ARCHITECTURE VIEW: A CONFERENCE ON GREAT CITIES
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ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Conference On Great Cities

BOSTON

When the invitation came to be "credentialed" for Boston's "Great Cities of the World" conference — the grand windup event of the city's 350th birthday celebration — I knew that I could not go. I frankly did not want to be credentialed — by anyone for anything; beyond my dismay at the word, I was intimidated. I might not earn my badge. And if I did, the idea of being tagged and slotted was depressing. The affront was double — to one's professional personhood and to the language of Emerson and Lowell that was being replaced by communispeak.

Things got no better with the "media advisory" that arrived from City Hall. The press was promised a clambake and a boat ride, the chance to photograph visiting mayors from around the world against the Boston skyline, human interest features such as barbecues in Boston backyards, and ample opportunity to listen to and take pictures of Boston's Mayor Kevin White. One proferred plum was the unique experience of seeing guests dine on the stage of Symphony Hall while Boston Symphony musicians serenaded them from a box, a feature advertised as a novelty which the fourth estate, uninvited for dinner, was offered the first few minutes of the meal to record. All these were unabashed media events — a word that seems to have lost its original pejorative sense, in Boston at least, as a non-event created purely for publicity purposes.

As for the working sessions of the conference, press attendance was not guaranteed because of restricted space; only the promotional hoopla was as big as all outdoors. Although the meeting was billed as "the first major urban affairs conference ever sponsored by an American city," it seemed surprisingly short on urban affairs and long on political hurrah. Whatever was missing in serious content was apparently to be made up for by the latest in "computer conferencing" — also known as "teleconferencing" — which eventually will substitute communication by computer terminal for old-fashioned speeches and panel discussions. The medium is the message and it does not truck with the niceties of nouns and verbs.

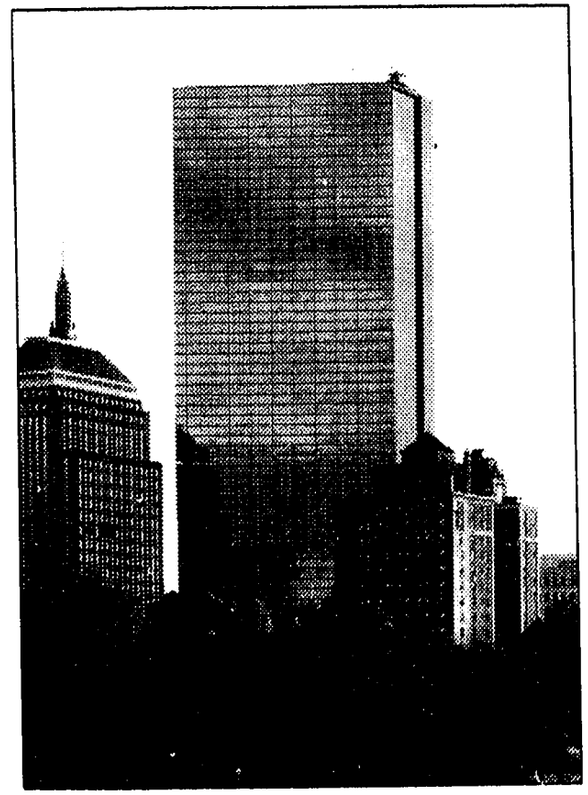
Boston was referred to in the releases as a "world-class" city (put that one on the verbal hit list with credentialing and conferencing), but official tours of the world-class city were minimal. There was a boat trip around the harbor, which offers a spectacular example of impressive waterfront renewal. Boston's mix of the marvelous old and the striking new, the richness of its restored and recycled landmarks of solid 18th- and 19th-century brick and granite and the dramatic 20th-century development of the adjacent Government Center and business community, sets a high level of civilized continuity. It is unlikely, however, that anyone pointed out how close this exemplary and delicate balance is to destruction by success and a formularized gloss.

A walk was planned for the rather unexceptional downtown retail district and its predictable pedestrian paraphernalia. The clambake took place in the historic Charlestown Navy Yard, which is the site of a redevelopment program. But in a city so blessed with architectural and urban history and sophisticated students of its style, the accent was overwhelmingly Chamber-of-Commerce. Maybe that is what world-class means.

Instead of seeing Boston as an urban and cultural whole, mayors and planning officials from abroad were taken to visit appropriate ethnic neighborhoods — wind up a politician and he runs to ethnic neighborhoods. However, neighborhoods, as such, were not on the agenda. "They don't have them in other parts of the world," a spokesperson explained.

What may have saved the week, and the conference, were the programs contributed by the educational institutions across the river in Cambridge — the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and a joint conference held by the Institute of Urban Design and the Graduate School of Design at Harvard. Where City Hall's idea of serious sessions consisted of those weary, cosmic subjects that no one can come to grips with and that can always be relied on to produce platitudinous generalities, like "The City in the Year 2000," the Harvard program took up the hard issues — the role of public investment in development and change, for example, and specific guidelines for relating the historic city to new needs.

'The recent Boston meeting seemed short on urban affairs and long on political hurrah.'



I.M. Pei's John Hancock Tower

That everything is not necessarily peachy in Boston was acknowledged in Mayor White's opening address, which referred to "the challenge of pavement and pollution, of ambition and angst" and confirmed the presence of "suffering humanity." It was a stunning rhetorical performance that touched all bases. But the opportunity was lost for a genuine international forum in which the problems and programs of cities could have been usefully addressed. Boston was the ideal setting for such a dialogue; the city's physical rebirth is remarkable in both economic and esthetic terms. Its successes and failures provide valuable lessons, from the bulldozer destruction of the West End, which taught cities what not to do with their neighborhoods, to the overwhelmingly popular Faneuil Hall Marketplace, which taught cities what to do with their landmarks.

But how a revitalized downtown can be plugged into the larger social and economic welfare is something no one has begun to solve, in Boston or anywhere else. Many of the visiting dignitaries offered little more than glamorous travelogues and upbeat statistics. Everyone was short-changed by this exercise in mutual boosterism.

For those who did not attend, the Boston Globe carried generous reports of the week's activities. To its credit, the paper passed up most of the "media opportunities," although it did go in rather heavily for visiting celebrity interviews with canned background material.

There was one lively exchange between Jane Jacobs, author of "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" and champion of neighborhoods and incremental growth, and James Rouse, the developer responsible for the Faneuil Hall Marketplace and its burgeoning offspring in other cities.

Arguing the virtues of big plans versus little plans, Mr. Rouse recalled Daniel Burnham's famous exhortation to make no little plans that fail to stir men's minds, and came out for big plans as the "new, compelling, rational images of what a city could be." Mrs. Jacobs didn't find the image particularly compelling. She thought that "piecemeal" should be made a respectable word again. "Life is an ad hoc affair," she said, "and has to be improvised all the time."

The only point on which all apparently agreed was that plans should be "humanized." Mrs. Jacobs' observation that "cities would never be humanized by conceiving urban models at Harvard" got her the conference's standing ovation.

The warnings of Ian Menzies, the Globe's urban affairs columnist, against "cosmetic recitations" went unheeded, along with his urgently expressed hope that Boston would be a pacesetter in the discussion of "gut issues" of violence, racism and the quality of urban life. Great cities, he wrote, "are the conscience of mankind." It takes more than hype from City Hall to make great cities great. ■