Lessons in How to Heal the City's Scars: Architecture Architecture Healing the City's Scars
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Lessons in How to Heal the City's Scars

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

OUT of the scandals of the Nixon administration comes a curious survivor: the arts. While social programs are axed with a cruelty visible only to those who see the individual death of hope, and Watergate shakes the national morality and the Federal establishment to their foundations, the arts, traditional stepchild of government, are doing very well, thank you. This year's appropriation for the National Endowment for the Arts, headed by Nancy Hanks, seems to be on the way to being doubled, and all programs are cooking with gas.

In the division of the National Endowment devoted to Architecture and the Environmental Arts, which interests us here, headed by Bill N. Lacy, the programs are of a remarkable caliber. They are taking on everything from the quality of Federal architecture and design—in the recently held First Federal Design Assembly and related backup efforts—to the quality of the city in terms that range from socio-political to historical-esthetic.

To this observer, who has been through the sporadic successes and failures of earlier Federal design programs and wishes the present one well with assorted caveats, the far more stimulating possibilities exist in the larger city efforts.

These would be unusual programs under any auspices or conditions, but under the weighty bureaucracy of administrative Washington they are nothing less than miraculous for their creative and pertinent professionalism. Perhaps one of the strangest phenomena of modern government, which is failing so badly in so many areas, is that it is doing so very well in such arcane matters of nonvoter appeal as planning and the arts.

What is most intriguing about the Federal architectural and environmental programs is the combination of informed sensitivity and innovative idealism that is shaping them. In a very conscious way, they reach for exploratory studies in extremely broadly defined environmental areas. The National Endowment is con-

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cerned with large ideas critical to problems of the cities that are at once abstract and intellectual and firmly anchored in reality. This is in notable contrast to some "deep think" stuff going on in the field that is little more than intellectual navel watching.

For all their deliberately ambitious scope, the Endowment's projects are bound to have some profound impact on the functioning and design of cities, and on public awareness of very important areas of urban esthetics and operation. That is no small objective, and it is worth noting how it is being done.

There is, for example, the bold "City Edges" program, for which $1,100,000 in grants was announced by the Endowment in April. "City Edges" is a phrase coined by Kevin Lynch, the man whose analysis of the form and function of cities has become a cornerstone of much of the basic planning philosophy of our time.

It is a term that refers to those places of conjunction and transition, often awkward, frequently ugly, too commonly misused or underutilized, that can blight or deform a city. They may be the despoiled edges of a river or other waterways, the reluctant meeting of the deteriorating inner city and better residential neighborhoods, the grim wasteland of railroad yards, the commercial strip that leads from city to suburbs—all of those forms of urban limbo where the metropolis fails conspicuously to coalesce and function constructively, attractively or humanely. These are the scars of cities.

Sometimes they are social scars, the ghetto against the dividing highway. Sometimes they are scars of the conflict of past and present, the sensitively restored historical district in the deteriorated inner city. Sometimes they are the scars of "progress," the railroad and the waterfront relegated to industrial slums.

In every case, these areas cry for study and solutions. In every case, with the broadest applications possible, the Endowment has opened the door to this kind of study, to cities across the country. The range is immense and the potential enormous. Whatever the eventual rate of plans actually carried out, these parts of our cities will never be seen in quite the same way again, and there will be a new awareness that is essential to necessary change.

Where have some of these "City Edge" grants gone? To Austin, Tex., for a study of waterways to form an integrated open space network for a range of community needs. To Chapel Hill, N. C. University of North Carolina Center for Urban and Regional Studies, to investigate those city edges that involve social interactions and neighborhood security in low and middle income housing projects—a study with national implications.

To New Orleans, for resolution of one of the country's most famous river edges, the Mississippi, for inventorying historic, social and economic resources to produce guidelines for a new riverfront plan. To Philadelphia, for improving the effectiveness and environmental quality of major highway corridors leading into the city. To the Suburban Action Institute in White Plains, N. Y., to determine the effect of breaking zoning restrictions in the suburbs for the development of racially and economically integrated new communities on the fringe of metropolitan areas.

And to New York, for some offbeat studies: the use of dock and seaport areas for educational, cultural and recreational needs concentrating on a Bicentennial "showboat theater;" to Cooper Union for "rooftops" as a lost city edge; to the Municipal Art Society for a crash study of a newly-created city edge—the Second Avenue subway line—to avoid Sixth Avenueitis, or a planless vacuum of non-interconnection with other city functions and construction.

Some of the more provocative grants: to Ron Grant of South Bend, Ind., for a study of the outer edges of Puerto Rico's urban centers where a kind of low income "subsociety" exists, "geared to basic survival." To Lexington, Ky., in the process of consolidating city and county governments, for understanding of this new "political city edge;" to Grady Clay, for examination of "zones of dynamic interaction between man-made and natural forces" in Los Angeles and other urban centers.

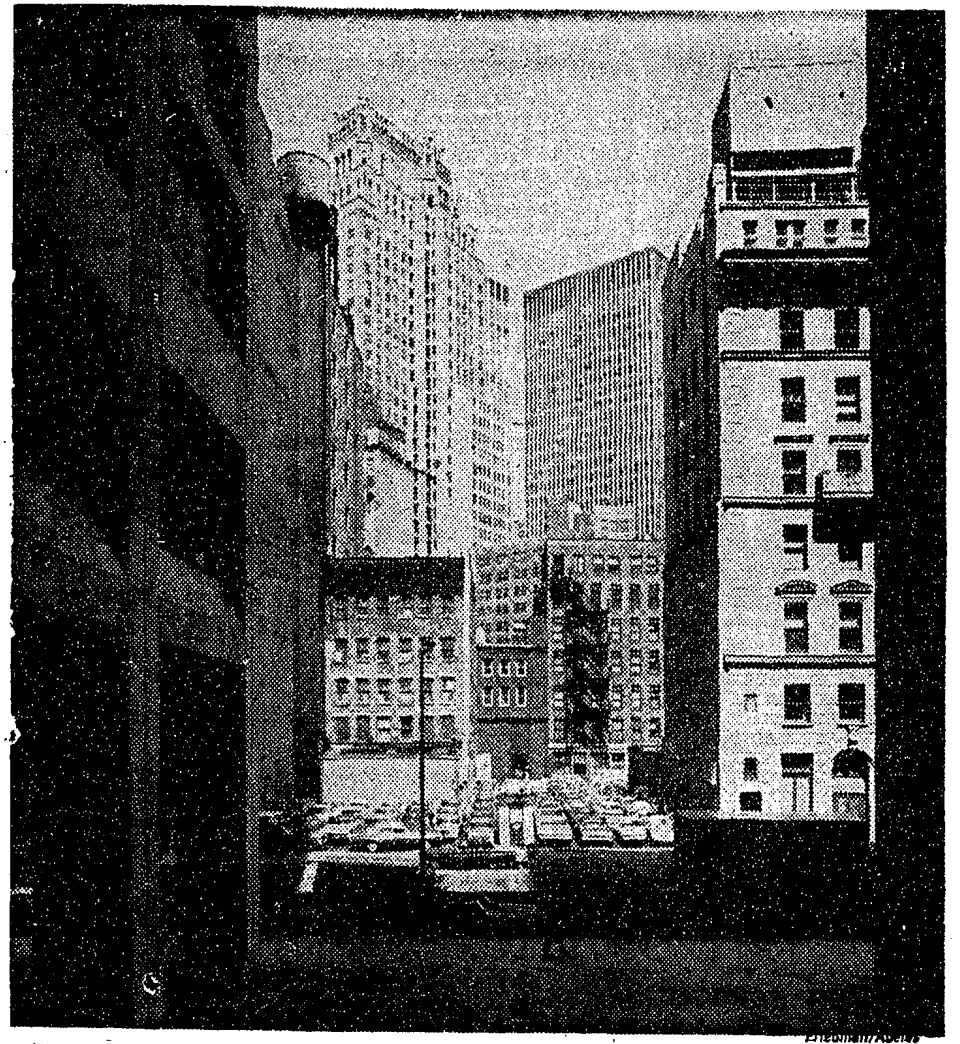
The National Endowment allows 15 months for reports on these studies, and has hopes of doubling the grants in a next round. They presently number 34. Meanwhile, the Endowment is going even farther. It has conceived, as the next step, a singularly imperative subject that represents a need of tragic urgency. This program is called "City Options," and it deals with the difficult options facing cities today of retaining their identity, versus characterless development.

How does a city face what is really a massive socio-esthetic catastrophe? How does it keep its individual quality and style against the onslaught of scaleless, qualityless, value-destroying speculative construction that produces pedestrian lookalikes and disaffected citizens without pride of place or community?

How do you find tools for the conservation of areas of unique and special character? How do you battle redevelopment forces which, if they follow the logic and inexorability of today's economics, will wipe it all out, where they haven't already done so? How do you help cities to think about the problem, and to devise answers; ways to exercise the "city options" of style, quality and continuity that make a satisfying and identifiable place to live?

It is none too soon for action. In New York, for example, genuinely creative, constructive plans for the development of lower Manhattan are not only producing a new city of surprising and gratifying excellence, but are also destroying, with the exception of the hard-won South Street Seaport, almost all that is left of the old city. The contrast of new and old, of scale and history is one of the richest and most breathtaking of urban experiences, with a style in lower Manhattan that exists nowhere else on earth. It is not expendable.

For one fleeting example, the Fraunces Tavern block framed by the stair opening of the upper plaza of the gargantuan new 55 Water Street has a visual and cultural impact without historical or esthetic parallel. Under the economics of land use, most of it is doomed unless a "city option" is found. Without "city options," — which the Endowment seeks with vision and validity — a lot will be lost that makes America worthwhile.



Nineteenth-century Manhattan buildings seen from new construction at 55 Water St.

"Contrasts in scale, history and style are not expendable"