

A Planner Among the Planners

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Vacancies come and vacancies go on the seven-member New York City Planning Commission, but architects or planners seldom fill them. What used to be a game of borough or ethnic roulette has been formalized by the new City Charter, which specifies that a member of the commission must be appointed from each borough. This procedure, designed to be even-handed, has turned into an exercise in local party politics.

With the departure of Alexander Cooper last month, there is a vacancy to fill. Mr. Cooper, the commission's only architect, comes as close as anyone could to being irreplaceable in his grasp of zoning and planning. This time the pointer says Manhattan and, with no minority member since Gordon Davis left to be Parks Administrator, the political requirement seems to be a black or Puerto Rican from Manhattan. Nowhere does it say architect or urban planner.

On this appointment hinges the very form and functioning of the city through decisions that will have decisive economic and environmental impact. It in no

way downgrades the capabilities of the other commissioners to point out that the City Planning Commission needs a member who is trained to read plans and project their implications accurately. Professionalism should be a recognized priority.

In this case, Charter reform has done more harm than good; the borough-rotation system has set up a direct route to local boards and clubhouses where the selection process is treated as a party payoff. This subverts the intention of creating the Planning Commission as an apolitical body, to attract the greatest expertise. A change in the Charter to do away with the troublesome geographic provision would be welcome, but given political realities, that is highly unlikely.

The appointee who would doubtless satisfy everyone would be a minority architect with the right political connections and a thorough knowledge of the arcane business of planning and of the even more arcane municipal bureaucracy. Barring such a miraculous find, the first consideration should be professionalism.

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