Planning: Blueprint For City Designed For People
-- ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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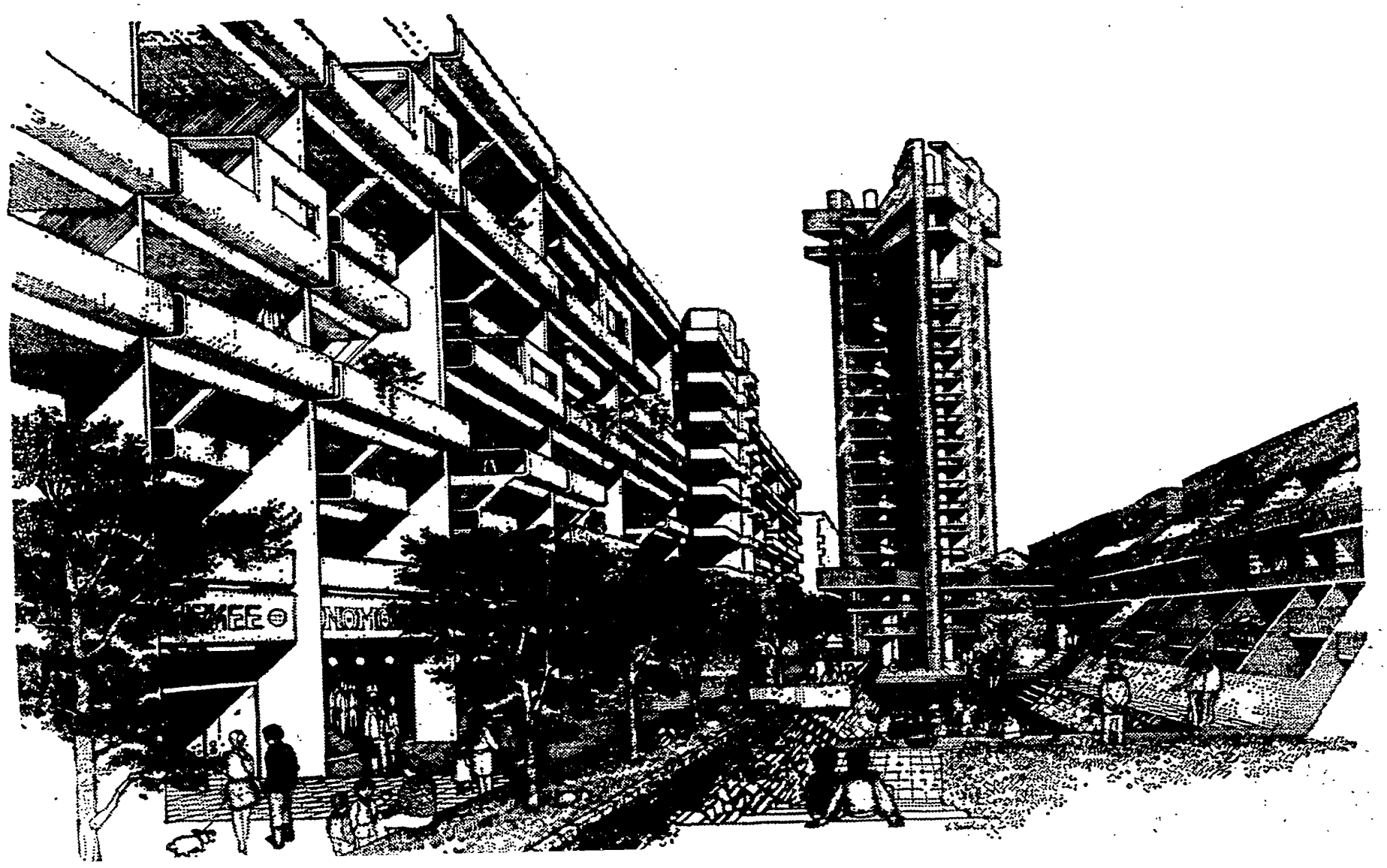

This example of how air space might be used over the Penn Central Railroad tracks in the Bronx is part of a Master Plan for New York released last week.

After 31 years of stop-and-go preparation, New York's Master Plan was finally released last week at the Regional Plan Association's 40th anniversary meeting at the New York Hilton, baptized by black militant protest, a barrage of hard rolls, and a hint of Mace.

In 1938, when the city charter called for a comprehensive planning document, no one could have foreseen the fracas or even the kind of city the long-awaited document is meant to guide. It would have been even harder to predict the kind of document the city has produced.

Times, and plans, change. At that time planning was an academic, Olympian exercise in ideal, long-range goals based on projections of statistical data in terms of physical land use and Utopian visions of the push-button "city of the future." This brand of planning has been updated in recent years by coloring a few of the foreground faces black.

Such proposals were destined to gather dust quietly while cities decayed and urban problems outstripped their textbook answers. Few, except planners, paid much attention to master plans at all.

But an extraordinary amount of attention is being paid to the newly unveiled "Plan for New York." Controversy had already started before its official presentation at the Regional Plan conference. The dissent of one Planning Commissioner, Beverly Spatt, appeared even before the plan. She calls it a "non-plan" and "letter to Santa Claus."

The 450,000-word document, of which the first 90,000 words, on "Critical Issues," has been released, was prepared during the last three years under the direction of City Planning Commission Chairman Donald H. Elliott, working with numerous city agencies. Who was, or was not consulted, is also a matter of controversy. Five borough volumes will follow.

Carefully guarded, the plan was given to Planning Commissioners one draft section at a time. It was held close to the city's chest until after the election as a potentially explosive document.

Trouble was anticipated because it deals not in agreeable visions for the year 2000, but in specific, politically vulnerable programs and commitments. It advocates, for example, the total reform of welfare, the abolition of the Board of Education, and the encouragement of minority employment through the "leverage" of the city role in jobs, selective purchasing and industrial development programs.

When The New York Times printed part of a first draft last February, there was an immediate, violent public reaction to its language, which clearly indicted the middle class for callousness to the city's poor and urged the creation of a black and Puerto Rican middle class through programs that would lead the city's minorities into its productive mainstream.

Although programs and policies remain the same in the final version, the language is far more diplomatic. The main thrust is still on the elevation of the underprivileged to middle class, participating status in the city's structure. What happens in the ghetto is related clearly to what happens everywhere else, and the city's physical problems are recognized as having deep social and economic origins.

Unlike the plans of the past, this is not a long-range physical proposal. It deals with immediate priorities and possibilities, and its range of action is the next five to ten years. Much of the current controversy is an Alice-in-Wonderland dialogue based on a communications gap about what this kind of planning represents.

New York's approach, still new in professional circles, is one toward which many cities and countries are moving. It is a social plan. It sets policies and goals and provides flexible guidelines for city growth and change in terms of processes and people, not through diagrams of physical redevelopment.

These objectives are set out in four sections: the National Center, Opportunity, Environment, and Government.

"The city as a national center" is concerned with New York's function as the corporate and cultural heart of the country. In the last two decades, 67 million square feet of office space have been built, or twice that of the next nine largest cities combined, and 50 million square feet are in design or construction now. The plan advocates still more mid-Manhattan concentration, with unprecedented guidance of private development by the city through zoning incentives and assisted land assembly with enlarged condemnation powers. Improved public transportation is stressed.

"Opportunity" deals with job development and manpower training, with emphasis on increasing the skills of the "underemployed" and the training of "paraprofessionals." These, in turn, would feed into health, welfare and education programs.

"Environment" encompasses neighborhood development, from community participation to urban design, in categories from slums to sound areas. More than 90 per cent of specially funded programs would go to "major action" or "preventive renewal" areas. Housing remains a dilemma. Of 800,000 units needed in the next decade through new construction and renovation, maximum expectation with existing tools and funds is 280,000 new units at a cost of $8-billion. How much more would come out of experimental renovation and maintenance programs is an open question.

"Government" treats the procedural machinery for carrying out elements of the plan, with an unequivocal analysis on the intractability of the present bureaucracy.

Criticisms of the plan are based largely on the familiarity of the material presented, and the lack of wonder-working new solutions or specific procedures for making programs succeed. It is scored as a litany of problems, a preface to a plan, and a recital of existing city programs, with a conspicuous lack of hard proposals on how to get the housing, better schools, health centers and other critical facilities needed. It is often obviously hung up on the frustration of no-answer issues.

Costs—estimated at $52-billion beyond anticipated revenues for the next ten years—are called pie in the sky or a realistic appraisal. The question of where presently inadequate funds will go and where others will be gotten remains a conundrum.

What the "Plan for New York" offers is a package of stated purpose and program possibilities meant to catalyze the crisis and influence priorities here and at state and Federal levels. There will be a year of hearings and changes before it is adopted as an instrument of official policy, and everything rides on how constructive that process will be. In New York, debate has a death-wish flair. And planning, like politics, is only the art of the possible.

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