

Safeguard for Urban Quality

One area in the vast limbo of New York City's unsolved problems to which the administration can point with pride is that of urban design. The art of city building simply was not practiced at the municipal level before; it was left to the tender machinations of real estate. From the appointment of the Task Force on Urban Design to the setting up of the Urban Design Group, new skills have been coupled with a new vision of the city to foster design and legislative innovations that other communities are beginning to emulate.

That accomplishment has brought into city government a new kind of talent—gifted professionals who see the job of designing the urban environment as one of the most critical and stimulating challenges open to architects and planners today. It has attracted the cream of the young professionals—unusual enough in city government—who see the art of environment as more important than the art of speculation.

The achievements to date are notable, but they are in danger now. The future hangs on the upcoming appointment to the City Planning Commission of a successor to Walter McQuade, an architect, whose term has expired. He has been the excellent design balance-wheel of the commission since Harmon Goldstone left it to head the Landmarks Preservation Commission, another agency with a notable achievement record.

If the Mayor follows his recent pattern of stressing non-design qualifications, the result will be a disaster. There will be no one—repeat, no one—professionally equipped to analyze urban design decisions. These, when you come down to it, transcend politics and economics, even in New York; they are the heart of the planning process. This is not the time to play conventional ethnic or political games, or to go back to the messy political pool that is the city planning process in so many communities.

The point cannot be made strongly enough that there is only one kind of appointment that will prevent a breakdown of hard-won environmental progress, no matter how capable the other commissioners are in their respective fields. The new member of the City Planning Commission must be an architect, planner or urbanist, someone who can deal constructively and expertly with the work of the city's design teams. He must be able to weigh the effect of decisions in terms of the technical and physical facts of how people live. The responsibility involved is the quality of the built environment, and the quality of New York life. The Mayor cannot finesse that responsibility now.