

A Start on Cities of 'Quality and Style'

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Sep 23, 1968; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 34

A Start on Cities of 'Quality and Style'

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Toward the end of an Administration, Presidential thoughts tend to turn toward immortality, or at least toward a preoccupation with the permanent record. It is then that plans take shape for those Presidential libraries, archives and memoirs that are meant to document the years when one man briefly assisted destiny.

In his recent dedication speech for the handsome new Department of Housing and Urban Development building in Washington, President Johnson revealed a more monumental sense of historic legacy. He was thinking building and he was concerned with nothing less than the physical quality of American cities that his Administration will leave behind. There is no bolder bid for immortality than that.

The Beginnings

Nor was this without some justification. This Administration has made a start on the job of providing 26 million houses and apartments in the next ten years, of rebuilding the cities, of tying physical and social needs and programs together, of visualizing a new urban America. It leaves the three-year-old Department of Housing and Urban Development and the 1968 housing

bill, the most comprehensive and sophisticated legislative attack on the nation's ills to come out of any Congress. For once, the political understanding of the urban crisis has gone beyond housing to the total environment, from the advance planning and financing of entire new communities to long overdue Government-promoted development programs for innovations in the design and technology of low-cost homes.

Need for Funds

What the Administration has not provided is the necessary funds, or anything approaching adequate appropriations; but it leaves the problems of urban America acknowledged and defined and it has set up an essential part of the machinery to solve them. The rest of the machinery is money.

The Johnson Administration is also leaving a few superior Federal buildings, such as HUD, begun in the Kennedy years, which prove that excellence in Federal building programs is not an impossible goal. Design excellence and the choice of quality solutions were other things the President stressed in his talk, and this is a new and still somewhat unfamiliar

emphasis in Government circles. These are subjects with absolutely no political appeal. But then, this is not an election year for Mr. Johnson.

Without much fanfare or publicity, the President made a concise and important policy statement on the quality of a nation's life through its environment. "We have learned that when man brutalizes his surroundings, he lays waste to his own life and spirit. When he throws together buildings that are tasteless and trivial, he confesses the poverty of his imagination. If he lets his cities decay, he tyrannizes himself."

He spoke of the "outpouring of concern for the physical setting of life in America" and of efforts at Government encouragement, "not just for quantity and size in our achievements but for quality and style as well." Mr. Johnson is evidently aware of the choice this country must make, not just to build, but to build well; of the decisions that will determine whether the cities of the future will still be "joyless places—traps for the poor and hopeless."

Risk the 'Unrealistic'

If something is lacking in this approach, it is frank acknowledgment of the fact that the most ambitious programs

and efforts to date are no more than a holding operation at best; the magnitude of the problems involved will barely be touched by corrective measures now contemplated or any budget under consideration. This kind of plain thinking, speaking and counting is called "unrealistic" and adds little to anyone's political popularity.

What Standards Ahead?

The question is not whether the man who follows Mr. Johnson will pick up the ball; he is bound to. It is whether he will pick it up at current, hard-won levels of comprehension and creativity or whether he will retreat to the nadir of eight years ago, when the Federal Government was about to destroy Washington's historic Lafayette Square for some block-long elephantine structures on a par with the gross banalities of the Rayburn Building, and when cities, with Federal help, were mistaking sterile super-projects for socially and humanly oriented renewal. The standards by which the new America will be built, if it is built, are as important as the money without which it cannot be built at all.

MRS. HUXTABLE is Architecture Critic of *The Times*.