

Toward Excellence in Urban Redesign.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

"It's better to play Cassandra than Polyanna," said Robert C. Wood recently, speaking as the new Under Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. "It's not enough just to pull cities out of disaster. We are not interested in perpetrating tolerable levels or average standards. We are focusing on the potential; on how good a city can be."

A quiet, professorial transplant from M.I.T., the Under Secretary headed a task force that produced the program endorsed and presented by President Johnson in his message on cities. He is, therefore, currently setting the department's policies and style. But he is a man who prefers to remain in the background, behind the low-key academic exterior that camouflages high-voltage ideas, and behind the department's suave, politically experienced Secretary Robert C. Weaver.

Dr. Weaver has been characterized by Washington observers as a shrewd administrator of extensive housing experience who plays the game intelligently, safely and well. Right now, the cities issue has top priority, and can be cultivated astutely in the political vineyards. Dr. Wood, on the other hand, can always return to the academic vineyards as a leading political

scientist. "I can afford to take the heat," he says.

The heat is on already. Mayors of cities and towns hoping to be among the 60 or 70 selected for the Demonstration Cities program are worrying about being cut out of the big aid. Congressmen are concerned about competing communities of equal need in their constituencies and the fact that this is no hand out for the needy, but a qualifying program with demanding criteria.

Demonstration Cities

From a professional viewpoint, the Demonstration Cities proposal is acclaimed by planning experts as one of the most comprehensive and far-seeing Government programs produced in this century to deal with one of its most pressing and characteristic problems—the urban crisis. It draws on a generation of trial and error in renewal efforts, unifies social and physical environmental aims and tools for the first time, and consolidates all possible sources for an all-out attack on urban ills. It offers vision, totality, and promise.

It has everything going for it, in fact, except legislation and money. What Congress provides in this session will determine whether the new department is with or without a program, as well as the means to carry it out. It will also de-

termine whether the close to 80 per cent of the country's population in its deeply troubled cities are to be given real hope.

The hope is based on two factors. For the first time, the scale of the attack matches the magnitude of the problem. And it matches the complexity of its causes with cures: housing, welfare, poverty and education are to be dealt with simultaneously by mobilizing all Government agencies, programs and resources.

The second factor is the program's residential and neighborhood character. This is primarily a socially motivated plan rather than a prop for the tax base, without the ambiguities of purpose that have clouded urban renewal. The unequivocal aim is to help people and clear slums.

Sophisticated Skills Needed

The formidable task will require use of the most sophisticated techniques and skills, thus far pathetically underutilized in the field. Advanced systems analysis procedures developed by the aero-space program would be necessary to organize, schedule and speed up solutions. Basic cost reductions will be sought by changes in building codes and processes, as well as in financing and ownership patterns, frequently as part of the local community's qualifying criteria for aid.

Explicit throughout is what Wood calls "quality control." He has stated that the pastiche of pedestrian spot-projects acceptable as a city's "workable plan" under urban renewal today, would not pass muster as planning in the new department.

Who Is to Judge?

The unanswered question, however, is who in the department will judge these monumental plans for environment and esthetic quality, the far from "natural" beauty that has become a recent national concern. There is still no top level administrator trained in and responsible for the critical element of urban design. An assistant secretary with this field of responsibility—two are yet to be appointed—could go a long way toward establishing enforceable criteria.

Given criteria, skills and legislation, there is still the inescapable fact that one large city alone could swallow up the major part of available funds to renew itself on the massive scale proposed. It is questionable whether anything short of moon money will do the job as it needs to be done. The solutions are as costly as the price of the human and physical waste at the heart of America's deteriorating cities.

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE is architecture critic of *The Times*.