

Using, the American Myth

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Apr 21, 1969; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 46

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

One of George Romney's first policy statements as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development dealt, not surprisingly, with the housing crisis. Since so many Americans today are caught in the trap of the high cost and low supply of shelter, he had a prefabricated audience. What he spoke of was the hope of prefabricated housing. What he left unsaid was that the production of conventional housing is just stumbling along, with the nation's ambitious housing programs doomed to failure for reasons that are as elementary as they are unpleasant.

Except for luxury housing, there is currently no shelter market that provides a predictable, satisfactory profit for the construction or real estate industries. There is, for example, a brisk trade in \$50,000 to \$100,000 second homes. But without writedown or subsidy, nothing can be built for any average income group that simply needs a place to live in or near the big cities.

There is little New York or any other municipality can do to make housing that a majority can afford as attractive to industry as the high-priced product. As long as this situation exists the investor is not going to look for risks or the industrial adventure of a mass market breakthrough. When

housing is less lucrative than commercial construction, he turns to the latter. When one city is more profitable than another, he moves. Business is business, not sociology or philanthropy, and—except for the singular lack of response to a challenge of national scale—you can't fault the builder.

Building Roadblocks

There are too many strikes against him. Restrictive union practices, local building and zoning codes, the high cost of money, zooming construction costs in one of the most inflationary sectors of the nation's economy, delays and red tape in Government programs, have all slowed down housing and sent its price straight into the stratosphere while dampening the most innovative spirit.

Costs are so unpredictable that contractors hold up bidding on city programs. The pressures toward building only for the affluent have even reduced to a trickle the once ample supply of more modest homes outside the city. Rent levels have been pushed beyond the legally set limits of Government-assisted housing. Only drop-in-the-bucket financing is available below astronomic market rates. Housing stock is deteriorating faster than it can be built. These are some of the basic facts of housing that no proliferating legislation will affect,

no luxury product will touch and no zoning relaxation alone will improve to any significant degree. There will be little change until moderate-price housing can compete with the free-market product. Right now the product that attracts builders in New York is immensely profitable commercial construction for the space-hungry, cost-no-object corporations rather than housing of any kind. With that situation aggravated by the inequities of rent control the industry is not going to build needed housing.

If the building industry can't do the job, the argument goes, then Government must do it. But all that has been demonstrated with any certainty thus far is that what private business won't, or can't do and therefore, the Government must do, it has not been able to do.

Rational Solution

Secretary Romney has proposed a national inventory of housing needs and the mobilization of mass production to fill them. He offers as analogy the automobile assembly line. It is a fine, rational solution marred only, as he acknowledges, by those restrictive practices, codes and union rules that are an immense stumbling block to the kind of large-scale production and building element standardization that are so obviously and desperately called

for. These methods have worked well in Europe. Such a change could radically improve the American housing picture.

Any realistic appraisal at this point makes it clear that the 26 million new and rehabilitated housing units called for over the next ten years by the 1968 Federal Housing and Urban Development Act are a pipe-dream. These units are going up in the smoke of funds that are not available, construction techniques and practices that hold down productivity and a lobster quadrille of bureaucratic buck-passing from Federal, to state, to local levels. In a form of Government McLuhanism, the processing has become the product, housing a by-product.

The hard truth is that there is absolutely no way, with current tools, procedures and appropriations, of solving America's basic shelter problem. In these revolution-high times, one revolution we plainly need is in housing production and practice, and the protectors of the status quo are the only ones at the barricades. The new Secretary looks surprisingly like the Emperor with no clothes. The American dream is that America can do it, and no one is going to stand up and say that it can't. In housing, this is the American myth.

Ada Louise Huxtable is architecture critic of *The Times*.