

# Unbuilding the Dream

There is no dream that cannot be defeated by inflation and bureaucracy. But nothing is more vulnerable to rising costs and red tape than the dream of a better place to live.

In New York, West Village Houses was an experiment in putting that dream into action. Community-sponsored, it was designed as a human-scaled, low-rise alternative to new apartment towers that were destroying Greenwich Village streets as they provided fashionable Village addresses. The aim was to prove that new development could reinforce the Village's specific attractions and life style rather than destroy them.

The idea was and is sound, and what is left of it after years of struggle with costs and city departments still attests to the validity of its urban design and human aims. Although design was reduced to the lowest common denominator to keep the project alive, there is still much to commend in terms of appropriate scale, neighborhood conservation and well-planned apartments. And trees heal architectural wounds.

In another New York attempt at better land use, a progressive development on Staten Island featured the amenities of cluster housing. This project will now return to conventional tacky-tacky because its out-of-town builders were defeated both by rising costs and by the leaden, labyrinthine business of getting anything built in New York at all.

What cannot be evaded in both experiences is that it is standard building procedure in New York for city departments to obstruct rather than to expedite. Each bureaucratic delay makes the price of housing go up and the quality of life go down. Reforms get lost in the municipal glue; the only certainty is that the process of delay has developed a life of its own, self-perpetuating from administration to administration.

At best, the West Village and Staten Island projects are aborted experiments. They are also unplanned monuments to a system geared to sabotage and a city determined to red-tape itself to death.