Plan Is Regarded as Break With Tradition
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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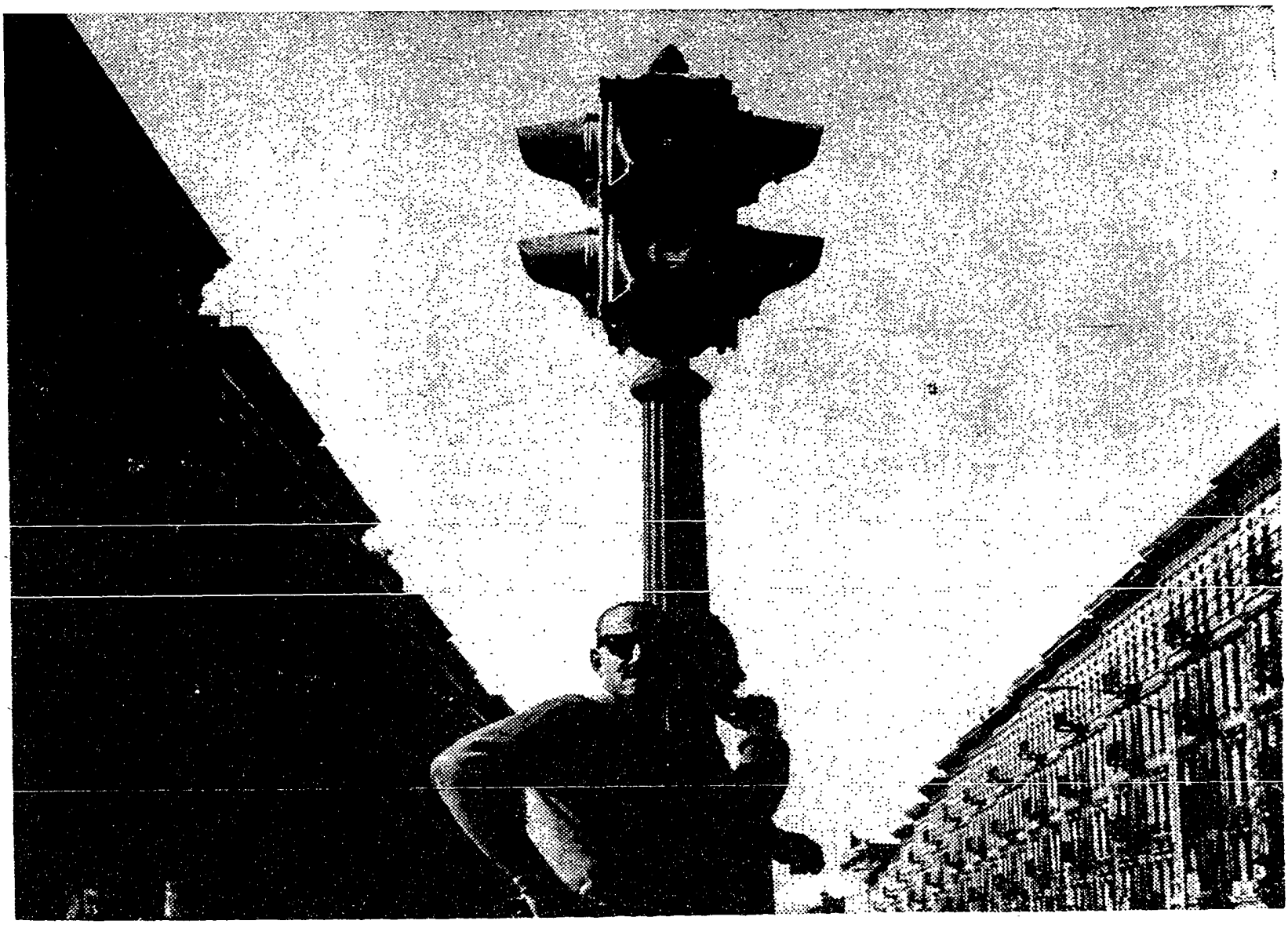

Burk Uzzle—Magnum
Manhattan street scene. An illustration from "Plan for New York City," released yesterday by City Planning Commission

Plan Is Regarded as Break With Tradition

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Well, it's here; come and get your New York City comprehensive plan while it's hot.

The "Plan for New York City," a folksy, plain-spoken, 450,000-word chronicle of New York's problems and policies intended to lay down programs and guidelines for the city's growth, has been generating almost as much heat as "Portnoy's Complaint." After 31 years on the city's backburner, the plan promises to get a good deal hotter before it is adopted as New York's official instrument of urban policy.

An Appraisal

Even before release, it has been characterized as a highly unconventional and controversial planning document. Any resemblance to the Master Plan visualized at the time the City Charter called for it in 1938 is purely coincidental.

Its renewal strategies are not the familiar redevelopment schemes in which the city is divided into neatly mapped areas with before and after pictures of blight and beauty and a vision for the year 2000.

A Wide Spectrum

These strategies deal with the renewal of people — their education, job opportunities, standards of living, participation in the governing process, and chances to "make it" in a city where the supporting middle-class has been drawn from a continuous stream of immigrants and migrants, the oppressed and the talented.

There are no elaborate "trend projections" and there is no "ultimate grand design"; in short, none of the traditional paraphernalia of the standard master plan.

It does not deal in any of these things for two significant reasons. First, the textbook scientistic-Utopian planning of long-range policies based on statistical extrapolations and translated into massive rebuilding schemes has proved such a conspicuous failure in the last 25 years that doctrinaire planning, and its adherents, are in considerable disrepute and disarray. The impressive theories and presentations that seem so intellectually compelling go up in smoke when faced with the human and political equation.

Second, if it ever worked at all, it could never work for New York. This city is a contradiction in terms of all the tenets dear to the doctrinaire planner's heart: low density, decentralization, orderly development, containable objectives, tidy separation of functions. New York's chaos, its very problems, are a result of its dynamic vitality—the pressures of the ongoing process of growth, building, demand and development.

Therefore, the plan deals with processes; with the forces of growth and decay and the inconstant and troubling human factors that underlie the city's serious disorders—things that cannot be pinned down on charts or graphs. It is designed for the greatest flexibility.

It recognizes that certain realities—change in population because of a change in Federal farm or welfare policy, for example, or programs passed but unfunded—can destroy the most orderly assumptions. What the plan does is to state problems, identify policy, and recommend solutions for the present and the immediate future.

Most comprehensive plans are so out of touch with immediacy that rigor mortis sets in on the day of publication.

British Experience Cited

Britain, one of the most experienced of planning nations, with many comprehensive documents to its credit, has found that physical plans are usually outdated as soon as they are adopted because conditions change so rapidly that the premises on which such schemes were based no longer exist or are radically altered by the time they are written. Experience shows that the master plan, as a physical plan, based on land use, zoning and specific renewal, is an obsolete concept.

Designation of renewal areas in physical plans has proved a guarantee of instant blight, so that the proposal becomes ironically self-defeating. American cities, such as Detroit, are involved in the reappraisal of physical plans prepared in the nineteen-forties and nineteen-fifties.

Current city efforts are emphasizing "strategic" proposals for the immediate future, focusing on the "quality of life" for the first time. Chicago began this kind of study in 1966 and Los Angeles has one in preparation for 1970.

New York is first to complete its social plan, and has gone the furthest with the concept. Much of it written in good, simple English by William H. Whyte, the 90,000 words of the initial, summarizing volume can, with patience, be read and understood. The almost chatty tone, with heavy emphasis on what "we are doing" may seem like political proselytizing to many, since it stresses programs begun by the Lindsay administration. They are trend-setting experiments, however, pertinent to realization of the plan's objectives.

Beyond the basic argument of what a master plan should be, which is already being pursued by the Planning Commission's dissenting member, Beverly Spatt, who calls it a "wordy non-plan," there is something on almost every page suitable for debate.

A few items that are certain dynamite: greater mid-Manhattan density for the city's ever-expanding role as a national center; city-motivated development supported by zoning changes; the continuation and encouragement of mixed residential and industrial neighborhoods; legislation to give the city condemnation powers for land assembly to help builders fill approved needs; the restriction of cargo port activity and construction to Staten Island and Brooklyn; the location of a jetport; center city restrictions on private cars; abolition of the Board of Education, and many more.

City Government Scored

The plan is sharply critical of the present welfare and education systems, budgeting processes and the city government itself, including accusations of a "bureaucracy unresponsive to officials or the people."

The language is plain. "It is the city's losers who are its scourge"; "the present system of welfare is inadequate, inequitable and degrading"; "no one yet knows how to make a ghetto school work."

It has already been alleged that the plan's thrust favors programs for the black and Puerto Rican poor to the neglect of the middle class. The city's contention is that the real threat to the existing middle class in the crisis in poverty, education and opportunity for the city's underclass, and that only by solving those problems can the middle class be made secure.

As one instance, it deals with the middle-class concern about safety. "In the long run," the plan states, "the basic ghetto problems of poverty and unemployment will be the most important in the war against crime." The real answers, the plan says, are to be found in the hard questions, and the city and the people must face them together.

What they will face in the next 10 years could be the further breakdown of New York's social and physical structure, or a positive action program to put them back together again. To that end, the plan is truly comprehensive. It is concerned with everything from a huge development concept for midtown to the pointed stick "technology" of the Park Department's maintenance system. The world's greatest city is also the city of the absurd, and to plan it is a courageous and surrealist exercise.