

Planning for the Nation's Cities

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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The words and music of the President's housing message have been something less than a smash hit, but the melody lingers on. And it will, because it dealt not just with housing, but with the needs of 135 million Americans, or over 70 per cent of the population, who live in the country's urban areas. These areas present clear case histories of all of contemporary society's most up-to-date ills—racial, social, educational, economic, technological and esthetic—in one complex, overwhelming, solution-defying package.

First Broad Approach

It is the section on cities in the President's message that represents the first broad, progressive, professional approach to environmental and urban problems at the highest executive, policy-making level. It offers the kind of general guidelines and recommendations that planners have been preaching. It reflects much of the expert thought of those same planners who have been categorized so often as dreamers by the political realists. It is, of course, in the hands of the political realists that the future of the cities, and the country, really rests, in terms of programs and legislative and budgetary action.

This, then, is a landmark message. In it, the Government graduates to a position of deep concern for planning the chang-

ing and dangerously exploited American environment. The question now is whether the Administration is going to be as powerless as the planners to turn this concern into constructive achievement.

The obvious weakness of the President's proposals is the crucial matter of implementation. He has outlined an advanced and experimental planning program that consists of specific suggestions with broad remedial powers, designed to meet problems unknown to any previous generation. Not surprisingly, much of it is out of the range of existing government machinery. It is also hard to assess financially. The question of implementation is the very real one of how to set up and administer a pattern of action for which there is no precedent.

Renewal Complexities

The powers of the Federal Housing and Home Finance Agency have already been stretched to the breaking point with the complexities of urban renewal. It neither can, nor should, be the administrator for the total urban package. The new Department of Housing and Urban Development called for by President Johnson, and by President Kennedy before him, is both mandatory and inevitable. The cities and states cannot do the job alone. Without Federal assistance nothing more

will be done than previously at local levels, and that has been nothing at all. The mess that is man-made America—a phrase coined by an observant British press more than fifteen years ago—continues to proliferate unchecked.

What the housing message offers, therefore, is an attack on some of the common causes of modern urban deterioration: lack of pre-planning of services, facilities and residential expansion, lack of trained personnel in the field, and lack of study of essential reforms in the urban structure.

Getting the Land

It recommends Federal assistance for advance land acquisition for predictable future needs, a practice responsible for much orderly growth in Europe, particularly in Scandinavia. It would give matching grants to build essential community and regional facilities and services and extend HHFA's financial support to encourage designed residential communities instead of undirected suburban sprawl. An institute of urban development would give training grants and initiate a desperately needed study of conflicting, crippling and archaic zoning and taxation codes that frequently do as much to depress cities as to support them. All this is long overdue.

What are the chances of going ahead with this far-sighted and far-reaching pro-

gram for America's cities? It can be set into action by Congressional legislation and appropriation, the normal next step.

Implementing Program

It can be carried out by existing agencies, often in extended roles—as the Department of the Interior has demonstrated in preservation and open space planning—and by the creation of the new Department of Housing and Urban Development. It can be administered by the collaboration of several agencies, a suggestion strongly implied in the message's recommendations on the expansion of urban renewal to include a "synthesis of services" covering the social, health and educational functions that must supplement construction for the successful revitalization of cities.

It can be implemented by the President, who is moving to meet the challenges with special Task Force studies and the White House Conference on Natural Beauty, which will also deal with urban problems. It can be done by states and cities, if incentives are provided on the Federal level. It can be the start of one of the century's most significant programs, or it can go right back to the planners' textbooks. The odds, and the stakes, are high.

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