

Paris: The Grand Design

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

PARIS

IN some kind of urban first, Paris and New York planners were brought together in the City of Light recently to spend three days listening to each other's problems.

French and American planning, political, economic and social experts attended a series of meetings sponsored by the French-American Foundation of New York and its counterpart, the Fondation France-Américaine of Paris, on the subject of "Two World Cities, Paris and New York: An Urban Plan for Survival," billed as the first binational meeting of its kind. Not surprisingly, New York won in the problems department, hands down. New York's racial and economic difficulties and its social pathology are awe-inspiring in size and scale compared with the effects of Paris's much smaller in-migration of minorities and dislocation of its physical and social structure. These problems, however, are growing, and will have to be faced in the future.

Desolate Contrast

The decay of New York's infrastructure and its public construction needs stand in desolate contrast to the amount of money and power being applied by the city of Paris and the French national Government to the physical plant and development of the center city and outlying regions, including public transportation and new towns.

Just as unsurprisingly, Paris wins in the sheer urban magnificence department, without even trying. Not only does Paris begin with the advantage of its historical heritage, the hundreds of years during which kings and emperors spent princely sums (for which they accounted to no one) for their own and Paris's greater glory, but also Paris is still spending money in a way that made the New York delegation green with envy.

But perhaps the most striking difference of all is the attitude toward the city, and who chooses to live there. The United States, a country that has traditionally looked down on its cities and celebrated an agrarian and rural ideal, considers the reward of the American dream to be the escape to the suburbs.

Many of the privileged and most of the middle class have fled New York, leaving behind the poor, as well as the problems.

Sophisticated Choice

In Paris, in contrast, the poor are increasingly housed in the suburbs, because it is Government policy to build subsidized housing in the outlying areas and new towns. And the city itself continues to attract the rich and

the middle class (what city with this incredible beauty and vitality would not?) as part of a tradition in which city dwelling has always been the sophisticated choice.

This is true to such an extent that older sections and former slums, such as the 17-century Marais, have been reclaimed as fashionable historic districts, with that curious side effect, "gentrification," or the driving out of the poor and working class for an influx of chic residents, restaurants and boutiques. To see what is happening, it is easier to count the expensive Citroëns, Mercedes and Alfa-Romeos jammed along the narrow streets than to take a residential survey.

Parisian planners, however, are concerned with bringing the city into the 20th century. It is as essential to Paris's continued vitality to accommodate multinational business on the scale to which it has become accustomed, and to provide more housing, as it is to protect its historic heritage.

The result—the 640-foot Maine-Montparnasse skyscraper and the towers of La Defense. Le Front de Seine, the Place d'Italie and other high-rise clusters ringing the center—has outraged Paris and the world. One is grateful, at least, for the impulse that has pushed most of this construction to the city's edges, unlike London and New York.

These buildings are a result of the business and growth-oriented years from 1958 to 1968, in which private developers were given unusual freedom from Government controls. Their taste for blockbusters appears to have been accompanied by a liking for tutti-frutti colors. Ironically, La Defense has problems now, with a slowing market failing to carry the overbearing costs of an enormous development that dwarfs most new commercial centers in American cities.

Radical Change

The change from the Pompidou to the Giscard era, and the reduction of the powerful prefecture of the Seine to the smaller prefecture of Paris, was accompanied by a radical change in policy and the revision of both city and regional plans.

The outskirts will continue to grow, with strict controls and lower buildings, and there is increasing concentration on what is called the "tissue" of Paris, a planner's abstraction for the richness and subtlety of the factors responsible for this city's pervasive esthetic quality.

Rome may be the Eternal City, and New York seems increasingly temporal as it balances on the brink of disaster. But Paris still offers the timeless and total gratification of the most cosmopolitan sensibilities of the mind and eye.