About the Satisfactions of the Human Spirit
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

The New York Times (by Meyer Liebowitz)

A West Side Manhattan playground—ugliness is the urban condition and the environment is non-negotiable

About the Satisfactions of the Human Spirit

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ONE advantage of writing about architecture and urban design under the heading of arts and leisure is that it is possible to step back from the political, social and economic crunch of the physical environment at times and look at some values without which the city cannot survive.

Strictly speaking, the city will survive, of course. But there is a point where it becomes so ugly — a term that must be understood as more than esthetic — that it degrades and diminishes not only the people who inhabit it but life itself. There is a bitter irony in the fact that recognition of this truth has been forced on even the political pragmatists by the crisis conditions that are its direct result.

New York's Master Plan, released last week, makes this clear. It has as its basic premise a concern with the quality of the environment and the quality of life. Both are seen as rooted in the problems of people, and it is finally acknowledged that these problems are not automatically bulldozed away with blight or solved by redevelopment schemes.

The plan is already the center of a controversy rich in misunderstanding, non sequiturs, vindictiveness and, occasionally, genuine consideration of the issues and programs involved. All that has been, and will be, discussed elsewhere. For the purpose of this summary, the plan does several important things. It substitutes a social for a physical approach, which is one giant step forward for New York and for planning in general. It seeks to deal with the deep sources of physical disruption in terms of the human factors that cause it, linking the two specifically for remedial policies in a comprehensive city plan for the first time.

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There are, alas, no magic formulas for solving the city's problems and their recital has a depressingly familiar ring. The "science" of planning is empirical at best, and progress will be by trial and error. The way to a better life, and a better city, only God and, it is to be hoped, the Planning Commission know.

What we do know, however, is that a very important element has been added to planning and it is implicit in the city's statement of policy. The professionals have come out of their think tanks long enough to find that the quality of the environment (a comparatively recent discovery for them) and the quality of life are the same thing. Obvious? Not at all, to 30 years of planners or even to upholders of the American dream, which postulated that everything good would flow from the material benefits of an affluent society.

First, those blessings did not reach a lot of people. Second, they left enough of a hole in the essential satisfactions of psyche and spirit so that a whole generation is in revolt against them. Even the "safe and sanitary" housing provided for the poor by liberal reformers backfired into super-ghettos. Something important has obviously been missing. Several things were not programed into the planners' plans. One was hope, and another was understanding of what makes an environment supportable. The former specifically condemned the poor and the latter affected every stratum of society.

The British, with their flair for elegant phrase-making and their sometimes shattering experience with master plans, have led the investigation into what they call "the anatomy of ambience." The subject was neatly analyzed by a reviewer in The London Times Literary Supplement recently, his identity shrouded in the customary anonymity.

What makes a good place to live, he said, in terms of human responses, can be understood by a sensitive appraisal of specific causes and effects. It is worth noting that almost every one of the factors involved have traditionally been missing from the planners' kit.

There is, first, the matter of urban heritage. It is not expendable, as planners have supposed. The richness and diversity that serve and nourish a city's vitality are the result of a range of factors from formal, civic monuments and spaces to the informal, functional accretion that accommodates the intimate activities that society wants and supports. When development strips these layers away, much of the social fabric, the coherence and even the stability of the neighborhood, including its working functions, disappear. Their loss doesn't do anyone except the speculator any good.

Next, there is the importance of the sense of personal belonging to an identifiable place. Loss of neighborhood character and pride leads to loss of personal identity and pride. When local institutions are wiped out for homogenized commercialism there is a human and urban backlash. Ask any city now.

Alienation is a hard-core social problem with its roots in how people live. Try a quick trip to the South Bronx some day for a look at what speculative building earlier in this century created in a non-negotiable environment. There are other, middle-class neighborhoods that are not much better, but a sense of personal security and a small cushion of cash has turned them into home.

It is only a few steps from the non-community, ill-served by education and opportunity, to the non-society and its problems. The anatomy of this ambience is desolation and violence is not far behind.

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The matter of ambience, or what makes environmental quality, was recognized first in historical neighborhoods or towns. There the destruction of a recognizable local heritage, a landmark, or an area of genuine identity or quality, became so real — nothing has the reality of a bulldozer — that the loss was obvious to the most amateur eye. Some of the strongest citizen protest has followed actual demolition, when the enormity of the environmental rape became clear.

The nature of new construction is equally important. It sets the nature of the neighborhood for a long time, and is doing so in enormous quantities today. Through scale, design, distinction, purpose and amenity, it can kill or cure. These elements, again, are not words in the average developers' lexicon. But they are beginning to appear in the vocabulary of cities.

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The environment is made up of a complex of "group factors" — heritage, use, past and present styles, associations, relationships of building types, functions and design. It is in the spaces between the buildings, their surfaces and the street, the amount of light, sun and sky. Most important of all, it is the relationship of all this to people and their physical and psychological needs. This interaction is the environment, and it is also urban life.

We are only beginning analysis and evaluation of this kind of urban anatomy now. The job will not be done through "consensus by iterations," to quote a research institute program busy computerizing "expert" opinion. It is going to be done by a new breed of planner. As the gentleman in The London Times points out, it calls for "scholarship, humility and expertise." With him, we ask, where are those planners now?