

Pro Club
10/8/65

What's Happening to Holland?

by
Marvin Lindeman

The question has a ready answer, summed up in one word, urbanization. Holland is undergoing an urban change in its accommodation of an expanding population and economy, and the manifestations of it are becoming a bit startling. All of a sudden, it seems, Holland is losing its small town provincialism, and is being swept along on a tide of urbanization that kind of makes us rub our eyes in a bit of unaccustomed bewilderment.

Urbanization is a big-city word, and a frightening one. Its problems are quite monstrous, and their volcanic eruptions can be, and usually are, devastating. What urbanization is doing to major cities and their people is a subject that we read about in our newspapers and magazines, and one that is covered by TV documentaries. It has reached such proportions that cities have felt compelled to align themselves with the Federal government in order to cope with the unbearable situations, and Washington has been highly responsive to the alliance.

But let us not identify the processes and problems of urbanization solely with the big cities; it is something that also has to be associated with the emergence of urbanized status occurring with all cities. The statisticians promise us that in thirty years or so we shall have a national population of some 400 million, and 80% of them will live in cities. They also have dumbfounding statistical projections as to

the number of cars, the air and water pollution, shortages of water, increasing neuroses, leisure hours, cost of education, and all the many other things that will afflict our cities of the future. It's not a cheerful picture, and the thought of Holland becoming enmeshed in it is enough to make us quake in our boots. The omens are as numerous as the sighting of ominous weather conditions with their alerts that send us scurrying to our tornado shelters. One can get quite worked up about the vicissitudes of oncoming urbanization, making the mind reel with all the staggering implications. You can see why city planners, managers, budgeteers, and bureau heads often times seem to be preoccupied with nightmarish problems.

Urbanization has been in the dictionary ever since the word "city" has been there, and for centuries it was a nice, pleasant noun. Cities could be laid out any which way that suited the lay of the land, in an imaginative, aesthetic manner or allowed to grow like a Topsy. They consisted of a compact downtown closely surrounded by neighborhoods. One's job and one's bedroom were both in the city, and if transportation was needed, there was the bicycle or streetcar. The small towns on the periphery of the city were insular entities having their own independent individuality. Cities vied for population growth, for census status was a mark of virility and attractiveness.

But then came the automobile, and the paved highways, and the mobility that changed things all around. In today's meaning of urbanization there is nothing placid or insular about it; it is all flux and change. It is more disease than panacea. A taste of it, as with a narcotic, is superficially exhilarating, yet tasted too oft it

victimizes the city. But, except for shriveling up into nothingness, there is no escape from it - there's no sidestepping the fact that our increasing population is urban bound.

But enough of these objective generalizations. They are useful to have in mind, but urbanization as it particularly relates to Holland should be looked at subjectively. In doing so, you will understand that the views I express are of my own personal vintage and are therefore subject to argument.

I speak of Holland from being a community resident for 45 years - a time span that rather startles me, for it seems only a short time ago that I came to Holland as a stranger, taking my place with the few other outsiders in the front window lobby of the old Holland Hotel. There we would sit on weekday evenings to observe the passing parade up and down Eighth Street. Only it wasn't a parade - it was just an occasional passerby hurriedly bent on getting to his destination. The only one to saunter by was the night-beat policeman, who would give us a wave of his billy by way of showing his kinship with our loneliness.

There were no reasons to be downtown, not even for a stroll, when darkness shrouded it in night-time gloom. There were no lighted-up store windows, and I don't recall any neon signs - only the limited illumination of the carbon street lights, which did nothing but heighten the shadows. Nor were the downtown diversions of a type to excite any great interest - Himebaughs' Star Theatre, with Miss Allen accompanying the illustrated songs and silent movies on the pit piano, was the only public entertainment, and I was not long in town before

I learned that this was off-limits to the many townspeople who thought of the movies in the "Perils of Pauline" era as being sinful. Then there was the poolroom at the rear of the hotel where one could tarry, but that, too, was held in ill repute. That was about the extent of it, and we who sat in our nightly reviewing stand resigned ourselves to the inescapable conclusion that Holland was the next thing to being a ghost town.

Such were the weekday evenings, with only the rumble of the inter-urban to interrupt the gloomy monotony of an inanimate downtown. But Saturday evenings were something different. Downtown became alive with people, standing and chatting with each other, making the rounds of the lighted stores, as much for social as for shopping reasons. There was a touch of the miracle about it - the dead showing that it had life - with downtown serving as the once-a-week rendezvous.

I recite these impressions by way of implying that Holland was, not so long ago, an ordinary small town in which each today was but a repetition of its yesterdays. No problems; no disturbing concerns. Quite content to go about its affairs in its insular, provincial manner. No ethnic differences; no intrusions upon its traditional prejudices. Homogeneous; stubbornly intent upon blocking all secular influences with a stiff parochial straight-arm. Sturdy in self-reliance; strong in Dutch willfulness. Unique in its history, yet utterly indifferent to its uniqueness. Blessed by natural advantages of its location, but wholly complacent over their desecration. Getting integrity from its local government, but no imagination. Getting

exhortations on Sundays, but no inspirations. The catalog of smug contentments is indeed long as it relates to the Holland of not so long ago.

In my book, that was the Holland that was, and I believe it was the Holland that its founders meant it to be. But along came the influences of another age to make their mark on the community, and to bring the urban potentials of Holland to the fore. We must recall that in these past four or so decades Holland was caught up in the booming exhilarations of the '20s - was sobered by the washouts of the depressive '30s - was buoyed up in its economy by the industrial resurgence of the '40s - saw its schools and corporate area bursting at the seams, and the mushrooming of its sprawling suburban areas in the '50s. All this led to an imperative consideration of annexations and consolidations - the surest signs of all that urbanization had caught hold of Holland and had the community in its toils.

That the face and figure of Holland has already been changed by the vicissitudes of urbanization is evident to everyone. Witness the big gaps in downtown Holland where once were buildings and landmarks, now gone because of the inordinate needs for parking areas. Witness also the troubled decline of downtown's loftiest and most prestigious monument to the booming '20s - our once-proud Warm Friend Hotel. It, too, has had to adjust to the circumstances of urban evolution.

When urbanization sets in, as it has with Holland, there is nothing static about it. It uproots status quo. It demolishes or alters that with which we have been familiar, and which must yield to the urban-

izing pressures. It makes new things spring up where nothing was before. It is continually taking us by surprise.

Like when we come upon a new neighborhood that has sprung up unbeknownst to us. Like when we call at the doctor's office only to find that he has moved to a swanky new building in an erstwhile residential area. Like when we dropped in at fabulous Point West on our discovery visit. Like when we are first aware that the car dealer has given up his old downtown place of business and is now 'way out in what we used to think were the sticks. Like when we find out that what we always took for granted as nice little businesses are now big burgeoning industries. Like when it dawns on us that the shock of our leading industry going into eclipse has not made a dent in our economy. Yes, and like when we are startled by the knowledge that today more Spanish is spoken in Holland than Dutch.

This by no means exhausts the cataloging of surprises, all incubated by the all-pervading hand of urbanization. But of them all, what probably is the most amazing to me is the way I am more and more becoming a stranger in the town where I once thought I knew everybody. Most of the personal items I scan in the Sentinel have to do with people I don't know from Adam. When I drop in at Thrifty Acres it's like being in Grand Central Station where, if I spy an acquaintance, it's purely a coincidence. Friday night downtown transports me out of my familiar Holland into a sea of unfamiliar faces. Paradoxically, I came into Holland as a stranger, got to know its people, and now feel that I am back to where I came in - a stranger.

This is due, of course, to the influx that is irrevocably a part of urbanization - an influx that impersonalizes and thins out the ratio of individual relationships. It dilutes the homogeneity of a town like Holland. It waters down the cohesiveness of the people.

An oldtimer needs nothing more than this engulfment in a sea of strange names and faces to realize that Holland is on the grow. Then comes the realization that this new population factor has the power to enrich our community, or to degrade it, altogether depending on how responsibly we act in the assimilation of it. To ignore it, or merely to take it for granted, would be to gamble on Providence taking its usual good care of us - and there are plenty of signs that our luck in relying on this touchstone is running out.

An attribute of those who really care about Holland is that they are proud of Holland for what it is and for what it offers. It is this attribute that has to be inculcated in the alien stock that is permeating our local scene. And to engender this civic pride it must, of course, have its origin in the new citizen's sense of inclusion in our community fabric - a feeling of belonging, of being recognized, and of being desired. We must show that we care about them, for otherwise they may all too easily fall into the attitude of not caring about Holland - and that could mean trouble, particularly so in the light of their increasing numbers.

This calls for the initiative of enlightened service agencies and civic leadership, and I know that Holland is richly endowed in this

respect - and I know that the task of assimilation is proceeding with attentive concern for the welfare of our community. It's something new for the town - and I feel sure that this phase of urbanization will be an enriching experience.

Urbanization, and the changing economic pattern that goes with it, brings to a community a diversity of people - of different backgrounds, minds, interests, and beliefs. Holland is feeling the impact of this diversity, and can expect to feel it in ever increasing measure. Secular drafts are blowing through the citadel of Calvin, chilling it into a bit of panic - a foreboding of losing its grip in the control of Holland's destiny. Secularism is invariably the by-product of urbanization, giving rise to a worldly view because of opening up an increasing array of circumstances that make material considerations more pressing than righteous concern.

Holland has never had its own autonomy; its founders and their Dutch successors installed and lived under the theocracy of John Calvin. All things have been weighed according to the tenets of predestination, election, and reprobation. License and frivolity could not raise their heads; they were struck down by a strict moral severity. The reigning arbiters never permitted new horizons to be admitted, but always acted on the egregious presumption that John Calvin knew best what was right for all of us. Which brings to mind what a contemporary Dutch intellectual has said on the matter, and I quote, "The Dutch are the victims of a mental state deriving from the 16th century, when a French witch-burner founded a religious sect in

Switzerland. It came to be called Calvinism, and its chief characteristic is that it deprives man of his self-respect."

This may be an unfair indictment, yet there can be no doubting that the influence of Calvin created a majority bloc in Holland which has kept our climate a bit stuffy. So it is that when I see the sails of De Zwaan a-turning on a Sunday afternoon to the edification of Holland's visitors, I take it as a good sign that some fresh air is abroad in the community. The wall put up by the majority bloc is having some chinks put in it, and the reformed theocracy is quite powerless to prevent that from happening. Urbanization has that to its credit, and from that standpoint I am one to say more power to it.

But I am fully as quick to admit that I am glad Holland will not be without the protective vigilance of its religious watchdog. Calvinism will not have us in its custody as of yore, but in the face of a rising secularism it will be stronger than ever in its exhortations. And this is comforting, for just as the sails of De Zwaan must have the mill's brakes in good working order lest the sails become too frisky and wreck the structure, so should secularism have its constant restraints. I credit John Calvin for giving Holland some good brakes which, I am sure, will not allow the moral degradations and frivolities inherent in urbanization to become destructively rampant.

Traditions have an irritating way of confusing a lot of issues, and Holland is loaded with them. They are so often used as a sentimental gimmick to sidetrack a realistic approach to the issues. They are always at hand to serve as a crutch for those with an axe to grind.

Mostly, the reference to tradition is simply a device to resist change, and since there is supposed to be some sacredness about the traditional, it presupposes that to change is evil. It should, of course, be evident to every thinking person that just the opposite is true - that not to modify tradition in accordance with an enlightened regard for the times is the greater evil. What Van Raalte pronounced for his cloistered Dutch settlement of a century ago has no relevance to the times in which we now live, for not only have the situations changed in Holland, but so also have the people. Even the entrenched way of life of the antebellum South has had to yield its sacredness to the intelligence of the times.

I inject this comment by way of making a distinction between tradition and heritage. Tradition is subject to change; heritage is not. One is a transmitted way of thinking or acting; the other is an inheritance of origin - and in Holland that origin is wholly Dutch. (Please note that the spelling of the word is wholly, not holy)

I suppose it is natural for Holland's Dutch not to see anything unique in being Dutch. After all, being Dutch and being American are one and the same. Add to this the further observation that an American with Dutch blood coursing through his veins is more apt than not to be a bit phlegmatic about the Dutch part of his being. And so it is that Holland's Dutch have taken Holland's Dutch heritage for granted, and have been quite indifferent toward it.

But this is not so with the non-Dutch outsiders who have come to make Holland their home. They find Holland's Dutch heritage to be

fascinating, and they regard it as unique - as something that sets Holland apart from other cities. This distinction which is Holland's sets their imaginations at work, and out comes a Tulip Festival and a Windmill Island. Holland gets on the map, and into the nation's consciousness as a city unique in heritage, and uniquely attractive in its manifestations of that heritage.

One needs only to recall the names and roles of those who gave impetus to the ideas of Tulip Time and Windmill Island to verify the conviction that our Dutch heritage will be kept to the fore in our changing Holland. A school teacher named Miss Lida Rogers; a mayor named Ernest Brooks; a Chamber of Commerce manager named Charles Gross; a lady of culture named Mrs. John Telling; a fireball named Bill Connelly - there you have the genesis and establishment of Tulip Time. A resort operator named Carter Brown; a banker named Henry Maentz; a City Manager named Herb Holt - there you have the driving force behind Windmill Island. Not a Dutchman in the lot. On the strength of such a revelation one can be quite sure that urbanization can be counted on to enliven, not deaden, the uniqueness of our heritage.

I would wish that this same appreciation of our kinship with the Netherlands will extend to our Netherlands Museum and make of it a truly educational, cultural and enticing resource. The dank and musty image of a museum no longer holds true; increasingly the museum is a place of lively interest, and those that have made themselves attractively meaningful are swarming with visitors. We have that potential.

in great degree with our Netherlands Museum, for it is, like our heritage, unique in the nation, and needs only an appropriate structure to become one of Holland's chief attractions on a year-round basis.

Getting on with our topic, we see many tangible evidences of what's happening to Holland. Urbanization has many progenies, one being the gargantuan shopping center. Their outlying locations give special significance to the fringe areas of a city, setting them up as magnets which exert an undeniable influence on community planning. Closely allied with this offspring is the other one of suburban individualism out of which grows animosities between core city and suburb. This child is rebellious against parental wishes, and can become extremely self-willed and ornery. It sits at the parent table, partaking of its food, but thumbs its nose in derision of the parent. It goes through the stage of being a problem child, and when it acquires adolescence it also displays insolence. Hopefully, the next stage is maturity, and if the parent has conducted itself with understanding patience and good will during the offspring's obstreperous period, then, I am confident, will come the rapport so much to be desired.

Urban Renewal is another offshoot of urbanization, and we need only visit downtown Grand Rapids to see it in dramatic operation. In Holland we have not, as yet, drawn on Federal financing for an urban renewal program, but the renewal has nonetheless been going on in our downtown with gratifying progress, all through local initiative. Old

buildings are being restored to new attractiveness and usefulness, and the exodus of certain businesses and professions to outlying areas is being offset by the new businesses moving in, with a general air of rejuvenation prevailing throughout the downtown district. It is a changing downtown, but it is a virile change that does not allow blight to show its ugly self.

I could go on, as you well know, with a continuing recitation of the many other things that urbanization is doing to Holland, but I think I have made my point - namely, that a Holland is unfolding which has an exhilarating air to breathe, an exciting tempo to quicken the heartbeat, and a gratifying sense of destiny appropriate to its endowments.

In so many ways we are fortunate in our community growth and change. We are not a satellite city beholden to another city for existence. We are not a captive city to a dominant, all-pervading industry that has the destiny of the city irrevocably tied to its own fate. We are not a decadent city with a lot of dry rot. We are not an ugly city in need of face lifting. We are not a bankrupt or sick city in dire need of Federal sustenance. We are not a worried city about its water supply or sewage pollution. We are not a city with festering ghettos, nor one in which civil rights are a problem. We are not . . . but why go on; we simply do not have any adverse or impossible situations to contend with. On the contrary, we are blessed with all the circumstances and resources, both natural and acquired, to make of Holland a model city in all the attributes of orderly

urbanization. I am most happy to see this being done.

It has been evident to you that I have not delved into all that's happening to Holland, and that what I have touched upon is more skeletal than documentary. You have not learned anything new or profound - nothing that should send you away from here with either an aroused indignation or a plan of action. I have simply confirmed the fact that with regard to Holland's destiny I am an optimist. And here I would like to paraphrase a statement by the author of a new book, *This U.S.A.*, based on a census study as reported in this week's *Time Magazine*, "in Holland's history, the evidence suggests that it is the optimist who has been the realist." - and with that I shall conclude with just one more thing - a postscript.

POSTSCRIPT

There is no better arena in which to observe the urbanization drama than at the Council Room. I was reminded of that this past Wednesday evening when I listened in on the radio broadcast of the Council meeting. It was a heavy agenda requiring about three hours to cover, with most of the items reflecting the problems precipitated by urban development.

The City Attorney got a hot potato tossed in his lap by some irate residents in the Wildwood neighborhood who protested an industrial nuisance that had disturbed their peace and quiet.

The City Manager got the same from residents of Holland Heights who protested the dust and loose stones on their heavily used Eighth Street.

The Hospital Board got an ultimatum from the Traffic and Safety Council to alter their visitor parking lot so that its exit would not be on Michigan Avenue.

A shopping center project in the Federal District of Holland Township petitioned for city water, which was tabled because of an unresolved policy.

Several zoning changes to accommodate the urban developments within the city had their readings. A minor thoroughfare was approved for paving because of its emergence into a major street for serving a new major industry. A report on proposed new facilities for enlargement of the police and fire departments was submitted.

Such is a sampling of urbanization's demands upon the city administration, and appropos of that I am pleased to say that the man

who has the clearest picture of all the many implications of the urbanizing process, and who has the talent for staying on top of them, is Holland's City Manager. In my judgment, the best thing that has happened to Holland is Herb Holt - a manager who comprehends what's happening to Holland and knows how to cope with it.