

RENEWAL IN BOSTON: GOOD AND BAD

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

BOSTON.

THE vision of urban renewal is still bright and shining in spite of a discouraging record of cross-country failures. It is the Cinderella dream of cities—to turn the old and shabby into the new and beautiful with the magic wand of Federal funds to live happily, urbanistically speaking, ever after.

Nowhere is the dream brighter and shinier than in Boston today. Perhaps because it has survived the catastrophes of its initial efforts it has learned some painful lessons.

Boston's expressway, or Central Artery, is a conclusive exercise in how to dismember and blight a city; its early West End project was a definitive demonstration of how to destroy a community with a bulldozer. The scars are still there: a waterfront cut off from the city as if it had the plague, a few high rise apartments and town houses on the Charles River and a razed desert of parking lots full of cars instead of people.

While other cities made the same mistakes, and are still making them, Boston paused for shocked reappraisal of what "renewal" had wrought, brought in Edward J. Logue from New Haven to head the Boston Redevelopment Authority and set up an expert planning and architectural staff. Just as significantly, it began to plan directly with the communities involved.

Progressive Program

This tradition-rich city now has what may be one of the country's most progressive and promising urban renewal programs. Twenty-five per cent of Boston is under renewal and from the mountainous piles of rubble it seems like more. The most far-sighted feature of the program is probably its avowed objective, in specific plans and policy rather than in pious announcements, of combining the best of this tradition through preservation and rehabilitation with the most vital new work it can lure or commission.

It is ironic, of course, that a city with the historic and architectural character of Boston had to learn such an obvious lesson the hard way, and it is even more ironic that other cities, including New York, have not learned it yet.

The Boston Redevelopment Authority may be the only major urban renewal agency with an official architectural historian on its staff. It



BACK BAY BEHEMOTH—52-story Prudential Tower nearing completion in Boston's new Prudential Center.

doesn't rely on outside "advice," "liaison," or the cries of an outraged citizenry. Nor is it restricting preservation to "landmarks," isolating and quarantining a few important old buildings while tearing out the lesser buildings, streets, neighborhoods and vistas that are the city's heart and style.

Item one: Boston's new Government Center will replace derelict Scollay Square with a strong, contemporary, competition-winning City Hall now going into construction as part of a complex of striking new Federal, state, city and business structures that will include historic Faneuil Hall and the 19th century Sears' Crescent as well as a stunner by Paul Rudolph.

Risky? Not really. Boston is gambling with good odds for the big payoff: a renewed city that will complement the beauties of Bulfinch with buildings of a 20th century-style and vitality assuring the same tradition of excellence and suitability for its future heritage as for its past. To put it brutally, it makes New York look sick. And to twist the knife, the young architects of Boston's City Hall, Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles, are from New York.

Item two: The city's plan to renew the waterfront, unlike other port cities, is not

based on total clearance for sanitary new projects. It begins with the preservation of some handsome granite warehouses on or near the old wharves dating from the 1820's to the 1860's. They are now being rehabilitated and remodeled as apartments, to be supplemented by the polished new housing of I. M. Pei and others. A valiant, but necessarily limited attempt will be made to breach the barricade of the expressway to reconnect the waterfront with the city.

New York's approach to its waterfront heritage has been simply to chop it up into convenient chunks for total demolition and large-scale redevelopment. The oldest remaining portion along the East River has had no planning at all.

Item three: Boston's Washington Park project relies on 75 per cent rehabilitation. In the South Boston renewal area, Union Square, the Victorian equivalent of Beacon Hill's Louisburg Square, will be restored. So will the row houses on the hills of Charlestown. "Rehabilitation is five times as hard as bulldozing," says renewal director Logue, but it is being stressed throughout the city.

Item four: The Boston Redevelopment Authority has the power of design review

and uses it effectively. New York has the power of design review and does not. Washington Park's construction will include a YMCA by The Architects Collaborative, an unconventional "tot-lot" already carried out as a pilot design by the Redevelopment Authority, and a group of homes, Marksdales Gardens, that are reminiscent of Tapiola in Finland and could set architectural standards for this country.

Design quality ranks high in the BRA scale, but "human renewal," or social rehabilitation is given as much emphasis as physical renewal. Washington Park, a Negro community worked around the clock with BRA to hammer out mutually satisfactory plans in the light of its special problems. The Authority will present no plan for public hearing that does not have full community approval. (Visions of West Villagers carried screaming from City Hall still dance in a New Yorker's head.

Back Bay Failure

This does not mean that everything is perfect in Boston. Far from it. The mammoth Back Bay renewal scheme, Prudential Center, was started when the city was hungry for capital investment and commercial construction and so anxious to build that it gave the developer what amounted to carte blanche.

The result, unfortunately, is the biggest thing in Boston. A flashy 52-story glass and aluminum tower, a depressingly uninspired war memorial auditorium that will look like all other pedestrian-modern war memorial auditoriums, a hotel in typical American vulgarese (appropriately called the America), and a rigid set of routine office and apartment buildings make up an over-scaled megalomaniac group shockingly unrelated to the city's size, standards or style. It is a slick developer's model dropped into an urban renewal slot in Anycity, U.S.A.—a textbook example of urban character assassination.

It is not "the new" that is wrong for Boston, but this kind of new. The Redevelopment Authority is well aware of the sensitive problems of combining the old city with essential new construction. There can be many slips, of course, and many fingers in the municipal pie, between plan and final results. But as these urban renewal plans stand now, with the backing of Mayor Collins and with present commitments going full steam ahead, Boston can teach the rest of the country a lesson—if it isn't already too late.