At Last, a Winner

Riis Plaza Is Breakthrough in the Use Of Space, Certain to Have Wide Impact

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

In matters of urban design, New York has a well-documented record of finishing last. With Riis Plaza, the city finally has produced a winner.

This breakthrough in the design and use of open space in public housing, one of the first and best examples of its kind in the country, is certain to set national standards ranging from the simple pursuit of "beautification" to the solution by design of some of the American city's more pressing social problems.

An Appraisal

There is a great deal more than meets the eye at Riis Plaza. What does meet the eye, however, is extremely attractive, consisting of four "outdoor rooms," or "zoned" sections that run between the brick apartment towers for two full blocks formerly filled with off-limits grass.

These "rooms" include a quiet, raised sitting area with fountain and flowers, a sunken amphitheater surrounded by a pergola and promenade, a social plaza with benches and planters, and a children's playground, all executed to an exceptionally high standard of coordinated, creative design.

Earlier Experiments

The Riis plan is the culmination of earlier experiments on a smaller and fragmented scale at George Washington Carver houses in East Harlem and Nathan Straus houses on East 28th Street, also sponsored by the New York City Housing Authority and carried out by the same designers, Pomerance & Breines, architects, and M. Paul Friedberg Associates, landscape architects.

The grant given by the Vincent Astor Foundation for Carver Plaza in 1964 was expanded to a cool million last year for Riis Plaza's very cool design. Independent funds expedited the project; what would have been a two-and-a-half-year job under normal city procedures was cut to one.

Behind the attractive results at Riis is a design philosophy that attacks urban blight at its roots by dealing directly with sociological and environmental needs. At the same time, it breaks every sterile mold and stale convention of the city's park, playground and open space policy for the last 30 years. They were great years for the manufacturers of asphalt, chain link fences and Keep Off the Grass signs.

Intricate Layout

There are no Keep Off signs at Riis Plaza, and there is very little grass. But the intricate and intriguing layout that coordinates landscape and architectural design for a broad range of recreational pleasures is carefully arranged under a fine double row of full-grown trees preserved from the original planting.

Excavations for the amphitheater were used to raise other sections of the formerly pancake-flat land. The brick-walled sitting plaza at the south end is on a level above the distraction of walks and entrances.

The amphitheater, an open square of descending steps with a balconied stage at one end, designed with the advice of Joseph Papp, is already booked solid for the summer, with attractions from hootenannies to school graduation exercises. By day, children make up new games on its elaborate levels. At night, music is piped through the speaker system. On weekends, the stairs are a family picnic site. Summer will see the same stairs washed by jets while others spray to the center to make a play pool, as water restrictions permit.

The children's playground at the north end contains not a single piece of stock equipment or a single stock idea. It also contains no "play sculpture," an adult conceit, frequently of surpassing ugliness, that foists a pretentiously false estheticism on those too young to protest.

Environment for Play

This is a "play environment," according to Paul Friedberg, its designer. Hollow granite block "igloos" offer raised stones for climbing and have their own built-in slides that empty into sand beds below, set with mazes of wooden timbers and concrete blocks. One thing leads to another, including seesaws and a tree house. It is all planned as a "continuous play experience," rather than as a collection of static objects attached to an asphalt base.

The entire scheme of Riis Plaza is "permissive"; every element is calculated for use and abuse. The scale is residential and materials are textured rich and indestructible; brick, stone and concrete make interesting pavement patterns and furnishings. Seats and pergolas are heavy, bolted wood; lamp standards have plastic globes immune to bricks or bats.

Do children run through planting beds? There are no fences, although this has been the instinctive reaction of Housing Authority personnel. The architects have provided blocks and stepping stones. Do they climb over walls and William Tarr's cast concrete sculptures? There are toeholds and handholds to help; bricks and corners are rounded. Write on surfaces? Materials are rough. Invade the greenery? Thorns are better than fences.

What the architects have devised is a kind of roll-with-the-punches design that also capitalizes on the natural instinct, the happy accident or the unexpected effect. It goes with the grain of human needs, rather than against it.

All of these shrewd and frequently elegant devices serve a larger idea: the understanding that urban design, properly used, is a sociological tool for the improvement of both the human condition and the physical environment. As such, it is one of the most valuable tools a city can command.