

Design for a City

Le Corbusier once called New York a beautiful catastrophe,¹ and in the ensuing thirty years of construction—he also called it a city never finished—there has been more catastrophe than beauty. With the appointment of an Urban Design Council, an advisory group of prominent citizens in business, community affairs and the arts, there is hope that the emphasis will be changing.

The Urban Design Council is not meant to be a Fine Arts Commission, in the conventional sense of commitment to monuments only. That would be an anachronism in the maelstrom that is the fabric of New York. Urban design, in this battered and beleaguered city, is problem solving, not prettification. The Council's influential members, headed by William S. Paley, will act as liaison between the city's problem-solving public agencies, concerned with the city's form, and those who determine its form privately with massive doses of demolition and construction.

As an exercise in what-might-have been, there is the appalling General Motors Building, destroyer of scale, space and standards on the city's most elegant plaza, a monstrous behemoth dwarfing the park itself. This was not just a matter of design sacrificed by the builders to economic expediency, but, like the Pan Am Building, it is a matter of brutality of size and in addition a perversion of open-space planning. On these questions, the sponsor could and should have been well advised by the new council—if the council had been in existence.

The new office structure just south of the Seagram tower, with its slightly set-back stump and amorphous wrap-around plaza on Park Avenue, need not have mutilated Seagram's superb urban statement, nor would New York's most expensive (to live in) new apartment house, which has replaced the Brokaw mansion at Fifth Avenue and 79th Street, have done so much esthetic damage to its adjacent row of limestone palaces—if the Urban Design Council had been around to give the kind of advice that may now be expected of it.

The council will have to be concerned not with the traditional trivia of applied art and fountains and plazas as amenities. It will have to hold the line against the current epidemic of mismatched, meaningless plazas by builders who are heedlessly misusing the new zoning law to tear open a coherent cityscape for a bonus of more rentable floors. It will need to prod and persuade from Park Avenue to Harlem, dealing with the functional problems that frequently underlie architectural ills. There is no point in crying over spilled cement, but the lesson is clear: the council must deal with broader issues than visual esthetics. Le Corbusier could never have imagined a catastrophe the size of the G.M. building.