

Tale of a Few Cities—Everywhere

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Paris is an enchantment rediscovered by every generation, but the city yields its loveliness best to those who come armed with the experience of life and art. The secret of its urbanity is that it is not a young city, and the elegance of its stately avenues, verdant parks and golden buildings is a sophisticated blend of culture, history and taste, and that definable thing called style. There are great and grand cities, and cities playing a more aggressive role in international affairs; but Paris is, and always will be, the world's truly beautiful city in its impact on the eye and heart.

Problems for Paris

It will be, that is, if it can steer a wise course between preservation and development, a dilemma that faces all cities of age or character, but that poses special problems for the city of style. The question is very much in doubt, as Paris now appears on the verge of yielding its loveliness to the real estate promoter, with government approval.

It took a public protest to change one developer's course and make the obvious clear—that the palatial 19th-century mansions shaping the Rond Point also help shape the city and its image; their loss would have destroyed as much of the Parisian spirit as its structure.

In another developer's development, the Gare d'Orsay, which holds a proper baroque colloquy with the facing Louvre across the Seine, is threatened with replacement by a new hotel. Its die-stamped ordinariness will change that civil dialogue to permanent insult.

Eroding a Vista

It is one thing to erode Third Avenue for common commercialism, with serious losses in terms of simple humanity; it is still another to do it to the vista of the Seine and the splendor of the Champs-Élysées. Perrault, Mansart, Gabriel, architects of grandeur and the Age of Reason, meet the architects of the tax shelter and the Age of the Parking Lot. And meet the Minister of Equipment and Housing, a former promoter who approved these schemes and opposes "fanaticism about green spaces."

The uses and remembrance of things past—those fine buildings and spaces and the urban concretions expressive of a shaky sense of nobility traditionally called art and today called environment—bring people to cities above the call of commerce. Style is a fragile thing. It exists only where men have approached or reached greatness in art or actions. It is destroyed by lesser men called planners or promoters.

In London, the reluctance of

building societies to give loans on old houses threatens the city's most notable amenity: its handsome, historic squares. The Royal Fine Arts Commission argues politely and ludicrously about lopping a few stories off a new skyscraper headquarters for the National Westminster Bank because of the proximity of its sightlines to St. Paul's, when they should be vetoing the appalling crassness of its design at any height.

New York, that cultural upstart, rejected out-of-hand a comparable grotesquerie to top Grand Central Terminal. At the same time, it permitted a more insidious kind of destruction by letting General Motors put up a sham-swell building with a bargain-bonus plaza that damaged the sightlines, scale and subtle new-old world distinction of the existing plaza at 59th Street, the city's urbane heart. The one thing that cheapens its surroundings more than a cheap building is one with pretensions. At what point does speculation become sabotage?

The English, according to Christopher Chataway, Conservative M.P. for Chichester, an official conservation area, are learning "to distrust the planner and developer." Planning is at least intended to be a rational process and damage from that takes time; the developer usually gets there first.

"There must be more to putting up buildings," Mr. Chataway says, "than simply making a profit."

There is. It is also the way to make a city—or to break it. Ask every city that has discovered to its regret how one block of badly conceived new buildings in the wrong place can wreck centuries of the most cultivated virtues. Ask Athens. Ask Rome. Cities live by change and adaptation; that is the cumulative process called civilization. Each century adds its own architectural achievements. But the constant for any city's survival as man's most complex creative act is a carefully nurtured sense of suitability and style.

Developers and Style

It is the rare developer who has a sense of style. In the even rarer instance when he recognizes 20th-century style, he will not pay for it. There is no style in his catalogue components and less in what passes for the hearts and minds of the willing architects who draw his dismal plans. London, New York, anyone? This may be the last time you saw Paris. The Vandals or Goths couldn't do a better job. The barbarians are invading, bringing their squalid square footage with them.

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