

# *Planning Tied to Policy Held Key to City's Quality*

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York has been called the no-plan city. A top urban renewal official remarked in the days when Federally sponsored renewal programs were getting under way that New York was the only major city that had been built almost totally by private interests for private profit with no municipal policy, guidance or control.

And yet it has become increasingly apparent in the last decade, to both public officials and the public alike, that planning is a prime determining factor not only of a city's destiny but also of the quality of its life.

The environment is an intellectual concept that has become common currency today and nowhere has the subject had more impact than in New York, where the crisis of the environment is visible in everything from traffic jams to riots. First and biggest in everything, New York affords a textbook study of environmental deterioration and all of the physical and social problems that follow in its wake.

If planning is an idea whose time has come, it has come to New York just within the last five years. It is an omnibus concept now that includes the city's whole package of economic, social and physical programs. It is concerned with the city's growth, development and health.

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Planning recognizes that the attractiveness and suitability of the design of a single neighborhood, the policies that determine what shall be built where and what services the city shall have—even the use of the waterfront or the retention of the past—can have widening waves of impact on everything from full employment and racial strife to the class structure and tax base of the city.

But recognition of the role and function of planning is performing no miracles for New York overnight. The city's deterioration has gone too far, its problems are too severe, its fiscal plight is too desperate to make immediate, large-scale miracles possible.

What can be noted, how-

ever, are the steps being taken to try to impose a constructive, problem-solving framework on the city's inevitable growth and change. For the first time, a concentrated effort has been mounted to direct those forces into constructive channels, against the most formidable odds the city has ever known.

These are some of the steps that have been taken:

¶The creation of a housing superagency, the Housing and Development Administration, to handle all aspects of one of the city's most pressing building and social problems.

¶The reversal of the city's planning policies and practices from the imposition of renewal plans by City Hall to a far greater emphasis on community participation in both plans and execution.

¶A new insistence on human scale and neighborhood preservation planning and development. This includes smaller and less institutional housing units and scattered vest-pocket public housing sites.

¶A trend toward "mixed use" planning to insure more neighborhood variety and vitality.

¶A policy of more small

parks and the return of the waterfront to recreational and residential use.

¶The creation of a Mayor's Task Force on Urban Design, consisting of prominent citizens and professionals and headed by William S. Paley, to study and report on the city's esthetics and urban qualities.

¶The establishment of an Urban Design Group within the City Planning Department to study development possibilities from the city's point of view before, rather than after, the fact of construction.

¶The initiation and passage of special zoning district legislation, as a result of the studies of this group, affecting the retention and inclusion of such features as the theater district and the character of the Lincoln Square area, which new construction would otherwise destroy.

¶The adoption of the Lower Manhattan Plan (by the Wagner administration), which set the framework for stronger and more specific public planning policy.

¶The establishment of the Office of Lower Manhattan Development by the Lind-

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# Key to City: Planning

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say administration, to carry out the basic principles of the Lower Manhattan Plan and coordinate the massive rebuilding of the downtown area.

¶The resolution of differences between the city and the state over Battery Park City, the \$1.1-billion, 118-acre project for lower Manhattan that will construct a virtual city on landfill in the Hudson River.

¶The establishment of an Office of Midtown Development to guide and carry out plans for the West Side area in the 40's and 50's, in accordance with City Planning studies.

Many of the tools and powers being used for the guidance and control of the city's development had existed previously, but had been used minimally, if at all.

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Among them are zoning, design review, land write-down and tax abatement. They are all being employed today in carrot-and-stick fashion with developers, to gain features the city considers desirable.

These range from the provision of pedestrian arcades with shops and restaurants and parks in commercial construction areas to the inclusion of subway and rail connections for long-term transportation plans. In many cases these features and amenities are being exacted from private builders through the provision of zoning bonuses that pay for greater costs by allowing greater height or floor areas and hence more rentable space.

What has happened in the broadest sense in the last few years is that the design and planning principles and practices that professionals have believed should be guiding New York's physical development—which in turn determine the quality of its life and environment—have been adopted at the administrative level.

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Unfortunately, many of the steps forward include built-in obstacles. Community participation in planning revolves around who really represents the community and the community's limitations in articulating and interpreting what it really wants.

Participation in the execu-

tion of plans means finding qualified minority planners, architects, engineers and demolition and construction firms. Controversy within the community has threatened the loss of Model Cities funds for the South Bronx and Harlem, which are contingent on the resolution of a plan.

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Implied and real controls have rallied real estate and development interests against City Hall. Laissez-faire dies hard in New York, even in the face of crisis.

Much of the new planning power revolves around the chairman of the City Planning Commission, Donald H. Elliott. Considered a man of knowledgeable and enlightened planning sympathies by some—and a kind

of Rasputin to the Mayor by others—he is in the lawyer-administrator tradition that produced Edward Logue, one of the most effective and controversial city planners.

The report prepared by Mr. Logue for Mayor Lindsay on the city's housing and planning needs has been the basis for many of the city's actions in changing housing policy and decentralizing the planning process.

Elevated design standards are a component part of all of the new programs and policies. This has become an inflammatory issue between those who consider design a factor that slows down production and increases costs, and those who consider it intrinsic to quality housing and building of any kind,

as well as to the total environment.

For the first time in what has been called decades of dedicated mediocrity in New York housing circles, the city has produced a series of prize-winning designs. All are moving into execution. In some cases, stalemated projects have actually been expedited by redesign. There are newly designed public housing projects that have gone from City Planning approval to groundbreaking in record time. But design is a windmill-tilting operation at best in the face of the national factors affecting production of housing.

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New York's long-awaited master plan, mandated 30-odd years ago by the City Charter and the subject of constant needling by the

city's critics, is now almost complete.

In a curious paradox, with the greater emphasis on and knowledge of planning today, experts have come to the conclusion that even the idea of a master plan has become obsolete. Charting a city's destiny is a far more complex and volatile operation than ever before, and a definitive land-use document to which all future development can be tied is considered a dated dream. Change is the only certainty.

Today's city planning can deal only in vision tied to policy, affecting the whole spectrum of municipal aims and activities. It has become a social and political art with powerful political repercussions. In New York, it is still largely rolling with the punches.