

Visual Blight

The New York State Council of Environmental Advisors has taken a good look at the New York State environment. It seems that when you've seen one state you've seen them all—in terms of visual blight. The same highways, the same trashy commercial strips, the same drab developments—all eat away the natural landscape with a uniformity and indifference of impressive national scope. It is a kind of environmental erosion that this country succeeds in carrying out with extraordinary efficiency.

The fact is that blight is a highly successful commercial formula. The council found the approaches to New York State cities and towns consistently defaced by those common services for contemporary human needs—food, gas, consumer goods and entertainment—that combine the garish and the sleazy for maximum impact and the optimum take. Their hearts are diminished by drive-in banks and instant shopping centers. "Spread city" is merging villages and towns into indistinguishable disorder.

But more is at issue than the detritus of a consumer culture. What is being lost irrevocably is the historic and esthetic character of the still-beautiful older communities—their identity, quality and style.

"Beautification" and other genteel do-good efforts, however praiseworthy, are not the answer. The trouble is deeply environmental, as much or more than esthetic; it cuts to the essential amenity and viability of a community in terms of its standards of development and quality of life. Solutions go beyond sign-control and dump-screening to the useful rehabilitation of older buildings, planning and preservation of open space and green areas, desirable land-use patterns and construction zoning guidelines.

There is a need for competent evaluation of growth and change. A visual impact statement should be a routine part of any environmental impact statement, or the assessment of impact is incomplete.

The council will soon present recommendations for laws and action to Governor Carey and the Legislature. This is more than window dressing. Visual blight is not a surface symptom; in terms of physical form and function, it is an indication of urban health and a livable environment.