

AICP STUDY GUIDE

Podcast

Episode 12: Every Man's Experience

And welcome, planners, to the twelfth episode of the VERY UNofficial AICP podcast. I'm Jonathan Miller, and thank you all so much for joining.

I hope everyone had a great weekend because with only 11 days till registration ends, and an exam window that's 21 to 35 days away, it's time to buckle down and put the proverbial pedal to the proverbial metal.

If you're just joining us, go on if you want and rewind back to Episode 5 when we started our little journey, or if you need some tips on how to buckle down with the studying to make the most of your time, listen to Episodes 3 and 4 when we talked to Alex and Shane at Planning Certification about some study tips and the exam structure.

Getting back to it though, we are picking back up where we left off with the tenements. As a quick refresher, the first model tenement was built in 1855, basically as a way to profit off of the massive immigration happening at the time.

The land owners were eager to capitalize on the housing shortage and they basically built narrow long buildings that took up, if not all, nearly all, of the lots they sat on; and way too families were jammed into there.

This got the New York Citizen's Association to put together a Council of Hygiene in 1864, and they went about surveying the dismal conditions; and that's where our story today begins.

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So, New York in the 1860's; as we had talked about, these were some deplorable living conditions. Deplorable enough that riots had broken out. To be fair, they were also partly because of military conscription, but living conditions were a big, big, big part of it.

So, in 1867, New York passed the Tenement House Act of 1867.

In short, it really didn't do much to improve, well, anything. Technically, it required that every building had a fire escape and that each building had enough toilets, which they defined as one for every twenty people.

It also stipulated that every sleeping room had to have a "window or ventilator." As you can maybe imagine, the first thing these building owners did was come into complete compliance with the spirit of the act, or instead, they complied with the letter of the act by building windows to the hallways and between rooms. Hey, the act didn't say the windows had to go outside.

Nice loophole guys, way to be stand-up citizens by providing interior windows.

So, New York shored up that loophole with the Tenement House Act of 1879. This act required windows that faced a source of fresh air and light. Solves everything right? Unfortunately, not so much. The response was the subject of this episode – the dumbbell tenement - aptly named for the shape of the

building.

If you haven't seen one already, we posted a picture on Instagram and Facebook, or use google or whatnot. Basically, the street frontage and rear of the building were built to full width of the lot with the middle part of the building pulled away from the side yard lot lines by a couple feet. When stacked next to each other in this way, it created air shafts between the buildings on the middle for the windows.

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The problem with this was it was too narrow of a space; and lacking public services it ended up accumulating garbage, standing water - there wasn't any proper drainage either - and even bodily waste. Yes, super gross.

Wait, let me backtrack so you can understand why there was fecal matter and the like in these air shafts. So, with the first tenements there wasn't any plumbing required, obviously nasty on so many levels. So the New York Tenement House Act of 1867 had required the one toilet for every twenty people thing we had talked about, and that they had to connect to a sewer, when available.

The stupid workaround builders did then was add multiple outhouses to the back; frequently not connected to sewers - go figure. So, the Tenement House Act of 1879 required connection to sewers, but the outhouses remained.

These outhouses obviously didn't work out so well. There were always lines for the bathroom if you can imagine, and if you know your geography, New York can get pretty cold. So, people just went inside and emptied their chamber pots into these open-air shafts. And that's why these air shafts were just full of shit - both literally and figuratively. Gross.

Side story I came across when looking all the details up; I guess some lady found out her husband was cheating on her and tried to kill herself by jumping into the air shaft, and she ended up walking away unscathed because so much garbage and waste at the bottom cushioned the fall. Like, really?

(06:06)

So, Jacob Riis to the rescue.

I'll just say, it seems silly to cover this part of it for one main reason. If you're listening to this, you're either studying and preparing for the AICP exam, or my parents and fiancé. Now in the case of the latter, you don't really care that much, though I appreciate the support. And in the case of the former - hopefully a majority of you - you, in all likelihood graduated with a degree in planning.

And if you have a degree in planning, there is no f-ing way you went four years or more in a planning program and didn't hear about Jacob Riis, and "How the Other Half Lives." That said, we'll talk a little about 'old Jake anyways, so you can be more well-rounded and have a little context and perspective behind the how's and the why's.

So, Jacob Riis immigrated to the U.S. in 1870 from Denmark. Like we've discussed, there were a lot of immigrants, and as we talked about, where'd they go? The tenements.

So, while Riis lived in the tenements when he first arrived, he worked several odd jobs. But ultimately, he ended up landing a job as a journalist-in-training with the New York News Association.

He did really well there, and subsequently landed a job with the New York Tribune as a police reporter. Well, this job led him to reporting on, well, crime in and around the tenements. And as a former resident of the tenements, he knew all too well what it was like to be poor, homeless, freshly immigrated, and jobless.

So, he began using his platform to document the conditions; to provide some context. He knew people didn't understand what tenement life was like, and he wanted the world to see. The problem was he was a reporter, not a photographer. That is, until he taught himself photography.

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So, Riis started taking a camera with him when he was out reporting. He was mostly out at night, and used the new invention at the time of flash photography to document the conditions of the tenements.

In 1890, he compiled all of these photos into a book entitled - now famously, "How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York."

The book was simple; just pictures that he had accumulated with some simple descriptions. And these photographs, having never been seen before by pretty much every man, woman, and child not living in the tenements were eye-opening and appalling.

So why did Riis decide to publish the book? Well, according to him - and I'm going to quote this directly because I really just love it. He said that, "Every man's experience ought to be worth something to the community from which he drew it, no matter what that experience may be."

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Anyways, most importantly though, his book gained a ton of traction, and one of the biggest people influenced by it? Good 'ole Teddy Roosevelt.

Ultimately, Riis worked with him to help get the Tenement Act of 1901 passed. That act outlawed tenements on narrow lots, forced courtyards where garbage could be removed easily, required access to light and indoor bathrooms, and forced existing tenements to be updated. More importantly though, this was all done through codes and supervised construction.

And another fun fact? Tenements built between 1879 and 1901 are also called Old Law Tenements. So if you ever hear that term, that's what they're referring to because they reflect the old law. And tenements built after 1901? Those were called - you guessed it - New Law Tenements.

(10:13)

So, what did we learn today?

Well, we covered the Tenement Housing Act of 1867 which required windows, and subsequently created the loophole that led to the Tenement Housing Act of 1879. And that act, the Housing Tenement Act of 1879, created the loophole that led to the development of the dumbbell tenement in the same year: 1879.

We also related these abysmal living conditions to Jacob Riis and his subsequent life path that led him to publish his legacy book, "How the Other Half Lives," and that was in 1890, and how that book inspired the Tenement Housing Act of 1901 which finally shored up all the loopholes.

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And there you have it. That's the story of the dumbbell tenement, Jacob Riis', "How the Other Half Lives," and the Housing Tenement Act of 1901. Short and sweet.

If you want to know more about these topics, links to all of the information we used to put this episode together is in the show notes, or poke around on the internet yourself. Investigation can be one of the best learning methods.

For those of you playing at home, our question last week was, "What year and in what location was the transcontinental railroad completed?" And that would be 1869 in Promontory Point, Utah.

If you want to play along this week, our question is going to be, "What year was the first Old Law Tenement built?" Another softball, but our topics today were definitely ones that were more talked about in planning classes; if you remember anything from those.

Well, thank you as always for tuning in. Go ahead and email me or send me a message through the website, Instagram or Facebook – whatever - with any questions, comments, or suggestions.

Also, if you haven't already, go on and hit that subscribe button for this podcast on whatever platform your using for podcasts, or sign up on the show's website so you can follow along with future episodes, help prepare for the exam and supplement all of your other study regimens. And be a peach and share this out with anyone you know who might be interested.

If you do think this podcast might help make a difference for fellow planners taking the exam, make sure you leave a rating so this content gets put in front of the people who could use it; and of course it helps me out, so it's not all altruistic, but whatever.

Make sure you tune in next week. It's going to be a good one, I think, and it's going to be a little all over the map. You see, I need to hit Henry George's, "Progress and Poverty," but it'll end up dovetailing into some good stuff on economic development.

Anyways, really, thanks again everyone, 'till next time.

Links:

Tenement House Acts

[https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/tenements#:~:text=The%20Tenement%20House%20Act%20of,or%20privy\)%20per%2020%20people.](https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/tenements#:~:text=The%20Tenement%20House%20Act%20of,or%20privy)%20per%2020%20people.)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_State_Tenement_House_Act

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Law_Tenement

Dumbbell Tenement

<http://livingcityarchive.org/htm/themes/tenements/1879.htm>

https://americanexperience.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Tenement-Life_.pdf

<https://www.6sqft.com/a-short-history-of-new-york-citys-foul-air-shafts/>

Jacob Riis

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_the_Other_Half_Lives#:~:text=How%20the%20Other%20Half%20Lives%3A%20Studies%20among%20the%20Tenements%20of,City%20slums%20in%20the%201880s.

<https://mymodernmet.com/jacob-riis-how-the-other-half-lives/>

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jacob-riis/writer.html>

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/pioneering-social-reformer-jacob-riis-revealed-how-other-half-lives-america-180951546/>

<https://www.biography.com/writer/jacob-riis>

