

# Call for a Master Plan

## Architects' Report on State of the City Focuses Attention on Serious Problems

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects has discovered the umbrella. Which is an old Italian way of saying that the architects have perceived the obvious, or what every informed critical observer has known about the city all along.

The institute's report, "The State of the City," charts all of the ills of urban design that have made New York less than beautiful, amenable or convenient. What the architects are saying, politely, is that New York is a mess, an opinion with which the man in the street would scarcely disagree.

But the report says it in thoughtful, professional terms that focus attention on many continuing, serious problems of housing, school and hospital design, historic preservation, and the general quality of architecture in a city where building and growth have long since outstripped any efforts to deal with them in a positive or comprehensive way.

Even if it is no clarion call of discovery, it states the matter clearly and unites the largest and most influential group of the city's architects behind a firm call for a master plan.

In this, it reflects the personal campaign of the City Planning Commission's chairman, William F. R. Ballard, for a master plan since his appointment 10 months ago. It is a cry that has not been heard in the man-made wilderness of New York since the city commissioners laid out its checkerboard of streets in 1811, because the city has never been in the hands of professional planners.

### Flexible Guide-lines

A master plan is a flexible set of guidelines for a city's growth, in which patterns and trends of work, housing, transportation and population, and location of services and facilities for the city's functions and requirements are figured in broad, but carefully calculated predictions of future needs. Nothing is "locked in," revisions are made constantly by review, but always in connection with totally perceived and integrated configurations of planned uses.

Example: the area of Staten Island soon to be made accessible by the completion of the Verrazano-Narrows bridge is currently open house for the quick-buck land gamblers. A master plan would aim for the orderly and attractive use of these resources and the elimination of speculative spot-development. The price without it? The same that has been paid in each borough opened for development without plan.

To quote the report, "mile upon mile of nondescript, ugly neighborhods of declining values," or the usual chaotic, suburban limbo of filling stations, shopping strips and shoddy housing with inadequate roads and services.

There is little to cheer New

Yorkers in this report. It reads like a genteel dirge.

On housing: "We are forced to recognize that the public housing program here has seldom produced distinguished or even satisfactory architecture from human and environmental viewpoints. What is missing in public housing is generally missing in all our housing. There is little that gives it life, little to stir our pride."

On the inferior quality of the city's architecture: "The major amount of building activity in New York is of speculative or investment nature. It is erected for the sole purpose of income or a quick profit. Yet these buildings deeply affect present and future dollar values, community desirability, the rate of urban decay and obsolescence, the city's attractiveness and inspiration . . ."

### Independent Controls

On municipal administration as it affects planning and building: "The city grows under a whole series of independent controls, each of which shares a portion of what in some progressive cities would be a unified planning entity."

"Progressive cities" means staid Boston or Philadelphia, close in miles but light years away in planning. The first has one third of its area under urban renewal in accordance with some of the most enlightened design and preservation principles; the second is proceeding to remake itself under a professional master plan executed by an extraordinarily competent planning agency.

Neither has any guarantee against error, but both make New York look provincial.

The need for a professional and authoritative agency with power to implement its proposals in cooperation with city departments is, in fact, the crux of New York's problem, although the A.I.A. report drops it with a single, gingerly mention.

### The Emperor's Clothes

A master plan is a paper plan, without the means to carry it out. Under the new City Charter, New York's Planning Commission has less authority than before.

Fragmented responsibilities led to the recent tragicomic game of political errors in which the Manhattan Borough President played put-and-take with the proposed Police Headquarters site against the Planning Commission's stated position, and the Brooklyn Borough President did the same with the location of a community college in direct refutation of planning board recommendations.

In saying that "New York City is not getting benefits commensurate with the money, energy and effort that are going into its development," New York's architects have recognized officially that the emperor is wearing no clothes. They are the most qualified group to do something about it.