Adding Up the Score: Architecture
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pg. 124

Architecture

Adding Up the Score

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

BEFORE the assessments of the Lindsay Administration have all been used to wrap yesterday's fish, one part of the score that has been conspicuous by omission should be added to it. The subject is urban design, or as correctly stated in the title of a new book by Jonathan Barnett, "Urban Design as Public Policy" (Architectural Record Books, McGraw-Hill). Mr. Barnett is one of a group of able young people who worked in government to help establish this virtually new field as an integral part of city procedure, and Mr. Lindsay was the Mayor who put his weight behind it.

The results, in terms of city development in patterns of greater environmental quality, are extraordinary and precedent-setting and, in many cases, visible. They have made New York a pilgrimage point for serious urbanists. It is quite impossible to overstate the vision, skill, importance and, above all, concrete positive actions that have been involved. Mr. Barnett's book is a tell-it-all-like-it-is document that puts this significant chapter in municipal planning history on the record for those who would be informed—including, one hopes, the present administration.

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Urban design is a profession that has developed out of demonstrated need. While planners were allocating resources and specifying land use, no one was aware of how their charts and diagrams would turn out in three dimensions. In the postwar era, renewal schemes that looked fine on paper were considerably less than fine in actuality. The schemes were, in fact, often so bad that the idea of urban environmental quality was born by default out of all those things that were missing—life, interest, convenience, amenity and pleasure.

And so it became clear that it was not enough to map a logical dispersion of uses, but that someone had to take that scenario and actually project its consequences in an esthetic, sociological and functional model of the city. In fact, someone had to design the city, not just the buildings. This involves projecting trends and their physical outcome, a process known as conceptualization, or visualization before the fact. And it also involves dealing with issues as broad as the city's future.

The point is to face problems before they arise, such as the threat of extinction of the theater district, or the effect on circulation and land values of a new subway, or the need to preserve neighborhood character in the face of a building boom, or ways to save services and improve pedestrian features when massive new construction takes place. The effort, generally, is to avoid damage before it is done, and to guide development into the most desirable channels.

In this sense, the urban design process carries much of the responsibility for setting a large part of city policy—what the city will be, or should be, according to specific values and principles. This means that the designer deals with a good deal more than a drawing board; what comes off that board is shaped by economics, law and politics as well as by design, and increasingly by art and humanism. It is believable and real. And the results are measurable in the shape of the city and the lives people lead.

The Lindsay Administration occupied the historic moment when the new profession was beginning to make itself felt. There were a lot of lessons apparent in what had gone wrong in city planning practice in the past, and a lot of realization of what had to be done in the future. But all of the basic questions of how to set up the new procedures administratively and how to make them function soundly had to be settled.

The Mayor began by accepting the excellent recommendations of his task force on urban design headed by William S. Paley, which called for a permanent urban design force in the city rather than reliance on sporadic reports. In 1967, an Urban Design Group was established within the City Planning Commission, under the direction of its chairman, Donald Elliott.

The Urban Design Group immediately became a constructive, trouble-shooting unit. When, for example, it saw a new wave of commercial construction threatening New York's theaters, it devised a zoning plan that would encourage new theaters through bonuses to developers for building them. And when a second wave of Sixth Avenue construction seemed assured, it worked out ways to provide pedestrian conveniences and subway linkage that the first wave lacked.

But it soon became apparent that more was needed to carry out the proposals. The Mayor then established, by executive order and as an extension of his own office, special planning offices for various parts of the boroughs. These have been staffed by a high caliber of architectural professional. The staffs not only deal with problems *in situ*, but have the authority of the Mayor's office to coordinate all of the city's departments and agencies to get the job done. In addition, urban designers have been placed in the departments themselves, for further coordination. Subsequently, a civil service category was set up for them, although the special development offices still exist only at the Mayor's pleasure.

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Those development offices have proved an excellent invention. There are now eleven of them, including those for Staten Island, the Bronx, Queens, Downtown Brooklyn, and lower and Midtown Manhattan. They have not only been extremely effective in dealing with both the political and private sectors; they have also produced outstanding work.

The device traditionally used for shaping the city is zoning, and this has been one of the chief tools of the new process, pushed to creative legal limits by the urban designers. There are at least three innovative zoning uses functioning in New York now and being watched by other cities.

One is incentive zoning, which gives the developer carefully defined bonuses for the inclusion of desirable features that otherwise would not be built. This method tailors the features to specific areas and needs. That procedure led naturally to the creation of the special zoning district, in which character and requirements are defined for a whole area and written directly into the zoning regulations. A third innovation is the extension of air rights transfer to protect landmarks and historic neighborhoods.

New York's special zoning districts now include, in addition to the theater district, the Greenwich Street area, so well spelled out in form that no discretionary bonuses are needed, Fifth Avenue, upper Madison Avenue, Lincoln Square, Times Square, a Second Avenue transit district, and a series of creative zoning regulations to guide the two huge landfill communities going ahead in Lower Manhattan, Battery Park City and Manhattan Landing.

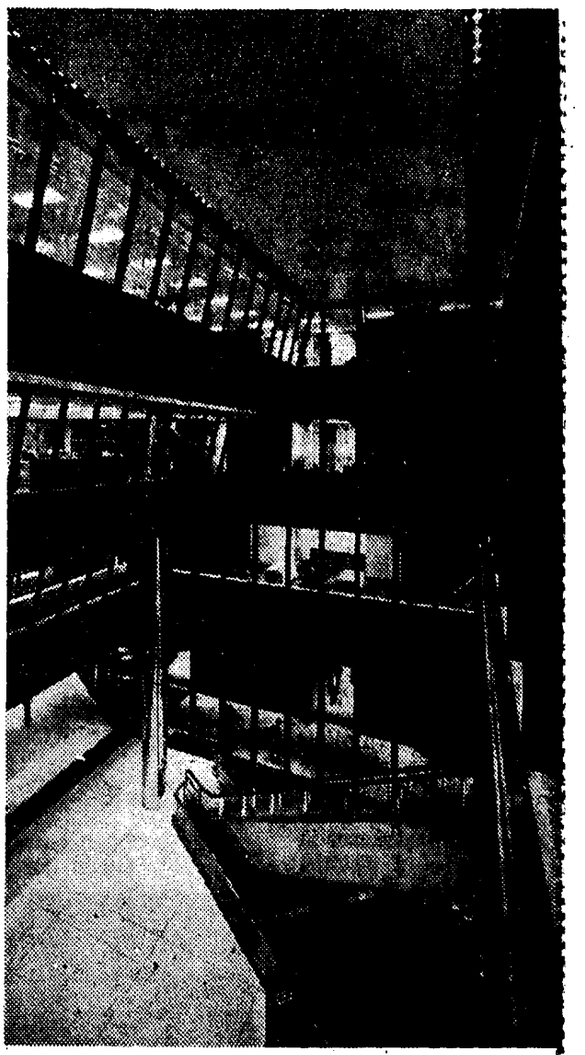
Downtown Brooklyn improvements are being carried out by the Office of Downtown Brooklyn Planning and Development. Planned unit development zoning to encourage cluster housing over ticky-tacky has been passed for Staten Island. Recently, housing quality in general has been attacked by a zoning study by the Urban Design Group.

It is now possible to see the new theaters on the West Side, to use through-block passages in midtown, and to begin to experience some of the intricate and pleasurable pedestrian and open space amenities in Lower Manhattan. It is a matter of just a little more time before one can enjoy gallerias and small parks and a mix of commercial and residential building where sterile offices have driven out city life.

But the most important, and less immediately tangible factor, is the care, quality and sophistication of the design attention being lavished on the city now, that is also being so well translated into action through appropriate legal and administrative processes.

It is impossible to name everyone who should be mentioned here, but a few who must be credited are Mr. Elliott, the first and second directors of the Office of Lower Manhattan Development, Richard Buford and Richard Weinstein, as well as of the Office of Midtown Planning and Development, Jaquelin Robertson and William Bardel, and the successive heads of the Urban Design Group, Mr. Barnett and Alexander Cooper.

For the many omissions, we apologize and refer the reader to Mr. Barnett's fine book. He points out correctly that New York's commitment to urban design has not been matched elsewhere in the country. It is a commitment that deserves to be continued on the highest administrative levels.



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Better places for people through urban design