

Planning for Beauty

White House Parley to Flex Muscles Over the Total American Environment

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The White House Conference on Natural Beauty, which sounds deceptively like a top-level tea party for little old ladies devoted to the cause of simple pastoral pleasures, is about to tackle one of the largest and toughest problems of the century: the total American environment. Its roster of panel-

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ists and delegates reads like a who's who of the conservation and urban planning fields. Their purpose is to

consider all those interlocking and interdependent physical factors that make the United States a better, or a worse, place to live. They will be discussing the American environment not only in terms of esthetics but also as a product of the orderly growth and efficient planning that must be the basis of any beauty that is more than skin deep.

Far-Reaching Project

The term "natural beauty," as it is being used for the conference and as it applied to the Presidential panel and report on the same subject earlier this year, is a catch-all phrase for every aspect of the natural and man-made landscape.

It concerns the urban and suburban as well as the rustic and rural; it deals with cities and towns as urgently as with the countryside. The phrase has more popular appeal than the pedantic word "environment," and its prettiness is being stretched to cover the bigger, more muscular idea.

The aim of the conference, therefore, is to get "natural beauty" out of the pansy beds and into the infinitely more complex and far-reaching subject of professional planning.

Not that the flower beds will be neglected. With a slight split in personality and philosophy, the conference will consider specific, short-term proposals, such as tree-planting programs and putting utility wires underground, as well as long-term considerations, such as the enormous problems of renewing American cities and regulating the spread of suburbs.

Its concern will range from what to do right now about 17,500 automobile graveyards, junkyards and scrap metal heaps counted recently on main highways by the Department of Commerce to how to rebuild the entire United States in the next 40 years. This process is expected to equal the total amount of construction in the country's earlier history.

The problem emerges as a double-barreled one. First, there are the holding operations. These come under the heading of conservation, which concentrates on saving what is left of the unspoiled landscape, including the remaining wilderness areas, from the threats of expansion and exploitation.

Among these threats are housing, highways, power plants and the system that taxes farmland on potential development value so that preservation is discouraged.

Reclamation is a kind of backtracking conservation that attempts to recapture what has already been spoiled by restoring certain natural features to their original attractiveness.

It deals with blight by strip mines, sand and gravel pits, junkyards, waste-laden rivers, agricultural exploitation and the latest addition to environmental ugliness — the endless asphalt parking lot.

Second, as a corollary and complement to conservation, or the holding effort, is the planning effort. Its purpose is to insure necessary new growth without unnecessary eyesores. The subjects are townscape, suburbia and highways. These planning or preventive aspects may be the program's most significant features as a means of control for the future.

To consider growth in esthetic terms is a radical reversal of traditional American policy. Ugliness has been accepted as an inevitable by-product of progress, and American enterprise has manufactured it with singular vigor.

The conference, therefore, will be much in the position of Alice and the Red Queen who had to do a lot of fast running just to stay in place. Concern with the quality of the environment is a century behind schedule. An impressive backlog of chaos is spreading as rapidly as the population explosion.

The conferees are expected to produce concise answers to hard questions. They are being asked to develop detailed sets of practical recommendations for each of the problems dealt with, which will be passed on to the President for implementation.

This sense of specifics and immediacy is meant to dominate the meetings. Many panelists have already received a tart telegram in response to summaries that dealt too much in high-minded generalities.

'We Want Answers'

"We're all for the idea of a better environment," is the tenor of instruction from the conference's management. "You don't have to convince this body of experts. The President is behind it. We want answers."

Whatever answers are offered, there will be legal, administrative and financial obstacles to carrying them out.

The number and kind of Government agencies involved in the design and building of highways alone, for example, is a subject for computer analysis. Conservation, as in the Storm King power plant vs. Hudson River valley preservation, cuts across Federal, state and local lines and pits public interest against private enterprise. The meetings will try to find ways to build a better America against formidable odds.

On the positive side is the fact that environmental excellence, or natural beauty, is an idea whose time has come. The importance of the conference is that it is bringing the best professional thought and experience to bear on the problem. The danger is that talk will peter out into nonaction.

But if the conference finds solutions, the President can put them to work immediately by Executive order. It is agreed by all that speed is essential. "Faster," said the Red Queen. "I'm going as fast as I can," said Alice. In the opinion of the experts themselves, this may not be fast enough.