

Ominous' Outlook for Housing

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Aug 4, 1969; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 34

'Ominous' Outlook for Housing

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Regional Plan Association has told the New York State Urban Development Corporation some home truths about housing in a study commissioned by the Corporation, and the Corporation has passed them on to anyone who will listen. "The sky is falling," cry Regional Plan and Urban Development, and New Yorkers go unheedingly about their business of disaster as usual.

The study says that the housing deficit is "ominous." It is "exacerbating racial separation," pushed by the high cost of new housing and the unavailability of the suburbs to the minority poor. This is, of course, all desperately familiar. Substandard units are increasing like rabbits, replacement and rehabilitation fall farther and farther behind, with the escalating costs of construction, land and money closing the trap.

Estimates of the city's housing needs are more than double the authorizations of 1966-67. The grotesque corollary is that it is no longer possible to build Federally assisted housing here under ceilings set by the housing law. The cost limit of \$3,150 per room is a fairy tale figure now, and the suggested increase to \$4,000 a room will still not make construction feasible in New York.

Inflation may be galloping

briskly across the country, but it is runaway in the construction industry. Architects add 1 to 2 per cent a month to building costs as standard expectation, and in housing that must be multiplied by time consumed by bureaucracy and community delays. Not to mention strikes and overtime. Even stopping to think about better plans costs money.

Labor Costs and Practices

Back at the bargaining table, construction unions have just won a tidy little cost-boosting package. Wages are taking a pattern of 20 to 30 per cent increases a year. It is reliably estimated that labor costs can double before 1975.

Nor are union practices accelerating noticeably to help meet housing needs through new technology, in spite of the carpenters' tentative acceptance of some forms of prefabrication. There is the now-famous story of the manifold—an assembly of pipes and valves for the hydraulic system of an ICBM launching pad. This factory-made unit cannot be knocked down and reassembled on the site according to what has become routine union practice without damage. The familiar union solution was to post a number of men in the vicinity of the instrument and to charge for the time that the

pointless disassembly and reassembly would have taken, if they had done it, adding a ceremonial welding mark. This became known as the "blessing of the manifold." Housing is similarly blessed.

However, we did get to the moon, so we may just possibly find a way to produce homes. There are hopeful sighs, such as more pre-cut factory-made components, but, and this is the rub, at higher costs than ever. The rapidly rising price of materials is no less significant to the national welfare than the price of bread or shoes. The wage-material spiral just about cancels out any technological advance. That leaves subsidies, mass prefabrication, large scale plans, such as new towns, and that dread idea, government controls, as possible answers.

The Bureaucratic Lag

The Government role in housing is already immense. The American Institute of Architects held a revealing cry-in this spring about what goes on at Federal, state and city levels. This is the age of the agency. Starting at the top, there is HUD, and the omnipotent FHA, to which cities, states and the private sector go for a multiplicity of aids and programs, from Model Cities to mortgage insurance. Washing-

ton is where the action is, when there's any action.

But until the housing crisis was certified politically, no one in Washington seemed to care how long the processing of programs took.

To speed things up, there is now an AMP program—Accelerated Multifamily Processing. This has one more step than before, although the sponsor may eliminate one at his own risk. In the move to New York's new Federal Building, the New York and regional offices split and went to different floors and that automatically led to two reviews instead of one. There is a huge communications gap between New York and Washington clogged with unanswered memos.

New York State has 80 steps, requiring sequential, rather than parallel review. "We are not funded to get involved with experimental building processes," a state spokesman has said. Progress is clearly not the state's most important product. City procedures, based on a bizarre departmental tug-of-war, are another long story.

The outlook for housing is "not optimistic," says the Regional Plan study. This may be the understatement of the year. Or famous last words.

Mrs. Huxtable is Architecture Critic of The Times.