

Architecture

You Can't Win 'em All

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A NEW ENGLAND hill by the sea, overlooking sunsets and small boats, in the direct line of seagull flight, offers a surprising perspective on the urban condition. The earth and sky are close and every man cultivates his own garden.

The city is no one's garden. The permanence of sea and sky is real, if endangered, and the city is buffeted by change. Truisms, but they seem revelatory as the sea turns from smoke to sapphire and brilliant pumpkins ripen on the vine. New England still has the verities. It still subscribes to use-it-up, wear-it-out, make-it-do. It is the last, crumbling refuge of the non-expendable environment and the last place where planned obsolescence is considered of dubious morality. And so we come back to the city to find that the verities are gone and the sky is falling as usual. It has fallen in unanswerable fathoms of mail citing crisis after crisis. The awful moments flutter in dead messages from the telephone. The past is being vandalized. The present sinks deeper into chaos. The future promises instant blight. Stupidity, venality and bureaucracy triumph. What else is new?

Too bad, our colleagues have taken to telling us in print, that you are helpless. How sad that you accomplish nothing. Good try and all that; score zero.

Agreed; we have not changed the world, or even New York. Drama criticism has not really changed the theater. A critic can close a play or keep it running and a lot of money rides on that, but the same kind of thing keeps opening and closing on Broadway. In art, the critic decries novelty and commercialism, and the profitable rat and status race goes on. The television critic argues cogently for better fare; clichés and reruns continue. Their jobs are no less well done, or worth doing, for all that.

This particular job has

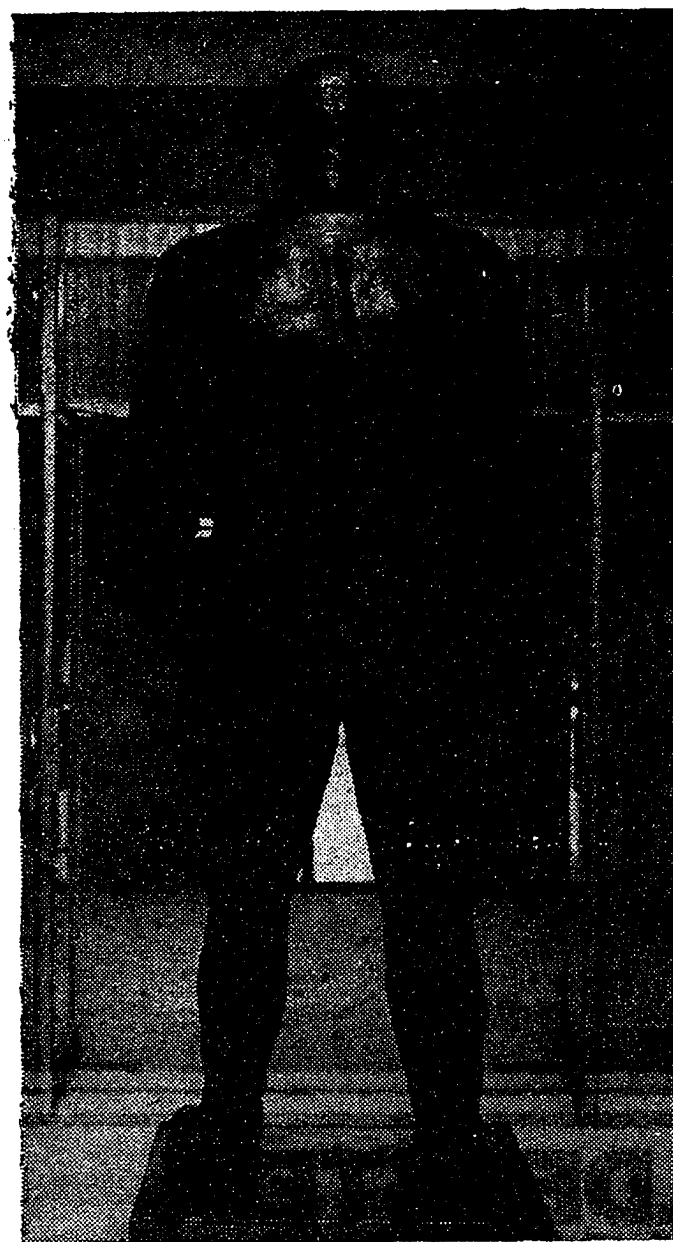
some uniquely tangible results and rewards. And so, for the record, before starting round eight (our eighth year), here is a partial box score. Our small triumphs are grains in the sand of the universe, drops in the bucket of despair. Many people have played more important roles. We may lead, or be no more than a reinforcing voice. But we are not a voice in the wilderness any more. There will be a few bright spots where reason, humanity and sensibility have lightened the limbo of urban desolation, when the sky finally comes down all over.

New York, for example, now has an excellent landmarks law. New York is the city where they said it couldn't happen—land values too high and real estate interests too strong and all that. Just no hope. And so there have been designations of about 350 landmark buildings and 16 historic districts. The city has had some tragic losses and some miraculous rescues. But one thing is certain: there would be nothing at all in New York without the law.

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The law is reinforced by air rights transfer, a zoning practice now being pioneered by New York. Unused square footage over older, small landmark buildings can be sold or leased to developers for new, bigger buildings on adjacent sites, adding economic incentive and rationale to the preservation of the city's past.

New York also has special district zoning—again, a pioneering effort—that recognizes and works to keep and reinforce the salient features and assets of neighborhoods threatened by redevelopment. This has, in one instance, prevented the speculator from wiping out the theater district by guaranteeing theater construction in new buildings. It protects the Lincoln Square area from complete commercialization, spelling out necessary amenities for builders, and guards the hotels around the park and



The New York Times (George Tames)

Rayburn Building statue, viewed from the formal entrance
Critics triumphed: Mr. Sam was turned around

plaza from office building encroachment.

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This has all been instituted in very recent years by the city's Planning Commission and Department and specially created planning offices. Thus, for the first time in New York history, the private developer no longer has carte blanche to destroy. He no longer has the unquestioned right to put the city in his pocket. For the zoning variances that he must get for his big new buildings, he must negotiate with the city's planners for the features the city wants and needs. He is even willing to do so. The builders, with characteristic revelation of how they think, call this deals. The city calls it planning policy. And planning policy, basically, is what

we have been struggling for all along.

There will be no grotesque tower over Grand Central Terminal. Remember that fight? And there will be a mid-block passage behind the new Rockefeller Center-associated buildings on the Avenue of the Americas to replace shops and restaurants that the bulldozer destroyed. It was a battle to get that, too, with one gigantic corporation threatening to take its building and its headquarters out of town. Never underestimate the courage of a city that has a planning policy.

We were the tail that wagged the dog on much of this, but it is still a useful role, and they are nice, solid achievements to share.

St. Louis has a reprieve on

its old Post Office; Pittsburgh's Rotunda will be part of new development; the Villard houses are still with us. There will be no meatmarket on prime Brooklyn waterfront, no Columbia gym in Morningside Park, no Hartford Cafe in Central Park, no Lower Manhattan Expressway.

A critique of urban renewal in historic Salem, Mass., led to the formation of a national advisory group on preservation in renewal. The urban slaughter continues, of course, but there are some reversals of bad plans and considerably increased sensitivity in new ones. Too late for most of America, but we take crumbs.

Staten Island continues to go the tacky tacky way, but there are a few cluster developments that came out of new zoning legislation, following study and reports, following agitation here. That's better than nothing at all.

We have lost, conspicuously, such things as the Grand Rapids City Hall (the loss, alas, is Grand Rapids's), virtually all of Manhattan's Greek Revival waterfront (it still hurts), Penn Station and the East Front of the Capitol. (Don't give up on the West Front. A new Architect of the Capitol is due to be appointed.) And more, more, more.

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We have been singularly unsuccessful against Federal architectural policy and we have bled all over the abominations on Capitol Hill. But even there we have had an effect. When we blasted the profligate, elephantine, Corrupt Classic banality of the mammoth Rayburn Building, noting that even the Rayburn statue had the seat of its pants to the ambivalent front door, they turned Mr. Sam around. Our cup runneth over.

But most of all, we have participated in the fight for a growing public awareness of the environment, explaining, exploring, championing, condemning—and always—believing that this country lacks neither the tools nor the talent nor the possibility of excellence in the part of the environment that is the man-made world. We shall continue to battle and believe. There's just that little matter of stupidity, venality and bureaucracy. Windmills, anyone?