

# The National No-Building Program

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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If anyone can remember back as far as the Johnson Administration, the gospel handed down, and still accepted, was that the United States would have to do as much building and rebuilding in the thirty-odd years to the end of this century as it did in the 300 previous years of its history. The implication was that this construction was to renew the fabric of our cities and provide the housing, schools, institutions, services and amenities society requires to survive.

At present construction costs, this is about like ordering a new environment from Fabergé. Even if no other factors were involved, such as tight money, expensive land and restrictive controls, the goal of urban reconstruction is now impossible in terms of the price of materials and labor, or just putting the buildings together. What the building trades and materials producers are saying to the victims of the urban crisis—through price rises, strikes and inflationary contract settlements—is “let them eat cake.”

At the costs that the construction industry has so assiduously escalated, it is no longer possible to build homes that most Americans can rent or buy, without massive subsidy. Even HUD's Operation Breakthrough, a crash program to industrialize housing produc-

tion, will affect quantities more than costs. To the shutting off of the housing market is now added the virtual shutdown of public construction. The nation's builders appear to be afflicted with a death wish and tunnel vision.

### Unfinished Business

Protesting costs, the Nixon Administration has ordered a 75 per cent cutback of Federal construction programs. But the trickle that remains is only about 25 per cent of what was left after the slowdown on government building already affected by the Vietnam war. Government structures such as the new Washington Tax Court have never gotten off the paper of the approved working drawings and Chicago's Federal Center is still an unfinished hole in the ground. Nor would anyone dare to look at what has happened to cost estimates of any of these and other unbuilt projects in the inflationary interval. Don't build now, and pay later. This curious form of government control makes no effort to deal with the real issue of out-of-sight costs or to produce necessary building at rational levels.

It is hardly rational that one of the country's most essential industries has priced itself out of everything except the luxury market. It is now restricted to a kind of gold-plated corporate construction (and even corpora-

tions are feeling the price squeeze, affecting whatever design gestures they might make toward public amenity) and high-cost, speculative buildings for high-cost residential and commercial use. This may still be profitable for builders, but it begs the country's needs.

Nothing is rational about the national construction picture. Tunnel vision and the death wish are not limited to the private sector. The large domestic programs on which the country's future will stand or fall are falling between and among the agencies that administer them on the Federal, state and city levels. Hale Champion, the man who just left as head of the Boston Redevelopment Authority after twenty embattled months, gave the process both barrels in a final report.

### Obstacle Course

Federally assisted construction “now flows through devices beyond the fantasies of the late Rube Goldberg,” he said. “The fact is that the Federal domestic program is not really administered or governed at all, even by the White House. It operates spasmodically through a series of non-enforceable and frequently violated peace treaties between and within Federal agencies.”

The trip down from the “stranded, fluke-thrashing whale that is the Federal Government” leads through the

state, repository of home rule, which considers city-conceived plans subversive, to the city, which has its own political life-style. “Boston's” said Mr. Champion, “has its charms, but they are not sufficient to justify its belligerence, its hostility, its pettiness, its devilousness, or its nearly paranoid suspicions.” In New York, costs are hiked another 15 to 20 per cent by contractors who add a kind of carrying charge to cover the city's months-late, lethargic bill-paying practices. Such is the peculiar obstacle race that politics provides in any city for any crisis-oriented program.

“Unworkable systems demand unthinkable approaches,” Mr. Champion concluded with stunning insight. That is the rising style of the new politics, which has as its credo that the only way to make the immobilized bureaucratic machinery work is to go over or under or around it. This is beating-the-system-within-the-system, as practiced by respectable revolutionaries. The question in the construction crisis is how to beat unworkable systems plus unthinkable costs.

“Comes the revolution,” said the late, great Willie Howard in a classic vaudeville skit, “and we'll all live in penthouses and eat strawberries and cream.” Sic transit the American dream.

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