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Office of the Press Secretary
to Mrs. Johnson

THE WHITE HOUSE

THE "B. Y. MORRISON MEMORIAL LECTURE"
BY MRS. LYNDON B. JOHNSON AT THE CONVENTION
OF THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS,
PORTLAND, OREGON

I can think of no more perfect setting in which to discuss the subject of man and design and nature, than this great city, with its snowy peaks on the horizon; its spectacular setting near a great river and a great ocean.

Portland is blessed to have such a setting -- where men can enjoy both the pace and excitement of the city, and the solitude and beauty of the countryside.

And, then, it's good to be here among people whose handiwork I have seen across the face of this land.

The man whose name this lecture bears -- B. Y. Morrison -- was a horticulturist of great skill and knowledge and imagination.

So I hasten to tell you that I speak to you today not as an expert, but only as a citizen deeply concerned about the relationship between the natural world and the world we are building. I am one of millions of Americans who are both troubled -- and hopeful -- about the physical setting of life in our country.

As you may know, my concern has been expressed in an effort called "beautification."

I think you also know what lies beneath that rather inadequate word. For "beautification," to my mind, is far more than a matter of cosmetics. To me, it describes the whole effort to bring the natural world and the man-made world into harmony; to bring order, usefulness, and delight to our whole environment. And that, of course, only begins with trees and flowers and landscaping.

When the President called for a planning study for the great Potomac Basin, you -- the A. I. A. -- responded with a task force report which expressed all that I imply by the word "beautification." It stressed not only aesthetics and pollution control, but economic development, transportation, and industrial and residential patterns. Now that the President has placed many of your recommendations before the Congress, I hope all of you will join the effort to translate into reality the dream of a model Potomac Basin.

If you think I mean writing your Congressmen and Senators to support the Potomac National River Bill, you are absolutely right!

If you think I mean urging local implementation in Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, the District of Columbia, you are also right.

If we are to obtain the vital balance of nature and architecture and man, the architects must become thoughtful political activists.

Years ago, when the white man came to barter with the Indians, the great chief, Tecumseh, asked this question: "Sell the country? Why not sell the air, the clouds, the great sea?"

His sharp inquiry reflects the rich sense of man's harmony with nature which the ancients felt. The Indians did not overwhelm the land; they lived as part of it. They were in nature -- not alien to it. They were users and sharers of their environment -- not exploiters of it.

Far be it from me to yearn for a return to the lost past. But surely it is not wrong to hope that modern man -- modern, urban, mechanized man -- will somehow recapture that sense of balance between his life and his environment -- before it is too late.

Already, in our age, we have done many of the things which Tecumseh considered unthinkable. Too often, we have bartered away not only the land, but the very air and water.

Too often, we have sacrificed human values to commercial values -- under the bright guise of "progress." And in our unconcern, we have let a crisis gather which threatens health -- and even life itself.

As a people, Americans have prized the virtues of the land: simplicity, honesty, hard work, physical courage, individualism, optimism, faith.

A preponderance of concrete and asphalt -- of fumes, haze and screeches -- go against our grain in a cultural way, as well as a biological way. Both dimensions of our makeup have been offended and poisoned.

Today, environmental questions are matters for architects and laymen alike. They are questions, literally, of life and death.

Can we have a building boom and beauty, too?

Must progress inevitably mean a shabbier environment?

Must success spoil Nature's bounty?

Insistently -- and with growing volume -- citizens everywhere in America are demanding that we turn our building to a sensible human purpose. They are asking -- literally -- for a breath of fresh air; for pleasant precincts in the heart of the city; for relaxation as well as excitement; for more reminders of nature in the city center.

Public opinion is calling for these things. And in my nearly 34 years of living with a public servant, I have learned the value of heeding such a call -- not only for Presidents, but also Mayors and City Commissioners.

We are being asked to develop a wholly new conservation.

For the American architect, I think the New Conservation means first, a concern for the total environment -- not just the individual building, but the entire community. No one knows better than you that the loveliest building can be nullified if there is no sign control ordinance, or if it sits in a pocket of hazy gray smoke.

The answers cannot be found in piecemeal reform. The job requires really thoughtful inter-relation of the whole environment: not only in buildings, but parks; not only parks, but highways; not only highways, but open spaces and green belts.

When the New Conservation speaks of the vast rebuilding that America must undertake, it does not mean on the old terms of freeways ripping through neighborhoods and parks, or of drab public housing, so all-alike that it reminds one of Gertrude Stein's phrase, "There's no there there."

It means a creative environment where people's imagination and variety of choice can flourish.

In the realm of transportation, one has only to think of Williamsburg, where cars are the exception, or of EXPO where there were a half dozen charming ways of moving about, to imagine what our communities could be like if we applied all that we can do.

In a related field, Congress has been considering a modest measure, the Highway Beautification Act, that would help states landscape their new freeways, build some picnic areas, and diminish the advertising that sprouts along public rights of way.

Vermont has moved faster and this spring passed a measure to ban all billboards in the state. Instead, they substituted an ingenious system of roadside information booths.

As Vermonters know, tourists were not attracted by a forest of signs.

The great challenge now is to rally citizens outside the architectural community -- so that not only designers, but city officials, businessmen, and plain citizens will share your concern for the total environment.

Secondly, the New Conservation will ask that the architect design with people in mind -- seek to build an environment on a truly human scale.

I earnestly hope that our civilization is remembered for more than its mammoth freeways and vast urban superblocks; for more than the isolated, impersonal, gigantic public housing projects of our cities. Too many of these great projects seem to me to be reproaches, not signs of progress.

The architecture which excites me most is made for delight and intimacy: for the enjoyment of those who inhabit it.

For instance, Philadelphia has found a way to depress its new Delaware River Expressway and will put a pedestrian plaza on top, binding the city to its waterfront. It says, "People matter -- not just traffic."

Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco is a marvel of attractions and surprises for the strolling shopper. Niccolet Mall in Minneapolis is an inviting, lively, commercial area built to make shopping a pleasure.

This concern for human values, human scale, human enjoyment, also means preserving what is historic and good. Georgetown, of course, is a famous example of how the past can serve the present. And in Savannah, Georgia, history-minded architects have marked 1100 priceless old homes to be restored.

At HemisFair, the planners have built a great modern exposition area -- but thirty old buildings have been lovingly preserved and restored, and they are among the most colorful punctuation marks at the HemisFair complex.

Concern for the whole environment; attention to the human scale -- and finally, a new emphasis upon areas of natural beauty, both inside the city and beyond its borders are three essential ingredients.

The twentieth century citizen, no less than his ancestor of another age, craves and needs to be reminded of his place in nature. The park, the public garden, the shady forest trail, the tree-lined river winding through a city; these are not only physical, but spiritual resources.

Fortunately, our ancestors realized this. So New York has its Central Park, and more than a dozen other cities once had their park systems laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted.

Who can imagine Washington without its hundreds of green oases -- 526 triangles and squares to be exact -- the legacy of l'Enfant -- its old Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, its thousands of trees and open skies?

Who can fail to delight in San Antonio's meandering little river, through the heart of the city, lined with walkways, terraced gardens, busy outdoor cafes?

Paley Plaza in New York -- with its rushing waterfall -- is more than a triumph of urban design. It is a reminder to the city dweller that there is a world beyond the asphalt and the concrete: it is a touch of nature in the city din.

It is a challenge to every public-spirited American architect -- to every planner interested in the New Conservation: a challenge to provide such pleasant lingering places wherever they are needed.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund which is before Congress at the present time is offering a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to acquire vanishing open space, both in the city and on its fringes.

For too many of the youth in our cities the experience of nature has been polluted water, and a 'no swimming' sign. The tensions and ill-effects of a poor environment will continue until there is enough ^{open} space, for challenge and refreshment, close to home.

In my own experience right now, nature is encountered most closely when I leave the city to go to our Ranch. I quickly then come in tune with the great rhythms of life. I always know whether it's a new moon or a full moon -- or the dark of the moon. When storms come, I participate in them -- thrill at the great black thunderheads, and the crackle of lightning, and the majesty of thunder. I rediscover a sense of hearing and I smell all the blossoms and grasses on the afternoon air after a rain. And it's good for my spirits.

This participation in the seasons and the weather is one of the most vital and renewing experiences of life -- too important to be reserved for vacations or for the few.

Accomplishing all these things will require a major undertaking by America's architects.

So deep is the environmental crisis; so urgent is the demand for change, that architecture must become not only a profession -- but a form of public service.

When so many are affected by your work, you are serving not only the client who commissions your work and pays your fee: the public is also your client.

When so many need your help, it becomes urgent that you look beyond the usual market and find new areas of service.

That is why I was heartened -- no, jubilant -- when your new president, Mr. Kassabaum, told the House Public Works Committee that A. I. A. members are entering the ghetto, tackling urban blight -- whether or not the client can afford traditional fees.

And now, I hope that I can enlist you in solving three specific problems which are very much on my mind.

First, there is the problem of creating a "design conscience" in every major community.

Well over a century ago, Henry Thoreau said, "It would be worthwhile if in each town there were a committee appointed to see that the beauty of the town received no detriment."

Washington has its Fine Arts Commission and its Committee for a More Beautiful Capital. Surely it might be a major step if other cities had similar public bodies -- led by architects and planners -- to act not as censors, but as educators and guides and leaders toward a sane and decent environment. I hope that each A. I. A. Chapter might consider this -- and persuade your local governments to establish such catalytic groups.

Second, there is the problem of unsightly shopping centers.

How many shopping centers are monuments to our lack of imagination -- to our indifference? Too many suburban shopping centers offer a depressing spectacle: vast, desert-like parking lots, and dull and uninviting buildings. The shopping center has become a sort of "urban strip-mine" -- a place of exploitation, when it could be a vital and attractive village center.

Finally, there is one of the most difficult problems: the ugly, ragged city fringes, the blatant neon jungles at the entrance to metropolis.

If there is any place in urban America where the natural world and the manmade world are at odds, it is at the city's edge. I hope that architects and planning commissions and metropolitan governments address themselves to this blight now -- and find some solutions before the visual chaos becomes irreversible -- and unendurable.

We meet here to talk about "nature," about design, about the environment. But what we are really discussing is people -- not abstractions, but human beings.

One day I was walking by a drab and crudely vandalized elementary school in Southeast Washington. One of your members was with me. Looking up at the broken windows, he made a remark I couldn't forget: "A rock through a window," he said, "is an opinion."

Today that school -- Buchanan -- is a new place. A private donor underwrote the efforts of our Committee -- and now, the school's community plaza offers city children delights once found only in the country: cascading water, hills to climb, a deep amphitheater for games, dancing and other diversions.

Seeing that hopeful place, I know that the nature we are concerned with, ultimately, is human nature. That is the point of the beautification movement -- and that, finally, is the point of architecture.

Winston Churchill said, "First we shape our buildings -- and then they shape us." And the same is true of our highways, our parks, our public buildings, the environment we create: they shape us.

You are shaping people -- shaping lives. And so your countrymen are looking to you for creative insights, deep compassion, bold leadership.

I am sure you will give them nothing less.

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