

Housing Quality

Although setting standards for better housing may seem an exercise in futility when the problem right now is building any kind of housing at all, that is too pat a view of the problem. The proposal that has just come out of the City Planning Commission, called Zoning for Housing Quality, was begun in the days of housing activity and will be valid when that activity resumes.

The proposed regulations are meant to encourage desirable design features, such as improved apartment layouts, more sun and air, safety, recreation space, and appropriate height and siting. These features would earn points for the builders, permitting lower, better-planned buildings that are less expensive to construct, and alternatives to standard open space. It is another form of incentive zoning. The whole thing is optional, however, rather than mandatory.

There are, unfortunately, two large uncertainties about the proposal: whether optional regulations will work, an unknown that depends, in turn, on whether the economics will work. The developers' law is immutable; the options will be picked up only in direct ratio to how well they pay off.

The concept, however, is not only a sound one, but an essential reform of the 1961 zoning that has produced overbearing towers of minimal amenity and sterile surroundings in small-scale neighborhoods. It represents the kind of specific, sensitive analysis and reshaping of rules and practice that is the proper role of the city's urban designers in good times or bad. When the future promises automatic reductions in quality in every way, the aim of more livable housing has a high priority.