Nobody Here But Us New Yorkers
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Architecture

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IT may have been Winston Churchill who said "We shape our cities and our cities shape us," but whether it came from an equal or lesser sage the statement is pretty close to oracular truth.

Or, as Lawrence Halprin has put it, "The people problem parallels the architectural problem." Mr. Halprin, a landscape architect and renegade New Yorker ("During the war I boarded my destroyer in San Francisco and never came home"), is also a man of sophisticated expertise and above average sensibilities to cities. He and his firm are the authors of a report on "the quality, character and meaning of open space in urban design," prepared for the Housing and Development Administration, called "New York, New York."

There is something celebratory about that title that is just right. New York is a city loved almost suicidally by most of its beleaguered inhabitants no matter what official stance of disapproval may be fashionable. (Mr. Halprin also found out that New Yorkers live here because they want to.) They will rise to protect it from its predators with a primitive passion.

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If New Yorkers have been a little late to the rescue, it has been from lack of knowledge of that most empirical of design disciplines —the environment and what makes it work—not from lack of feeling. When one is hit on the head repeatedly, the lesson finally sinks in. (That is what empirical means.)

Mr. Halprin has both feeling and knowledge. He offers so much wisdom about cities, so many insights into the urban world and so fine a sense of the special needs and qualities of New York that the report should be read by everyone and taped to the forehead of city officials. It is a complete course in the arcane mysteries of urban design for both the layman and the professional. What it does particularly brilliantly is to interpret those peculiarities of place that make New York, New York.

It is also a kind of Band-Aid, or attempt to bind the wounds that New York has already suffered. Mr. Halprin was handed six of the city's renewal projects, completed or in work, for study: the West Side renewal, Penn Station South, Bellevue South, Tompkins Square, Cadman Plaza and Dayton Towers.

His firm was asked to analyze, and, if possible, patch up something about them that was making everyone profoundly uneasy. It seemed that although they were not all bad, they all had something awful in common. The total effect of the effort to provide better housing and improved living conditions was bleak and desolate. The results are safe and sanitary, but utterly lacking in beauty, vitality, or any suggestion of urban pride or place.

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Mr. Halprin was a gentleman about it. He complimented whatever was worth praise. He could have slugged the city with irrefutable accusations of unfeeling solutions totally destructive of scale, humanity and local character. There is a terrible indictment to be made of gross architectural and planning malpractice. (The architect operated on the renewal area and the city died. Neighborhoodcide.)

The analysis of what went wrong is almost a primer of how not to design a city. It shows, with revelatory clarity, how inseparable are the city's social and architectural ills.

Picture (it is all too easy) almost any renewed area: a group of similar, humdrum buildings spread out flatly on some dull, off-limits city grass, rich in cold downdrafts around the towers and wind tunnels along the barren open spaces (yes, this climate is actually created by the architectural layout), some singularly depressing shops in standardized one-story barracks spread along the edges, and long, blank sidewalks against long, blank walls.

"There is a sense of disorientation in these projects," the report states. "Everything is the same and one feels like a stranger in a surreal landscape, insecure, out of touch, depersonalized, inhumanized. These environments create a quality of stress. Insoluble stress makes people neurotic and negative."

Penn Station South, for example, "has become an island of isolation both internally and externally. The people problem parallels the architectural problem — there is a real feeling of alienation and isolation in both."

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The important point is that environmental disruption is also social disruption. Add lack of opportunity and education, poverty and discrimination to the architectural formula of alienation and the results are obvious. Can there be any question in anyone's mind of the importance and the effect of the design process? Of how we build in despair, vandalism and disorientation? Of how we decimate rather than reinforce the community?

The design process is not "beautification" or "window dressing"; it is integral. It can be racist. It can enrich or destroy. It is the crucial determinant of a social pattern or the lack of it. The tragedy is how little of this is commonly understood, even yet.

But where Mr. Halprin's sensibilities show most of all is in the solutions he suggests. He proposes to bridge avenues, create community centers, coordinate buildings on a human scale, add amenities and amusements, restore the street and the neighborhood, give vitality, visual pleasure, and the possibility of joy. He would provide "linkages" of space, site and street design to tie the city together visually and functionally, for its people. None of this is "decorative or surface ornamentation"; each suggestion is based on "deep and meaningful solutions to real needs."

Naturally, these proposals would all violate existing city codes, laws and practices. With the best intentions, but with much red tape and few resources, New York's response is bound to be minimal. What better place for the new state Urban Renewal Corporation, with its sweeping powers to ignore local codes and with the money the city will never have, to come in? What more worthwhile way to give genuine urban first aid? What better way to attract adjoining private improvements?

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Certainly the city's own sensibilities still need a lot of improving. The Transit Authority, for example, might read the Halprin report and then look again at the 78th Street block between Lexington and Third Avenues which it plans to dig up for a power installation for the Lexington Avenue subway at the price of cutting down large trees and endangering the designated, century-old landmark houses. This is a singularly lovely street with a special sense of place. It is easier, evidently, to destroy the irreplaceable than to cope with traffic, steam lines or possible real estate pressures on the nondescript streets to the north or south.

One wonders, too, at the sensibilities of the Museum of the City of New York toward its own city. There is a window in the late 19th century Rhinelander Building about to be demolished for Brooklyn Bridge approaches that came from the 18th century Rhinelander Sugar Mill on the site, which was used as a prison during the Revolutionary War.

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For historical and environmental continuity and enrichment it should stay in lower Manhattan, where it has survived so long. The Museum of the City of New York wants to cart it uptown for gallery display. This is the best way to kill history and, again, a sense of place. It could probably be incorporated into the new Police Headquarters on its own home territory, as was done before in the Rhinelander Building. This, too, is urban sensitivity. Small things, but all part of keeping a city alive. New York, New York.

The New York Times (Sam Falk)

78th, east of Lexington, a street with a singular sense of place
"It is easier to destroy the irreplaceable"