ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Exploring Manhattan's Open Spaces

The photographs by Marvin E. Newman on view until March 3 at the Urban Center in the historic Villard Houses (457 Madison Avenue at 51st Street) are extremely skillful and revealing images of New York. Remarkably evocative of the city's gigantism and rapid change, of the ceaseless activity and impact of huge buildings constantly going up and down, this group of 40 color and black-and-white pictures presents the Manhattan of legend and reality with greater fidelity to its spirit and construction than any photographic display that I have seen in a long time. These are not the usual romantic views of towers seen through morning mists or sunsets; the beauty of these images is in their sharpness, clarity and accuracy. It is their sense of New York's sheer, overwhelming size and vitality and continuous physical transformation that catches the city so dramatically and well. Mr. Newman has a superb reportorial and urban eye.

The photographs are the subject matter of an exhibition called "Breaking Ground: Open Spaces Temporary and Accidental," organized by the Municipal Art Society with a grant from the Arthur Ross Foundation, and it is the latest in a series of continuing shows at the recently established Urban Center. A number of civic and environmental groups have joined forces and addresses in the north wing of the newly restored Villard Houses under this title, to serve as a focal point for ideas and activities concerned with architecture, planning, preservation, land use, urban design and public art. The Urban Center includes the Municipal Art Society, the New York Chapters of the American Institute of Architects and the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Parks Council and the Architectural League. All sponsor public events and share the handsome exhibition rooms on the ground floor, where there is also a unique architectural bookstore set up by the Municipal Art Society and the J. M. Kaplan Fund. It should be made clear that while the new Palace Hotel occupies the south, or 50th Street wing of the Villard Houses, and the entire landmark building has been restored by the builder of the hotel, Harry Helmsley, the Urban Center and its offices form a totally independent entity. In these impressive midtown quarters, the center is already becoming an effective force in the city's environmental life.

I can think of no better exhibition than this one for New Yorkers to see to confirm or enlarge their own vision and understanding of their city, or for visitors to head for to gain an immediate feeling for New York's spirit and identity. The text, by Brendan Gill, is lucid and lively, with insights that are as sharp as the pictures. A small, neat catalogue is on sale that reproduces both.

In Mr. Gill's words, the purpose of the display is "to call attention to two separate but related features of the urban landscape — open spaces that come into existence temporarily, in the course of the demolition of old structures and the preparation of their sites for the construction of new

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structures, and open spaces that, having come into existence by chance, remain as permanent and almost always welcome oddities in the formal plan of a city." These spaces range from those great holes in the ground that appear and disappear regularly with new construction and have such unfailing magnetism for sidewalk superintendents, to the permanent openings formed by the intersection of the city's right-angled grid and older, wayward streets, like Broadway. Such landmark spaces as Times and Herald Squares and Columbus Circle attract communal life and activity and provide a particular sense of place.

But Mr. Newman's photographs convey a great deal more than the exhibition's title suggests. The value of these pictures is the way in which they make us see and feel the relationship between what is, and isn't, there; the way they catch the counterpoint of the unexpected and unconventional void and the city's extraordinary, crushing density. They show a New York that, for once, is not just a monumental skyline, but a kind of urban bricolage of accident and design.

An unanticipated benefit of the current building boom, Mr. Gill tells us, is "the opening up of many unexpected vistas. It is hard not to imagine these vistas as the sites of future parks and squares, though in fact we know exactly what they are: deep holes in the ground, blasted out of bedrock and soon to become the multi-storied basements of high-rise office buildings."

Those of us who saw the hole in the ground made for the Pan Am Building will never forget the miraculous effect of that sudden opening of the city's dense heart; it not only suggested a park but made it dramatically clear how badly one was needed right there. It was no more illogical a notion, of course, than the vast, green expanse of the Tuileries in Paris, which occupy extremely valuable, prime land on the city's traditionally fashionable Right Bank. Or for a closer comparison, it would have been as illogical and unrealistic as the creation of New York's Bryant Park, if one figures in the economic calculations of the comparable value of midtown office space. The fact that New Yorkers have had to give over their rights to this superb midtown space to a drug subculture that makes the park both dangerous and unpleasant is something its farsighted Beaux Arts designers could never have anticipated. Still, the very considerable fringe benefits remain — the sunlight, trees and views from surrounding streets and buildings.

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But oases like Bryant Park and Central Park are purposefully planned open spaces; it is the qualities of the completely accidental and impermanent ones that are being celebrated here. And it is a significant virtue of the show that these spaces are not presented as arty abstractions or nostalgic incidents in the life of the city, but as part of its total aspect.

At a time when exhibition texts seem to be growing increasingly ponderous and pretentious, Mr. Gill's messages are characteristically cheerful and pointed. While we marvel at the size of the skyscraper-walled AT&T excavation on Madison Avenue between 55th and 56th Streets (now being filled by the Johnson/Burgee tower) he asks us to experience its "openness and its sense of sky."

It is sky, of course, that we are all hungry for in New York; it is sky we seek at the tops of our buildings as much as the spectacular views. And it is sky — with its marvelous corollary, light — that we discover in cities like Washington and Paris, where the height restrictions are every bit as important as the architecture. Given sky, it is style that then makes a city ordinary or sublime.

And so we are warned that "on block after block along Madison Avenue, these temporary open spaces are being filled with great chunks of buildings, which largely obliterate the sky. The domestic scale of Madison Avenue north of 60th Street is among its most precious aspects, and is now more than ever in jeopardy." And we are told that a huge slab building like Edward Durrell Stone's 1968 General Motors Building "bruises" rather than scrapes the sky, which immediately makes its gracelessness quite clear. The new Fisher Brothers Building between 51st and 52d Streets "leaps with tyrannical self-confidence out of the middle of the block" in a Newman photograph that is both beautiful and terrifying. "In hard times," the text comments succinctly, "the city tends to grant builders an imprudently overgenerous gift of urban light and air."

The message conveyed by this show is an important one. Cities breathe and live, either by plan or by accident, through their open spaces. And it is these spaces as much as the buildings that give cities their character, amenity and charm. When space is a major contributor to a city's style, as with London's many gentle green squares, for example, or the very French and formal juxtaposition of classical spaces and buildings in a city like Bordeaux, these are memorable and wonderful places to be.

"Whether we are conscious of it or not," we are told, "the amenity of a suddenly increased volume of light and air has a salutary effect on our dispositions. We are drawn to a construction site not merely to watch the hard-hats at work but also to catch a welcome glimpse of the city's past at the very moment when the city's future threatens to obliterate it. We perceive that the city's past, in terms of urban design, could have been far better than it was; we perceive as well, and more poignantly, that the city's future could be far better than it is going to be." The lesson is all too clear. ■