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THE WORK OF "LA RENAISSANCE DES CITES"

This Society (which was founded in 1916) has, for its sub-title, "Oeuvre d'entre aide sociale." Its object is to assist communes, towns, and villages of France to a complete social and material renaissance, in a practical way, by grouping together in a definite organization the leading authorities on such questions as Town Planning, public hygiene, sanitation, water supply, etc., and the various economic problems—such as claims for war damage, indemnities, etc.—which have to be solved before a satisfactory solution to the actual question of reconstruction is possible. The work of its members is entirely honorary, and the Society is non-political in its organization; it is supported by all shades of religious opinion.

The fundamental principle on which the efficient and practical organization has been built up is that of co-operation with local authorities in the ultimate solution of the problems with which they have to deal. This is achieved, chiefly, by advising Mayors and other local authorities on technical points, and by assisting them in their negotiations with the various administrative departments of the State: by this means, difficulties and delays are avoided, which, without such help, would prove almost insurmountable, and the work of actual reconstruction is expedited.

The work of "La Renaissance des Cités" is not confined to the devastated areas, but the greater part of its activities have so far been devoted to the solution of the problems resulting from the devastation of the Liberated Regions, which called for immediate action on the conclusion of the War.

Before attempting to give a brief summary of what has already been done in this direction it is, perhaps, desirable to give a short account of the early history of the Society. "La Renaissance des Cités" was founded in 1916 by two artists, M. Adar Mitrécy, and Mlle. Tarrade-Page; with remarkable prescience they foresaw the difficulties which would attend the efforts of the Communes in the war area with regard to the problems of reconstruction. The movement encountered considerable opposition from various sources in its early days, and, by the untimely death of M. Adar Mitrécy, the work of organization fell on Mlle. Tarrade-Page. Those of us who know something of the peculiar difficulties of organizing a society of voluntary workers (especially when its activities are so intimately connected with the work of official departments) can appreciate the magnitude of such a task, and admire the courage and perseverance which finally resulted in the creation of a body of experts whose authority was unquestioned in the matters with which they had to deal.

An Executive Committee was first formed, having, as its joint Presidents, M. Charles Dumont (Ancien Ministre, Député du Jura, and now Rapporteur Général du Budget), and M. Louis Marin, (Député de Nancy, Rapporteur Général du Budget), under the patronage of the President of the Republic, their Majesties the King and Queen of the Belgians, the Minister for the Liberated Regions, the Marshals Joffre and Foch, the Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris, the President of the Council of the Reformed Church, and the Chief Rabbi.

The next step was the important one of the creation of the Technical Advisory Committees. Of these, the "Commission Technique," presided over by M. Louis Bonnier, Inspecteur-Général des Services d'Architecture et d'Esthétique à la Préfecture de la Seine, had the important task of examining and reporting upon all architectural and constructional questions.

The "Commission Sociale," under the direction of M. Georges-Risler, Président de la Section d'Hygiène Urbaine et rural du Musée Sociale, dealt with questions of hygiene, sanitation, water supply, etc. The "Commission Juridique," which had, as its president, Me. Ferdinand Larnaude, Doyen de la Faculté de Droit de l'Université de Paris, was entrusted with the examination of the legal difficulties which were encountered in the problems of reconstruction. The "Commission Artistique" comprised amongst its members many well-known artists and was fortunate in having, as its president, M. François Flameng, Président de l'Institut and of the Société des Artistes Français. The "Commission Archéologique" was presided over by M. Lefevre-Portalis, Président de la Société Française d'Archéologie.

The founders then decided that the success of their work was

sufficiently assured to justify an appeal for funds ; this appeal met with a satisfactory response. The Society was recognized and subventioned by the State, and subscriptions were received from the provinces (départements), municipalities, banks, etc., in France, together with a generous response from the United States (where committees had been formed for this purpose), and an annual grant from the Trustees of the Rockefeller Foundation.

The period for action had now arrived, and the practical work of "La Renaissance des Cités," commenced with the examination, by the "Commission Sociale," of the regulations of the Ministry of the Interior on public health, which resulted in their recommendations being adopted by the Conseil supérieur d'hygiène publique de France. The Town Planning Schemes (under the law of 14th March, 1919) for the reconstruction of the town of Albert (Somme), Tracy-le-Val, and Ollencourt (Oise), and La Courneuve (Seine), were examined by the "Commission Technique" and certain modifications suggested, with satisfactory results. A competition was organized for a Town Planning Scheme for the town and district of Chauny (Aisne), and the Society had the satisfaction of seeing the first premiated scheme adopted by the Municipality for the rebuilding of their town.

The question of the reconstruction of Coucy le Château was also considered by the "Commission Technique," and, as a result of their report, these ruins and the site were classed as a "Monument Historique."

Through the generosity of the American Red Cross authorities, and the support of their American benefactors, "La Renaissance des Cités" were able to secure the services of Major George B. Ford, the well-known American Town Planning expert, who (as the special delegate of the Society) personally visited a large number of Communes in the devastated areas, and advised the municipal and other authorities on the preparation of the Town Planning Schemes for some 200 towns and villages in this area, in accordance with the requirements of the law of 1919, and the latest developments of Town Planning. Major Ford also gave the Society the benefit of his experience in the preparation of the Town Plan for Rheims. This plan was approved by the Municipal Council on 17th June, 1920, and finally approved by the "Commission supérieure des Plans d'aménagement, d'embellissement et d'extension" on 25th July, 1920, which created a record for speed. This plan was also the first to be finally approved by the Commission Supérieure.

The plans for the reconstruction of the village of Pinon (Aisne), "adopted" by "La Renaissance des Cités" for reconstruction as a model village, were finally approved at a recent meeting of the "Commission Technique," and as the necessary funds have been provided, it is hoped

that the work of rebuilding will be commenced at an early date. And, early in March of this year, a preliminary study of the scheme of reconstruction for St. Quentin (Somme), was undertaken by the Commission at the request of the Municipal authorities.

It is to be regretted that but little British support has been given to the very practical and useful work of the Society ; much could be done to “adopt” (for the purpose of rebuilding on modern Garden City lines) the numerous other villages who have made requests to the Society for their assistance in this direction, were the necessary funds available. It seems somewhat remarkable that, as a practical nation, we prefer to support a more limited scheme of “adoption,” which certainly is of great value in providing the necessities of existence to the population, but is of no great assistance in dealing with the greater problem of improving the pre-war condition of the destroyed villages.

Mention must, however, be made of the generous support given to the Society in its work by Mr. George Cadbury, who has assisted “*La Renaissance des Cités*” not only financially but also by valuable suggestions with regard to propaganda work in favour of the Garden City idea, which is not so fully appreciated in France as in this country.

H. P. CART DE LAFONTAINE.

Plate 2

Rue Colbert

RHEIMS