

ANDREW THOMAS, A CITY ARCHITECT

Housing Projects Designer Dies at 90—Fought Slums

Andrew J. Thomas, an architect who designed millions of dollars worth of housing projects for John D. Rockefeller Jr. in the city and who popularized the garden apartment, died Sunday at Harkness Pavilion. He was 90 years old.

In 1924, soon after completing a \$7 million six-block apartment development for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in Queens, Mr. Thomas said:

"I'll abolish every slum in New York if I can gain the attention and help of charitable organizations, the state and society. I'll begin as soon as the first bond issue raises the money and I'll raze 9 or 10 blocks at a time until the entire city is rebuilt."

If Mr. Thomas fell short of his goal, it was not for lack of effort. During a 75-year career, he designed model projects in Cleveland, Bayonne, N. J., Long Island City, Queens, Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx.

Thomas Gardens at 840 Mott Avenue in the Bronx still bears his name. He designed the old Queens County Court House and the Board of Transportation building in Brooklyn.

But it was alleviation of slum conditions that challenged Mr. Thomas most. His grayish-blue eyes would light up with enthusiasm or blaze with impatience at anything that delayed his plans for changing the face of the city.

In designing the Metropolitan Life houses, Mr. Thomas first planned to use 8,000 square feet of a 100x100 foot lot for each building. He found he could cut a building's size to 6,700 feet, then 6,100, finally 5,000 feet—50 per cent of the land. While the rooms were slightly smaller than first envisioned, there was more than ample compensation in the space and airiness around the building.

In the Mott Houses, which he designed for Mr. Rockefeller, the architect found he could construct each building on 46 per cent of the land. The garden apartment was born.

Although he was successful financially, Mr. Thomas seemed to understand the problems and needs of the tenement dweller. He could appeal forcefully to his own laborers also. When he found that other contractors were trying to hire away the men who were building the five apartment houses of his Bayonne project in the nineteen-twenties, he called the workers together and told them:

"This housing is being built to provide decent homes for union men and their families. The costs have all been figured down to the last cent, including the money you fellows agreed to work for. If your price goes up we'll have to break our promise and raise the rents on our tenants, all good union men.

"You'll stand by your own people, won't you? Are you with us? Will you stick with us?"

A hundred voices shouted, "Sure!" and the work was finished.

Designed Own Dwelling

Unable to get away from his life's consuming interest, Mr. Thomas designed his own house as a hobby. It was on Fenimore Road, near the Hartsdale station in Westchester. Built in the Normandy style, it had seven rooms, including a hexagonal conservatory with a floor in various colored tiles.

The walls were hung with bird cages, and in the spacious Japanese rock garden paraded South African cranes, silver pheasants and tropical birds.

Mr. Thomas was born on Lower Broadway. At the death of his parents when he was 13, he took a job as a jeweler's helper, but he had no liking for that business. He went to Los Angeles to work as a bellhop in a hotel, and returned to the city two years later to become a rent collector for a real-estate speculator.

It was then he first saw the dank, ugly tenements. He later became a timekeeper for a contractor, and he found himself spending long nights in shanty offices figuring out construction plans.

"I had never taken a drawing lesson nor had any technical schooling in architecture but I knew what people needed to make them comfortable," he said.

Mr. Thomas's last project was completed about three years ago. It was a hospital for the insane in upstate New York, the contract for which he had been awarded when he was 80.

There are no immediate survivors.