

Architecture

Some Awful Building Truths

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT is one of those awful truths that everyone knows that it costs more and takes longer to build for "government" than for the private sector. This curious and consistent phenomenon includes the predictable mediocrity of the product and the fact that costs rise and needs change during the drawn-out process.

On the other hand, everyone also knows that unless the government building process is spelled out as a series of required but crippling steps and hamstringing safeguards, the ever-ready large and small crooks and blackguards and manipulators will move in through every loophole for the kill. Both the public and the public agencies will be gulled, creamed and had.

The dilemma is timeless. Either the complications of building by the book become horrendous, costly and ludicrous and a whole bureaucracy grows up whose sole purpose is to enforce them, or the sweet aroma of deals and windfalls brings the com men like the proverbial bees to honey. Take your choice; you lose both ways.

Maybe nothing can, or will, ever be done about it. But one would have to be hopelessly stupid or cynical or really fond of a rotten mess not to want to try. Particularly when a lot of people are desperately in need of housing, schools and services of all kinds.

There are a few traditional correctional courses open. One is override—the process of setting up autonomous agencies that can operate under their own rules and ignore all others. The Port of New York Authority is an example, and New York State's University Construction Fund and Urban Development Corporation and Health and Mental Hygiene Facilities Improvement Corporation are others. The results, measured in amounts of construction achieved, are notably successful.

The State University Construction Fund, for example, has built \$928-million worth of new facilities—so strong a program, in fact, that there are now serious doubts about overbuilding causing tuition rises and questions as to whether plant has become

more important than the availability of the educational product. The State says subsidies exist for all who need them. Some observers say not. Plato, or was it Socrates, functioned under a tree. But times have changed and there is no doubt about the staggering quantity and sometimes superior quality of the construction, and the clear memory of a recent time when it was desperately needed.

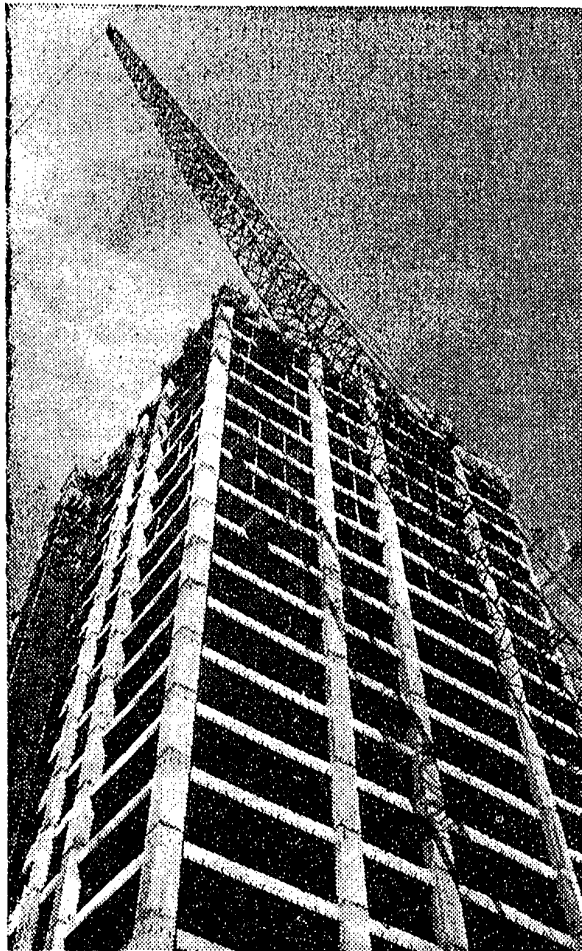
The Urban Development Corporation is building \$628-million worth of housing statewide while the city, strangling in red tape and internecine political wars, watches its smoke.

The Port Authority has built a steel and concrete empire and become so congealed in its own success that it has a bureaucracy now to perpetuate that. (Perhaps, as bureaucratic rigor mortis and the corruption of Machievellian management set in so that real needs can no longer be met, all these agencies should automatically dissolve.)

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There is also total override, such as Governor Rockefeller's billion-dollar Albany Mall. It looks like one of those funny trade magazine's corny vision-of-the-future ads, but it isn't. It's a lot of dreadfully real building. (Let that be the answer to the fashionable attitude among architects and intellectuals that we need a Napoleon or Sixtus with absolute powers to get big things done. You've got it, gentlemen, and look what you've got.)

Another system is something called reform, which comes like the seasons. A recent example is the consolidation of New York City's existing multi-agency mess for the avowed purpose of streamlining operations and increasing efficiency, in Mayor Lindsay's superagencies. An assortment of rent, renewal and housing departments (except public housing) were brought under one roof to become the Housing and Development Administration.

That play has resulted in at least three of the surefire results of governmental bigness—the flattening of design standards to mediocrity or worse, depersonalization and loss of morale, and programs lost in the morass to become



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Problems of construction and architectural excellence attacked at their non-esthetic roots

particularly vulnerable to abuse and corruption, as in the current housing rehabilitation scandals. I think I mentioned that you can't win.

Meanwhile, the public construction crisis grows worse. Currently, an agency called the New York State Council on Architecture is trying to do something a little different about it.

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The Council, created by Governor Rockefeller and the State Legislature, began operations as a management, consultant and advisory body under the direction of George A. Dudley in 1968. Mr. Dudley headed the University Construction Fund before that, and was responsible for the high standards of its early work. The Council's mandate, "to encourage excellence in architectural design in all public buildings," sounds like just another noble, elitist seal-of-good-design-ap-

proval kind of thing. But it is trying to attack the construction problem at its non-esthetic roots.

It started its job by asking the obvious question that no one had considered before: just who does the building for the State, and how much is there? The answer was enlightening—46 agencies are responsible for a whopping \$9-billion of ongoing construction (give or take a billion for the Albany Mall). That is an incredible amount of building. Of those agencies, 10 accounted for 90 per cent of the work, and 95 per cent of their design work was done by independent firms.

Having discovered these basic and striking truths, further studies were made to see what was gumming up the works. It was determined that public construction was taking three times as long as private construction and costing much more. There were no uniform specifications for

jobs, no joint scheduling to avoid labor drains and overpricing, and everything was tied up in a great big malfunctioning bow by the State's complex, often conflicting, and frequently outdated, construction legislation.

As a result, a directive was issued by the Governor in 1971, on the Council's recommendation, for all State agencies involved in planning, design and construction to adopt the uniform system of specifications of the Construction Specifications Institute. This change, alone, is expected to save millions of dollars in time and money. (Are you listening, New York City?)

At present, there is a bill in the Legislature, introduced by State Senator Warren M. Anderson, that would permit the Council to undertake a comprehensive study of all State construction laws. "Legal barriers, complicated bidding and award procedures, requirements for contractor performance bonds and other restrictions result in delays, spiraling costs and even obsolescence," says Senator Anderson. The resulting analysis and recommendations could lead to essential changes of present obstructive and obsolete practices that would benefit New York City as well.

The process will not be easy. It is no secret that the notorious Wickes Law, now in force, which mandates four separate contracts on all state and city jobs, is the prime villain. Every objective study has urged its repeal. It is also well-known that the Legislature has shied away from repeal in response to intense trade lobbying. The talk, each year, is that, frankly, the gentlemen in Albany won't repeal it this time but there might be a chance in the next session.

There may be a chance, and there may not. But the Council on Architecture is making it clear what architectural excellence really is. Good building is a process, not pretty pictures. It is the Wickes laws that make construction costly and inefficient, not architectural "frills." These facts consistently fail to penetrate the political consciousness. At the Council, at least, someone seems to be doing something about it.