

THE "TODAY" SHOW

ROBERT WEAVER INTERVIEWED

NBC NETWORK

AUGUST 18, 1964

FRANK BLAIR: Surprising as it may seem, some 70 percent of this nation's total population is clustered together within just one percent of our total land area. Now, to put that into more simple terms, it means that most Americans live in a city or a city's suburbs, a fact that's producing a growing number of problems for all of us. What they are and some of the things that might be done about them is the subject of this new book, "The Urban Complex" by Robert C. Weaver, a gentleman whom some of you may know as the head of the Federal Housing and Home Finance Agency and the President's advisor on urban affairs. Good morning, Mr. Weaver.

WEAVER: Good morning.

BLAIR: Let's take things in perspective, if we can, on this subject. What is your definition of "the city"?

WEAVER: Well, I think the city is obviously, today, the core of the metropolitan area. It's the hub, as it were, from which you get the satellite suburbs, and altogether they make up the metropolitan complex.

BLAIR: Well, I think we're all aware that city life is getting to be more complicated for all of us. What changes has the city undergone in the last 20 years?

WEAVER: I think there are several basic changes. Of course, it's undergone many. But I would say, the first one, of course, has been the change in the population distribution, with people moving more and more out into the suburbs from the areas of the city which are in decay or decline. And this creates financial problems for it, obviously.

The second thing is that certain types of industries are moving out from the central city, because they want horizontal factories, factories over a wide expanse rather than vertical factories. And thirdly, the one thing that is probably typical of our great problems today, both in the central city and the suburbs, is the congestion of traffic.

BLAIR: Well, without having to tear down the city and start all over again, what can we do about some of these problems?

WEAVER: Well, I think the thing that we're learning is the fact that many of these things we can influence by planning--by looking at the problem, by looking at the objective that we have, and trying to use intelligence, trying to present alternatives and trying to choose that alternative which will do the job best. This is the essence of planning.

Also we're learning that some of the great problems are problems which do not stop at the geographic limits of a city, let me say, or of a township; but they go across. And here is our great challenge, how we can develop the types of governmental agencies which will meet these problems which do not coincide with our present governmental lines of authority. And my guess is that we'll do it on an ad hoc basis.

BLAIR: Well now, could you describe for us, Mr. Weaver, with the present day limitations that we have, what kind of city would you like to see?

WEAVER: Well, I think the first thing I'd like to see would be an attractive city, because I think the aesthetics of living are terribly important. Secondly, I'd like to see an open city in many ways--open in the sense that Americans--all Americans--would have freedom of choice as to where they'd live, in accordance with their effective demand for housing. And more effective demand I'd like to see, too, but this is another matter.

And thirdly, I'd like to see a city that was open in a sense that people and goods could flow much more freely than we have today; and this is why we're interested in and we now have a new bit of legislation for assistance to mass transit. Because we don't think that you can get this flow of people without having some form of mass transit; you can't depend just upon the automobile.

BLAIR: Well, you're a practical man, Mr. Weaver--how far short of this ideal city are we going to wind up with?

WEAVER: Well, I don't know what you mean by "wind up"--depends upon how long. In my lifetime, I think we're going to approach some of the solutions in many of the areas which I have mentioned. I think we are beginning at least to have a great deal more recognition of these problems than we had before, and in a democracy, I think, recognition of a problem is the first step to its solution.

BLAIR: Well, I have a note here that architectural critic Jane Jacobs has often accused planners of being cold and utilitarian in their thinking, and that most of their urban renewal results in the changing of a warm neighborhood into a sterile area--that's the result of urban renewal in her opinion. How do you answer that criticism?

WEAVER: Well, I think that in the first place these "warm neighborhoods" were not quite as warm as she suggested in the sense that she is suggesting warmth. They have been warm--they've been warm with crime, they've been warm with social problems, they've been warm with decadence and decay. Now there are instances--and there's one that's classic in the field of urban renewal, and that's the west end of Boston, where you did have an area which though physically in decline was a well-integrated neighborhood and there was warmth there and unfortunately that was demolished; and that's been used from then on to damn urban renewal and to be the typical--whereas it was the atypical--case.

Actually, the average area that is torn down is not this cohesive warm thing that these romanticists would like us to believe; it's an area with social pathology, an area with physical decline, an area of ugliness in every sense of the word; and also an area where the people are constantly on the move, so you don't have the neighborhood that has all of these characteristics that should be preserved.

I grant you that there have been great mistakes--and any program that's only 15 years old is bound to make mistakes. There has been sterility in the design, but I think we're getting much, much farther away from that; and I would invite anybody who wants to see what urban renewal can do in a residential area to come to Washington, D. C. and see Southwest Redevelopment, which I think is a most attractive place. And also we have attractive developments in San Francisco, in St. Louis, and in scores of cities.

BLAIR: Well, you're talking about residential redevelopment primarily now. What about business, downtown area, urban redevelopment?

WEAVER: Well, I think here our architectural successes are even greater and pretty much more further along than in the residential areas. Last night I was at a performance at New York State Theater, here at Lincoln Center, which I think is a magnificent building; and I was at the dedication of the Plaza in Hartford, Connecticut, which is a very, very lovely development.

BLAIR: It's been subject to a lot of criticism, however.

WEAVER: Of course it is, because taste is a subjective thing; and no great architecture is immediately appealing to everyone. I'm sure that the pieces which we now look well upon were once quite controversial; all art is controversial, and all art is subjective. But I think the important thing is that people are concerned with design and they feel that this is something

that has to be given some attention. And only time can tell whether or not it's going to be enduring.

BLAIR: You touched on a subject, Mr. Weaver, that some cities are being strangled by their own traffic problems. Well, we certainly see that right here in New York, but New York is not typical of a great many cities in the country. New York has narrow streets, one-way streets, and we have no delivery areas--all deliveries have to be made from sidewalks and so on. Do you anticipate that anything will ever be done about that kind of problem?

WEAVER: Yes, I think some things can be done about it; as a matter of fact, New York does a great deal about it. Imagine New York without its mass transit facilities; 80 percent of the people, I am told, who come and go from New York during the rush hour go by some form of mass transportation.

BLAIR: We went through that several years ago when we had a subway strike here.

WEAVER: I was here at the time, I recall it.

BLAIR: We know what that's like. We've also been through some rather severe snowstorms where private cars have been eliminated from the streets; and this helped to cure the traffic problem. Now, is it possible that we might get into some situation like that, where private cars may not be allowed to come into big cities?

WEAVER: Well, since the essence of my philosophy is that everything that government does should be to provide greater choices for people, I hope not.

I hope we can be creative enough not to get to the ultimate. And the ultimate, of course, would be in some way to discourage or to prohibit or to keep out the number of cars that now come into a large city. I think this would be most unfortunate; but I think that it could happen. And this is why we're trying to do something now about a mass transit system. We're trying to get those reforms

and those demonstration projects which show that if you give people better service they will increase the ridership; and when they increase the ridership, the revenue increases.

BLAIR: Mr. Pell, representing the State of Rhode Island, has indicated that he would like to see something in the Democratic Platform concerning the mass transportation, particularly here in the East. He's talking more, I think, of long-range railroad transportation from Washington to Boston; but this is a serious problem with us--mass transportation on a long- or short-haul basis.

WEAVER: Yes, I think that our biggest problem, from the urban point of view, is in the urban areas, not in between them. These things are not unrelated, obviously; and I think the problem there is the problem of technique, a problem of technical development--the problem within the city is a financial problem of making it economically feasible.

BLAIR: Do you see the Federal Government subsidizing this?

WEAVER: We're already doing it. We've just passed a mass transit bill this year and, as a matter of fact, on Friday we were talking about the appropriations for that bill.

BLAIR: Doesn't this cost a lot of money, Mr. Weaver?

WEAVER: Yes, it does; but it doesn't cost, I don't think, as much as many people would believe. Because, if we can reverse the spiral of cutting down the ridership, cutting down the revenue, cutting down the service--and this keeps feeding on itself--and reverse that, it won't take as much money as I think many people believe, if we're able to do it soundly.

BLAIR: Well, ultimately the taxpayer has to provide the subsidy money.

WEAVER: Yes, he does; but I think ultimately it's much cheaper than for the taxpayer to pay for a city being strangled to death.

BLAIR: You know, how about the population exodus, the rush to the suburban crabgrass, so to speak. Has this affected the city proper?

WEAVER: Oh definitely. It has affected us most immediately in the matter of revenue. Because most of the people who have moved are those who are of a higher income group and who pay higher taxes. But, this seems to be now reversing to some degree. In other words, it's a two-way movement now; we're having people come back to the city. And I think the one thing that urban renewal has proven is that if the people in the city have something to come back to--if I can end the sentence with a preposition--they will come back.

BLAIR: I do it all the time. Why do they come back to the city? Is it to get away from the crabgrass or what?

WEAVER: Well, I think it's a combination of circumstances. I was born in the suburbs and I must say that lawnmowers don't appeal to me anymore. There's a convenience of being able to walk to work. There's a convenience that I had when I lived here in Manhattan of not having a car because I didn't need one. There's the convenience of being able to go away and just lock the apartment door and not worry about whether or not the water's going to freeze and so forth. And there are also the conveniences to many people of being able to be within hitting distance of the cultural things which interest them as well as the other exciting things which I think a central city has.

BLAIR: In 30 seconds, Mr. Weaver, can you tell me what the urbanite can expect in the next 25 years?

WEAVER: Yes. I think he can expect a lot of problems; I think he can expect a lot of progress; I think he can expect a more viable city; I think he can expect a more attractive city; and I think he can expect, from himself, the need for putting more into his city in order that he can get more out of it.

BLAIR: Thank you, Mr. Weaver. Robert C. Weaver, the head of the Federal Housing and Home Finance Agency; his book just out, "The Urban Complex: Human Values in Urban Life." Thank you for being with us.

#

