

# CITIES: GREAT PLAINS OR CUT-RATE CURES

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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**T**HE Museum of Modern Art added its powerful endorsement to the Pennsylvania Avenue plan this week with an exhibition of the model and drawings of the impressive proposal released recently for the rehabilitation of Washington's shabby axis between the Capitol and the White House. The show opened yesterday and will continue through September 18.

This plan, prepared by a Presidential advisory council and made public in May, is one of the most ambitious and grandiose excursions into urban design advanced for a major city in our time. It has been compared, correctly, with Hausmann's 19th-century rebuilding of Parisian boulevards and Sixtus V's 16th-century revamping of Rome.

Essentially the proposal calls for an avenue of low, arcaded facades on its north side, with high commercial construction pushed back to E Street, punctuated by monumental plazas and cross-axes tying the White House to the Capitol and the Archives Building to the new National Portrait Gallery. Its most striking feature would be a dramatic National Square almost as large as the Place de la Concorde at the White House end, leading to a ceremonial White House Gate. There would be cafes, shops, restaurants and pedestrian malls.

The fact that the museum has tapped this proposal for display in its elegant and influential showcase, a gesture that has established many contemporary reputations, is more than the usual esthetic cachet.

With the crisis of our expanding and deteriorating cities called the number two problem of the second half of the 20th century after the keeping of world peace—a statement made last week by the World Health Organization of the United Nations—the museum's exhibition is serious recognition of the fact that large-scale urban planning is a subject of prime critical and topical interest in the arts today.

### Art and Statistics

It also makes it significantly clear by showing an atypical example that planning, as it is being practiced typically, has a tragic deficiency. It is slum clearance or traffic engineering or some endless variation on the pseudo-statistics of chart and graph making which produces impressive patterns, trends and maps, but few grand or pleasing designs. Typical planning lacks an all-important basic concept, an esthetic ideal, or an architectural image. The demography is magnificent, but the results are not. Our most conscientious efforts bring forth formless, anti-architectural limbos that replace black areas with gray areas and will continue to do so unless the science of planning is raised to an art.

One of the most curious and interesting things about the Pennsylvania Avenue proposal, however, is that it uses 20th-century art to serve an 18th-century ideal. The avowedly avant-garde museum is presenting a design that is frankly classical and Beaux Arts in all of its visible aspects.

What is not visible, except in cross-section, is that this is also a bold and far-sighted attack on urban disorder that is as modern as the world of tomorrow. Even the handsome renderings of symmetrical streets and squares carry only schematic suggestions for buildings; the program calls for the country's most advanced architects to carry them out.

### New and Old

This seeming anachronism of startling new solutions within a stately, familiar framework is as right for Washington as it would be wrong for other cities that do not have the capital's formal monumentality. This comes, incidentally, from its original, and even grander, l'Enfant plan. (As cities have grown, men's standards have shrunk; large cities today deal in small, bargain basement ideas.)

What the Pennsylvania Avenue plan offers beyond the obvious "city beautiful" is a multilevel, or "platform" design, which separates vehicu-

lar and pedestrian use and regulates through-traffic and parking by putting it underground, eliminating intersections and freeing street levels for pedestrian and, in this case, ceremonial functions.

The above - and - below - ground platform concept is no wild-eyed dream; it has already been put to work in Hartford's Constitution Plaza and is on the drawing board of almost every qualified architectural planner. Multi-level sorting and control of the city's functions is a basic answer to the complexity and concentration of contemporary urban problems.

Underground parking is an operational and esthetic balm to troubled cities wherever it has been used properly. In-town tunnels preserve communities where exposed expressways destroy them. Correlation of the elements of circulation, storage and con-

nection to the city's processes and neighborhoods seems like simple common sense. But it's also expensive common sense, and that's the rub.

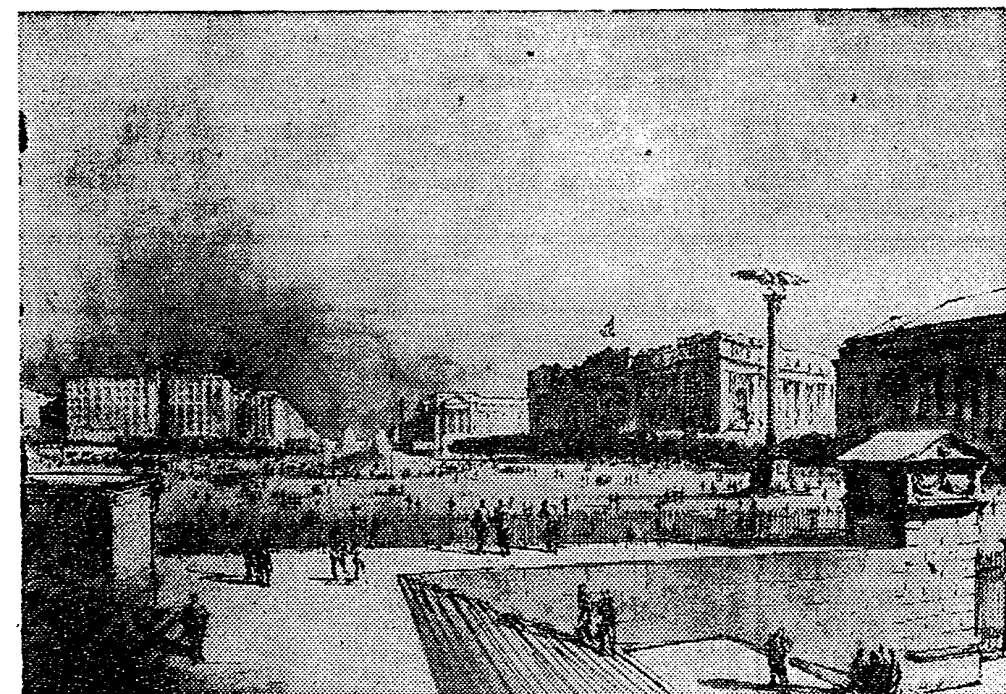
### False Economy

It's much cheaper to destroy neighborhoods and their social stability with bisecting thoroughways, to tear down buildings for parking lots, to bulldoze the shabby past regardless of historical and architectural values. The ultimate price, however, is catastrophically high — virtually total blight, or the destruction of the social fabric and the civic amenities that make a city a proper city and a fit place to live. These are also the values that make it economically viable.

Washington poses the question with particular force. Its postwar growth except for a notable urban renewal program, has been a mutilating

invasion of its serene, radiating boulevards and the erosion of its formal elegance by the tiresome architectural taints of the speculative builder and the steady deterioration of older areas. The only unifying element is the dependable glue of congealing traffic.

As the nation's capital, it has much more to lose in terms of beauty, tradition and character than most American cities, and the Pennsylvania Avenue plan offers massive first aid that goes far beyond the creation of a handsome ceremonial boulevard. The proposal has had impressive professional endorsement but no official action. The Great Society, in President Johnson's optimistic phrase, must now decide whether Washington is to be a great capital or a do-it-yourself disaster.



**PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE PLAN**—"Its most striking feature, a National Square almost as large as the Place de la Concorde." Nicholas Solovioff drawing.

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