Civic Center Inches On

Balancing Act Is Required of the City With Architectural Gain Its Objective

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The course of the Civic Center plan, which has the unimpeachable objective of aiming for a distinguished group of government buildings in the architectural chaos around City Hall, has been marked by more than the usual criticism, confusion and delay. Although these factors are part of any large building project in the city, they seem to have a tendency to increase in direct ratio to the degree of municipal involvement.

An Appraisal

The most striking thing about the plan is the fact that at its initial stage the city placed this most important and pressing urban design problem in the hands of architectural experts. The action was an uncommon one in New York history. The experts — Max Abramovitz of Harrison & Abramovitz, Simon Breines of Pomerance & Breines and Robert W. Cutler of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill—came up with a solution in December, 1962.

Impressive Effort

It was not a revolutionary proposal, but it represented an impressive tidying up and pulling together of existing elements and the provision of badly needed new space. It did this within the framework of certain unavoidable realities, such as prior land commitments for urban renewal and contracts already let by the city for new buildings.

The plan was met with a barrage of criticism. Most of it came from the fact that the proposal did not go far enough. Professionals believed it did not go far enough simply because it chose not to ignore those commitments, contracts and plans already in force within the area. It was forced to stumble around them to the best of its ability. Therefore, it could not offer the most desirable long-range solution in terms of the city's future growth, ideal placement of buildings and connection with traffic patterns.

Roads Split Area

The new Brooklyn Bridge approaches were already drawn up, virtually cutting off one part of the civic center from the other.

Partially city-assembled, city-cleared land just below the bridge, called Brooklyn Bridge South, was committed to urban renewal development and the expansion of Pace College.

An $80 million Federal court and office building, already designed for a specific site in Foley Square, threatened to throw a gigantic monkey wrench into any attempt to create an attractive, coordinated design.

For a true master plan for the Civic Center, every one of these elements would have had to be properly studied, correlated and even resited and redesigned.

But New York is traditionally a half-a-loaf city, and it proceeded with what seemed to be a half-a-loaf plan. The architects and the city made a valiant attempt to have the Federal Government move its building to the west, to make continuous park and plaza areas between City Hall, a new municipal office skyscraper and Foley Square. The effort was defeated by the need for additional Congressional funds.

The battle was promoted by the city's persistent Civic Center gadfly, Nathan R. Ginsburg, head of the Architects Council of New York City, who had been calling for a master plan of the area since 1960. At the same time, a group of distinguished architects and critics came out against the proposal.

In a counterstep, the city announced in the fall of 1963 that Edward Durell Stone had been hired as design consultant for the whole project, to work with the firm of Eggers & Higgins, which had a long-standing contract for the office tower.

By April, 1964, the Stone-Eggers & Higgins plan had made substantial changes in the original proposal, including the concentration of all new office space in a single 54-story tower and the addition of a multilevel landscaped plaza. The protesting architects endorsed the revised design.

Newest Opposition

The most recent opposition has come chiefly from businessmen and preservationists. The concerns to be dispossessed for the plan have been led by Henry Modell of 240 Broadway, occupant of a building scheduled for demolition.

Also scheduled for demolition is the old County Courthouse just behind City Hall, a Victorian swindle of epic proportions in which construction profits pocketed by the Tweed ring were almost as impressive as the Corinthian columns that face the building. The Hall of Records on Chambers Street would go too.

What the city is faced with now is a balancing game. It must weigh the value of the old buildings against the promise of the new Civic Center; the adequacy of the present proposal against the possibility of a genuine master plan; the delay on some projects, such as badly needed offices and police facilities, against the improvement of the total program. It must also find a solution to the problem of commercial relocation.

To some critics the plan is "too little and too late." To others it is "better late than never." Either way, it is a far from perfect solution, but it has the promise of some positive architectural amenities.