

## The Crisis of the Environment

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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The bulldozer approach, say the official renewal pronouncements, is a thing of the past. Total clearance is dead. We are going to save our cities and spare our pastoral splendors and make an environment that is civilized and humane.

Or are we? Everyone who believes in fairies raise his hand and Tinker Bell will live. There is no corruption in Vietnam, no Mafia in Sicily, and there are no bulldozers anymore.

They've all gone to Lexington, Ky., where they moved in at night to start demolition of a three-block historic district, or they work weekends to insure the reduction of landmarks to rubble in Santa Fe. They stand poised to demolish everything around a few token preservation blocks in Denver; they wait to level 148 acres in Pittsburgh; they bide their time for the heart of the historic communities of Salem, Mass., and Hudson, N. Y.

Nothing much has changed except the statements of Federal policy that somehow get lost in the translation at the local level, and the increasingly pious use of the word environment—a poorly understood concept at best.

We know that our cities are decaying, our skies are shadowed, and our ecology is

threatened. That word environment gets a fast response now; almost as fast as the bulldozer. The protests of "consumerism" are being directed to conservation—against those who consume and exploit the land and its resources.

But conservation is only half of the environmental picture. The bulldozer that tears up the farm or forest for the super-highway or the speculator's sprawl with its inadequate sanitation and services is clearing the way for more than the irreversible loss of the country's natural assets.

#### **Affront Against Man**

It is turning the first earth for an inexorable series of environmental disasters. It is the same bulldozer that pulverizes the urban neighborhood. What is begun with the despoliation of the land ends in the city slum. What is initiated with industrial waste finishes with industrial blight. What starts as an affront against nature becomes an affront against man.

Conservation and community are the two sides of the environmental coin. For the crisis of the environment is also the crisis of cities and of the man-made world. It is a crisis of survival and the soul—and of conscience, as well.

It is odd that this rich and pragmatic country should be

having a crisis of conscience. It is even stranger that the awakening of conscience should be led by its youth. The issues of conscience have been civil rights, hunger and Vietnam. Now it is the turn of the environment.

In the cities, the giant social issues of justice and opportunity for the underclass have obscured some of the specific causes of physical and human desolation. They are also issues of conscience.

There are the asocial values of real estate, for example, on which our cities are built. It is traditional to treat shelter and society as negotiable commodities; so many bags of beans to be dumped when the price is wrong. The construction on which people depend for their homes and work is conceived not as environment, or as the shaper of cities, but as cash flow. Pollution and the cash flow environment have a lot of ugliness in common.

Add the high cost of land, labor, materials and money, the unrealistic cost ceilings on Federal aid—and the possibilities grow dim for building a proper environment at all. The only kind of housing still feasible economically is barbaric environmentally: the kind of massed, institutional barracks that have given Chicago, to cite one monumental instance, a new city-size set of social

problems in its "safe and sanitary" superslums.

The renewal process has developed a curious corruption of its own. There is the game of Federal program musical chairs in which local administrators of smaller cities move from one to another in an easily traced route of weekend demolition and parking lots, carrying their blinders and bulldozers with them. You might call it a new kind of professionalism. And there is the sinister and sinuous web of municipal indifference, ignorance or malpractice that feeds on renewal needs and programs, as in the searing example of Charleston, W. Va., documented in a recent Architectural Forum.

#### **The American Wisdom**

These private and public practices have gotten by because they are so firmly entrenched as the economic and bureaucratic verities, and the conventional American wisdom says don't fight money or City Hall. But the verities and wisdom are being shaken up because the question is survival. What is needed is a brand of "environmentalism" akin to the current "consumerism." A nation sick to death of the kind of "progress" that exacts a terminal toll from the environment, could make it stick.

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