

Architecture

Doing the Hard Things First

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THERE is a very well intentioned and quite amiable little show at the New York Cultural Center called "Making New York Understandable," a theme close to this writer's heart. It is a timeless and open-ended subject, and the questions it raises will last long after the closing date of Oct. 11.

For nine years this fall, we have been struggling to make New York understandable, knowing that it is an impossible task. New York will never be understandable in anything except detail or microcosm; both its spirit and its physical facts are contradictory and evasive, full of the paradoxes of the too large, too tragic, too rich and too real.

Reality, as New York puts it together, consists of nirvana and the lower depths with every gradation in between. It offers punishments and rewards of the body and soul that defy even the most sophisticated analysis.

The simplistic mind that demands reason and order and proper hues of black and white reduces New York falsely to its own level of inadequacy. Define humanity under pressure. Or civilization at its most brutal and complex. Or survival, primary and profound. At best one only senses New York, given revelatory glimpses of its scale, processes and meanings, beauties and enormities. Equally, understand the workings of the universe.

Nevertheless, the kind of understanding that the exhibition at the Cultural Center seeks is both laudable and logical. It takes the form of a sampling of the devices used to give information about the city to city dwellers—to clarify their surroundings, to aid them in their daily lives, to reveal the city's services and form. It proceeds from basic graphics—in posters, street and subway signs, publications and films—to the necessities and amenities of public trans-

portation and vest pocket parks, right up to the Olympian manipulations of the environment by planners in new-towns-in-town such as Welfare Island and Battery Park City.

The range is from the direct guide, as maps, to methods of making the city more livable and workable, as in the currently stalemated proposal for a Madison Avenue mall. There are models, photographs, films and books, and even a copy of New York's Master Plan.

The exhibition was conceived and assembled by the Art Directors' Club, in connection with its 17th annual communications conference, held in New York from Sept. 6 to 8. The idea came from William McCaffery, program chairman of the conference. Material included is the work of Art Directors' Club members and other designers, writers, filmmakers, architects and planners, all with a stake in making the city visible, comprehensible, or better in some way.

"The decay of the city increases as it becomes less understandable to its citizens," Mr. McCaffery says. The entrance wall label calls for the city's "communicators" in visual and verbal fields to address themselves to the problem of communication between the citizen and his habitat.

The show, necessarily spotty because of its scope, is cheerful, even optimistic. But something else emerges from the casual assemblage of plans and projects. It goes beyond the pleasant, rational novelty of the model of the Prattaxi developed by Pratt students, or the Ginkelvan by Van Ginkel Associates for the city's Office of Midtown Planning and Development, or the promise of subway sense and style emerging from MTA chaos by MTA consultants Unimark International, or the eloquent plea for the care and handling of city trees by land-

scape architect Robert Zion.

Assembled in the most offhand way is the most solidly impressive evidence of the planners' work in New York on a very large and sophisticated scale, almost all in construction now.

The Bedford-Stuyvesant superblock, by landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg and Associates and architect I. M. Pei and Partners, is a completed and successful experiment in bringing urban amenity to the ghetto slums.

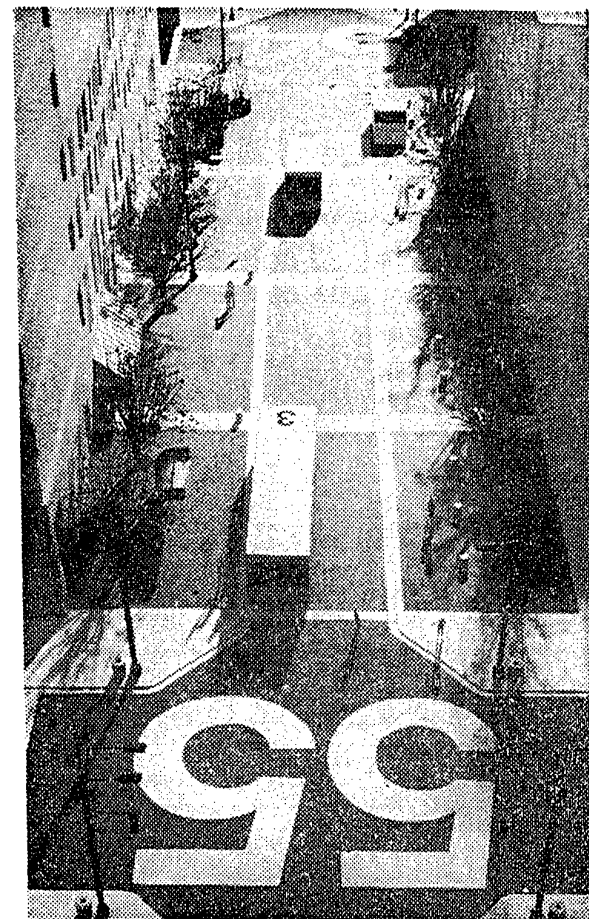
The Harlem River Bronx State Park, a 65-acre project of recreational open space with housing, schools, shops, pools, gyms, athletic fields, amphitheater and marina, by Friedberg and Davis, Brody Associates, is currently rising on a desolate industrial riverfront site. The client is the State Park Commission for the City of New York.

Battery Park City, a 91-acre new community for 55,000 residents, designed by the team of Philip Johnson and John Burgee, Harrison and Abramovitz, and Conklin and Rossant, with active handholding by the city's planners, is going ahead now, under the auspices of the Battery Park City Authority.

Welfare Island, master-planned by Johnson and Burgee, with all of its well-aid troubles, has still managed to break ground for housing. With Ed Logue, a man of steely commitment and impressive achievement heading the State Urban Development Corporation, its construction is no real gamble.

In one of the most curious understanding gaps of all, New Yorkers fail to grasp that these massive schemes are going ahead; that these things are actually happening. Brought up on paper plans and no action, the people and the media maintain habits of easy cynicism.

The exception is the young. Raised on science fiction and the moon, in a world where anything can, and does, hap-



Model of a section of proposed Madison Avenue mall
"It is easier to build developments than get a taxi"

pen, their reality is broader. They carry the badge of New York cynicism like a cheerful flag, but they accept what their elders reject.

The day we visited the show, a high-school class on a cultural outing suddenly brought the galleries to sharp life, their reactions instinctive, totally New York. The girls, to a Ms, teetered on four-inch platform soles, with fingernails of black, silver and dried blood. The boys vied in rainbow sneakers. They didn't bother with wall labels. They wrote their own script.

"Welfare Island?" (Granny glasses, wide cuffed pants.)

"Is that what they're making now?" (Broad-brimmed black hat and glasses, six-inch cork platform soles.)

"You mean just for welfare recipients?" (Jean Harlow hairdo and blouse, rhinestone pin, wedgies.)

"Don't be crazy; it's the

city of the future." (White stocking cap, jeans, red-white-and-green sneakers.)

"It's going to be our city?" (Purple body shirt, red-white-and-blue sneakers.)

"Sure. But don't worry about it. You'll be dead." (Hair and Aquarius d'sha-bill.)

Laughter. (All.)

All they really underestimated was the time it would take, but then, time is notoriously long for the young. We give it 10 years, and we expect to be around. The big dreams are the most real thing about this unreal city these days. They have the substance of money, law and steel. If there is another lesson in the show, it may be that it is easier to build immense, planned developments than to get a rational taxi or a clear street sign. We do the hard things first.

In New York, in fact, we only do the impossible. Understand a city like that?