

... Small but Vital

Building may be at a standstill in New York, but planning is not. Although this is clearly not the time for the kind of large-scale development controls that produced special district zoning and new kinds of construction in New York in the 1960's—for some of the most progressive and visible results in the country—neither is it the time, as some critics would have it, to declare the city's planners expendable.

In a commendable shift of vision and scale, the city is working on neighborhood improvement plans, projects that can be carried out with limited funds for maximum impact. These are projects for which funds can be found when capital budget money is not available, and which can make the difference between a neighborhood that slips irretrievably and one that is restored to health.

The planning range is from the revitalization of deteriorated streets as centers of commercial and social activity in places such as Newkirk Plaza in Brooklyn and Beach 20th Street in Far Rockaway, to the resolution of physical and population pressures in Chinatown and Little Italy, and a special City Island zoning district.

Four of these areas, Chinatown and Union Square in Manhattan, Alexander Avenue in the Bronx and Montague Street in Brooklyn, have strong historical roots, almost lost in disruptive traffic patterns and environmental decline. Their study has been funded by a National Endowment for the Arts "City Options" grant—a program of exemplary imagination and result. All of the work has been carried out by the local, or "live-in" planning offices, or by the city's Urban Design Group.

In some cases, improvements have already started. Funding comes in part from Community Development programs, supplemented by state and Federal sources and business contributions. In Far Rockaway, city highway funds have been channeled from traffic and parking to pedestrian street features. The MTA would carry out the renovation of the Newkirk Plaza subway station.

The trend in planning everywhere today is to deal with the immediate environment. Projects like these are desperately needed to stem neighborhood decline and stabilize communities. The scale is small, but the dividends are large.