

## Public Housing or Public Slum?

The basic suspicion with which this country views the necessity of public housing has always been reflected in its housing legislation. It is not only that the law specifies a maximum cost per unit, with construction rigidly cut to the economic bone for minimum standards of "safe and sanitary" shelter; but built into the legislation is a kind of punitive intent, a guarantee that nothing too good shall be given the poor.

While the amount of public housing provided in American cities in thirty years has been only a drop in the bucket of need, the restrictive clauses have succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams in creating the "project look," that dismal mold that blights cities, neighborhoods and people. The impersonally cheerless barracks called "public housing" have produced a terrifying new breed of slum—in New York as elsewhere.

An amendment to the state public housing law introduced by State Senator Whitney North Seymour Jr., which would do much to help correct the situation, has now been passed by the Senate and will soon be up for action in the Assembly. It would permit "project cost" for new construction to include excellence of architectural design "compatible with prudent budgeting."

This is no mandate for extravagance. It is merely recognition of the fact that well-designed housing can deal with the emotional and environmental needs left unsatisfied by the kind of minimal "safe and sanitary" standards that dehumanize and destroy. Man does not live by shelter alone.

The desolate "projects" are hated—in Buffalo they have a 10 per cent vacancy rate—and in every city they carry the stigma of personal and environmental poverty and the seeds of despair. "They are hated," writes James Baldwin, "because they reveal the real attitude of the white world." They also reveal clearly the attitude of legislators and government agencies.

When the Federal Public Housing Administration sponsored some housing of uncommon attractiveness it was promptly condemned by the General Accounting Office for extravagant extras, in spite of the fact that its superior design had been achieved within the specified budgetary limitations. No matter, said G.A.O., it could have been built more cheaply still by eliminating its attractive features; and although the intent of Federal law includes "livability," it was held to require the stripping of all amenities to rock-bottom levels.

This attitude must change if the nation is seriously changing its thinking about cities and slums. A slum is psychological as well as physical blight. Design is not a frill; it is not "prettifying" plain buildings; it is the process of creating housing that looks and works better, not walled off from the community by chain-link fence, but functioning as part of it.

Elimination of the quality of self-respect along with quality of environment is false economy. Real economy can be achieved by attacking obsolete codes, bureaucratic delays, restrictive union practices and lack of progressive and experimental housing study and techniques. Anything that moves public housing toward these ends and an atmosphere of human dignity is a step toward solution of the cities' social and racial ills.