The City, Dear Brutus
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

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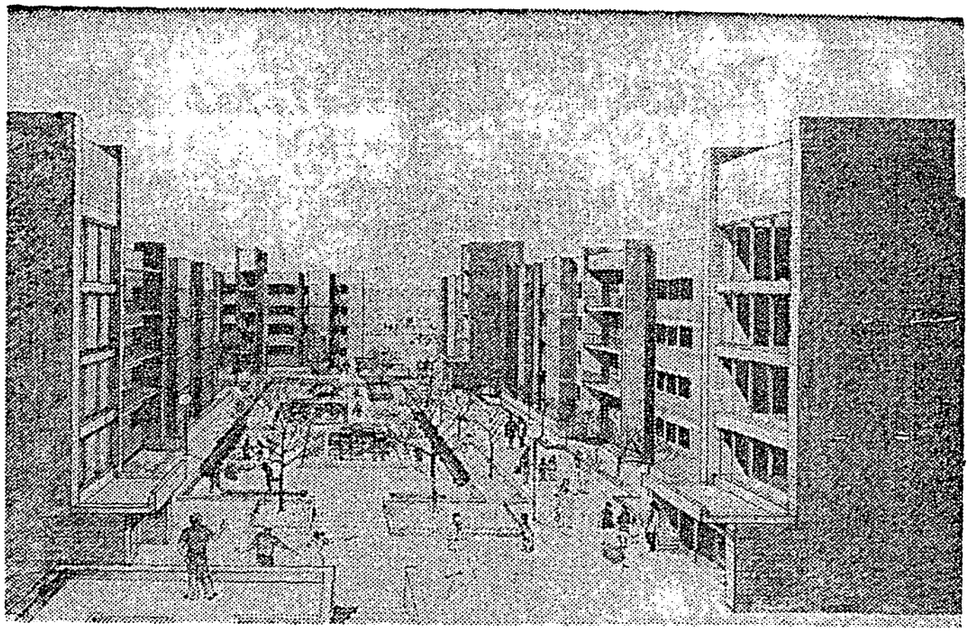

Vest pocket housing for East New York, with low buildings around open space
The new "non-project" look for older neighborhoods

SOME of the Lindsay administration's best ammunition has been languishing quietly at the Architectural League in a small show called Urban Design in New York. It closed last week, but it really doesn't matter. An exhibition of this sort is visited only by a special audience of students, professionals and intellectuals, and they do not a Mayor make. Urban design may shape the city and therefore profoundly affect all our lives as much as the price of bread or of racial inequality, but the subject, as anyone knows, has no political sex appeal.

What the show had to say, however, deserves wider circulation. It recorded the initiation in New York of the kind of responsible thought and action that determines the future, using the design and planning process and the tools of reinforcing legislation. This is a breakthrough for this city that makes reaching the moon look easy.

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Say urban design to the average New Yorker and you'll draw a total blank. Say slum and traffic and foul air and water and blighted neighborhoods and high rents and bad transportation and you'll get an instant response. They are two sides of the same coin. Without the first, you get the second.

Urban design is the not-so-simple, but very rational process of considering the city's patterns of growth, building and development in terms of their effects on its people, neighborhoods, circulation, living and working conditions, and, if you will pardon the expressions, beauty and pleasures. It is the basic planning process for a city's survival in humane and functional terms. And it has simply never existed in New York.

The traditional substitute—yes, we have our traditions — is building for profit and letting the chips fall where they may. The chips are the conditions we call crisis.

The urban design program began in 1967 with the report of the Mayor's Task Force on Urban Design, headed by William S. Paley. The report recommended the establishment of "an urban design force of trained professionals to be charged with the developing of concept designs for rebuilding specialized sections of New York."

For once, the report was not the product. An Urban Design Group was formed and staffed within the City Planning Department. It began to look at trends and forces in the city and to study the effects before rather than after the disastrous fact of development. It dared to question the real estate process and to suggest alternatives to conventional commercial construction with no loss to the investor and immense gains for the city.

The exhibition showed some of the most important independent projects that have been undertaken by the Urban Design Group, its coordinated housing programs with the Housing and Development Administration, and the related work of the Office of Lower Manhattan Development, which has been molding the massive rebuilding downtown to the guidelines of the city's Lower Manhattan plan.

To a lot of this, there has been predictable opposition stemming about equally from blindness or venality. For the professional doubters, Walter McQuade, a city planning commisioner who wrote the introduction to the exhibition, points out that "each project is being launched successfully into law and development."

The work is divided into four categories: Focused Zoning, Civic Continuity, Community Survival and Long-Term Development. The labels are not as arcane as they sound; each illustrates a sensitivity to the city's needs as illuminating as the design solution. And each illustrates a rare — for New York — kind of vision, in which factors of change are recognized for their potential benefit or harm, and appropriate steps are recommended and taken in the public and civic interest.

"Focused zoning" is a use of the existing tool of zoning to achieve specialized environmental results in particular neighborhoods. Without it, zoning produces a uniform cookie cutter pattern that may insure light and air, as intended, but it also insures the destruction of neighborhood character and amenities.

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In the theater district, the city recognized in time (repeat, in time) that the westward movement of new commercial construction was dooming the theatres to demolition. Special zoning made it possible to offer incentives to developers to include new theaters in their business structures, and now, after no theater construction for 30 years, four new ones are being built.

Lincoln Center is another case in point. The cultural construction that was meant to trigger area redevelopment set off an uncontrolled building boom that would inevitably have resulted in overcongestion and restricted commercial use as well as the loss of the area's civic qualities. Again, a special zoning district was established to guide development for a "more gracious and workable environment."

To encourage better use of the city's remaining open land — Staten Island is the conspicuous example—a Planned Unit Development amendment to the zoning law was proposed by the City Planning Commission and passed by the Board of Estimate. It hasn't eliminated the ticky-tacky housing game on Staten Island, but more than 3,000 units have been proposed by developers that will take advantage of the amendment's waiver of yard and height requirements to produce clustered homes with open space around them, and better site plans.

Community Survival deals with housing and vest pocket renewal projects meant to save and revitalize decaying neighborhoods. Civic Continuity — or how to keep a changing city whole — ranges from the use of portable parks for vacant lots to how to deal with Penn Central's megalomaniacal proposal for a tower on the Grand Central Terminal site.

The city's alternate suggestion for the Penn Central project proposes special legislation that would allow the railroad's developer to build on air rights over adjacent Penn Central property, to keep the landmark and its open sky intact. How curious that the planners should come out squarely for preservation of the landmark, and the Landmarks Preservation Commission should not!

The exhibition documented an extraordinary breakthrough. (We have another New York tradition — brilliant performance in the private sector with public practice reserved to hacks.) But this new professionalism that has belatedly poked through the political ooze of the greatest city in the world is completely vulnerable to political change. Like any city program, this one is dependent on the municipal bureaucracy and the Mayor's appointees. It can all be voted out with the administration. As yet, no challenging candidate has shown any grasp of the principles and necessities involved in urban design, any recognition of the standards finally established, or any commitment to the continuity of the program.

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The alternative to the design process is the death of the city, if you define death as the loss of the viability and values that make men and cities great, or cities even livable. There are no taxi drivers with buttons saying Design a Better New York.

"The city, the city my dear Brutus — stick to that and live in its full light," said one Marcus Tullius Cicero, quoted in the exhibition introduction. "Residence elsewhere, as I made up my mind in early life, is mere eclipse and obscurity to those whose energy is capable of shining in Rome."

Well, as they say, Rome wasn't built in a day.