

New York's Great Open Space

The traditional attitude that has doomed new ideas, experiments and necessary change in New York is based on the assumption that this is the city where "it can't be done."

In urban design particularly, New York is frequently the city of the absurd. There is no important area where the door of lethargy has been more tightly shut. It opened just a small, significant crack yesterday with Mrs. Johnson's dedication of a trend-setting design for recreational open space in public housing; the two-acre plaza at Jacob Riis houses on the Lower East Side made possible by a grant from the Vincent Astor Foundation.

The achievement at Riis houses can be measured in more than its two-block area. It is the key to the kind of urban planning that this city, lagging behind many others, desperately needs. It demonstrates in microcosm what has been lacking in New York's urban renewal programs in terms of human, esthetic and environmental design.

Riis Plaza offers a striking list of the things that couldn't be done: imaginative, unconventional play equipment, unrestricted use of open space, elimination of fences, neighborhood participation, and abandonment of stale, standardized formulas for a strikingly high standard of design. It couldn't happen here, but it has.

Urban design develops its solutions by attacking urban ills in the most basic terms; every attractive element at Riis is the result of a direct response to those deficiencies of deteriorated neighborhoods that produce some of the city's worst problems. This is not the red herring of "beautification," or a cosmetic cover-up for deep-seated urban ills. It is creative, experimental planning that unites beauty and utility in a true understanding of sociological needs.