

HISTORY OF CHICAGO BUILDING CONGRESS

In the summer and fall of 1938, a spirited group of Chicago building industry leaders met on several occasions to establish an embracing new trade association. This ringing address was delivered in December of that year by Elmer C. Jensen, president of the Illinois Society of Architects, at the Organizational Meeting of the proposed "Chicago Building Congress," held on Tuesday, December 13, 1938, at the Union League Club in Chicago. The following year of 1939 witnessed regular CBC meetings beginning at the Union League Club, which continue down to this day. Mr. Jensen would go on to serve with distinction as the CBC's first president during the formative prewar years of 1939 to 1941.

Historic Remarks by Elmer C. Jensen at the Organizational Meeting of the Proposed Chicago Building Congress: Tuesday, December 13, 1938, at the Union League Club in Chicago.

The question will naturally occur to many of you as to the reasons for this meeting. The building industry in our country is one of the most important, in numbers employed, in money exchanged, and from the standpoint of general prosperity of the country. It has been reported that from 1920 to 1928, there were, in round figures, five million men and women gainfully employed in this industry. At present, it is estimated that approximately one-third of this number is employed. It needs no stretch of imagination or exaggeration of facts to assume that, if this full number could again be gainfully employed, the depression would be completely routed and confidence again in large measure restored. In this, the second city of our country, conditions are relatively the same, and, according to some authorities, are even less favorable than in the balance of the country. It has been estimated that, in Chicago alone, there are over 200,000 engaged directly in building work. The prosperity and well-being of this number has no mean purpose. They are engaged in providing shelter for all purposes necessary for human existence. At the moment there is no head or central organization representing its many elements and interests. It has no voice to reach the public or legislative bodies.

The purpose of this congress should be to correlate and unite into one effective organization individuals, firms, corporations and labor unions – directly or indirectly engaged in or related to the building industry in its widest scope – to cultivate a spirit of goodwill and co-operation within the industry and promote the general welfare of the community. It is extremely important to create goodwill and willing co-operation on the part of labor. Intimate contact with labor breeds genuine appreciation of the brawn and skill of the workers. This phase alone may well fill pages with its romance and its interest. The Congress should recognize that labor is entitled to more than a mere living wage. The public should be assured that, as far as possible, the industry will promote a high quality of products without excessive cost. Because of the lack of co-ordination in the industry, practices have developed, the results of which have been contrary to the purposes intended. The results have created discord, lack of harmony and inefficiency, and have been partly responsible for the lack of confidence on the part of the public.

Mission of the Chicago Building Congress

The Chicago Building Congress ("the Congress") should co-ordinate and seek to harmonize the interests and activities of the various groups engaged in or related to the building industry through the promulgation of codes of ethics and fair practice. Our city apparently is on the threshold of a period of reconstruction. We are becoming conscious of many of our physical shortcomings. The correction of these defects will go far towards creating employment and prosperity within the industry.

Our industry is, above all others, the one most affected by reconstruction of our city fabric. The Congress should assist in the procurement of adequate state enabling legislation and local municipal ordinances, especially as they relate to regional and city planning, zoning, and the subdivision and development of land, building, sanitary and housing codes, and the equitable assessment of property, both for general taxation and special assessments. There are important civic organizations

that are studying our tax situation and we should effectively co-operate in finding a satisfactory solution. Large areas of our city, due to a number of causes, have been and are being blighted. Out of this blight, slums have been created. This city cannot continue to properly grow and develop until practical methods have been found to correct this situation.

The Congress should encourage efforts on the part of neighborhood and community organizations to eliminate blight and slums, and to prevent the spread of further blight in neighborhoods not yet affected. This will involve, among other things, the reconstruction of buildings now existing that are unfit for habitation, and the renovation of many buildings that have been neglected. The Congress should also encourage and promote new research studies and scientific surveys designed to improve the methods, materials, equipment and designs employed by the industry so that there may result a wider distribution of the industry's products and services. A very considerable number of workers employed in this industry have developed conspicuous zeal and skill, and, in some cases, the nature of their work involves hazards and hardship that require uncommon courage. Organizations of workers and trade organizations within the industry have, on occasion, displayed admirable public spirit – and these qualities and efforts should be recognized by the Congress by suitable honorable awards. The product of our industry forms so much of our everyday life and such a large part of the physical side of our city, that the public has taken it for granted, and apparently do not recognize the tremendous size and importance of the industry as a whole.

To create a public consciousness of its magnitude, the Congress should sponsor, initiate, and also promote a comprehensive educational course of studies, supported by charts, graphs, diagrams, statistics, etc., for use by trade schools and colleges dealing with every phase of the building industry. An industry which now numbers an army of over 200,000 people – and produces products which are so close and vital to the public – should be an important force for the wellbeing of the city. Home ownership is not only extremely desirable, but also forms one of our strongest bulwarks against radicalism. Any legitimate action which promotes this should be effectively developed, and with this, the Congress should sponsor and promote adult educational programs designed to give to the public an honest and factual picture of industry problems and aspirations, through use of radio, motion pictures, and permanent or temporary exhibits or expositions. The basic principle of the Congress shall be to serve the interests of the industry, as a coordinated unit, viewing all of its branches as parts of a large, interdependent organism, rather than to serve the interests of any group or section of said industry. To achieve these results will require earnest and devoted efforts on the part of the membership of the Congress. It will mean a willingness to fore go some advantages as a sacrifice for the benefit of the whole. This sacrifice should not be too difficult when recognized that it is a contribution to the well being and prosperity of this great industry. Surely, all of these aims cannot be considered utopian. They are practical and entirely worthy of the earnest efforts of intelligent men.