THE CITY ON TV

Our Major Architectural Problem Is Intelligently Aired at Last

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT is a pleasure to report that Columbia Broadcasting System-TV has tackled, with serious intent and gratifying results, the most difficult and distressing architectural subject of our time: the city.

"Big City—1980," will be seen tomorrow on Channel 2 from 9:30 to 10:30 P. M., the second of the ambitious C. B. S. "Tomorrow" series prepared in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It is highly recommended to all those who recognize the handwriting on the urban wall that reads "Standing Room Only," and who strongly suspect that the real Day of Judgment will be ushered in not by trumpets, but by the motor horns of a monstrous traffic jam in which everyone will abandon his car —*and the city—to find* that there's no place to go.

Ominous Future

For by 1980, more than half of the American population will be living in cities not yet built that will stretch across the country in great, contiguous metropolitan "regions" of a chaotic ugliness that will make the 1960 model look charmingly quaint by comparison. Unless, of course, we apply our technological and esthetic know-how (more traditionally called the art of architecture) to the creation of new communities and the rehabilitation of old ones.

If this sounds like the stuff of a provocative and pertinent show, "Big City—1980" proves to be just that. Although the writer previewed an unfinished film, the presentation was coherent, stimulating and absorbing all the way through. It is a tale of two cities and their implications for the future: Brazilia, the fantastic new South American capital carved out of wilderness in less than five years ("instant city" according to the show's layman-*questioner-star, Garry Moore*), and Philadelphia, where a concerted citizen effort is being made to restore order and beauty to the 278-year unplanned growth of William Penn's tragically devastated "greene countrie towne."

The contrast between immediate, planned "perfection" and the accretion of several centuries of human error and untidiness is an extraordinarily striking one. Brazilia is breathtaking in its daring monumentality and in the occasional impact of undeniable architectural beauty. The sweeping, sculpturesque arcades of the President's Palace rising from the bulldozer-barren red mud and dust (the building is fittingly called, for this new world, the Palace of the Dawn), the soaring, arched concrete ribs marking the underground cathedral, the startling saucer-shaped legislative quarters, possess a large-scale magnificence that augurs well for symbolic architecture in our age.

But it is a symbol, above all, and symbols are hard on people. Brazilia's housing is a case in point. Massive superblocks designed at the same scale as the official structures become monstrous rather than monumental; they project the conformity and impersonality of a one-industry government town with depressing emphasis. In spite of their newness, cleanliness and the amenities they offer, their size and standardization are almost as appalling as the workers' temporary shantytown that they will replace. Here art serves inhumanity.

The films taken on the site have their own picturesque irony: from the primitive picks and shovels of peasant laborers rises an architecture of such extravagant sophistication—severe, aggressive, suavely avant-garde—that it seems more like some surrealist dream than reality. To Brazilians, proudly having their pictures taken against the not-yet-dry new buildings for the folks back home, it is "the city of tomorrow today."

Cities and People

It is this presentation of plans in terms of people that makes the show engrossing. For plans are people, a fact that architects have a deplorable tendency to forget. The story of Philadelphia's redevelopment is told through those affected by it—the small, dispossessed shopowners, householders faced with eviction, residents who feel that supermarkets and shopping centers will never replace the personal and social values of neighborhood services and stores.

In spite of these classic difficulties, Philadelphia has already chalked up some remarkable achievements. Architectural as well as human values are being preserved. Major municity areas have been rescued from industry and railroads, and the selective demolition of slums has preserved rows of rehabilitated eighteenth-century houses as the nuclei of new residential neighborhoods. Of this we take special, grateful note, for city planners as a group appear to be subject to a certain occupational insanity—an uncontrollable urge for wide open spaces and the crashing roar of bulldozers clearing away the past—a madness comparable only to that of the spring-cleaning housewife before whom all men quail. But although the eighteenth century is deemed worthy of preservation, the nineteenth century is not—as yet. Planners and preservationists have still to learn that the tradition of a city *is in the richness and flavor* of its architectural continuity, not in sterilized examples of eighteenth-century-under-glass.

Happily, the show relies on professional architects and planners to make its points. (There is no more distasteful display in the dossier of TV faux-pas than the actor delivering unfamiliar technical material with patently synthetic sincerity.) To Garry Moore's suitably self-effacing questions, John Burchard, dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at M. I. T., Edmund Bacon, head of the Philadelphia Planning Commission, and Pietro Belluschi, dean of the School of Architecture at M. I. T., provide informative and interesting replies.