

Architecture

A Planning Happening

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

NEW YORK is having a new kind of happening—a planning happening. There is no other adequate description for the curious matter of the proposed Mall between Lincoln Center and Central Park in the news these past two weeks.

To plan, of course, means to devise an orderly, structured scheme that binds up functional solutions into an esthetic and environmental whole. A happening, on the other hand, is an occurrence with no ties to cause and effect. If they are a contradiction in terms, so is the Mall. As it stands now, there are at least two conflicting versions, both offering non-solutions to the problems of one of the more critical, transitional areas of the city in the throes of social and economic renewal. One is a showy plunge back into planning's dark ages and the other is a fashionable leap onto the bandwagon of current clichés.

As with any proper happening, a large number of people are in the act, each in his own way. Neither proposal nor counterproposal has been officially commissioned or released. Both, miraculously, are in the hands of the Mayor for decision.

There is, first, the scheme of former City Planning Commission chairman, William F. R. Ballard, backed by the coordinating architect of Lincoln Center, Wallace K. Harrison. Both gentlemen share a dream of classical promenades and formal vistas. A second plan has been put forth by Parks Commissioner Thomas P. F. Hoving and Raymond Loewy, William Snith, Inc., a firm of industrial designers and expert packagers of popular ideas. This one is for buildings, rather than open space, and is replete with the current urban paraphernalia of raised walkways and pedestrian mazes. Only Ballard and Harrison are talk-

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ing about the same thing. Since the idea was initially Ballard's, that is probably the place to begin.

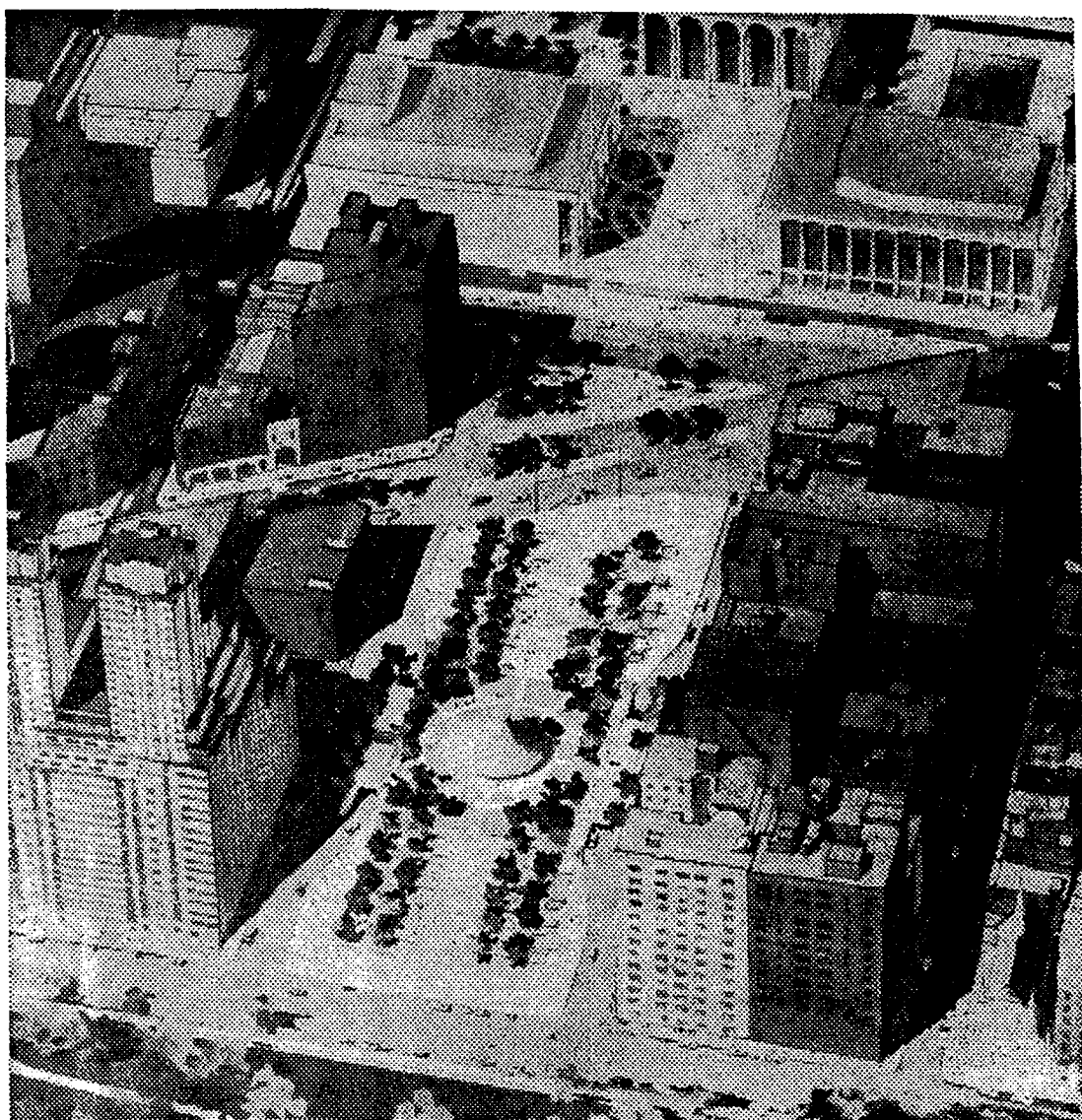
Mr. Ballard's proposal, which would raze the buildings from Broadway to Central Park West to connect the Lincoln Center Plaza and the park with a *grand allée*, is a discouraging demonstration of the dated ideas of c. 1900 Beaux Arts *parti* planning, and of how durable these dreary ideas really are. Their objective was to impose vast, arid wastelands and dead-end views on a city's vital patterns, from which life, and people, absented themselves as rapidly as possible.

The grandiose, panoramic artists' renderings, which still have sure-fire visual appeal, became, in execution, sterile exercises in spatial desolation. In spite of constant references to Parisian boulevards, and the inevitable fountains and potted trees, the results, more often than not, have been lifeless voids with a half century of subsequent problems of how to fill them up appropriately, as in the St. Louis Mall, and how to make them work as urban spaces, as in the San Francisco Civic Plaza. Bowling Alley Barren about sums it up.

Mr. Harrison has actually done no design work on the project, and never saw Mr. Ballard's rendering. A Beaux Arts man himself, however, he digs Mr. Ballard's concept and thinks it might be good to carry it even further into the park. A connecting mall between Lincoln Center and Central Park was a possibility discussed in the early days of Lincoln Center planning.

A bad idea, if it is pretentious enough, dies slowly. Many professionals consider this a moribund approach to urban design. When, in addition, it disturbs or destroys viable and necessary social institutions in its path and ignores unresolved circulation problems by playing esthetic leapfrog over them, as it does here, it becomes a worse idea still.

The naive, unreasoned enchantment that has been the reaction in civic circles to



A drawing of the Ballard proposal for a Lincoln Center Mall

Playing esthetic leapfrog over planning problems

the idea of sweeping away the block from Broadway to Central Park West for this kind of draughty grandeur shows how little New York's planning thought has progressed beyond 50-year old clichés to meet its contemporary crises.

The Hoving-Snaith scheme would turn the Ballard-Harrison *allée* into a *passaggiata* or activity-oriented mall with shops and stores. Any resemblance to the original, as they say, is purely coincidental.

Pick your version; it is all window dressing. Both are innocent of even a basic how to the neighborhood's real planning problems.

First, there is a singularly bad circulatory and traffic situation in the Lincoln Center area. It is aggravated by each new building of the cultural complex, with confusion concentrated at the chaotic intersection of Broadway and Amsterdam Avenues where people are discharged and picked up and routed to the Center's inadequate parking, in constant conflict with through traffic. This beauty spot, with all of its planning errors and omissions uncorrected, is the starting point of the mall.

Circulation around the Center itself is still unresolved. Superblocks have a way of

creating super-strangulation in spite of circumferential street widening — the only solution the city has come up with here, or downtown, where other superblocks are rising.

Queried about this problem, Mr. Ballard said that he did not pretend to traffic expertise, but that Commissioner Barnes liked the underground garage that would "stuff 1000 cars under the Mall." How many of these cars would be related to Lincoln Center performances, or how many would simply converge on the facility to further gum up circulation remains unclear. "I don't think the Mall requires more study," he said. "It's esthetics; a fine thing to do."

Kafkaesque

Second, the Lincoln Center neighborhood is in a serious state of transition due to the human and economic dislocations of renewal. Two of the most important stabilizing influences, the YMCA and the meeting house of the Society for Ethical Culture, would have to be demolished or moved for the Ballard-Harrison Mall. They would be moved or enmeshed in chic urban effects for the Hoving-Snaith version. The best way to destroy an area is to remove its community institu-

tions or weaken them by relocation.

The Mall scheme presents no valid argument against a properly designed New York Academy of Sciences building directly opposite Lincoln Center, as currently planned. It could be an effective terminus for the Center's eastern end. Such a building should not be considered, however, without also dealing with the closure of open space, the questions of traffic, and provision of facilities that Lincoln Center forgot, all of which will take more money than the Academy has. Something must be done about that catastrophic circulation pattern and the Kafkaesque street crossing and sad, misshapen parklet between—elements of singular visual and functional ugliness that neither Mall plan touches, and that makes Lincoln Center a mockery of comprehensive urban design.

The solution is certainly not to sweep away the block beyond, or give it cosmetic treatment. Nor is it another long stretch of standard brand architectural conservatism "in character" with Lincoln Center. For once, the Mayor is not on the horns of a genuine dilemma. It is more like a genuine boondoggle, and he can go on to more serious matters.