Housing the City—I

In the light of ghetto conditions in New York it is natural to measure all housing in the most urgent terms of tragic human need. It is easy to do so to the exclusion of all other considerations. But this would be one way of insuring the city's continued slide into the kind of bankruptcy that congeals the ghetto and its problems into permanent insolubility.

The answer to a city's needs in housing is more than a roof over *x* number of heads of those whose living conditions demand immediate improvement. Housing, in a city the size of New York, is the broad base of the socio-economic structure that makes the city function. It provides the guarantee of its future, and there will be no future without an urban-based middle class, a social and income as well as racial mix, the skills and sources of support that a whole range of housing must supply.

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There has been a great deal of simplistic logic in New York lately about housing that is doing a desperate situation more harm than good. Facts and fallacies are becoming hopelessly confused.

Fact: To provide the kind of low-income housing that New York must have to substantially alleviate ghetto conditions will take more money and resources than are available from city, state and Federal programs. Fallacy: It therefore follows that every cent and every effort must be put into low-income housing and all other proposals must be fought as inimical to that end.

Fact: Only the most intensive, quantitative production can get enough housing fast enough to make a dent in the need. Fallacy: All that matters is the number of units produced, counted against the overwhelming number required, regardless of the quality of what is built or its relationship to the solution of serious, allied problems.

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Both fallacies are being pursued with a vengeance. They are destructive exercises in the housing numbers game, if other factors are not properly understood.

There are two of particular importance. First, New York is trying to upgrade the quality of design and environment in its present programs, a necessity demonstrated with damning clarity by the superslums that the numbers game has provided in the past. Second, it is trying to utilize community cooperation to insure this improvement in terms of community needs. It takes longer to plan with a community than to impose something unsuitable from above. It takes longer to provide a constructive and attractive answer than to stamp out the same old standardized units in the same problem-breeding limbo.

The result is slowdown. Delays are caused by attempts to break the deadly pattern of public housing monoliths with vest-pocket projects in middle-class neighborhoods that are fought bitterly by residents. Solutions are held up by tight money, a shortage of sites and the city's high building costs.

Public housing allocations from 1965 are still unused and the Federal Government has announced that it will approve no new urban renewal projects for New York until earlier funds are spent.

But the most disheartening source of delay is the process of trying to put something a little different or a little better through the city's procedural pipeline. It jams on all the standardized stops. The pattern for mediocrity is immutable in New York.

The Lindsay attack on this problem has been administrative reorganization into superagencies—a necessary but further delaying action, while the hesitation waltz at the bottom goes on as usual. The destructive mold remains, from a Controller's office that can dead-end a project with amateur design review to all of the routine rules, regulations and time-consuming obstructionist departmental procedures that make creative change impossible.

In the end, this may be the quiet, inexorable way that a city unable to survive without change destroys itself; not with a bang, but with red tape.