

Architecture: To See Ourselves ...

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

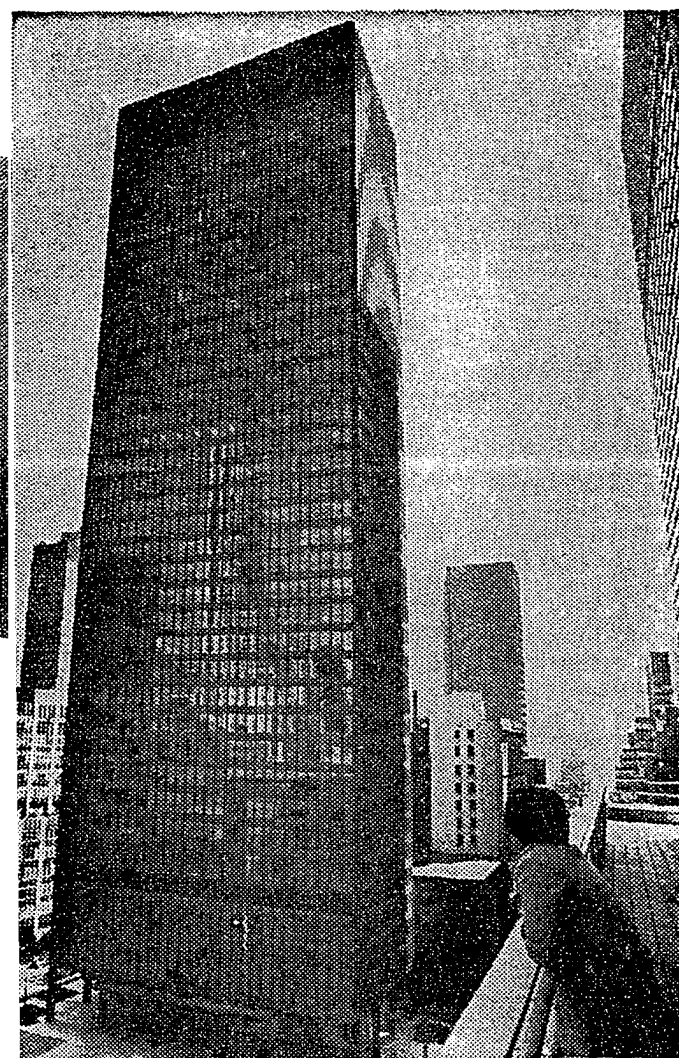
New York Times (1923-Current file); Apr 5, 1970; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
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Architecture

To See Ourselves . . .



Developer's house, New Jersey; Seagram Building, New York
Mies in the daytime, make-believe at night



Lawrence Fried

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HOW do others see us? That question has been fascinating Americans since de Tocqueville and Mrs. Trollope assessed our democracy and manners. "Tell us about ourselves, even if it's terrible," we beg our visitors from overseas. And they do. Often with a clarity and objectivity that make lengthy foundation research projects, Congressional hearings and special task force reports seem strained and murky.

Take the urban condition. And take Heinrich Krebber, planning consultant to the Development Planning District of Olpe in the Rhine-Ruhr area, Germany's most heavily industrialized region, a recent visitor to this country.

Mr. Krebber is the proponent of a new technique called "net planning," a kind of "process" planning in which the network of relationships among needs and priorities is worked out in a "critical path" diagram of costs, time, urgency and effect. Travelling with a tour sponsored by the Duisberg Chamber of Commerce, he visited New York, Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Washington and Philadelphia. "I feel like a guest," he remarked politely before leaving New York, "but I would like to take a critical stand on some things I have seen."

He began with a smashing indictment. "American cities are in permanent process of renewal. But they are destroying their urbanity without creating a new one. Nobody seems to know what a city is any more." Think about

that one, as the current saying goes. Because few of our planners have.

"You are abandoning your cities and the price is much too high. Where will the civilizing impulses come from when you no longer have cities?" The assumption is that Americans must know, as Europeans do, that cities are the crowning cultural creation of the interaction of constructive thought and behavior that is the substance of civilization. "The Culture of Cities," Lewis Mumford called his classic history and analysis of urbanism. All that is implicit in the European point of view. It is not the thinking of the men who build America.

Our cities are technically impressive, Mr. Krebber tells us. But he tempers his admiration immediately. Every single technical achievement, he says, can be questioned. There were only two objectives for the renewal efforts that he was shown by American officials—"economic and functional."

The impressive new construction "penetrates the cities, increasing density, reducing space and amenity for the people in them. *The timeless and predestined stimulation of the city is missing.* (Our italics.) "I assume that biologically and sociologically healthy living quarters are not worth their while in your cities any more," he says calmly. Meaning that our cities are not fit to live in.

Well, for a variety of reasons, Mr. Krebber may be right. As witness the suburban exodus. And the increasing squeeze on even those who would like to stay.

"In my opinion, the reason for this is the absolute, unchecked pursuit of profit," he states matter of factly. (His hair is short and his conservative suit is well-pressed.) "There is no consideration of the necessary relationships between society and the individual. These considerations must put a limit on profit if there is to be any long-range stabilization and reduction of urban tensions."

"I question the technically excellent construction when it leads to this kind of planning. It makes me think that many new buildings are only continuing the stream of an old fabric, an old practice—and that a serious mistake in planning has been made. A basic problem is that there is no national land planning policy at all. And your cities are renewed only in their economic and functional elements."

For the six cities he visited he offers "symptomatic" observations. "A high percentage of the white population abandons the city and moves to suburbs without urban density or an urban core." The suburbs are a "bland porridge" enveloping the city. Shops are combined to form shopping centers "geared exclusively to the task of supply."

"The permanent purchasing power of the old cities is being extracted, continually decreasing their attractiveness. The entrepreneurs soberly and superficially point out that they follow the purchasing power. They surround themselves with parking lots, making the separation from

the community complete. And so you achieve a clinically clean split with the residential neighborhoods, further strained by traffic and increasing distances, in a vicious circle."

Mr. Krebber is fascinated by suburbia. "The architecture of the high income brackets is very revealing. I have viewed sections where almost every house leans on a historical ideal—usually the French or English periods of the pioneer times. Is it possible that an escape into the past is sought? Is this part of the population unable to find the energy for a style of its own? You like modernism for business, make-believe for the home. It's Mies in the daytime, Michelangelo at night."

At the other end of the social and economic scale he notes, with consummate understatement, "The rental buildings on the edge of the cities do not seem geared to have a positive influence on the people living there. It is too brutally dull and again, it will lead to an attempt to escape. The relationship between man and environment is disturbed. I question a voluntary identification of its dwellers with the neighborhood. This building meth-

od creates new ruptures of a sociological kind between the city and its suburbs. I often have the impression of ghetto formation."

"The teaching value of the environment has been lost," he points out. It would be good to think about that one, too. McLuhanism and the current intellectual wisdom tell us that education and experience come electronically and by remote control through assault of the senses by the mechanical media. We have forgotten the most important source of man's learning and of his humanity or lack of it—the environment around him.

The environmental assault can be fatal. "A brutal environment can only create brutality," says Krebber. "The sociological community is a long-range investment, and free enterprise cannot solve the problems alone. It is a matter of insight, attitude and courage for the investment," he concludes. "You have great technological proficiency, but you are afraid of the sociological task. Cities must change, but you cannot abandon them."

Research studies and task force reports to the end of urban time can't put it any clearer than that.