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Charles Abrams: Papers and Files



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Department of Manuscripts and University Archives

John M. Olin Library

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Introductory Note

Charles Abrams's papers present the story of an unusually full career, and one that was dominated by his interest in housing and discrimination. They also identify the efforts of other individuals in New York State, the United States, and the world, who were engaged with him in the effort to improve the living conditions of people. And they show, to a large degree, the extent to which governments and organizations concerned themselves with these problems during the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Abrams indicated in his will that he wished his papers to be made available to scholars and charged his literary executor, Professor Lloyd Rodwin, with working out a plan to accomplish that desire. Following an agreement signed in November 1970, Cornell University Libraries' Department of Manuscripts and University Archives received the entire collection, organized it, and selected from it material to be microfilmed. The filmed collection and accompanying printed guide were given to four institutions with which Abrams had been associated and offered for sale to any others who wish to expand their research holdings.



Charles Abrams

A Biography

The late Charles Abrams was a lover of cities and the people who live in them. When he died in 1970 at the age of sixty-eight, he was the dean of world housing experts—a most unacademic dean who upset established theory with pragmatic heresies. “Charlie has always kept his allies off balance,” a New Deal housing expert once observed. “He is continually questioning and rethinking the fundamental beliefs for which all of us, including him, have fought and bled.”

His voluminous papers are the record of a richly varied career unified in subject (cities), approach (imaginative), method (empirical), and style (direct). These threads run through and tie together the Abrams story, as seen through his papers, from his early success in law and real estate to the middle decades when he held office under Mayor LaGuardia and Governor Harriman in various city and state positions concerned with housing and racial discrimination. And, through the last sixteen years of his career, he was both a peripatetic teacher and a worldwide troubleshooter in the field of urban housing and planning, the former as a professor at Harvard, Columbia, M.I.T., and other universities, the latter as the most dynamic globe-trotting expert for the U.N. on housing problems in Asia, Africa, and South America.

All this, plus the seven books he wrote, plus the myriad reports, surveys, lectures, and other mimeographed items (some as long as some books), adds up to quite a lot of experience—he probably knew more about housing, at the practical-financial-political level, than any other man of his time—and explains the considerable influence Abrams has had on several generations of student and professional “urbanologists,” that is, “one who claims to be an expert on the woes of the urban problem and professes to have the answers.” Such is the definition given in his final work, *The Language of Cities*, a delightfully personal and unacademic “glossary of terms”—he wanted to call it *A Glommentary* (gloss-cum-commentary) but the publishers balked.

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In a review of one of Abrams's books, *The City Is the Frontier*, Eric Larrabee suggests what made Abrams such a signal critic and prophet of our times:

Charles Abrams knows more about urban planning and real estate than any decent man should. An *alte Kampfer*, he was going down to defeat in glorious causes before the rest of us had chosen sides, and his book is illuminated by an awareness of what has failed us all: a failure of the urban spirit—"a lag in the initiative of the American people, and their waning interest in their urban culture and leisure and in the environment that nourishes them." Years in the jungle of housing laws and administration have made Abrams a master of its complexities: he knows how the fate of a neighborhood can hinge on a mortgage-interest rate, how legislation can be made to serve the opposite of its aims, and how the best of intentions can be tripped up over a tiny pebble of stubborn self-interest. He knows how much patience, perseverance, and guile are needed to effect even the most trivial improvement. Most of all, he knows that the destruction of American cities did not simply happen; it was done—and he knows who did it.

Charles Abrams was born in Vilna, Poland, then part of Czarist Russia, in 1902. There, his father was a tradesman, his mother respected as a direct descendant of the Vilna Gaon—one of the major religious and Talmudic leaders of his time. The family emigrated to the United States two years later, settling in that great center of Jewish immigration: the Williamsburgh section of Brooklyn. Many years later, when Abrams worked on a housing code for the LaGuardia administration, he was amazed to find that, according to all physical standards, he had grown up in a slum. But since nobody then realized it, it wasn't—except statistically. Williamsburgh was a hard-working, lively, close-knit community, as was the Abrams family, and young Charles was happy in both. It instilled in him a sensitivity to the important role of neighborhoods in people's lives. His father managed to support the family by selling pickles and herring from a sidewalk stand. "There was something noble about everything he did," the son recalled later, "Even the sale of a miserable pickled herring somehow became a courtly and humane transaction." Charles went to public schools, and by nine he was adding to the family income by after-school jobs as a messenger boy and as a lamplighter. The latter job he recalled as exhilarating, even romantic: speeding along on roller skates in the Brooklyn twilights and dawns, he would declaim such heady stuff as Mark Antony's Funeral Oration ("If you have tears, prepare to shed them now . . .") or Spartacus to the Gladiators ("Ye call me chief, and ye do well to call me chief.") When he had finished high school, college being out of the question in that Paleozoic time for the son of a vendor, Charles went to Brooklyn Law School at night, financing himself by working in law offices during the day. His last job, and the most important in its formative effect on his personality and career, was with Arthur Garfield Hays, general counsel to the American Civil Liberties Union, a leading constitutional lawyer and a veteran and resourceful fighter for liberal causes. The young Abrams tried to emulate Hays—smoked a pipe because his hero did—and the mature Abrams

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continued to admire Hays. Probably an important factor in his early resolution to divert the thrust of his career from money-making into crusading (a most practical and tireless crusader who always carried a slide rule and a ham sandwich in his helmet) was the example of Arthur Garfield Hays.

In 1923, shortly after he was admitted to the bar, Abrams set up a law partnership with Bernard Botein, later a justice of the New York State Supreme Court. In five years he was making \$25,000 annually, a princely take for a young lawyer then and not unimpressive today. He began to invest his earnings in Greenwich Village real estate, acquiring in seven or eight years some eighty properties, most of which did nicely (but he claimed he lost most of his hair in the process). He took considerable pride in reviving and bettering that historic section of Manhattan whenever possible. During this period, he married Ruth Davidson, now a painter of note, and settled in a spacious brownstone house on West Tenth Street in Greenwich Village, where they proceeded to raise a family and to entertain, at large and extremely variegated parties, a constantly fluctuating circle of old friends, new acquaintances, students, and distinguished visiting firemen, urbanological and otherwise, from Ghana, Chile, Philadelphia, Paris, London, and other foreign parts. ("These parties of Charlie's and Ruth's were unique, in fact each one was unique" an experienced Manhattan party-goer recalls. "You never knew what, or who, to expect. All you could be sure of was plenty of talk, plenty of good food and drink, and plenty of Charlie—and that you'd be invited at the last minute or later.") Charlie, as even casual acquaintances instantly called him, was a puckish spirit, overflowing with wisecracks, puns, and extemporaneous jingles he couldn't resist trying out on the most solemn occasions. Not that any occasion was very solemn with Charlie around. "High on a list of secret ambitions he drew up in 1929 was: 'Write a great song hit,' " Bernard Taper writes in his definitive profile in *The New Yorker* of February 4 and 11, 1967. It was one of the few ambitions the Williamsburgh lamplighter didn't achieve.

In 1933, Mayor LaGuardia asked Abrams to help draft the legislation under which the New York City Housing Authority, the first one in the country, was founded the next year with Abrams as its counsel. He was an early shaper of public housing law, notably when he successfully argued the city's suit against one Andrew Muller, a landlord who refused all offers for a piece of property the city needed for a housing project. Abrams thought Muller's property could be condemned and acquired by an extension of the principle of eminent domain to this new field. LaGuardia and some of his commissioners were hesitant, fearing that to lose the case might jeopardize the whole program. But their young counsel persuaded them to risk it and established an important precedent. "If Abrams hadn't pressed the

Muller case and won it, there would be no public housing today," stated Longdon Post, the Housing Authority's chairman.

Abrams resigned as counsel in 1937, after clashing with the mercurial and increasingly dictatorial LaGuardia, but he didn't go back to money-making. The metamorphosis was permanent. "I switched [in 1933] from the profit motive to the prophet motive," he punned. The business savvy he had acquired as a successful player of the "real-estate game" provided a practical foundation for his housing crusades that few if any other urbanologists could command. "He says that on many occasions, both on missions abroad and here in the United States," Bernard Taper writes, "his achievement has been to come up with some 'gimmick'—some legal formula or some administrative or financial mechanism—that generates significant social action. 'What I am really is a kind of finagler,' he says. 'In real estate I learned how to finagle for myself. After that, I began finagling for society.' "

In 1939, he published his first book, *Revolution in Land*, which Lewis Mumford called the most significant study of landed property since Henry George. This was followed by *The Future of Housing* in 1946. From 1947 to 1949 he was the *New York Post*'s housing columnist; he raked a lot of muck in the factual, documented, hard-hitting tradition of Steffens and Tarbell. In 1947 he fought the important case of *Dorsey v. Stuyvesant Town* challenging the right, on constitution grounds, of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company to refuse to rent apartments to blacks in its huge housing project, which was partially financed from public funds. The case was lost in court but, stimulated by Abrams, first the New York City Council and, later, the New York State legislature passed the first laws forbidding racial discrimination in housing projects built with public money.

Abrams was appointed New York State Rent Administrator by Governor Averell Harriman in 1954 and the next year chairman of the New York State Commission Against Discrimination. In this post, which he held until 1959, Abrams introduced a new concept of active intervention: he investigated whole industries, sponsored research into employment patterns, and negotiated agreements with large corporations. His *Forbidden Neighbors*, published during this period, was a pioneering study of racial discrimination in housing.

The last sixteen years of Charles Abrams's life were divided among traveling abroad as a housing expert for the UN, making studies and recommendations on domestic housing problems, and university teaching.

His first UN missions were in 1954: to Turkey (where he was initially frustrated and then, in a typically ingenious and complicated Abramsian ploy that was barely if at all related to the purpose of his

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mission, managed to bring about the founding of the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, which has proved to be one of his most durable brainstorms) and to Ghana (where he devised a simple and obvious—after he'd thought it up—"roof-loan" scheme for financing housing in underdeveloped countries, a scheme that was later used in Bolivia and Nigeria). In the following years he served on UN missions to Kenya, Pakistan, India, the Philippines, Ireland, Japan, Jamaica, Singapore, and a few other places; he was also a consultant to Ford Foundation projects in Calcutta and Chile. Ernest Weissmann, a Yugoslav architect who was formerly director of the Housing, Building, and Planning Branch of the UN has defined the Abrams quality as UN missionary:

That roof-loan plan of his was so simple yet only someone with a flexible and original mind would have thought of it . . . The impact that Abrams' missions make has amazed us. He sees housing as part of the whole social, political and economic picture. This alone makes him more valuable than any other specialist I know. But, leaving aside the technical schemes he offers, his very personality has a powerful effect. Twenty-four hours after he arrives in a country, housing suddenly becomes a front-page topic. Somehow he makes the leaders aware of the importance of problems they had been taking for granted or else had considered hopeless. He shows them possible solutions that are right under their noses, and he convinces them that they have to drop everything else and get going then and there. Wherever he goes, he foments reform.

For all his globe-trotting, Abrams kept very much in touch with American urban problems. He was an early critic of slum clearance in a period of shortage in low-cost housing, that is, in our time: "In a housing famine there is nothing that slum clearance can accomplish that cannot be done more efficiently by an earthquake. The worst aspects of slum life are overcrowding and excessive shelter cost. Demolition without replacement (by other low-cost housing) intensifies overcrowding and increases shelter cost." He was passionately opposed, as a lover of the anarchic variety of urban life, to the kind of "urban renewal" that dominated in his time—"urbanicide" and "urbanectomy" were some of his conversational terms for it—because it obliterated interesting, lively neighborhoods and replaced them with dull, sterile "projects." Nor was his voice silent about the degeneration of public housing into unimaginative stodginess. Among his domestic forays of this period was the landmark study, "Housing in California" (1963). He also looked into and wrote consultant reports on Boston's waterfront, urban renewal in Louisville, highways in Baltimore, housing and urban renewal for the then new Lindsay administration in New York City, and housing in Puerto Rico. *The Negro Housing Problem: A Program for Philadelphia* (1966) was prepared for the Community Renewal Program of Philadelphia and has served as the basis for national legislation on home ownership for low-income families. His most comprehensive survey of domestic housing and urban renewal policies is *The City Is the Frontier*, published in 1965.

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Charles Abrams's academic career, or rather careers, were as multifarious as other aspects of his life and personality. All over the world his former students, now in planning, academic, or government jobs—often jobs Abrams got for them—remember his personal concern and encouragement. Aside from lecturing, consulting, advising, and the like, on occasion at Princeton, Yale, the New School for Social Research, Pratt Institute, Johns Hopkins, New York University, and the Universities of Chicago and Wisconsin, he was for longer periods visiting professor of Urban Land Economics at M.I.T., a member of the planning faculty of the University of Pennsylvania (1951–55), on the faculty of the City College of New York, and, in 1968–69, a visiting professor at University College, London, and the Harvard School of Design. In 1965 he became chairman of the Urban Planning Division at Columbia University, and at the time of his death he was founder and chairman of the executive committee of its new Institute of Urban Environment. Two of his assignments to his students at Columbia were to draw up plans, maps, and models for Heaven and Hell. The latter project produced the more interesting designs—not at all, one imagines, to their professor's surprise.

Charles Abrams died at home in New York City on February 22, 1970. He is survived by his wife, Ruth, two daughters, Judith and Abby, and four grandsons. His will directed that his body be cremated because he felt cemeteries had become a use of real estate that our society can no longer afford.

It seems appropriate to end this biographical note with Charlie's own words—that little ode to the special, and precious, quality of urban life that unexpectedly erupts into the businesslike prose of *The City Is the Frontier*:

A city, even an American city, is the pulsating product of the human hand and mind, reflecting man's history, his struggle for freedom, his creativity, his genius—and his selfishness and errors. It is the palimpsest on which man's story is written, the record of those who built a skyscraper or a picture window, fought a pitched battle for a play street, created a bookshop or bakeshop that mattered. It is a composite of trials and defeats, of settlement houses, churches and schoolhouses, of aspirations, images and memories. A city has values as well as slums, excitement as well as conflict; it has a personality that has not yet been obliterated by its highways and gas stations; it has a spirit as well as a set of arteries and a voice that speaks the hopes as well as the disappointments of its people.

Chronology

- 1902 Born, Vilna, Poland, February 16
- 1904 Came to the United States
- 1916 Became naturalized citizen
- 1918 Graduated Eastern District High School, New York City
- 1921–22 Law clerk in Arthur Garfield Hay's office
- 1922 Received LL.B., St. Lawrence University (Brooklyn Law School)
- 1923 Admitted to New York Bar. Established law office with Bernard Botein
- 1933 Coauthor, Municipal Housing Authorities Law
- 1934–37 Counsel for New York City Housing Authority
- 1936 *New York City Housing Authority v. Muller*
- 1936–39 Lecturer, New School for Social Research
- 1937–39 Counsel for American Federation of Housing Authorities
- 1946 Special counsel to Joint Legislative Committee on Housing and Multiple Dwellings
- 1947 *Dorsey v. Stuyvesant Town*
- 1947–49 Columnist, *New York Post*
- 1951 Special consultant to Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Department of Interior
- 1951–55 Visiting professor, University of Pennsylvania
- 1954 United Nations mission to Turkey
- 1954 United Nations mission to Ghana
- Received Annual Award from League for Industrial Democracy
- 1955 New York State Rent Administrator
- Visiting Professor of Urban Land Economics, M.I.T.
- 1955–59 Chairman, New York State Commission Against Discrimination
- Member, Governor Harriman's Cabinet
- 1957 United Nations mission to Pakistan
- 1958 United Nations mission to the Philippines
- 1959 Received Brotherhood Award from the Catholic Interracial Council
- 1959–63 Advisor, United Nations missions to Bolivia, Ireland, Japan, Nigeria, Singapore, and others
- 1961 Advisor, ICA Mission to Jamaica, B.W.I., Colombia
- 1961–65 President, National Committee against Discrimination in Housing
- 1965 Received Honorable Associate Membership, American Institute of Architects

Professor and Chairman, Division of Urban Planning, Columbia University
Received S.L. Strauss Memorial Award from the New York Society of Architects

1966 Chairman, New York City Housing Task Force

1966-67 Consultant, Ford Foundation in Chile and India

1968 Visiting lecturer, University College, London
Member, White House Task Force on the American Indian

1968 Member of the Citizen's Advisory Committee of the Housing and Development Administration
Member, AID Housing and Urban Development Advisory Committee

1968-69 Visiting Williams Professor, School of Design, Harvard University

1970 Died, New York City, February 22

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This bibliography is based primarily on the files preserved by Mr. Abrams. Those files have been supplemented by the standard bibliographic tools available in most research libraries such as the *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature*. The published catalogs of the Avery Library of Columbia University and the Harvard Graduate School of Design have also been used. Many articles were not indexed anywhere, however, and undoubtedly much remains to be discovered. It has been particularly difficult to trace articles printed with title variations and writing reprinted in anthologies and books of readings. Scholars who locate additional items are urged to report them to the Department of Manuscripts and University Archives at Cornell.

Possible entries that could not be verified in some way outside of the Abrams papers were omitted. For instance, a manuscript exists with the notation that it was sent to *Post-War Outlook*. Since the item does not appear in any index and since a file of the publication was not available, the item was not included. The *New York Post* articles are not included since they were reproduced complete in the film. Letters to the editor of the *New York Times* were not included since they can be traced easily through the *Times* index. References to Mr. Abrams and his work appear in hundreds of locations and no effort is made here to report them.

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Summary of Microfilm Reels

In the course of his career, Abrams had developed a filing system of six major series: (1) "Administration," a general correspondence file arranged alphabetically; (2) "Topics," a general reference file in alphabetical order relating to subjects of special interest to him; (3) "Organizations," an alphabetical file of companies, committees, colleges, and organizations with which he dealt; (4) "Speeches, Articles, Releases," a chronological file of public statements; (5) "Studies," an alphabetical file of places that were subjects of major housing or planning reports; and (6) "Books and Pamphlets," a file on major publications by title. All of these series contain correspondence. For example, the "Speeches, Articles, Releases" file has all correspondence relative to arrangements for talks and the "Studies" file has correspondence before and after missions to various countries as well as letters about the report itself. His office staff also maintained scrapbooks of clippings.

The user should keep in mind that these are the files of an extremely busy and productive man. The subject categories he chose have been kept, although his designations and short titles may sometimes seem incomplete to the user.

The arrangement for filming follows these divisions although the series are in a slightly different order. Almost three-quarters of the papers were filmed, and the originals are maintained in the order in which they were filmed. That order is explained in the following section. Duplicate copies, government documents, material under copyright, and studies written by other people were not filmed. Such items were generally in the "Topics" and "Organizations" series and they may be consulted at Cornell if desired. Some duplicate copies of publications were distributed to interested institutions.

Reel 1

Biographical Data

Biographical documents are arranged topically and chronologically within topics.

Summary of Microfilm Reels

Reels 2–10

General Correspondence

This series was called “Administration” by Abrams and includes all personal and administrative correspondence not directly related to other series. It is arranged alphabetically by the name of the correspondent and then chronologically within each correspondent file. There are frequent enclosures. The guide lists significant correspondents indicating the number of letters from each person and the dates of the letters. Names with asterisks (*) beside them are those men and women whose files Abrams kept in a separate folder.

Reels 11–18

Organizations

Files on seventy-eight organizations, agencies, and universities in which Abrams was an active participant are arranged alphabetically by name and chronologically within each file. Names of organizations are written out in this series of the guide. (They are designated by shortened forms or initials only in cross-references.) The names of individuals in the listing for an organization identify the people who usually wrote on the official letterhead. Extensive files are subdivided with the correspondence coming first. Classroom lectures, when available, are reproduced here, under the names of the institutions, rather than in the Articles and Speeches series. Newsletters and multicopied materials for mass distribution by organizations were not filmed.

Reels 19–25

Studies

The major studies done by Abrams appear alphabetically by the geographical location of the investigation. The documents are filmed the way they were kept, showing the chronological progression of each study. First, come the correspondence and agreements arranging for the study; then, the drafts and sketches preceding the finished report are filmed. After the report itself, sometimes in more than one format, come the reviews, critiques, and correspondence generated by the study. In a few instances, there were no written reports, and one file is included to illustrate a preliminary correspondence that did not result in a contract. As in the Organizations series, the names of correspondents involved significantly in the study are listed. Researchers interested in making a meticulous examination should also consult the Topics series that includes reference information on each area.

Reels 26–35

Articles and Speeches

Written public statements made by Abrams appear in chronological order, beginning in 1935. Location is given only for speeches outside of New York City. An exception to the chronological listing is the *New York Post* articles (1947–53); these appear at the end of the series, followed by correspondence referring to Abrams’s work for the *Post*, arranged chronologically. Correspondence relating to local arrangements comes before the item. Four brief, taped speeches have been transcribed and the results filmed in their appropriate chronological places. The tape itself is available only for the WCBS

Summary of Microfilm Reels

interview. An oral history interview, conducted by Dr. Bluma Swerdloff for the Oral History Research Office of Columbia University, is filmed (under May 1964) with the permission of that office. An asterisk (*) preceding a title in the guide indicates that the file contains correspondence relating to that speech or article but that there is no copy of the statement itself. Some copies of articles and speeches also appear in the scrapbooks. The titles are frequently working titles; they often changed with publication. Facts have not been verified beyond the information in the collection.

Reels 36–38

Book Manuscripts

Drafts, galleys, notes, reviews, and correspondence for twelve book-length manuscripts are filmed in alphabetical order by their proposed or published titles. The file on each manuscript is arranged chronologically. The published version is not filmed because of copyright restrictions.

Reels 39–51

Topics

Containing reference materials used by Abrams, notes, correspondence, and clippings, the topical files appear alphabetically by subject and chronologically within each file. Extensive files, such as “Discrimination,” are often broken down into subdivisions, arranged alphabetically under the general topic and chronologically within each subdivision. Most of the studies Abrams did are represented in the Topics files. These files do not contain any of his own work, however; that is in the Studies series. Copyrighted material and government documents have been removed. These files are particularly valuable because they frequently contain unique documents and because items from a wide range of sources are gathered together by subject.

Reels 52–53

Scrapbooks

Ten scrapbooks are arranged chronologically. They relate primarily to Abrams’s New York State responsibilities—one is a fascinating collection of his poems, doodles, and plays.

Reel 54

Personal Correspondence

This is a restricted reel of family and financial matters that have been filmed for preservation purposes; the reel will not be sold. Biographers who believe they need to see the material should apply to the Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Olin Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853.

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