

Architecture

More on How to Kill a City

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WE cannot pretend that there is any suspense to our on-again, off-again architectural serial, "How to Kill a City." The outcome is too predictable. The hero seldom comes to the rescue in the next installment; the city is not saved from disaster. But the plot has its sinister fascinations, and an occasional last minute miracle, such as the reprieve of a landmark like the Pyne houses, keeps hope alive.

The latest chapter of "How to Kill a City" deals with the present rather than the past. It is devoted to the peculiar perversion of noble intentions, or good ideas gone bad. The fact that they are going bad on a monumental scale is not surprising since that is the way New York does things. It just makes disaster city-wide and certain.

We are concerned here, first, with the threat to that lively and lovely focus of the city's spirit and sophistication, the Grand Army Plaza at 59th street on the southern edge of Central Park, New York's most distinguished, urbane and elegant open space. By extension, we question some unanticipated effects of the new zoning law on the creation and destruction of open space throughout Manhattan.

Plaza Spoiled

The Plaza area, a fortuitous combination of a perfectly scaled square and well related buildings with suitable shopping and social functions, is about to be mutilated as a coherent, justly proportioned element of civic design. This will be done by two undertakings euphemistically known in real estate language as "improvements."

The first is a good idea gone very bad, the Huntington Hartford café for the southeast corner of Central Park, on the Plaza. The second is a prime example of the perversion of good intentions—in this case the city's new zoning law—by the projected General Motors building which will replace the Savoy Plaza hotel. In combination, they will wreak havoc on one of the city's most delightful urban features.

The controversial café, which will go ahead as a result of the Court of Appeals decision last week, will cost Mr. Hartford, who seems to have a gift for backfiring cul-

tural gestures, an extra half million to do the wrong thing.

The vision, of course, is of an idyllic, bucolic, European-style restaurant-café, a place to sit and watch the popular parade go by in a pleasant atmosphere of schmaltz and schlag. The reality, alas, will be a perversion of the dream.

The pretty proposal for a pretty building against a sylvan backdrop by Edward Durell Stone does not show additional areas that must be gouged out of the park for deliveries, parking, garbage disposal and assorted ugly, space-consuming services. If the café is to be a democratic facility, as the city assures us it will be, hot dogs and ice cream wrappers will be commoner than cappuccino and cassis. And the passing parade will consist of more noxious automobiles than ever on a corner where crosstown, uptown and downtown traffic already converge, without still another stopping and parking point.

Park Abused

The worst perversion of all is implied in the court's description of the rustic outcropping of rocks and shrubs to be replaced as "neglected and misused" land; by implication, expendable. The whole park is neglected and much of it is misused, but the answer is scarcely to eliminate it.

In terms of planning, a factor of which this city remains stubbornly innocent in too many executive decisions, the site is atrocious. It is not only a patent violation of irreplaceable park land—and it is immaterial whether or not the courts have decided that

the city has a legal right or precedent to violate it—but it is also destructive of the plaza itself, by opening its terminating natural boundary to construction and congestion.

As for the General Motors building, its contribution to the rape of the plaza is a clear demonstration of how the new zoning, like the old zoning, is to be used exclusively as a tool for profit.

The old zoning law yielded the largest income by permitting the greatest rentable space in a lumpy, ziggurat-shaped mold pushed to the building line. Once it had been worked out in dollars and cents, it became the standard formula.

Reaching for architecture, the new code offers builders bonuses for straight-lined towers, allowing them to rise higher (more rentable space) if plazas and arcades are provided. The intention was admirable. The result is that investors have figured out the new mold for maximum profit, and while it is an infinitely better mold, it will be used irrespective of suitability to site.

General Motors is a perfect example. To achieve the most bulk possible under the new law, it will have an open plaza, facing the existing plaza. Ever heard of a redundant plaza? This is it. Something like having two heads. Not only does it provide extra space at the one spot in New York where it is not needed, but it breaks the building line where enclosure is desirable.

It has been suggested that the General Motors plaza belongs on the Madison Avenue

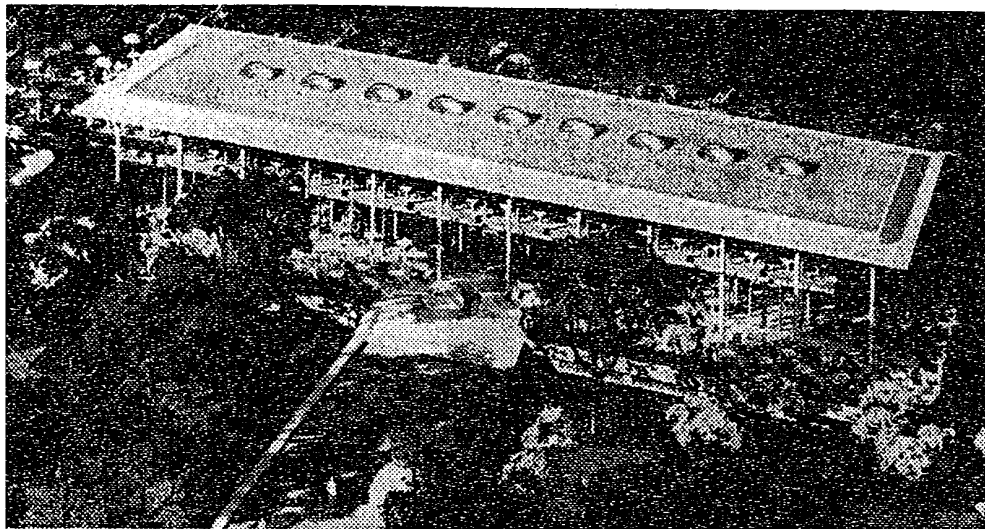
side of the building. But opening up Madison Avenue would be an equal mistake, because its best feature, urbanistically, is the intimacy of its small, closely connected, luxurious specialty shops that unroll the treasures of the world for the pedestrian. Why destroy that scale and continuity?

Obviously General Motors is not interested in a building that makes a public contribution, in spite of official corporate protestations to the contrary. Every creative architectural possibility has been barred, beyond permitting the architect — again Edward Stone — the liberty of making thoughtfully detailed and frequently excellent studies of what can be done within the maximum profit mold.

Zoning Misused

The handwriting is on the wall. The new code's plaza-tower formula for the greatest investment return has been set. 245 Park Avenue, for example, now under construction, will be set back meaninglessly for still another plaza on Park Avenue, which might have been far more advisable for the congested Lexington Avenue side. As much as we need open space, it can be as destructive of an urban pattern in the wrong place as it can be beneficial in the right one. As usual, it will be calculated not by planners, but by profiteers.

Thus the new zoning incentives for a better urban environment are subverted. General Motors, which could have equalled Seagram's handsome municipal gesture with ease, has proved to be no exception to the rule.



Model of the Huntington Hartford café for Central Park

"... a good idea gone bad"