

# Old Town Blues

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ST. PAUL DE VENCE, France.

**T**HIS town is ripe for urban renewal. The buildings are at least 300 years old and the toilet count is low. To say nothing of the density. All those old stone buildings huddled together on top of a hill, packed so tight they nearly touch over narrow, crooked streets.

Any planner knows that anything over a hundred years old with that kind of density and toilet count is substandard. That's the key word, substandard. It's in all the urban renewal studies and it means that things need to be improved.

It would be easy enough to get going on an old place like this. It's full of investment opportunities. Real estate men who know a good thing on the French Riviera are dying to build villas. That's south-of-France for apartment houses.

Nice, but . . .

The trouble is, Paris won't let them. Some ministry declared this place a historical monument. They call it a national treasure and there's even a law that protects it. The ramparts that Francis I built around the town can't be taken down and the old houses have to stay. No tall buildings can be constructed on the hillsides to spoil the view. All changes must be "in character." No smart little stainless steel awnings or neon signs. No Carrara glass fronts or aluminum siding. They can't even widen the streets or bulldoze a few buildings for parking lots. No one can do anything progressive.

Of course, it's picturesque. It's really quite dramatic silhouetted against the sky. You might even say it's quaint. Walking through those curving, stone-walled, stone-paved streets, there are some nice surprises, like coming into tiny squares with splashing fountains, or suddenly glimpsing far-off, sunlit hills through twisted, shadowed alleys. The light in the town is stopped down, filtered and subdued, captured in narrow spaces and reflected from masonry walls. Beyond those walls it washes hills of olive, oak and pine with brilliant luminosity and fields of roses and carnations spread out like an illuminated cyclorama.

*Ni vitesse, ni bruit*, the sign says on the approach road. No speed or noise. They pull the ramparts in at ten o'clock at night. It's picturesque, all right, but any planner would know in a minute that it

hasn't got the amenities. Dance hall, cinema, bowling—ask the English New Town builders. You're dead without amenities. They've proved in England that you get the New Town Blues without amenities. Obviously someone has overlooked the need for a survey to see if they've got the Old Town Blues in St. Paul.

Nothing to do at night except walk around those ramparts in the moonlight. You can almost touch the moon. Or climb to the top of the southern ramparts to see the distant silver glimmer of the Mediterranean. Count the figs, pomegranates and oranges on the trees. Even Michelin only gives St. Paul an hour; a stroll around the town and out.

## Nothing Doing

Any open space expert could tell you that those views and protected fields and hills are useless. According to the latest theories they should be utilized for active recreation. There could be people tramping, camping, swimming, playing touch football and pursuing organized physical activities out there. It's almost as big a waste as not letting the developers build villas.

Of course, if the French are serious about this national monument thing there's a way to do that right, too. They could "Williamsburg" St. Paul. It would be easy to have some archeologists dig out some shards and stones from under the ramparts to prove that some buildings

were once there that aren't there any more. They could make new copies just like the old ones. That's called reconstruction. Another key word.

Or you could "restore it back" to its prime period. But that would be hard to decide. If you really took it back to its beginnings it would be necessary to get rid of a lot of the stuff that's there now, including the ramparts. Maybe it would be best to make it all Francis I period. With hostesses in appropriate costumes.

But then that would bring a lot more tourist trade and something would have to be done about the roads. They would have to be widened and straightened out. No American car can get in and turn around on these streets, and all they've got now is a man with a cap and a whistle and a large assortment of Gallic shrugs and frantic appeals to heaven. He could be kept for local color. The rest could be fixed by any up-to-date traffic engineer.

Even now, the tourists pour in locally on Sundays and from all of France in July and the International crowd takes over in August. The hills around are full of big-name artists like Chagall and Picasso. Matisse, Leger and Braque lived and worked here. But anyone knows an artist is some kind of nut and obviously nobody gives a fig or a pomegranate for city planning.

Funny people, the French. They must be doing something right.



The historic hill town of St. Paul de Vence, France  
*A pretty place to visit, but a planner couldn't live there*