

**Architecture**

# Too Bad About The Mall

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

EVERYBODY knows about Gov. Nelson Rockefeller's \$1-billion, Monumental Camp Albany Mall, his bid for master-builder immortality that sets some kind of record for ludicrously grandiose planning and costs.

But few people know much about the building program that legitimately puts the Governor right up there with the popes and pharaohs: the \$4-billion program of the State University Construction Fund. Established by the State Legislature in 1962, the fund not only finances the physical development of more than 30 campuses of the State University of New York, but is responsible for planning, design, selection of architects and supervision of construction. It does the job with remarkable quality, within budgets and on time.

The figures are overwhelming. The Fund has brought 752 projects out of the ground so far, completed at a cost of \$957-million. An additional 284 projects valued at \$508-million are now in construction. Another 333 projects adding up to \$1-billion, are currently in design. By 1974, the grand total will be 2,000 projects worth that awesome \$4-billion. By 1980, this will serve a student body approaching a quarter of a million. The program's standards of architectural excellence are hard to match anywhere. Too bad about that Mall.

The operation has brought master plans to all of the state's campuses, by many of the country's leading architects. Within these plans, top talents have provided stellar groups of buildings. In government terms, the whole thing is something of a miracle. It has been brought about, first, under the leadership of an architect, George A. Dudley, and in recent years by an educator, Anthony G. Adinolfi, an able man who died much too young this spring. There is a great deal of understandable concern at the present time about whether the program will hew to its direction and

standards, or sink back to a bureaucratic norm.

Arthur Drexler, director of the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art, calls the work of the State University Construction Fund "the most conspicuously successful university building program in the country." Currently, Mr. Drexler has chosen to exhibit one aspect of it, the entirely new, \$250-million campus for the College at Purchase, a Westchester site in the Establishment Greenbelt 45 minutes from Manhattan. The school, which will have a College of Letters and Science and a showcase School of the Performing Arts, is under construction now. The exhibition will be in the museum's architecture galleries through June 22, with installation and catalogue by Wilson Wright.

Purchase is a fine demonstration of master planning, properly understood. It is a lesson in how superior architecture by a team of talented individualists can work together for a united concept, or idea. The idea, says Mr. Drexler, provided by Edward Larrabee Barnes as master planner, "is to give priority to those shared public spaces which constitute the public realm. Their size and disposition is what keeps everything in control." These are the principles not just of campus planning, but of the best urban design.

The shared public space and focus of the plan is a central paved mall, 300 by 900 feet. A library and student facilities in the middle of the mall, and a complex of four theaters that terminate it, will be by Mr. Barnes. The long sides of

the mall are flanked by trees and arcades. Through the arcades are the entrances to the college buildings, by other architects. The buildings themselves are held to rigidly parallel lots, separated by 32-foot "streets."

The plan is rational, formal and tight as a drum. It sets a pattern that no single architect can violate, although within that pattern each is free to work his own way. The architects working with Mr. Barnes are Philip Johnson, for the Art Gallery; Paul Rudolph, the Natural Sciences Building; Gwathmey, Henderson and Siegel, dormitories and service buildings; Giovanni Pasanella, dormitories; Venturi and Rauch, Visual Arts and Humanities and Social Service Buildings; The Architects Collaborative, Visual Arts Instructional Facility; and Gunnar Birkerts, Dance Instructional Facility. The landscape architect is Peter G. Rolland.

Make what you will of it, Mr. Barnes has arranged his master plan so that you will not really "see" the buildings that are not on the mall. It is the central public space, the mall and arcades, that dominate and set the scene. The arcades have the specific purpose of covering and unifying both flanking rows of structures, and only the "streets" between them reveal their style, and then as a pedestrian, rather than as a panoramic experience. Future expansion simply continues the buildings on their same axes — a penalty in corridor lengths, perhaps, but with a premium on order.

This highly urban organization, with its insistence on a classically regular grid and clear orientation, eschews

all suggestions of the rustic-picturesque or scattered-college-monumental, in spite of a 500-acre rural site. Open fields give way to formal lawns, and then to the axial symmetry of the paved, landscaped plan with its concentrated buildings. Five buildings are almost complete, and the rest are expected to be ready by 1976.

The four theaters, to serve everything from opera and dance to experimental drama, are to be the heart of the School of the Performing Arts, which will comprise 20 per cent of the student body. To be used as a local cultural center as well as an educational complex, they are extravagantly equipped, although Mr. Barnes points out that they are not "luxuriously" designed. Call them pipe-rack Cadillacs. The rest of the students will be in the College of Letters and Science.

A total enrollment of 6,000 is expected by 1980. That's a lot of students and activity and the Regional Plan Association, the unofficial tri-state planning group with a singularly unclouded crystal ball, is less than happy about the State University's selection of the Purchase property.

At one point, RPA, which also opposes the random corporate flight to the suburbs, tried actively to dissuade the State from making the move. Sheldon Pollack of RPA has said in the publication, *The Environment Monthly*, "A university campus induces development. Unless we force a change in present patterns, we shall see the consistent location of major trip-generating facilities in scatter fashion, chewing up our

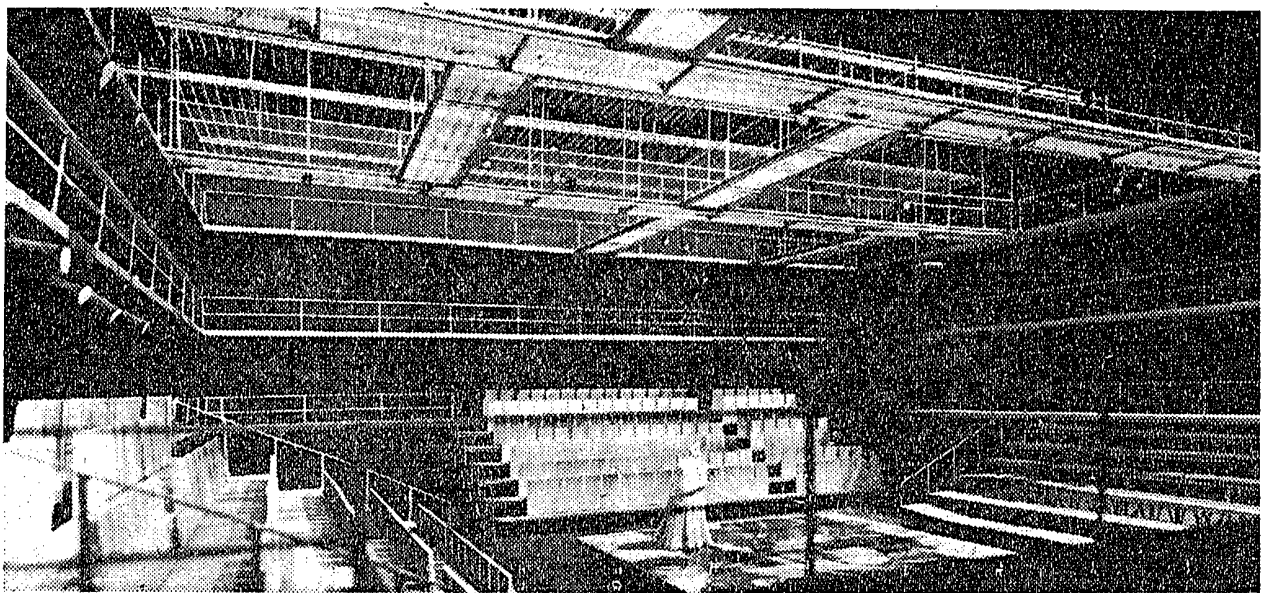
natural environment." What he is predicting is "gasoline alleys" and traffic jams, and further dependence on the automobile. Housing, in these luxury suburbs of restricted zoning, will be hard to find for faculty and administration. Alas, all is not perfect in Eden.

Nor is everything perfect on Welfare Island, subject of another state-sponsored master plan. The excellence of the Purchase plan raises questions about the Welfare Island plan, being carried out by another of the Governor's master-builder agencies, the State Urban Development Corporation and its offshoot, the Welfare Island Development Corporation.

The Purchase plan is everything the Welfare Island plan started out to be but no longer is — a coherent shaper and binder together of disparate elements into a recognizable urban idea. The original Welfare Island plan by Philip Johnson is being tragically eroded; it is hard to tell whether from disinterest or default.

The idea — a schematic set of principles that emphasized a quality of island life in shared public views and spaces — is taking a beating from a team of architects who have not communicated meaningfully since they began work, with no conceptual control from the agency or from the master planner, who was immediately dropped from the job. It is better to honestly scrap a plan than to mutilate it in this fashion.

Purchase promises success; Welfare Island risks failure. Immortality is chancy. Building new communities beats horse-racing.



Model of theater for the College at Purchase, State University of New York  
*"The country's most conspicuously successful university building program"*