

Sunrise Over Morningside

The Morningside General Neighborhood Renewal Plan for the upper West Side is the culmination of a seventeen-year effort on the part of the city, the local community and the major institutions within that area to find a way to upgrade and restore a large and critical section of New York.

It is an ambitious, conscientious and comprehensive attempt to resolve some of the city's worst problems of poverty, crime and social deterioration and to preserve what is left of a stable community at the same time that it meets the expansion needs of a stellar group of schools, hospitals and religious institutions in the Columbia University neighborhood.

But the program that outlines these admirable objectives is only a beginning. The real problems in this area, as in every other renewal site in New York, are the human and social ones of relocation—for renewal disrupts a community no matter how laudable the objectives—and the economic and esthetic ones of the kind of environment that will replace existing conditions. After the brutal sweep of the bulldozer and its sterile results in early renewal projects, there has been a belated swing to the philosophy of rehabilitation, and the West Side will be its first real testing ground. But the ideal preservation of neighborhoods must also be faced realistically, if it is to be made to work.

Rehabilitation is, admittedly, troublesome and expensive. It is advisable only for buildings of sound structure and distinct architectural worth. It is imperative for buildings of landmark quality and for the retention of neighborhood character. At the same time it must be understood that there are places where new building would be better. Relocation is inevitable in either case.

The trouble, of course, is that new building is not always better. This is the crux of the renewal picture in New York. Until time, thought and money are spent on the basic problem of design and production of a higher quality of housing for the city, the entire expensive and elaborate effort of renewal can only be a seriously flawed solution, at best. Equally important, a way must be found to get that kind of housing through the bureaucratic controls, legislative restrictions and departmental checks and requirements of the city government that form a mold for mediocrity.

We urgently need crash housing studies in New York, publicly or privately financed, and we need the kind of municipal cooperation and encouragement that will get them built. Only then will renewal plans have any real chance of creating the better environment that is the whole aim and purpose of urban renewal everywhere.