

HHFA -- DESIGN AT THE TOP: PRIZES SHOW AGENCY PLAYS PRIME ROLE IN U.S. SCENE

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Oct 25, 1964; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. X15

HHFA—DESIGN AT THE TOP

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT is an uphill fight and it has taken a long time, but building in this country is beginning to be understood as architecture, and architecture is beginning to be understood as environment. There is a growing awareness that our daily discomforts or pleasures are directly related to the absence or presence of the arts of design.

Evidence that this awareness has reached high places is presented by the Housing and Home Finance Agency's 1964 Design Awards, for which the winners were announced this week. The awards cover every major field of building aided by government programs, and that is an overwhelming amount of construction by any measurements.

Big Builder

If these awards seem like just another architectural-Oscar contest, consider the following facts:

HHFA, which started out simply as the Home Finance Agency to increase the housing supply and encourage builders, now includes, in addition to this function, the Urban Renewal Administration, the Public Housing Administration and the Community Facilities Administration. Its gross expenditures are about \$5 billion a year. It promotes staggering amounts of rebuilding in American cities through urban renewal, assists college and university construction and public building, and produces dwellings for the elderly and public housing, as well as the majority of American homes. All this is done through a combination of loans, grants and Federally-insured mortgages.

Although Americans prefer to reject the implication that any large-scale government agency exercises tangible controls over the American way of life, the impact of HHFA is inescapable. And so is its responsibility.

The good news, therefore, is that this large and influential Federal agency recognizes the importance of architectural standards and the designed environment as opposed to the casual accretion of chaos that we have settled for until now. Under the Agency's administrator, Robert C. Weaver, a narrowly bankers'-and-builders' outlook has been enlarged to include broad social objectives, and with the design program these objectives have been extended to the improvement of what is being built. It is none too soon.

What, then, has HHFA produced to give prizes to, how good are the premiated examples, and to what extent is

Prizes Show Agency Plays Prime Role In U.S. Scene

HHFA responsible for them?

Thirty one top awards and fifty five subsidiary citations have been given for excellence in planning and design. It is an impressive total. These awards have gone to residential and commercial aspects of urban renewal and facilities such as schools included in renewal projects; single and multiple family housing and housing for the elderly outside of renewal programs; public housing and government-aided public facilities.

It sounds like a lot, and as a group it adds up to some strikingly superior work. But it is only a drop in the national bucket. Excellence has been culled from overwhelming mediocrity, and even the good material is a commentary on the generally low standards that prevail.

The results are strongest in urban renewal, which, paradoxically, has been the weakest in creating good environments. Urban renewal failures are almost all environmental, in terms of scale, humanity, esthetics and neighborhood identity. But there are some handsome buildings and some well-planned projects, and the Urban Renewal Administration, under its design-conscious head, William L. Slayton, can point to some obvious, if occasionally partial, successes. Although design distinction is only one of many complex, interacting factors in urban renewal, it is a pivotal consideration.

Star Performers

It may sound like oversimplification, but success has largely been the result of the use of good architects and planners. Mies van der Rohe, one of the giants of the 20th century, is the recipient of not one, but three "first honor awards" in urban renewal, in Baltimore, Detroit and Newark. Names like I. M. Pei and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill recur, among others of equal reputation. And there are new names—Meathe, Kessler and Associates, for example, a talented young office doing stimulating renewal work in the Detroit area.

In home design, however, the results are a patent disaster. Incredible as it seems, out of the seas of suburbia and their uncountable new dwellings only thirteen one-family houses were singled out for honors. Of these, some are pleasant; none are exceptional. FHA regulations

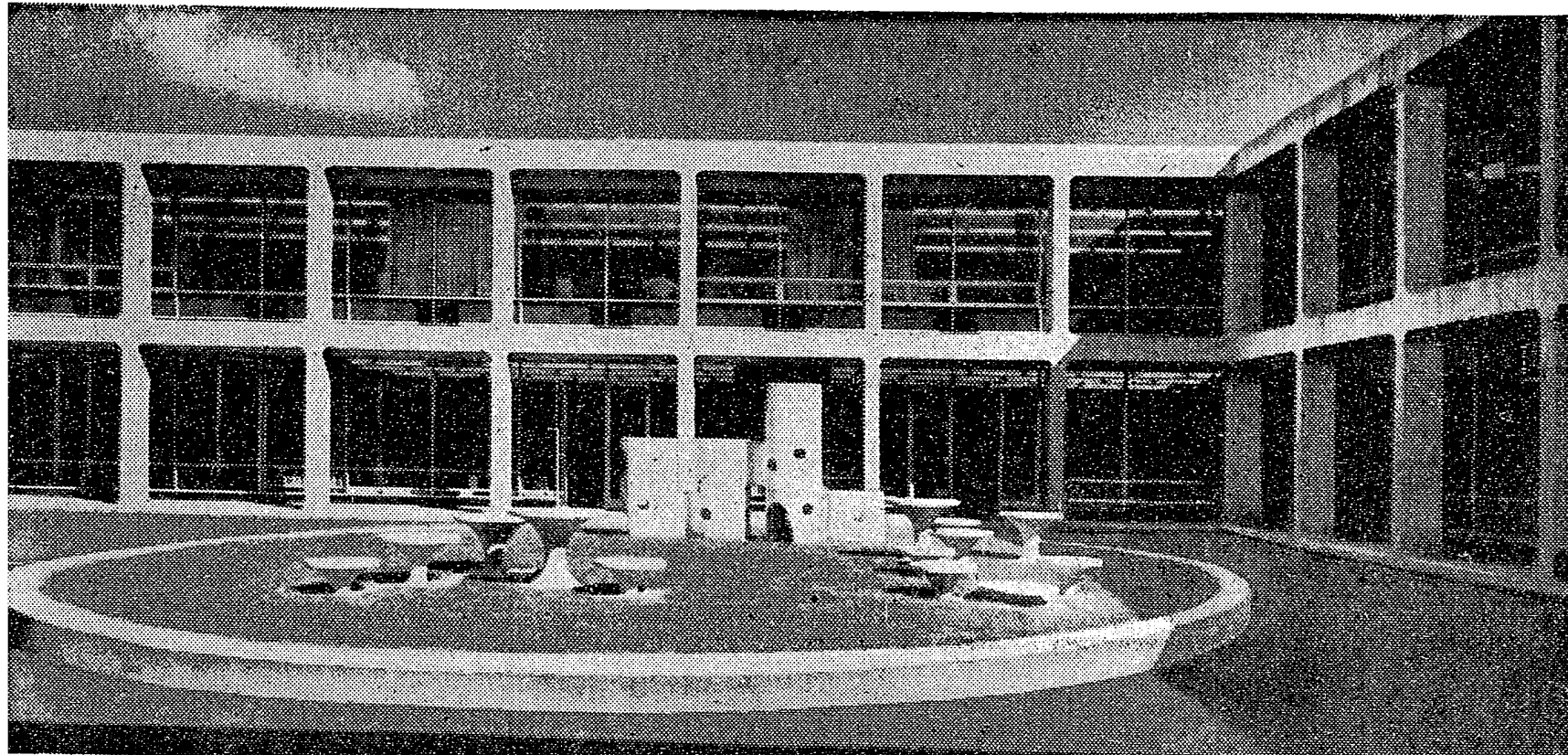
have not been known to encourage creative solutions. And speculative builders are equally noted for their adherence to lowest common denominators. Ninety-nine per cent of builders' houses in the United States are not architect-designed. The moral is too obvious to pursue.

To this appalling figure are added seven multifamily houses, at least three of which seem to have been "borrowed" from the urban renewal category, and six examples of housing for the elderly. Three public housing projects were cited. But since public housing is often design by legislative restriction or public accounting office, there is more to it than just getting a good architect to take on the job. We have, in fact, lost some very good architects that way.

Praise and Blame

Ultimately where does the responsibility for good design lie? HHFA made all of these buildings possible, in the fiscal sense. It is consciously encouraging quality with recognition and loosening some of its stultifying regulations, although it has a long way to go. But it does not commission buildings directly. In urban renewal, design quality is the responsibility of the chosen developer; in houses, it is the builder's job.

Men like the late Herbert Greenwald, who commissioned Mies van der Rohe to design for urban renewal, are an exception to a rule of speculative irresponsibility. In programs in the public interest using public funds local communities can set standards and requirements. But most, including New York, do not. Which leaves us right where we were. We now have some shiny new award certificates, a few pioneering standard-setters, an increasing concern with the nature of the environment, and hope.



PRIZE-WINNER—Harry Conte Community School, Wooster Square urban renewal project, New Haven, Conn., by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, recipient of a First Honor Award for design distinction in the Housing and Home Finance Agency's Design Awards Program.