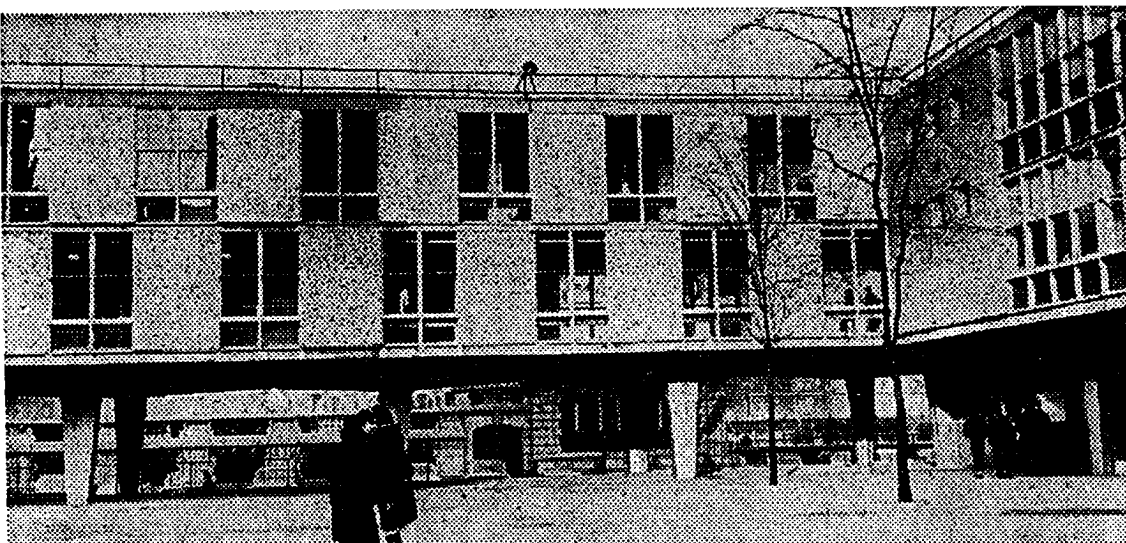


Architecture: Building a Third-Class City

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Jan 30, 1966; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. X24



It may be Modern Miscarriage, as in a new school on the Lower East Side .

Architecture

Building a Third-Class City

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE design here is Daumier third-class carriage style," said New York's new Parks Commissioner, Thomas Hoving, looking over a standard expanse of concrete playground in Chelsea recently. "That was all right in the W.P.A. days."

What was all right for the W.P.A. has become New York's permanent public works style. It runs the full scintillating scale from Budget Banal to Modern Miscarriage, a current aberration that takes flying leaps out of routine pedestrian into heavy-footed jazz. The first plods dully across the New York scene; the second falls flat on its face. It is enough to make citizens cry (the City Club has done so, in its past denial of the Bard Awards to public structures) and strong architects weep.

With pitifully few exceptions, the parks, playgrounds, zoos, housing, schools, li-

braries, administration buildings, highways, parking garages, sanitary facilities, subways, street furniture and signs and graphics that are part of the multi-million dollar civic construction and design program carried out by or through city agencies every year have one predictable consistency. Their uniform lack of distinction and delight could not be more successfully achieved if they were the result of a conscious conspiracy of mediocrity.

Obstacle Races

The cause is not conspiracy, however, but something more like a municipal meatgrinder. The city's procedures could have reduced the Parthenon to a pulp. The emphasis is on form and affidavit filing under a multiplicity of delaying departmental jurisdictions and reduction of all ideas to the cheapest familiar formula through economic rather than design review. No part of the process puts the stress on better solutions, where it belongs. There are no standards set at the top.

The few attempts to break the negative mold — Kelly and Gruzen's Chatham Green and Towers middle income apartments, Marcel Breuer's work for Hunter College and some spotty upgrading of schools since the 1950's nadir, to cite some non-conforming examples—take on the character of obstacle races with dream sequences. Only persuasion, persistence and special pleading buck the bureaucratic barricades. Almost any architect who has worked with the city will tell you that it is a time-consuming business at fees below the

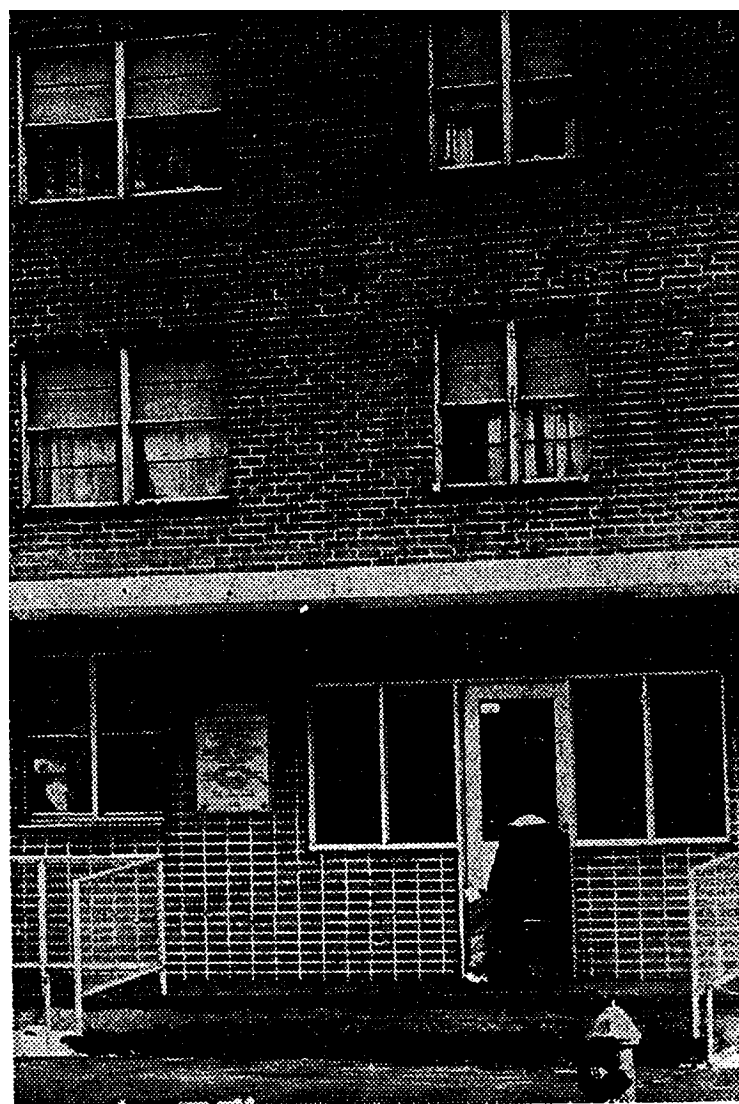
going commercial rate, calculated to reduce all design to the lowest common denominator. And it does just that.

All of which leads to the inevitable question: why? The proper Bostonians can come up with a new city hall and a new state complex in the city's government center now under construction that are creative, colorful, contemporary buildings of thoughtfully considered purpose and plan, but New York plays the same old piecemeal game of civic center patching, compounding errors of planning and design with routine packaging or big name gift wrapping.

The New Yorker returning from Europe where he has seen the sympathetic execution of municipally-sponsored amenities in housing design is faced with the spiritless vista of housing that makes the Daumier third-class carriage style seem an extravaganza of outré inventiveness.

The answer is apathy, inertia, and lack of vision. It is the absence of the right kind of architectural professionalism at the highest levels of city administration. The same old formulas are good enough. The same old firms are good enough. The same old processes are good enough. It is fully evident that they are not, but without a sophisticated, thoroughly expert understanding of what really is good enough, or what the current standards of achievement are in the private sector of design, there can be little improvement. Nor can a climate of excellence be created. Recognition and knowledge on the policy-making level are the first necessary steps to better municipal building.

It took President Kennedy's



The New York Times (Sam Falk) Larry Fried . . . or Budget Banal, as in West Side housing.

architectural directive — an executive order — to begin to pull a few better buildings out of the murky mess of federal patronage and regulations. In essence, Governor Rockefeller did the same thing with the huge building program of the State University Construction Fund. But in addition to setting design standards by putting live architectural administrators in charge, legislation made operating and financing independent of routine state procedures.

The solution, therefore, is in both policy and administration. Mayor Lindsay's proposal to bring separate building and housing departments and activities together in a single administrative grouping with a single head, strongly urged by his housing consultants' recent report, could be the initial important step in bringing logic and efficiency to the city's construction program. This is essential to the realization of architectural quality.

The suggested expansion of the Bureau of the Budget into a Bureau of Planning and Budget should broaden the perspective by which designs

are presently judged. The changes being made in department and program heads could bring the kind of professionalism and standards to the city that it so badly needs. Fees, supervision schedules and techniques of architectural selection need to be reviewed. Procedural reforms within departments could cut red tape to speed up building at immense savings.

The ultimate irony, of course, is that in this age of exceptional architectural vitality, when the average of brilliant and even beautiful solutions to urgent building needs is extraordinarily high, New York is just not with it. Its sluggish creative current is out of the mainstream of today's architectural performance. The scandal is that this should happen not in some backwater, but in the most esthetically sophisticated of cities.

What is needed as a start is just exactly the kind of civilized, critical comprehension long absent from official circles in New York, that was implicit in Mr. Hoving's urbane and knowing remark. Judgement, wit and style grace life and art, and any city worth calling great.