

Local Workshops to Study Residential Zoning Plan

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

City Planning Commission chairman John E. Zuccotti has announced a series of borough "workshops" to be held in September to consider the new residential zoning proposals announced last week. These proposals are intended to reform the way apartments are built in New York. The present rigid,

An Appraisal

that would emphasize human and environmental elements such as privacy, safety, sunlight and space, and make lower buildings possible.

The purpose of the meetings will be to obtain community comment and input for the proposals, with the hope of turning them into legislation before the end of the year and the Lindsay administration.

This latest zoning innovation follows the passage of a record amount of trend-setting planning legislation by the Lindsay administration, including special zoning districts for theater construction and Fifth Avenue retailing, air-rights transfer for landmarks, and the mandated provision of services in new construction areas. It has all been aimed at the quality of the city and its life.

Zoning the Villain

The current attempt at residential reform is the latest effort to bring New York's zoning law into line with these environmental considerations that the 1961 zoning resolution took little note of.

It is also meant to tackle a particularly difficult city problem: the notorious inadequacies of New York housing. It would not create more capital or more subsidy, but it would substantially affect the nature and quality of any housing built.

The current study and proposal is the work of New York's Urban Design Council, a group of citizens appointed by the Mayor. It cuts across many professional fields and uses the expertise of the city's Urban Design Group, an arm of the City Planning Department.

When the council set itself the task of defining quality in housing in a city where quality housing has been conspicuously absent, it found a major villain quickly: zoning.

A Miscalculation in 1961

This magic numbers game is something the city controls, the developers play and few laymen understand. But everyone understands the results.

Protests against disruptively brutal high-rise structures in residential neighborhoods, from the celebrated Forest Hills controversy to Manhattan's posh Upper East Side, have been increasing in force and frequency in recent years.

The real designer of these buildings, and of the city, is zoning—far more than the architect. A conscientious or sensitive architect will sometimes tie himself in knots to bend the zoning rules to more human or functional purposes, and an exceptional developer will sometimes take a loss to put up a better building. But most build relentlessly to the standardized formulas that the zoning law establishes once they have figured out the most profitable interpretation of the requirements.

There is nothing like 20-20

hindsight to see what went wrong with the zoning regulations of 1961, under which New York's subsequent housing was built. Although that statute contained many genuine reforms, its basic concept—stacking all the arithmetic to create a free-standing tower in open space—has proved to be a monumental environmental miscalculation.

The law was written by men advised by architects of an open-land ratio, re-advised by architects of an earlier generation, to whom the promised land was a clutch of Le Corbusian towers in a park. The word environment was barely in vogue and poorly understood.

These regulations have forced New York residential building into the inevitable and often unsuitable and incompatible high-rise mold, with cold drafts, desolate and frequently dangerous open spaces, and redundant, useless or misused plazas. Disruptive to neighborhood scale and character, these buildings bear only a remote resemblance to those Utopian architectural textbook prototypes that the planners had in mind. They are an acknowledged disaster.

To find out why, the Urban Design Council examined all the housing built in the city under the 1961 zoning. In all five boroughs, they found the same stereotyped structures, produced by the same rigid envelope. The end-product was identical regardless of density, location, or private or subsidized financing—a collection of legal minimums. "The accumulated horror was almost too much to bear," says Alexander Cooper, the council's executive director.

An Amenity Score

The radical reforms set forth by the Urban Design Council and now sponsored by the City Planning Department are meant to remove the restrictions that make the present formula inevitable.

They open many more design options to the builder, within his cost limitations, to produce pleasant and better housing.

The new and more flexible system would rest on an amenity score, built up by the number of points acquired for desirable housing features. The points would be based on four categories: neighborhood impact, recreation space, security and safety, and the apartment itself.

Land coverage and building bulk would be determined by the number of points, scored under a very specific and complex system, but the bulk could not exceed existing maximum densities.

The builder could dispose the bulk more freely on his land, not only for lower buildings, but also for different shapes and sizes. And he could gain his optimum bulk in a number of different ways, through choices, for the provision of a variety of features, eliminating sterile formulas.

By scoring for such desirable features in each category as relationship to neighborhood scale, provision of recreation space indoors or out, trees and benches, visibility of lobbies and apartment entrances, window and room sizes, balconies and privacy, the zoning mandates better housing, not just the form and disposition of its bulk and height. It is, in effect, a "performance" code, rather than a set of purely physical regulations.

Speed of Essence

The proposal is a giant step forward for both housing and zoning in this city. It is residential zoning that finally recognizes neighborhood, environment and human needs.

The question is whether its legality will hold—the design council and the planners believe the regulations to be a proper extension of zoning under the public welfare rule—and whether it can be turned into law before a new administration, less willing to teach old developers new tricks, drops it.

It must be thoroughly tested by the workshops to avoid post-1961 "surprises." At present, it is the city's only real hope for better housing. From slums to shoddy "luxury" apartments, there is nowhere to go but up.