Realistic View of City

Problems of Planning Are Illuminated But Not Solved by Sophisticated Panel

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

It was a good show. It would have made prime time on TV for a star-studded discussion program and it was longer than Open End. But the two-day and one-evening, city-sponsored symposium on planning in New York could not have been more serious in its purpose. Its aim was public discussion, in the public interest, of the problems of a city in dynamic change. In this sense, the meetings set up by William F. R. Ballard, chairman of the City Planning Commission, with the aid of the Lavanburg Foundation, may have been a historic New York first. The idea, the procedure, the participants and the quality of the talk were on a level of sophistication uncommon in New York's public affairs.

An Appraisal

This has been a city notoriously slow to accept professionalism in fields that cut across areas of political interest, and planning cuts across them all.

The symposium transcended politics and aired New York's troubles with enough professionalism to demonstrate clearly the need for comprehensive planning, as well as the almost insurmountable obstacles. It proved to be both an illuminating and a frustrating experience for the invited audience of 450, representing a cross-section of the city's leading citizens, who paid $35 a ticket for the bargain lineup of 25 illustrious speakers.

Variety of 'Forces'

In morning and afternoon sessions, the panelists dealt with "The Forces Shaping New York's Future," ranging from integration and the city's slipping economic base to the housing shortage and transportation tangle.

Three conclusions stood out:

First, the complexity of New York's problems defy simple analysis. They include the impact of demographic change on schools, housing, health and welfare; the effects of what economists call a "withering employment base" on city growth; a deteriorating physical plant in aging neighborhoods, and the reconciliation of the city and the automobile, of social needs and money shortages.

Second, the complexity is heightened by the interdependence and interaction of these problems, so that decisions affecting one affect all.

The age-old clash between the individual and the general welfare is magnified to appalling proportions in a city like New York, where there is little homogeneity of social structure and interests are as diverse as the population.

Third, the city's planning machinery is inadequate to deal with the magnitude of these problems in any comprehensive fashion. The new city charter, failing completely to recognize the scope of the city's planning needs, fragments and weakens planning functions. Even the choosing of a public building site, to give one example, is out of the Planning Commission's jurisdiction and in the hands of a site selection board.

'Letters to Santa Claus'

In the words of panelist Henry Fagin, professor of planning at the University of Wisconsin: "The number one priority in New York is a city planning process that can plan. You just don't have it." He characterized Friday morning's meeting as a "session of letters to Santa Claus."

What came out of the symposium eventually was a sense of crisis, rather than concrete answers. "This society moves only when it's in trouble," said Dr. Martin Cherkasky, director of Montefiore Hospital. "Then every emergency program in the wrong place becomes a vested interest with which future city planning must deal."

"The city faces four forces that will change the future," said Commissioner Ballard in his opening remarks. "They are population, automation, transportation and recreation. We must channel them constructively, or they will flatten us."

This feeling of impending disaster persisted. Jean Gottman, the Parisian geographer who put the term "megalopolis" into the language with his study of the urbanized Northeastern seaboard of the United States, noted the "pervading sense of urgency" in his summation: "Everywhere, responsible people believe things have gotten out of hand. But they look to New York as the symbol of what Western civilization is trying to do, as the 'modern city'."

For once, New York, in effect, looked at itself. The symposium was an adult, intelligent and conscientious appraisal of the basic elements that underlie physical planning of any kind, but which in this case have reached a state of chaos. As the social and economic emergencies were brought out, the "future by design" of the symposium's title appeared increasingly remote. Planning emerged as the piecemeal art of the politically possible.

The meetings solved no problems, but they served as a catalys for an awakening community concern. It was education and catharsis—and a preparation for the planning job ahead.