Planning for Cities in Chaos
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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It is easy to say that the profession of planning is at a crossroads, or in crisis; both are comfortable clichés. In less comfortable terms, crisis is the point at which a planner sent by the city to aid a community is told by its representatives that if nothing happens they will simply burn down their buildings. And they mean it.

Crisis is Watts, Detroit and Newark. It is a country with a galloping rate of substandard housing and the job of rebuilding itself by the end of the century. It is cities in chaos. It is New York, where chaos has been impacted by a thirty-year city failure to work directly with people and their needs.

To put it bluntly, the traditional practice of planning has failed. The planning profession is currently going through agonizing reappraisal of its aims and practices. Limited in the past, by training and methodology, to purely physical solutions—land use, density calculations and tidy scale models of Utopia—its practitioners have had remarkably little bearing or impact on the enormous, untidy, tragic human problems of an explosive and changing society. Now they find themselves pushed to the front of the battle against poverty, injustice, decay, ugliness, all the ills of environment and man.

Planners have no sure answers for any of this. But there will be no answers without planning. Now they have a vastly broadened outlook and the benefit of some bitter experience. They also have two important new key concepts: "interdisciplinary" and "advocacy" planning.

Interdisciplinary planning merely means that theory and practice from many fields must be brought to bear on any plan if it is to be a valid answer to people's needs. Advocacy planning is a much more controversial subject. Advanced by the younger members of the profession, it proposes that the planner act as advocate or representative for the people of the neighborhood under study, working with their ideas of what they want, with close understanding of particular ethnic features, community patterns and local conditions. He prepares the community's own plan, as opposed to a plan imposed authoritatively from above. He not only prepares it; he advocates it.

What this amounts to, in most cities, is in-ghetto planning—planning that rejects official city planning procedures. With a tremendous potential for sensitive, local problem-solving on a professional basis—and an equally great potential for trouble—it is bound straight for the spotlight of the urban crisis.

Advocacy Planning Groups

New York already has advocacy planning in ARCH, the Architects' Renewal Council in Harlem. The objective of this small, independent, experimental group has been on-the-spot social design, directly responsive to the community. Recently, in the troubled spirit of the times, most of its dedicated, all-white architect members have stepped aside for Negro replacements so that the movement could be black.

A group called Urban Planning Aid has been set up on the same model for Boston. Newark is about to get a Negro-led advocacy planning unit for its controversial medical center area. University, government and private funds are going to the growing movement. The American Institute of Planners has an offshoot advocacy planning group, and the American Institute of Architects is holding serious discussions on the subject.

Advocacy planning is a pendulum swing from the old-style City Hall planner, who took one field trip to the "blighted" area and then worked from statistics and abstract principles and held public hearings when large sums were already invested in the plan. The advocate planner moves into the community. He helps clarify neighborhood needs and ideas and puts them into professional form; he offers plans instead of protests. Advocacy planning and local pressures, in New York and elsewhere, are succeeding in opening the ear and eye of government to the community.

What can happen, however, is that this planning approach, so full of hope, may itself be susceptible to the ills of the ghetto. It runs a real danger of confusion and perversion by the proponents of black power. This does not mean that it cannot work. But there is a growing question of whether the objectives and methods of advocacy planning will be subverted into just another home-rule device of black nationalism, or if the movement will be permitted to carry out its essential aims.

There is also the matter of whether the client—the community—can apply the expertise of the objective professional to its problems. As in parts of the poverty program, it could become a disastrous amateur take-over.

Shortage of Negro Talent

With the rejection of white architects and planners, the problem also arises of how the huge vacuum of professional talent needed for planning in the nation's ghettos can be filled. The Negro planner is in very short supply. Even the number of white planners fails to meet demand. It is a particular, tragic distortion of our times to feel that only the Negro can do the job.

There are other disquieting questions. Will advocacy planning turn into do-it-yourself without a dialogue between community and city? Will it be real democracy at work, or will it signal a breakdown of the democratic process by ignoring local government and collaborative planning at City Hall? If it breaks with the city, how will it substitute for the city's funds and resources?

The rational answer is cooperation through the city's established structure, but the ghettos are in no mood for rational answers. One of the most promising and provocative new weapons in the fight for our cities and society hangs in the balance.

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