

Architecture

# World Of the Absurd

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

INEVITABLY, 1967 ended and 1968 began with news about cities. Athelstan Spilhaus (a name with an authority of its own) saw the old year out by telling the American Association for the Advancement of Science that old cities are obsolete. Out with the old, in with the new, was his message; the new would be a \$4 billion Experimental City to rise in Minnesota, using advanced, multi-level techniques of transport, construction, communication and organization. Ten Minnesota industries and three Federal agencies have put together \$300,000 for preliminary studies.

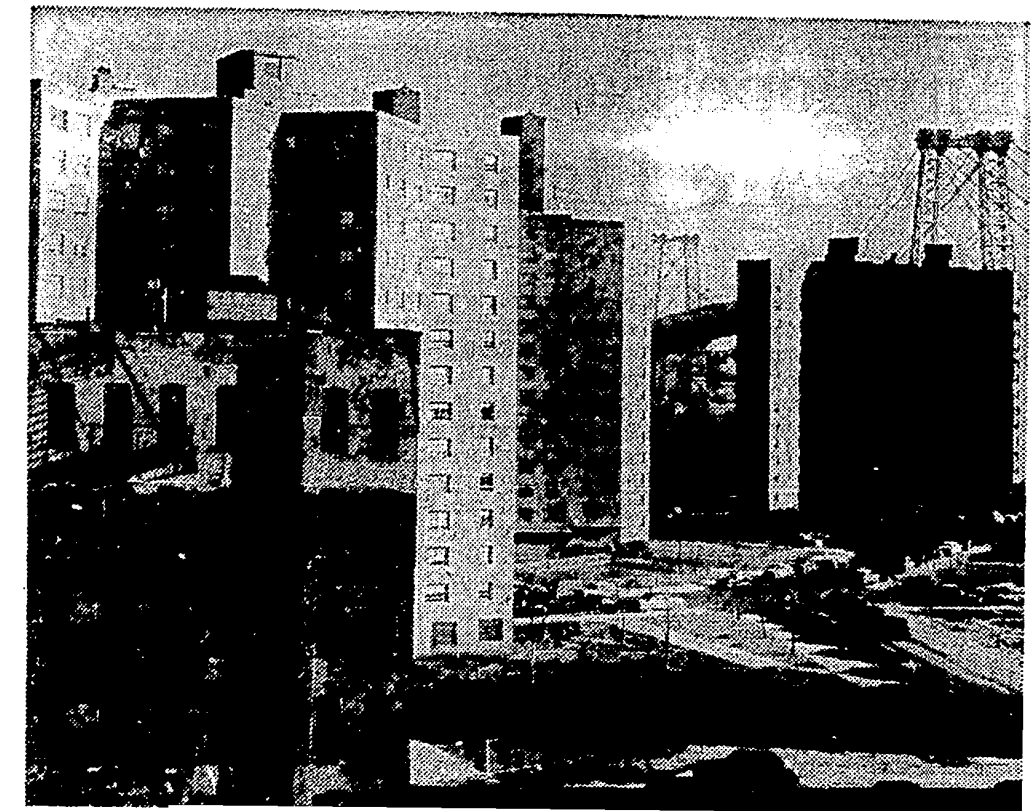
Also in the news as the old year died was the fact that city life and city problems had come to Antarctica. In some kind of record for nest-fouling, urban sprawl has turned McMurdo Station into an urban horror in a brief ten years. This may be a standing backjump record for ruining the environment.

"A smoking garbage dump and junkyard litter the shore of a once picturesque inlet; power lines from the nuclear plant deface the stark, wind-swept and lifeless hills that so awed and impressed explorers 50 years ago," a reporter noted. The answer? A McMurdo redevelopment program, naturally.

The new year will see megalopolis, the urban smear that is staining the entire American northeast and blurring city boundaries everywhere, relentlessly on its way to ecumenopolis, or a totally urbanized world, according to planner Constantinos Doxiadis. (The Greeks had a word for it and still do. Any trend or truism dressed up in classical etymology becomes a charismatic concept for the intellectually susceptible. It has the authority of a sermon from the Acropolis.)

Ecumenopolis may take a little while, but we'll get there. We may get to the moon first, of course, although only one thing is sure about that and none of the scientific prognostications mention it. When we get there, we'll make a mess of it.

Meanwhile, back at the foundations and universities, studies of the city proliferate and the new year promises more. In a brilliant review of a compilation of



The New York Times (by Sam Falk)

Today's city, where mistakes are made on an Olympian scale  
The black comedy continues to be played out

papers by urban experts collected under the title of Taming Megalopolis, planner and architect Clive Entwistle envisions "continuing and increasing and ever more expensive 'research' projects to the horizons of urban space and post-graduate time."

The pinned butterfly of urban phenomena, the dissected and annotated crisis, with enough academic verbiage attached, substitute handily for solutions. Few studies have the jolting pertinence of a Moynihan analysis of the Negro family in American society. Most are pretentious and fatiguingly detailed enshrinements of the obvious or ordinary, properly impressive to those who are awed by Greek-root words. "Before the buzz of refined scholarship," Entwistle concludes, "the decision makers, engineers and politicians stand abashed and emasculated."

The new year, not surprisingly, will produce still another research group, this time on the highest Federal level—an Institute for Urban Development to process problems and trends.

"Trend is not destiny," warns Lewis Mumford in one of his periodic blasts on the urban scene from his sanctuary in the non-urban hills of New York State, quoting Albert Mayer's book, The Urgent Future. "Progress," says the New York Times editorially, is an idea that needs to be "challenged."

All of which makes it quite clear where we are in 1968. We are obviously in the world of the absurd. The black urban comedy continues to be played out in the research institutes and the black urban tragedy goes on in the ghettos while Rome,

and Detroit and Newark burn.

Disaster is charted as destiny and objective, scholarly truth. Progress consists of making the same mistakes, but on an Olympian scale. Research builds abstract monuments to itself. Funds are made available for "prototype studies" while untouched problems take their toll of the human heart and the urban world. In government agencies, policy set at the top is reversed by bureaucracy at the bottom.

We pollute the country with the refuse of the affluent society. In Washington, D. C., it has been found that there is more gold per ton of fly ash in the refuse dumps than in commercial mines. At McMurdo we have the apotheosis of absurdity: we have destroyed the environment while studying it. The reality of the world of the absurd can't be touched by anything in the imagination of man.

There is hope, of course. We can press that precious garbage into construction blocks and build with them, according to promising new processes, rather than face slow strangulation from the detritus of prosperity. Eventually we may be able to move to Minnesota. We can enter the research cloisters in handsome parts of the countryside where megalopolis waits to spring.

But at some point we are going to have to resolve a basic conflict. There is a current credo of it's right and it's real because it's what's happening, baby, and all we have to do to be with it is to feel it, and documentation is the ultimate revelation. This may open new polemical horizons for the intellectual and new creative doors for the artist, but it

is suicidal stupidity as an attitude toward the world we live in.

What's happening in cities happens to a large extent out of greed, self-interest, ignorance and foulup. The few happy environmental accidents that occur, the occasional lessons in the vitality of an unregulated urban mix as against the defective sterility of much planning, are no argument for the abdication of judgment, morality, opinions, objectives and ideals. These are square words and square concepts, but also square necessities.

For responsibility and action we substitute the high level make-work of scholars. It is a face-saving, if not city-saving, evasion. For value judgments we embrace an esoteric, half-baked, admiration for the natural chaos of "the scene." The administrator, politician or planner who holds convictions enough to battle for solutions—and solutions are always partial, imperfect, debatable and without guarantees—must be an extraordinary combination of gutter tough and intellectual visionary. He does it, surprisingly in an age of cynicism, because he cares.

The 20th-century is a time of mind-blowing, psychedelic change, in both values and environment, much of it as valid and fascinating as it is painful and confusing. An understanding of this fact, too, must be used, like research, to help create a viable quality of contemporary urban life.

Abdication or rejection is not the answer. Neither is the fashionable acceptance of the existential status quo, unless crime, disease, pollution, slums and human misery are also acceptable answers for our time.