A Prescription for Disaster
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

A Prescription for Disaster

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WHEN officials dynamited Pruitt-Igoe Houses in St. Louis this year, they finally blasted the subject of housing design into the public consciousness. It took the violent and necessary act of destruction of part of a public housing project that had become an obscenity of American life to make it clear that we have been doing something awfully wrong.

It wasn't just the failure of a dream, although that was bad enough. One of the great American social reforms — safe and sanitary housing in exchange for slums — has obviously gone off the rails. The anguished "why?" that society is asking now has many complex answers. But one of the most basic and important is the physical fact of how American public housing has been planned and designed. Now comes a supremely significant study and book to tell us that we have, with the best intentions, literally built in failure by erecting buildings that are actually designed to exacerbate crime and violence and problems of human behavior, for the near-destruction of a segment of our society and whole sections of our cities.

The book is "Defensible Space," subtitled, "Crime Prevention Through Urban Design," by Oscar Newman, just published by Macmillan. It details the results of a three-year research program called the Project for the Security Design of Urban Residential Areas, directed by Professor Newman, who is also an architect and director of the Institute of Planning and Housing of New York University, where he is an associate professor.

The study deals primarily with the "effects of the physical layout of residential environments on the criminal vulnerability of its inhabitants." It relates the incidence of crime and vandalism to the specific factors that encourage it. In doing so, it indicts much current housing practice. More broadly, and most importantly, it deals with a most controversial subject—how environment affects behavior.

The study, significantly for these times, has been funded not by housing or design sources, but by the U.S. Department of Justice. The method has been statistical analysis and experimental design modification of existing projects to test hypotheses. Housing developments in every major city in the country have been examined, with heavy reliance on the inexhaustibly complete statistics of the New York Housing Authority. Professor Newman points out that New York builds and maintains better, keeps better files, and has a better housing record than any other city. But the findings were the same everywhere, and they are going to shake a lot of people up.

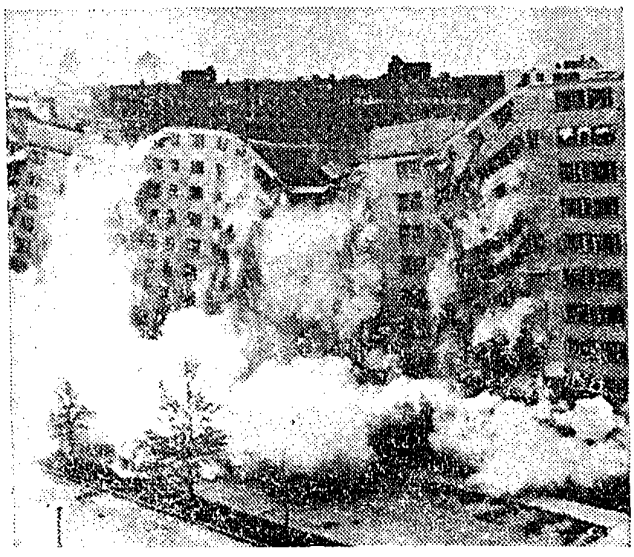
The conclusion—given the same social factors and statistics of color, race, age and income level of residents, family size, condition and problems, number of welfare recipients, etc.—is that much of the difference between housing success and failure is in the design of the buildings and their grounds, and their relationship to the surrounding community.

The final conclusion is that the larger-and-larger cookie cutter formula projects of clustered high-rise buildings on superblocks of open space —usually dictated by land costs and economics—is the guaranteed prescription for disaster. Given the same densities and people, crime rate and tenant disaffection drop substantially in smaller, low-rise projects where certain principles of social design have been followed.

Professor Newman defines these principles as territoriality, natural surveillance, and image and milieu.

Territoriality is the division of the residential environment into zones toward which adjacent residents easily adopt proprietary attitudes. Surveillance is achieved through the visual and physical contact of one area with another—by visibility, layout and plan. Image and milieu are concerned with the stock, large-scale housing project located conspicuously in unsympathetic areas, stigmatized by visible design, the criminal's "easy hit."

The real villains, the author says, are project size and tall buildings. Crime and vandalism rates go up with size and height. The only "defensible" space becomes the apartment itself. The blind elevators, the long, anonymous, double-loaded corridors, and the enclosed fire stairs are a no-man's land made to order for anti-social activity.



Recent demolition of part of Pruitt-Igoe housing, St. Louis
"Society is asking an anguished why"

As a test of his thesis, Professor Newman has modified some projects, specifically Clason Point in the Bronx, with the cooperation and encouragement of the New York City Housing Authority. Design changes have already reduced the crime rate to six times lower than formerly, and increased desirable social patterns. Moreover, HUD funds exist up to $1,000 a unit for such modifications for any city that wants to use them. There is no excuse not to do so now.

A lot of us have been indicting the design of housing projects for a long time, but mostly on the grounds of empirical observations of the relationship of design and a more humane environment, and half-formed feelings about the depth and importance of people's responses to the physical ordering of their lives. Professor Newman provides facts and figures, not feelings; this is definitive documentation of human and urban tragedy. Incredibly, similar projects are still going ahead, even as Pruitt-Igoe is dynamited and Philadelphia prepares to close off the top stories of Rosen Houses. Forest Hills, as planned, had almost every dangerous defect on the list.

The irony of all this is that the hard-nosed champions of housing — good men and true if sometimes politically motivated—have consistently dismissed design as "frills." Their word. No matter how much those of us who believe otherwise have explained or argued, we were met with a tolerant dismissal of our attempts to "pretty it up," as this was so woefully misunderstood, and told that the only important thing was to get countable units of desperately needed housing built.

Gentlemen, eat your words. The numbers game, without regard for design, or rather *specifically because of design*, has demonstrably increased tendencies toward crime, violence and social dislocation, compounding problems to the point of no return. And the costs, in terms of money and society, are insupportable.

But the saddest irony of all is that architects, pioneering innovations of impeccable social intent, have been so blindly at fault. To quote the author: "Many of these physical features may have been intentionally provided by the architects as positive contributions to the living environment of intended residents." But the superblock removed the life and surveillance of streets; the open grounds, meant for recreation, were unused and invited only the criminal; the off-street entrances and their winding paths meant danger to the resident; the tall buildings hosted countless physical and psychological hazards. Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse and dreams of the modern movement, R.I.P.

The whole area of architecture and behavioral science is fraught with challenges and uncertainties. It is a field that demands attention and research. Fallacy number one was the modernist idea that an architectural setting or group of buildings of certain design characteristics could give birth to a Utopian society. "Isomorphism," says Professor Newman, "remains a happy delusion of very few architects and physical planners." Fallacy number two is a pendulum swing that rejects the idea that design can have any effect on behavior. It has now been conclusively demonstrated that while design cannot create behavior, it can to a significant extent modify and control it.

The inevitable conclusion is that the architect's responsibility, in the light of these findings, is now heavier than ever.