, to get a view not only of the mobile home situation in the area, but also of how mobile homes fit into metropolitan planning for the future.

The Metropolitan Housing Guide released just this past year by the Metro council states:

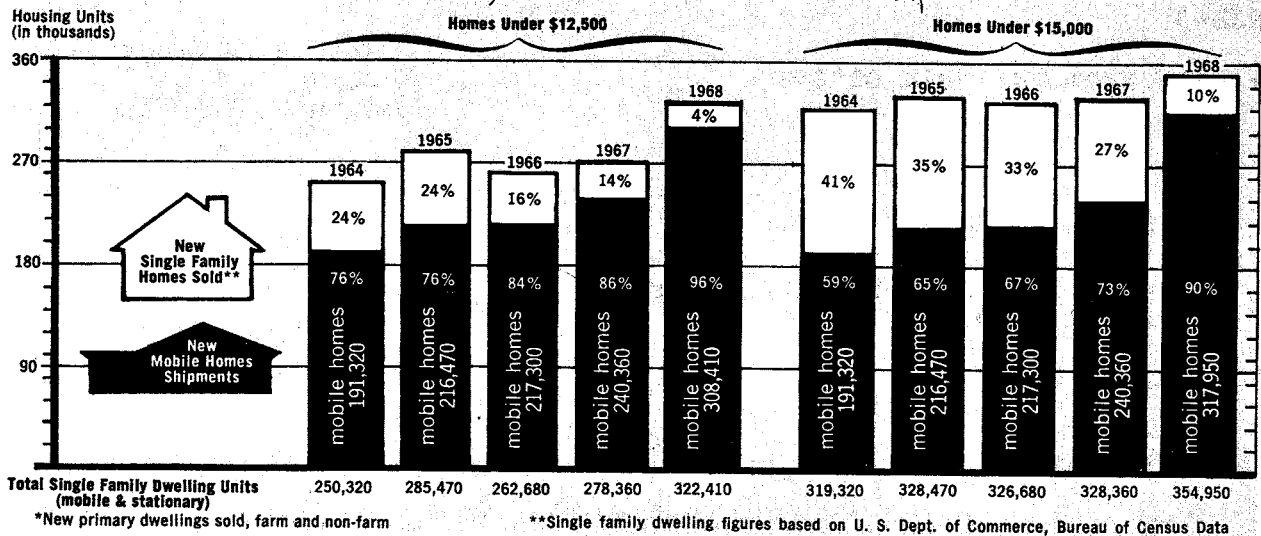
"...a survey of building trends between 1969 and 1971 revealed that low-to-middle income families have little opportunity to own or rent new housing at today's prices. The average sales price of a new single family home in 1971 was \$38,446, and the average rental was \$211. Eighty-five per cent of the area households could not afford the average priced new single family home, and fifty per cent of area households could not afford to rent the average priced new apartment, based on the assumption that people should not spend more than twenty five per cent of their income on housing."

The report goes on to say that nearly 70% of the housing affordable to the lower income families is in the cities, and 85% of the subsidized housing is in the city.

The twin cities are not unique in recognizing the plight of their citizens when it comes to housing. For years experts have been complaining about the inadequate overall housing stock and the particular problem of housing for low and moderate income families. The absence of moderately-priced, conventional housing has undoubtedly been a large factor in the mobile home boom. Figures released by the Mobile Home Manufacturing Association show just how much of the moderately priced housing market is dominated by mobile homes.

### MOBILE HOMES and TOTAL SINGLE FAMILY DWELLING SALES\*

In 1968 mobile homes represented 96% of all single family homes sold under \$12,500; 90% of all single family homes sold under \$15,000; and they were nearly equal to 60% of the 530,000 single family homes sold at any price.\*\*



If the twin cities are not unique in being aware of the problems they are somewhat unusual in their perception that long range planning necessitates metropolitan planning. The area has been one of the leading advocates for long range metropolitan planning over the past fifteen years.

The Metro council notes in their publication that jobs and opportunities are moving to the suburbs, but that the supply of inexpensive housing in this area is almost non-existent. I wondered what the Metro council saw as effective housing policy for the future.

Before talking to Trudy McFall of the Metro council I was certain that there would be an emphasis on mobile homes, at least as a "long-term temporary answer" if not as a "long-term permanent answer." Trudy McFall surprised me when she said that mobile homes, in her opinion, were not the top priority of the Metro council in planning for an increased housing stock. In fact, not only were they not a priority, but Ms. McFall had some interesting reservations about mobile home park development.

Ms. McFall felt that the council would primarily push for federally subsidized housing; utilizing both Section 235 home ownership and Section 236 rental programs. This decision was based on hard thinking about community receptivity, financing, land use and esthetics.

Ms. McFall felt that any program that would significantly increase the moderate priced housing stock in the suburbs would meet with some resistance. She felt, however, that this resistance would be particularly strong toward mobile home parks. She said that local communities have, over the years, expressed a great fear and hostility toward mobile home communities.

Some of the problems have been corrected by recent state laws providing for a more equitable taxing structure and for minimum construction standards. Even so, Ms. McFall said, there are a number of problems with mobile home parks. These problems are both esthetic and ecological.

Ms. McFall said that in looking at the potential of mobile home development the council had become aware of certain ecological problems, the main one being inadequate sewage disposal systems. The council was concerned that new parks should develop adequate sewage systems without taking advantage of already overburdened suburban sewage systems.

Having said all this Ms. McFall admitted that, at least for the immediate future, mobile homes offered a partial solution for the moderately priced housing problem. Because of this the council had drawn up what it considered a workable guide for mobile home development. The guide takes into account overall esthetic design and density control. I think it is helpful to look at the guide's suggestions along with state requirements and the requirements of an actual suburban community, Makeado. The Metro council is not only not planning to push mobile home development, but it has set design requirements that will undoubtedly make mobile home development much more expensive, possibly prohibitively expensive.

Minnesota law requires that: "...each individual mobile home site shall abut or face on a driveway or clear unoccupied space of not less than 16 feet in width, which space shall have unobstructed access to a public highway or alley. There shall be an open space of at least ten feet between the sides of adjacent mobile homes including their attachments and at least three feet between mobile homes when parked end to end."

North Makeado's Mobile Home Ordinance requires that: "...mobile homes shall be separated from each other and from other buildings and structures by at least twenty(20) feet. ...Mobile homes placed end-to-end must have a minimum clearance of fifteen(15) feet. ... a minimum of five hundred(500) square feet per mobile home shall be provided for defineable play areas and open space within the mobile home park. ...Notwithstanding the type of development concept used, the maximum density shall be seven(7) mobile homes per acre."

The Metro council suggests the following: "Every mobile home unit shall have a yard area....The yard area shall be at least 200% of the Mobile Home unit's ground cover area determined by the product of the exterior dimensions....Mobile Home Park developments shall provide 1,500 square feet of on site open space area, per mobile home unit. This area shall be reasonably accessible from each unit and shall be capable of providing for normal outdoor passive and active recreational activities."

The Metro guide goes on to suggest walk paths, and recreation areas, as well as a maximum density of about four units per acre.

Unlike the Minnesota code which sets minimum standards, the North Makeado regulations and the Metro guide make esthetic judgements about "minimum" space in an attempt to make mobile home communities less threatening to suburban communities.

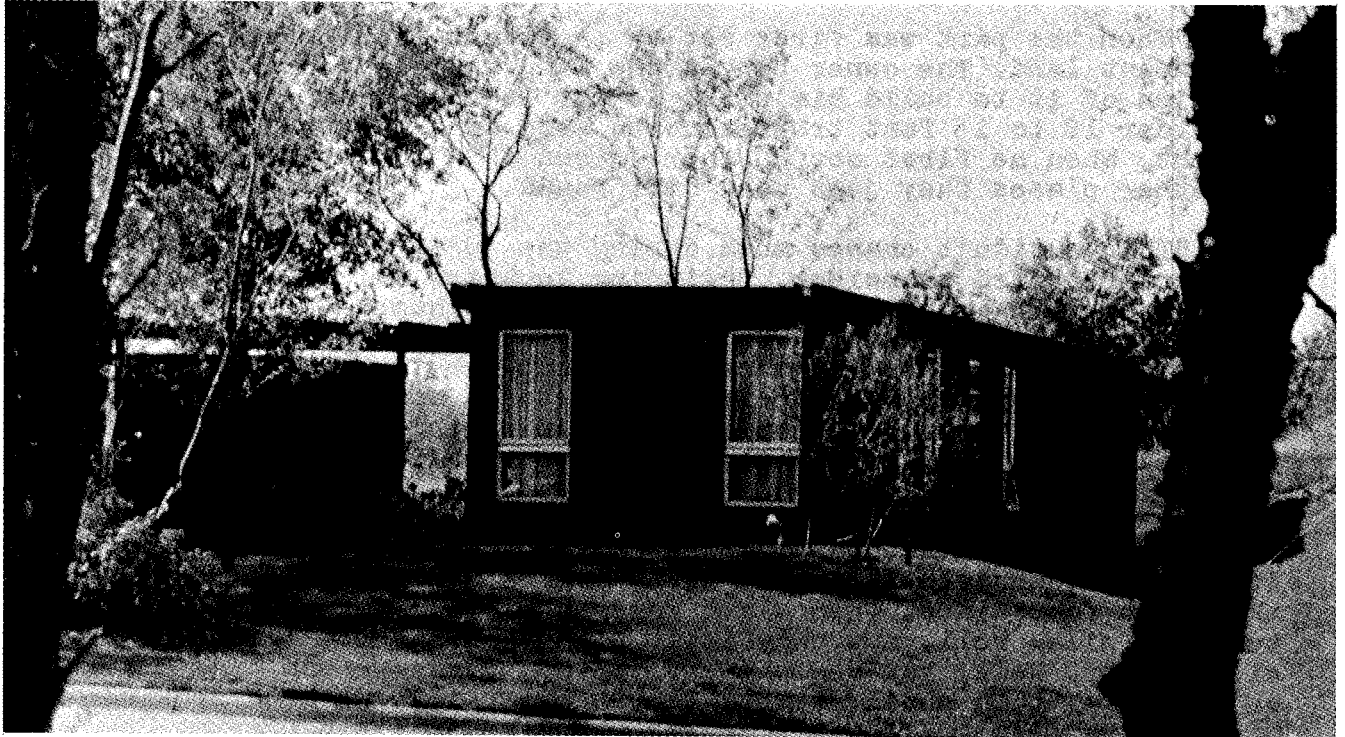
Having read about mobile home development and discussed the issue both with Ms. McFall and with some local architects I thought it would be wise to visit a couple of parks. Of the large variety of parks in the area I decided to visit one of the new and innovative parks, Cimarron, and a more traditional park, Landfall Terrace.

Pemton, Inc., developers of Cimarron, is a well known and successful conventional home and apartment builder in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. Seven years ago the company decided to go into the mobile home business. In the last five months the company has decided, at least temporarily, to get out of the mobile home business. I spoke with Robert Engstrom, vice president for market and design, about these decisions.

Bob had written about Pemton's involvement in mobile homes. "Our (Pemton's) transition to the manufacturing of mobile homes began in 1967 when a market research program was completed for the company. The report concluded that the principles of good marketing, land planning, and environmental development could be applied to mobile home park development." With this in mind Pemton bought a 200 acre parcel of land in a suburban, semi-rural town-thirty minutes east of St. Paul. By the time Pemton got through planning Cimarron they decided not only to plan the community's development but also to manufacture the units. At the planning stage Pemton believed it could manufacture better housing: better built, more esthetically pleasing and at the going market price. As it turned out the units that were produced were running a good \$2,000-\$3,000 above the general market price (their units were selling for \$11,000-\$13,000).

Cimarron was planned to house 505 units. It was to be the first of several communities that Pemton was to build. It is now more than two years since the park was opened and occupancy stands at 427, a disappointment to the park owners. Based on this performance Pemton has decided at least temporarily to close down its manufacturing, and not to undertake any more major mobile home developments. I asked Bob why he thought the park hadn't totally met expectations. He said the market had changed, even over the last two years. When Pemton had first decided to enter the mobile home market there were long waiting lists at all the better Minneapolis-St. Paul parks. The number of people who wanted to enter a park far exceeded the number of people who could get in. At least for now, this doesn't seem so true. A lot of parks, according to Engstrom, have empty spaces. Some of this, he feels, is caused by everyone building as much as they could to accommodate what seemed like an inelastic demand. Also other types of housing, especially moderately priced apartments, have been built.

Engstrom also admitted that the cost of the Movilla, Pemton's unit, had gone over what they had predicted and that the market seemed unwilling to support with extra money what was in his mind unquestionable better housing. Bob suggested that I take a ride out to Cimarron and take a look at it myself.



So the next day I drove into the somewhat rural countryside to Cimarron. I must say that the park is rather unusual, and, even in the winter, distinctive. The design of the homes themselves is quite different from the traditional (if such a word can be used in the ever-changing mobile home world) mobile home. The exteriors of the homes are not metal but wood, and the units all have patios and partitions that make for more than the usual amount of privacy. The park itself has a very modern and attractive community center, in which there is a pro (golf) shop, vending machines, card tables, pool table, and a day care center. There is a pool, and outdoor tennis courts, as well as tot lots, ball fields, a pond, walking paths and a nine hole golf course. Since it was winter, with snow already on the ground, I didn't get to actually see most of these outdoor facilities. I did, however, tour two of the model homes, and must say that for the average viewer, like myself, the interior is not noticeably different from that of other mobile homes. The construction may be better, but it isn't obvious.

Having visited Cimarron I felt that I should also visit, as I said, a more traditional mobile home park. I picked Landfall Terrace which is also located in the Eastern suburbs of St. Paul. Landfall Terrace is one of the oldest mobile home parks in the twin city area. It is not spaciouly planned like Cimarron. The styles of the homes vary greatly in the park, as does the skirting. The houses are closer together-much closer to the state minimum than they are at Cimarron, where the spacing is somewhere between the North Makeado model and the Metro guide. This park started seventeen years ago, like most other mobile home parks, as a trailer camp for the traveling person and seasonal worker. According to Dick Simmons, who has worked at the park for the last three years, the nature of the park changed as did the clientele.

"When the park was first set up there was nothing around but vacant land. The owner bought the land and cleared only a fraction of it to build his park. He put in some places to park the older 12 to 15 foot trailers with some small power electric current. When he first set up there weren't paved roads." Like the other places they just used dirt roads.

"Things didn't change much during the 50's: the nature of the park remained transient. Beginning in the sixties the change started occurring rapidly. All of a sudden the homes began getting bigger, and more permanent. Unlike the older homes that were almost always moved behind a car or pickup truck, the new homes couldn't be moved by the owner, but had to be moved by special commercial vehicles. And people weren't planning to live in them seasonally. They saw a sort of permanence about these homes."

"The new homes needed bigger hook ups. Now take this park, it could accommodate the first batch of new homes, the six and the eight foot wides. Then along comes a guy and says he has a ten foot wide. Well, not only is it bigger but it needs more electricity. Well, you see one and you say sorry we can't help you out. You say that until eight, ten, twelve people with those kind of trailers come in. Then if you're a businessman you figure a way to expand. That's how this place changed. We'll probably change again. See, just this past summer a guy came in and said he had an electric house. Well, I said ok we'll take you. I didn't understand he meant everything was electric, even the heat. Well we couldn't accommodate him, and we had to make an exception. Now if that's the way mobile homes are going to develop, then that's how we are going to go."

"The clientele has changed. In the olden days I think people who lived in mobile homes lived in them because they wanted to. They liked the mobility, or took the kind of seasonal job where they had to move around. Things have changed a lot. A lot of people are living in mobile homes now not really because they want to, but because they can't afford private homes of a conventional type."

I asked Dick Simmons if his park was full. He said it wasn't, that the park could accommodate several new tenants. Over the last sixteen years the park has continued to expand. It now has room for 341 units, and not all of them are taken. Dick told me that two years ago there were waiting lists in this park. Now they have empty space. "Everyone tried to take advantage of the situation and built, built, built. Now there are extra spaces. But you wait two years from now, there'll be waiting lists again."

Landfall Terrace is a very different sort of mobile home park than Cimarron. Landfall Terrace is a traditional park, the type of community that has, over the years, raised community opposition. But one wonders if complaints against mobile home parks like Landfall Terrace are very different than those that used to be aimed at Levittown(ticky tack) communities. Cimarron may to some extent represent the mobile home community of the future. Designed by architects, it attempts to be something much more than simply a mobile home park; a planned upwardly mobile community. However, I wonder if the prospective mobile home buyer

share the suburban planner's esthetic judgements about space. Furthermore the cost of living in a well planned, well-spaced community may place even mobile homes out of the reach of a great number of Americans who desire private housing.

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Mobile home parks are never located in the center of an urban area so I knew if I wanted to visit any parks I would need to rent a car. Although unfamiliar with car rentals I felt it should be no problem, just a series of papers to fill out. Up to filling the papers out I was right. As soon as my American Express card was accepted I was given the keys to a green Pinto parked in the driveway.

Everything went fine until I put the car into drive. All of a sudden a loud whirring noise started and a flashing sign lit up in red-seat belt. I looked down and, yes indeed, there was a seat belt. The noise wouldn't stop until I fastened the seat belt, a good safety requirement but quite an annoyance.

The seat belt now secure, the red light off, and the whirring noise gone, I left for my first appointment. Luckily I arrived a little early. I put the car in park, turned the ignition off, and removed the key. That is, I tried to remove the key but it wouldn't come out of the ignition. I pulled this way and then that way but it wouldn't come out. I turned the ignition on and turned it off again, pulled again and no luck. I put the car in neutral, then in park, pulled forward, backed up, put it back in park, but the key wouldn't come out. I looked up on the column and saw, in little letters, lock right over the key, but the key wouldn't turn that far to the left.

I spotted a man walking by the car, and interrupted his walk with "Excuse me, I've just rented this car and I know you won't believe this but I can't get the key out of the ignition. Could you help me?" He looked at me in utter disbelief, strolled over to the car, looked in the door and tried to pull the key from the ignition. No luck. He, like me, turned it to the right and then the left, still no luck. He backed off and asked if I had the car in park. Yes, I said.

Bending back to full posture he looked at me and said, "I don't know, maybe it's broken. Sorry, I've got to run, good luck."

Christ, I thought, what the hell am I going to do, leave the key in the ignition? Another man came by but he didn't have any more luck than I did, or the man before him. Finally I found a knob on the steering wheel. I pushed it, and much to my amazement the ignition easily turned to lock and the key dislodged itself from the column. I leapt out of the car and ran into the building now just a little late for my two o'clock appointment.

Sincerely,

Received in New York on January 26, 1972

*Richard J. Buzen*