

Construction Halted . . .

When Mayor Lindsay dropped plans for two of New York's most controversial expressways this week it was both a political act and a sign of the times.

Expressways and urban renewal projects were once handed down from Government agencies labeled "progress" and "modernization." As destruction and dislocation followed, the labels just didn't stick. These issues have become some of the most hotly debated in the country, rallying an increasingly aroused electorate into citizen protest groups. Woe to the politician up for re-election who doesn't listen.

Mr. Lindsay listened, and the Cross Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan Expressways, juggled on and off maps for a quarter of a century, are no more. Their elimination does nothing to solve the very real transportation problems in those areas. As we have said before in endorsing a below-ground Lower Manhattan Expressway, New York must face up to these traffic needs. This is particularly true in Lower Manhattan, which is being massively rebuilt.

But the Mayor's political change of heart reflects a significant change of attitude toward expressways everywhere. It coincides with a heightened awareness of the immense and difficult task of rebuilding the country, from its troubled cities and transportation networks to the reclamation of its squandered resources.

Signs of the times are clear in the Department of Transportation's cancellation of the bitterly disputed New Orleans expressway. They can be read in St. Louis, which has reversed earlier city approval of a bulldozer renewal plan and substituted a scheme based on keeping what little is left of a once-historic waterfront. Portsmouth, N. H., has just shifted its renewal plans from total demolition to rehabilitation and reconstruction.

In each case, solutions are now being sought that are more responsive to retention of the humanity, history, character and social and environmental needs of a community. Roads will have to be built and neighborhoods renewed in New York and elsewhere, but the full cost of the engineers' straight line and the real estate developer's singleminded calculations are finally being realistically assessed.

Expressways and renewal plans have catalyzed the resentments of poor and black neighborhoods with dreadful clarity. Preservationists and conservationists are using increasingly sophisticated combat methods. All are presenting the accounting at City Hall. A decade ago none of these changes would have been made. The environmental comprehension gap between politicians and constituents appears to be narrowing, but it closes fastest in an election year.