Slab City Marches On
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Architecture

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IN a preview of its second Regional Plan, a study that comes 37 years after the first Regional Plan, the Regional Plan Association zeroes in on New York's CBD. That is planners' professionalese for the Central Business District, in this case Manhattan, otherwise known as chaos solidified, Mammon triumphant and real estate undefiled. It is also, on occasion, paradise lost and garbage uncollected.

The preview is an exhibition at the Architectural League, 41 East 65th Street, that deals with one section of the upcoming report called Urban Design: Manhattan. This important and illuminating show will run until March 15. The full documents for the entire New York metropolitan region will be released next month.

The Regional Plan Association points out that New York's CBD, or the city's business and cultural heart, has no plan. This is not a surprise to New Yorkers, who have been watching a kind of postwar carnage in the 8.6 square miles below Central Park.

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The game, as it has been played, is simple. The private developer proposes and disposes. He has built, in a speculative lottery and at considerable profit, a total of 70 million square feet of standardized rentable office space from 1947 through 1965, and 1966 to 1971 will see 40 million more square feet of the same. The result, according to the Regional Plan people, is Slab City, and they view it with alarm.

They summarize as follows: "First, the growing malfunction of this enormous machine for doing business is causing congestion and friction that increasingly tax the levels of human tolerance. Second, the vivid imagery and distinctive form and appearance created by Manhattan's clustered office towers, which mean Manhattan in the eyes and mind of the world, are in danger of disappearing under a spreading Slab City, lacking the variety and identity of the special districts which exist today."

The answer, as urged in the exhibition and report, is urban design, a discipline of which New York, of all great cities, is touchingly innocent. Le Corbusier called New York a catastrophe over 30 years ago; today it would be called a happening. Those who have embraced the currently fashionable intellectual stance of admiration for the accidental esthetic complexities of chaos can come and get it, hot or cool. (There is a curious parallel here with the urban sophisticate's admiration of primitive societies; their simple charms frequently include ignorance and disease.) Most chaos lovers do not live in it; they just like the effect.

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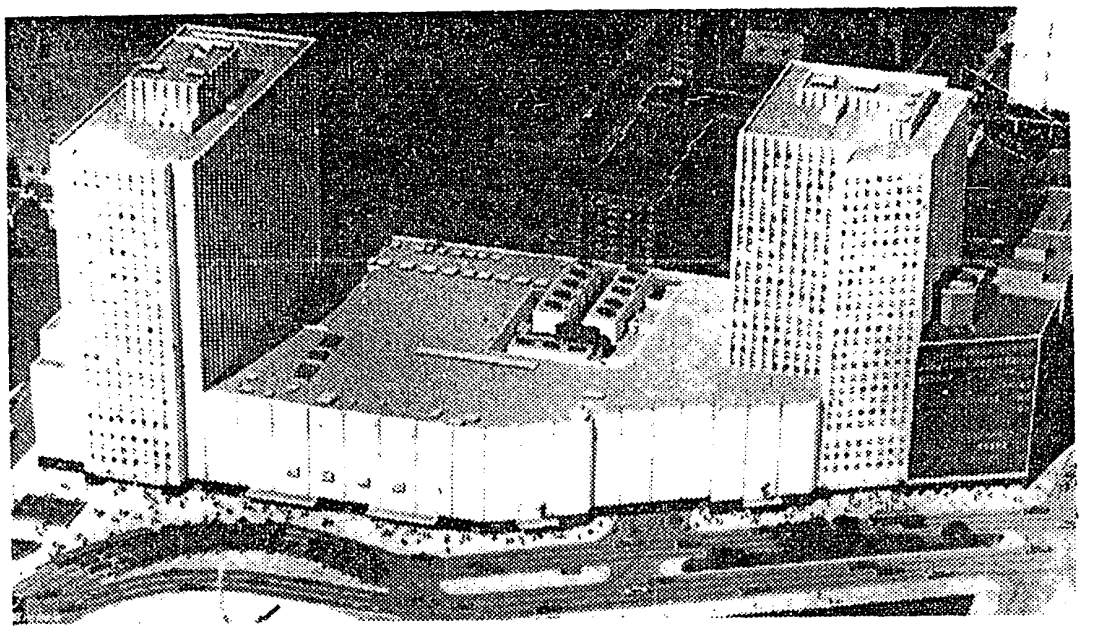
Seventy-seven per cent of New York's daily commuters come underground, by subway or rail. In the Grand Central area alone, 80,000 people emerge from the concrete from 8 to 9 A.M.; 200,000 surface in the course of a day. Therefore Regional Plan goes underground. Its urban design principles begin with function, and function begins with circulation.

What it proposes is a generally applicable urban design principle called an "access tree." The roots, below grade, are the horizontal, underground layer of trains and subways, the trunk is the vertical circulation of elevators and escalators connected with and leading directly to the branches, which can be streets or office building corridors.

This under - and - above ground planning is shown as the basis of new nodes of clustered tower development, which would, in turn, give the city its proper physical form: the alternating drama of high and low groups of buildings, of light and shadowed places, of closed and open space.

The connection between transportation, circulation and new construction is as obviously necessary as it has been obviously neglected.



Proposed Coliseum expansion over 60th Street to new office tower
Doubling its bulk and banality

Sixth Avenue is perhaps the most flagrant example of public dereliction and private disinterest—15 blocks of new skyscrapers built concurrently and consecutively south of the park with no circulatory connections. The buildings ignore each other, the subway lines underneath, and the adjoining example of Rockefeller Center, which some of them purport to extend and which set a precedent of successful multi-level planning more than 30 years ago.

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Almost 60 years ago, an example was set that is yet to be equalled. The Grand Central Terminal plan, a many-layered complex of train, vehicular and pedestrian circulation linking 21 buildings and the Terminal's magnificent (if sordidly defaced) public mixing chamber, the Grand Concourse, is still bearing up, even under the impact of the Pan Am Building.

Pan Am's one benefit has been the additional pedestrian circulation route opened up through it which does much to absorb the traffic of the 17,000 more persons added to the area. But the 55-year-old underground tunnels and corridors and existing trains and subways are straining to hold the line in peak periods. And by partly filling in Grand Central's low focal center, which is urban breathing space between today's tall buildings, Pan Am brought Slab City one giant step nearer.

Now it moves closer still. Six blocks from the Regional Plan display, seated on a moss green velvet sofa in a suite at the Hotel Plaza, one of the city's dwindling bastions of urban amenity, Morris Saady, English developer, outlines plans for a new tower over Grand Central Terminal. It is to be, in effect, another $100-million Pan Am.

Mr. Saady has a lease on the air rights over the Terminal from the newly-merged Penn Central. He displays a design contract with Marcel Breuer, containing an unconventional clause that specifies a building of superior materials and quality design, a condition stipulated by the architect.

The Terminal, as a landmark, has already been brutally overpowered by the overscaled Pan Am Building. The proposed tower will pose awkward design questions in addition to functional problems and will plug up most of the remaining Grand Central area open space.

The firm of Emery Roth, which practically invented Slab City and built Pan Am with an esthetic whitewash from Gropius and Belluschi, refused the job earlier when New York builders were considering it, for financial and functional reasons. "The economics, and the area, won't support it," says Richard Roth Jr. Philip Johnson passed it up at that time on the grounds of esthetics and conscience. "I didn't want to be responsible for ruining a landmark that I had worked so hard to defend."

Mr. Saady is aware of the controversial nature of the project, which has already aroused professional and press protest. "Don't judge me yet," he says, giving off electric charges of enthusiasm. "Wait and see what we propose. I want to put up the finest building in New York."

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Across town, another Slab City scheme surfaces. In the final stages of unplanned redevelopment, Columbus Circle is a motley assortment of architectural curiosities and bores. Now the biggest bore proposes to get bigger. The Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority is recommending a $38,560,000 expansion of the Coliseum that would extend the exhibition hall as a bridge across 60th Street and finish it with a near-match to the existing office tower for a pair of giant bookends. That is not a trick mirror image you see on this page, it is merely the Coliseum doubling its bulk and banality.

The Authority indicates that at best the expansion, as yet unapproved by the city, would be a stopgap measure. What it would do, in the process, would be to put the final stamp of spoilage on what could have been one of the city's handsomest public spaces, if anyone had cared.

The Regional Plan Association cares. The main thrust of its long-awaited report will be a strong plea for immediate and intensive concentration on urban design—or a dim future without it. But Slab City continues its inexorable march.