

# A Singularly New York Product

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

It is hard to grasp the size, importance and impact of Co-op City. In New York, superlatives bore. This is a city that swallows cities; not, however, without serious urban indigestion.

But the simple facts of Co-op City stun those trained to think in urban terms. The

An Appraisal world's largest cooperative housing community. The largest single apartment development in the

United States. A city of 50,000 to 60,000 people in 15,382 apartments piled onto 300 acres—instant new town.

A community of 60,000 was the standard starting point of almost all of the British government-planned, postwar new towns. It was the initial population of those famous Scandinavian planning models, Valingby and Farsta in Sweden and Tapiola in Finland. But the similarity ends right there.

Co-op City is an example of a singularly American, or New York, product. Its size and scale are monumental; its environmental and social planning is minimal.

The British and Scandinavian new towns are total town-planning concepts. Major preliminary investment in both design and money has been concentrated on providing and integrating those important services and amenities and land-use features that turn houses into real places to live.

In Scandinavia, for example, a great deal of the investment goes into attractive town cen-

## Co-op Monumental in Size, Minimal in Social Planning

ters, always a large, focally located and unusually attractive group of buildings, plazas, stores, fountains and recreation spaces that are much more than the shopping centers considered adequate at Co-Op City. The true town center, through its architectural style and quality, creates a community core, a way of life and a special kind of shared environment.

The overwhelming consideration of Co-op City's nonprofit sponsors and builders, the United Housing Foundation, has been to provide livable apartments at an exceptionally low cost, period. This is an unsailable objective in a city that can use all the housing it can get, even if it is producing a bumper crop of human failures through environmental failure.

### Foundation's Philosophy

The United Housing Foundation's philosophy and practice has been to buy relatively inexpensive land and put up uniform, large buildings at high density in a standard cookie-cutter pattern for maximum costs benefits. Beyond the provision of some basic shopping facilities and the space allotment for necessary public services that the city must follow along and provide, everything else is expected to fall into place. Foundation partisans say this pattern, repeated in all their projects, makes the low-cost formula possible.

Certainly, success is on their side. They build good apartments at unbeatable prices.

The foundation has provided this kind of housing in at least a dozen cooperatives to the tune of about half a billion dollars, or half of New York State's investment in low-interest mortgage financing for housing low- and middle-income families.

Why, then, is there any debate about the virtues of Co-op City? Why has the U.H.F., been under constant professional attack for sterile site-planning and uninspired architectural design, for communities that are

not communities in the urban expert's sense or according to the standards of the more urbanistically enlightened countries of the world? With so much government financing, are greater sociological and environmental planning the luxuries that the foundation stubbornly contends them to be?

### Answers In the Story

The story of how Co-op City got built provides answers. It reveals the mutually serious faults and failures of the U.H.F.'s planning and design limitations and of the city's sticky machinery for assisting such an undertaking.

The city argues that the full implications of the huge scale of Co-op City were not acknowledged by any significant change in U.H.F. building or planning attitudes. There was no planner involved—only the architect, Herman J. Jessor, who had been producing standard U.H.F. housing since the Forties.

The process that made Co-op City what it is today—a considerably improved version of the foundation formula, if far short of a planner's dream—can be called only planning fence-mending, or a posteriori planning by negotiation.

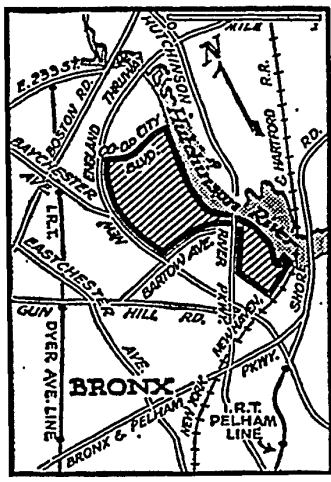
What the city used for persuasion was its tax abatement powers under the State Mitchell-Lama Law, which provided Co-op City's financing, and necessary mapping and zoning changes. What the foundation used was the promise of all that housing.

### Four Bitter Years

"They came in with the usual stereotype that they always build," a city spokesman says.

They went out with the density cut from 17,000 to 15,382 units, a revised plan and street system, consultant site planners and landscape architects—Zion and Breen of Paley Park fame, recommended by the city—tower and V-form variations of their standard buildings, grouped where possible; changes in material and color from endless institutional red brick, and 236 town houses for human scale. While the results will set no world standards, everybody gained.

Protracted negotiations have



The New York Times Nov. 25, 1968  
Two sections of Co-op City will be joined by underpass.

determined public facilities, transportation, institutional sites for religious and social agencies, garages, schools, open-area treatment and parks, and the relationship of the huge project to its surroundings, including provision for industrial development and jobs.

There are 100 pages of street agreements alone. "I can't remember all the gruesome details," one of the city's planning staff says. It took four bitter years.

A city coordinator had to be appointed to pull a dozen bureaucratically mired city departments into coordinated action. Even so, roads are just going in now. Schools will be built by the U.H.F. and repurchased by the city, to get them built at all.

The crippling city zoning that locks big buildings into those desolately spread site plans is yet to be changed to make better planning possible. It will be years before subway lines are extended. Architectural design possibilities remain unexplored.

"Design innovation is not permitted to drive up costs," the foundation insists. That means that New York's most important producer of housing closes the door that might ultimately drive costs down and house more New Yorkers in unaccustomed style. The greatest city in the world stumbles on.