The Design of the City

Within four months, New York has had two major reports on the design of the city. The first was the supplement to the Logue report called "Planning and Design in New York." The second, just released, is "The Threatened City," from the Mayor's task force on urban design.

Both studies were prepared with a passionate concern for a more livable and beautiful city. Both are indictments of architectural and planning failures. The first was a fact-drenched technical document by a professional urban designer, David Crane, with a brilliant final section on the quality, or lack of quality, of the city's buildings. It carried the conviction of tough and knowledgeable expertise. The second is the product of a mixed professional group of prominent New Yorkers headed by William S. Paley, brought together by a common cause. Its appeal is a frankly emotional evocation of the city's beauties and blunders.

Although the two reports deal with the subject of a better city from opposite ends of the esthetic pole, they come to some similar conclusions. The necessity of aggressive support and understanding for environmental design at the top level of city government is stressed. So are the needs for more qualified design professionals within the government structure, and for simplification of bureaucratic procedures. Some of the conclusions are no less valid for being obvious. New York's Planning Commission is understaffed, underbudgeted and undertalented, and any realistic qualitative attack on physical planning will require radical remedial steps.

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Unfortunately, the task force report fails in the definition of the meaning and urgency of urban design. It is overly preoccupied with traditional views and vistas; the esthetic smash or squalor of the grand visual approach; the individually elegant or ugly buildings. Its conventional brand of nineteenth-century urban esthetics has limited value for the dynamic disorders of the twentieth-century city.

Urban design is the form given to the solution of the city's problems. It is the professional process that finds practical answers to those problems. The answers take physical shape; the shape of the city itself. The best solutions are creative, combining delight and use, evolving beauty from function. Urban design is neither esoteric nor purely esthetic. It is an immense, immediate and critical concern for any city in change or crisis. It is the way to order those solutions for a better place to live.

The real significance of these studies is the growing realization that design of the city is a subject for public attention. In the words of the Crane report, the barrier is finally crumbling between the legitimacy of "practical" concerns and the illegitimacy of art in government. The art of urban design is one of the city's most powerful tools for its future.