

Imagination in Civic Architecture

CITIES OF LATIN AMERICA. Housing and Planning to the South. By Francis Volich. New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation. 1944. 241 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by CARLETON BEALS

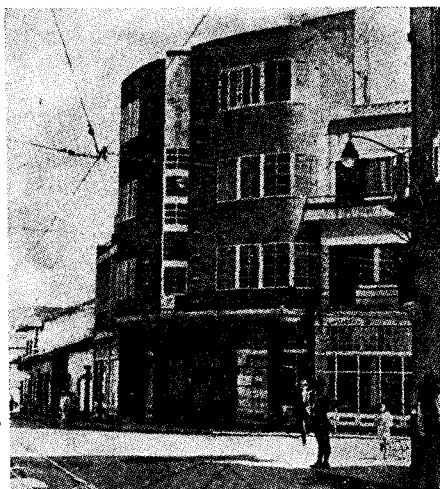
AT a time when thousands upon thousands of bureaucrats from the United States are traipsing up and down Latin America and trying their best to make it over in our own image, by means of well-intentioned, but wasteful and often fantastic projects, the present volume injects a wholesome note of realism precisely when realism is frowned upon as being damaging to the good-neighbor policy and mayhap to the war effort. But since the good-neighbor policy is now so badly corroded and is now looked upon so cynically by the mass of Latin American people, perhaps a little realism may help to straighten out its zig-zag course.

Certainly the present book offers extensive and sound suggestions for Western Hemisphere coöperation in the field of city planning, sanitation, and public housing. They differ widely in spirit and methods and purpose from our official hot-air propagandizing, the hush-hush policy while the taxpayers money is being spread around recklessly, the general patronizing air; the resultant manifestations on most projects of wastefulness that shocks the southern people, of Jim Crowism, of relegating the trained men of the southern countries to inferior roles in nearly all the enterprises carried out.

In our assumption of superiority in all things, it may come as a shock to the average reader to learn that "with nothing like the wealth and resources of the United States, Latin technicians have built, and are building, cities which outrank ours in the use of the imagination and the provisions of facilities for rich social living." Among all our great waterfront cities, not one can compare with similar Latin American cities in the beauty of water-edge development, the democratic utilization of such areas by the general public, or even in cleanliness. Mr. Volich might have added that even in the realm of modern techniques, in which we are so advanced, the applied results are not always superior. Thus the commercial port-loading facilities of Buenos Aires make those of New York City seem like an outmoded dump-heap. He does comment that whereas we have utilized our modern technical superiority to make our cities ever more congested, the southern peoples have attempted to make their cities more

livable, more open, and more gracious. "Where is there one among all the cities of our West as boldly planned and built as Brazil Goiania?" he asks. "The city planning attack on São Paulo exhibits a boldness of approach that no planner in any United States city has dared show."

City planning with us is a fairly new and faltering thing, too often restricted to grandiose concepts in World Fair exhibits or the Sunday magazine section of *The New York Times*, but splintering in practice on the eternal rock of petty commercialism and often planed down to mere zoning ordinances. Latin America carried on definite city-planning before the United States was even heard of. The Incas, Mayas, and Aztecs were remarkable city planners and bold remodelers. Mexico City at the time of the Spanish Conquest was larger, more competently and spaciouly planned, and more impressive than any Spanish city of that day. Even



—From "By Pan American Highway Through South America."

Corner in the progressive city of Medellín, Colombia.

so, the Spaniards were remarkable city planners, and if the specifications they provided for New World cities were quite too rigid, nevertheless they grasped the essentials of community living better than we do today in the United States; their cities began with the community center idea that we are painfully groping toward in practice.

The nearest we ever came to this sort of thing was perhaps the development of our western "kiting" towns. But these were layed out by a single surveyor; their aim was wholly speculation; what beauty that had was for the purpose of "lithographic menadacity," to attract eastern suckers. They had none of the grandiose concepts of the dignity of man, of God,

and the State which lay behind the efforts of the Spaniards.

After independence, there was a tremendous fervor of city planning and remodelling throughout Latin America. It set a precedent adhered to ever since. And so it is that today the city-planners of Latin America have, if fewer resources, a larger perspective, greater imagination, broader social aims, less commercialism, and better skills than are generally encountered here in the United States.

It should also give us pause that Latin America began slum clearance before the United States, that its public housing program began decades before ours did. It might also give us pause in our vigorous good-willing and torch-bearing to the benighted to reflect that probably the worst slums in all Latin America are found in our own possessions in Puerto Rico and in Colón, Panama. The latter, in fact, are mostly owned by the United States government. The Panamanians point them out with a mixture of glee and anger to every important visitor.

Social security was adopted by Chile ten years before the United States, and in many countries the funds are being used for the development of public housing, thus providing a double benefit. In short, when one reads Mr. Volich's book, one might come to the humorous deduction that the New Deal is a sort of Latin American product. Certainly in *continuismo*, the long perpetuation of one-man political rule, in governmental centralization, in paternalism, and personal dependence upon bureaucracy, we have these past few years been increasingly Latin-Americanized. Unfortunately, by and large, we have not imbibed the beauty and grace of Latin America; we are far more shackled when it comes to working out honest plans for community benefit.

This is not an overly technical book. All the problems are posed against a broad, enlightened background of history, politics, and economics, and vitalized by keen personal observation. Society for Mr. Volich is all one texture, and if he is more interested in an outstanding central portion of the pattern, at no point does he neglect the overall design. His book has to do with problems rapidly growing acute in our own country, problems which will become tremendous as soon as peace returns. From it we can learn much of Latin America; we can learn much that is valuable for our own needs. It is clearly, simply, and often beautifully written, with a fresh enthusiastic and sympathetic touch throughout. The text is enhanced by copious illustrations, spectacular and well-selected, and competently commented upon.

He Rang Down His Own Curtain

THE ORACLE OF BROADWAY. By Helen Mitchell Morosco and Leonard Paul Dugger. Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers. 1944. 387 pp. \$4.25.

Reviewed by ARTHUR BRONSON

OLIVER MOROSCO came out of the West in the early 1900's, already a glamorous figure in the theatrical producing world, to duplicate his Los Angeles success on the Broadway scene. It was the heyday of the American theatre, and Morosco carved an important niche for himself in it. He launched on both coasts a succession of hit plays and a barkload of future stars. He made a fortune and built up something of a theatrical empire, only to see it crash and see himself stripped clean when a smooth set of New York stock promoters took him over. His story is as intriguing a slice of American stage history as it is an integral part of it.

Yet "The Oracle of Broadway" is a disappointment. Written as Morosco's autobiography, dictated to his third wife, Helen Mitchell Morosco, and written by her with the assistance of Leonard Paul Dugger, the book suffers from a stuffy, sanctimonious style which may be the fault of the authors but is also somewhat a reflection of the producer's personality. The writing is often pedestrian, and the treatment of important events vague and superficial. There is a good deal of trivia and irrelevant matter, and the recital of controversial incidents is obviously one-sided and stacked throughout. Yet for all its glaring faults the book holds one's interest, a revealing chronicle of show business for both the stage-wise and the stage-struck.

Morosco, whose real name was Mitchell, took his professional tag from his theatrical tutor and benefactor, Walter Morosco, whose real name was Bishop. The latter, a colorful combination of acrobat-manager-producer, gave nine-year-old Ollie, in 1884, his first job as acrobat; introduced him into the business end of show business as a box-office clerk at eleven, and made Ollie, at sixteen, manager of a house, the youngest theatre manager in the United States. Oliver broke with the elder Morosco when he married Annie Cockrell, a housemaid, and went off to Los Angeles to make his fortune.

The book discusses in great detail Morosco's subsequent career, as a manager, playwright, songwriter, producer, and real estate magnate. He owned a string of coast theatres, and built a Morosco Theatre in both Los Angeles and New York. He produced "Bird of

Paradise," which ran twelve years; "Peg O' My Heart," which earned him five millions; "So Long Letty," "Lombardi, Ltd.," "Cappy Ricks," "Canary Cottage," and many other hits. He gave unknowns like Eddie Cantor, Earl Carroll, Marjorie Rambeau, Bebe Daniels, Edmund Lowe, Leo Carillo, Fay Bainter, Warner Baxter, and Harold Lloyd their big chance. He started a film company in 1913 but failed to see filmdom's possibilities—a situation made more ironical when the movies helped him back on his feet after his Broadway collapse by buying his plays for talking films.

Morosco's family life was always unhappy. The long personal and legal battles with his first wife, Annie (credited by many with Morosco's original success), and his temporary idyll with his second wife, Selma, are set out frankly, with Annie coming off as unfavorably as Selma comes off well. The story of Morosco's fleecing by, and subsequent trial of, the stock promoters is handled vaguely, with no names and few dates given. This vagueness, however, is a fault predominant in the book.

A few actors and playwrights come

off badly under Morosco's delineation, notably actress Marjorie Rambeau, "the unfortunate victim of an over-zealous mother," who failed him twice, and J. Hartley Manners, author of "Peg O' My Heart," who "tried to steal my rights to the play."

To hail Morosco, as the book does, as "the last of that great theatrical triumvirate" along with Charles Frohman and David Belasco, is a little thick, Morosco never attaining the rank or prestige of the other two. The book's title, too, is a little self-conscious, the "Oracle of Broadway" never gaining much prominence as a nickname for Morosco.

Important names, the Shuberts, the Belascos, appear casually through the book, sketchy and undeveloped. The book could have been much more than it is, a study of the times, the social changes, theatrical backgrounds, the growth of the cities along with the theatres. It could have been a complete social study of the times and a picture of a fabulous era, but boils down to a smug, one-sided recital of a gullible, vain though interesting stage figure.

KEEP ON BUYING BONDS
UNTIL IT HURTS (ADOLF)

Ben Hecht

hits the bullseye with this laugh thriller

I HATE ACTORS!



• A rowdy novel of high jinks and sudden death in California... a brilliant carnival of the most outrageous and entertaining characters you've ever met. \$2.50

2ND PRINTING BEFORE PUBLICATION
CROWN PUBLISHERS