

HOME DESIGN DRAB IN U.S., STUDY SAYS

A Federal Report Deplores Mediocrity in Planning

By **ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE**

The design of housing and housing sites in the United States was scored yesterday as "of mediocre quality" with "random exceptions" in a 223-page illustrated report sponsored and released by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The report is the result of a two-year study of 700 housing sites in 30 cities by Robert D. Katz, an associate professor of the Department of Urban Planning of the University of Illinois. It is a scholarly indictment of current American housing practice in terms of land use planning in both the public and private sectors. Its critical observations are couched in the objective, low-key language of academic research.

Called "Design of the Housing Site, a Critique of American Practice," the study was financed by the Federal Housing Administration, the Urban Renewal Administration and the Mobile Homes Manufacturing Association.

The Urban Renewal Administration has paid for its publication in book form with a demonstration grant. The Federal Housing Administration and the Urban Renewal Administration have since been consolidated into the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Continued on Page 40, Column 1

Design of Houses in America Is Deplored as Mediocre in a Federal Report

Continued From Page 1, Col. 8

opment, headed by Robert C. Weaver.

A flyleaf note states that "the report is the product of the University of Illinois and does not necessarily represent or coincide with the standards or policy of the Federal Housing Administration."

Mr. Weaver's comment on the release of the volume, however, endorses the study at the highest Government level.

"This book provides a much needed new perspective in design of the dwelling environment," he said. "It shows the numerous ways through which sensitive design can add substantially to the quality of housing in areas of multi-family housing."

The report focuses on the connection of design with livability in the American home. Its chief concern is the planning of the complete housing site, or the relationship of buildings to the land and to one another, measured by people's needs. Many experts believe that this is the most valid basis for judging housing design.

In addition to the charge of mediocrity, the report criticizes what it calls the national waste of land through poor open space planning, the low quality of spatial organization of the land that is found in a majority of housing developments, and the missed opportunities for a pleasanter visual and recreational environment.

Lack of Privacy Cited

Unimaginative landscaping, failure to use open space well, poor relationship of interior to exterior, faulty circulation and inferior solutions for parking and car storage are also cited. Cheap materials, slapdash construction, incorrect placement and inadequate maintenance of buildings are scored.

According to the author, poor site planning also leads to a noticeable lack of privacy in American houses, as well as inadequate provision for differences in family size, type and tastes. Design attention is re-



Housing development in Philadelphia, like many in other cities throughout the country, received criticism from the report for unimaginative design and use of open space.

stricted largely to facade appearance. The result is physical monotony and a lack of focus for social activity.

"Without doubt, there is a serious lack of quality in site planning in the United States today," Professor Katz says. "The challenge of working out a plan that fits the site, climate and special human needs is frequently ignored. The designer falls back on a convenient stack of 'samples.'"

The results, he says, are "leftover space and cut-up little patches of grass, with trees cut down, hills leveled and streams filled to force a recalcitrant merger of building and land."

Where exceptions exist, good practice is attributed to a combination of skillful designers and developers who look beyond short-term profits for a better long-term formula.

The author cites the new town of Reston, Va., with its cluster housing and communal open space, and developments such as the housing for married students at Harvard University, for attractive building-type variety.

He cites mixed residential

and commercial use of land as a desirable solution, as well as greater recreational use of rooftops. He also suggests building over highways, piers and parking fields, and more research in industrialized construction.

The report analyzes the causes behind substandard American housing. It states that the emphasis on the single family house, with the multi family house considered less desirable on the American scale of values, has motivated against the development of improved housing types. Building regulations reflect this single house bias. Rising densities and expanding communities, Professor Katz observes, make this a national disaster.

Controls such as zoning and building, housing and sanitary codes, dictated by custom and example, the author says, are rigidly restrictive and have not changed with changing conditions. They are so specific and often so antiquated that there is "virtually no room left for creative design."

He points to protection of property values as one factor promoting this rigidity. Both the Federal Housing Adminis-



Group of apartment buildings in Puerto Rico. The report praises variation of facades, underground parking areas and landscaping. Dr. Robert D. Katz prepared document.

tration and private lending institutions have been hesitant to underwrite departures in housing design that might effect existing neighborhoods.

The housing agency, in its role as mortgage insurer, and the Veterans' Administration are called the chief forces that have "helped shape suburban America." Neither the public agencies nor the private institutions have a record of encouraging innovation. The burden has been on the designer to "prove" that innovations are desirable.

In recent years, the F.H.A. has considerably liberalized its regulation and procedures. Lately it has introduced incentives to better design.

Broad Planning Urged

It is still common practice, however, to think of building on a traditional block-by-block or lot-by-lot basis, although the reality today is that very large tracts are being developed, often in single ownership.

The more logical procedure, the report says, would be to begin with total, coordinated land or project planning, either by the private developer or by a public agency. An example of

wasteful small plot development in the immediate metropolitan region is the whittling away of Staten Island's open land by conventional piecemeal building.

The study takes up one aspect of American housing that is generally ignored, in spite of its rapidly growing popularity. This is the trailer park, which, in its present form, is considered a blighting influence on most communities.

The "mobile home," as its promoters prefer to call it, seldom moves. Mobile home lots are now being sold instead of leased.

Specific Recommendations

The mobile home is the single most economical form of one-family housing being built today. Unlike most other housing, it is being industrially produced. It is cheap, because of its factory production and because building codes, which run up costs, do not apply to it. It also receives the least design assistance in terms of its contributions to the environment.

It is suggested that the mobile home be redesigned to look less like a cross between a car and a house, with an appearance closer to conventional housing.

"If the full potential of compact design and flexibility were realized, the mobile home could be a great boon to the residential community," the report concludes.

The study makes these specific recommendations for the improvement of American housing:

¶The role of Government should be to promote operational procedure that encourage good design, and to support innovation and research.

¶In urban renewal, which represents massive amounts of the country's new housing, "land is too difficult to secure and too expensive to develop for design to be a giveaway." Design review by qualified staff or consultants should be mandatory for all Federally aided programs.

¶A concerted effort must be made to attract talented designers to public service, where the level has been notoriously low. The F.H.A., the Public Housing Administration and the model cities programs of the Department of Housing and Urban Development are cited as critical areas.

¶Sites should be examined before plans are approved, to insure better site development and design.

¶There should be less overriding concern with risks in financing, and more support of site-planning experiments.

¶Code and zoning revisions must be made in favor of "performance" standards. Performance codes set standards for noise, privacy, fireproofing, light and air without giving detailed specifications for setback distances, window openings, roof shapes, and other mandatory or prohibitory requirements. This gives maximum design flexibility.

The report concludes that responsibility for the quality of the American housing environment can be widely distributed among designers, developers, governmental agencies and the public.

It says that housing design has been held in too low professional esteem, developers have been too narrowly profit-oriented, and public expectations have been too low.