

Conference on Ugliness

In a day when the "no-decision conference" has become standard operating procedure it takes a meeting of really monumental inconclusiveness to attract attention. This week's winner was a serious, frequently provocative one-day session on esthetic responsibility, or why our cities are so ugly, held in New York (ugly) at the Hotel Plaza (beautiful) by the American Institute of Architects. Over five hundred participants and eighteen distinguished panelists from almost as many different fields attacked the problem.

There were as many answers to the key question, "Who Is Responsible for Ugliness?" as there were participants. Culprits pinpointed by the group included panelist Erwin Wolfson, builder of New York's gargantuan and highly controversial Pan Am Building (ugly); big business, which finesses esthetic judgment by recourse to evasion by conference; and today's society, which wants convenience and conformity first and "beauty" last, as a kind of optional "extra," like sun visors or whitewall tires.

What the conference proved, without setting out to do so, is that ugliness is here to stay, inseparable from our culture, tastes, times, beliefs, standards and desires. Nor is there any easy answer, like a few well-placed Bombs for Beauty. The only effective weapon against the unpleasantness of our urban environment is an increasing number of people who care. While those who care wouldn't have filled Madison Square Garden (ugly, and the new one to be built this year promises to be even uglier), neither will urban esthetics replace ice hockey. The most remarkable thing about the conference, in this age of ugliness, is the fact that it took place at all.