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Architecture

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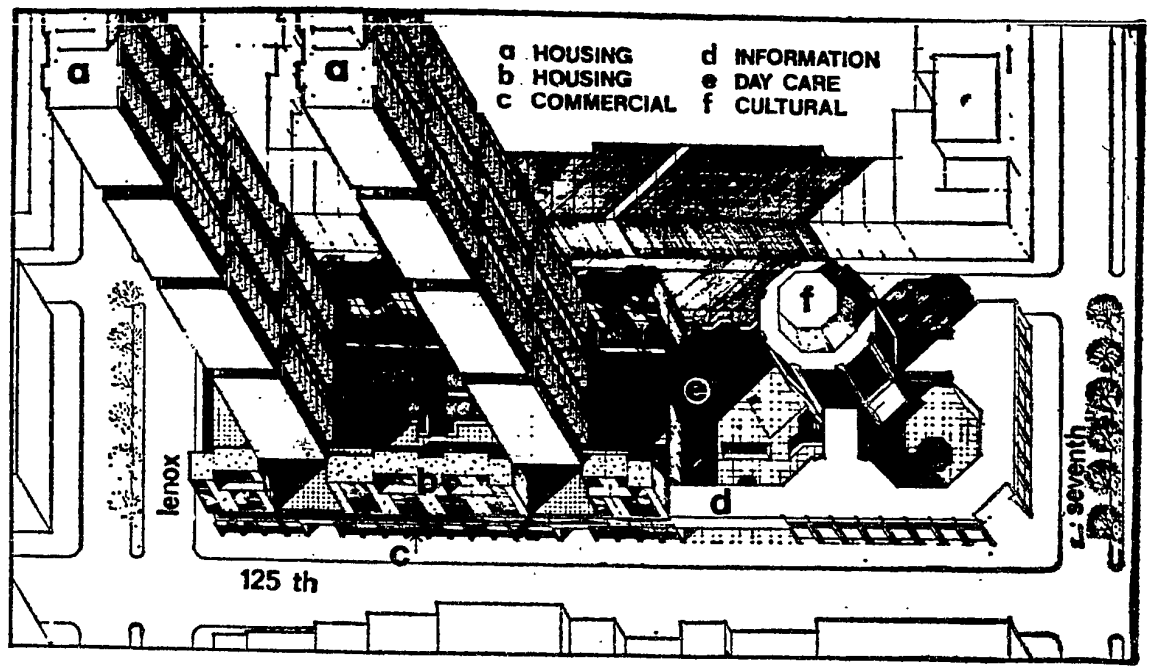

Alternative for the state site by the Architects Renewal Committee in Harlem
At issue, self-determination and an effective working partnership

THE case of the State Office Building, known in Harlem as the SOB, has turned into Governor Rockefeller's Vietnam. It is mired in the question of community participation, or the complex matter of who speaks for the real needs and wishes of the Harlem community, or even if anyone can. And it focuses on the basic problem of physical planning: how it can meet needs and desires on the local level if it is to have any degree of environmental success.

The great disaster of "planning," for black and white communities alike, is that in the past it has almost wholly failed to do this. Meant to create a bright new world for everyone, it became, through no consciously evil act but simply by following a kind of conventional real estate wisdom, a discriminatory operation. Called renewal or redevelopment, it has been an economic rather than a social tool, aimed at a set of limited economic objectives that have been essentially destructive of anything that does not fit into a preconceived pattern of certain types of acceptable financial benefits, largely to business and the tax structure.

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What was destroyed in the process, in too many cases, were neighborhoods, such as Boston's West End, a now-classic urban renewal catastrophe, housing that the poor could afford, which was never replaced, and the variety, humanity and stability of older sections of any city that had worked out their own modest destiny. It bulldozed the shaky structure of the "underclass," and added fuel to minority fires.

That is why the case of the State Office Building has a particular importance. It goes to the root of planning practice.

The project was headed for trouble from the time Governor Rockefeller announced it in 1966, because he was operating under an old and already dangerously outdated set of rules. The assumption then was that all major revitalizing investments were going into other parts of Manhattan, with attention turned particularly to the huge expenditures of the World Trade Center, and that Harlem should get "a piece of the action." And so the Governor announced a State plan for the 125th to 126th Street block between Lenox and Seventh Avenues, with half of the site to be a State Office Building and half a cultural center.

At the time it seemed a courageous act for the State to go in where real estate men feared to tread. And the idea of economic and social integration still had considerable general currency; it was just the Governor's bad luck and timing that black self-determination was on the rise. It was further bad luck and timing that a group of Albany legislators promptly cut the cultural center out of the plan.

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Opposition started immediately and grew in 1968. In the summer of 1969 a group of activists, the Community Coalition, occupied the site to prevent construction. The State's Urban Development Corporation then offered to finance the half-block of cultural or other neighborhood facilities that had been dropped, contingent on finding "a representative community advisory committee to work with." In September the police removed the squatters and the Governor announced that he was going ahead with the office building.

In October, three proposals for housing, a school, and a variety of social and commercial services for the entire block were unveiled by ARCH, the Architects' Renewal Committee in Harlem, a group of young black advocacy planners. Advocacy planners are a new breed of professionals that works within a community to express, and advocate, its wishes, often in opposition to government or official plans. ARCH has announced itself as unalterably against a State Office Building in any form, which it considers "in clear contempt of the needs and desires of the Harlem community."

A group of Harlem businessmen proposed a development corporation. CORE offered a compromise: state offices in a tower above a substantial community center that could be "built as far as the heavens," says Roy Innis, "barring negotiations with God." Negotiations with God would appear to be easier than negotiations on the ground. It is apparently as hard to get all the factions together in Harlem as it is in Paris, and peace seems equally far away.

A few facts about the controversy won't hurt. First, the State Office Building and cultural center project as originally conceived and released by the Governor's office had about all the sparkling warmth and potential community vitality of a typical old-style urban renewal proposal. Color it black or white, that kind of block is devitalizing cities everywhere.

Second, there is that most interesting and sensational of charges hurled by the black activists—that the State Office Building presages a white takeover of Harlem. Actually, that's not nearly as far out as it sounds, if you remove the grotesque implications of white establishment conspiracy.

What it really means, is that the routine redevelopment of parts of Harlem, as such development has occured in other marginal neighborhoods, "upgrades" land potential in a way that it makes it profitable for real estate speculators to follow. What happens then is, in a sense, "takeover"; the residents are bulldozed out for an entirely different kind of institutional, commercial and residential community. Again, color it black or white; that is precisely what has happened in some of the city's other marginal neighborhoods.

To understand that this is not pure paranoid fantasy, one must think of those parts of Harlem close to universities or hospitals, or prime transportation centers such as 125th Street. The Harlem protestors are sophisticated enough to know that the prospect of the State Office Building was already attracting other potential outside investors. And when they question this kind of "revitalization" by asking "For whom?"—it is the same question being asked by social planners who have watched the process of dispossessing neighborhoods before.

Fact number three: the state has radically revised its position as to what can and should be put on the 125th Street block, even to the extent of considering the interiors of the State Office Building almost as a blank check for community-oriented services. Moreover, the state, in the form of the Urban Development Corporation, is now in virtually complete agreement with most of those who are claiming to speak for Harlem in the only area of general consensus—definition of what the community needs. That is housing and community and commercial facilities. Both sides suffer from a current malady: intransigence. Apparently the Governor has to have a State State Office Building, no matter what the four walls contain, in part because he has already spent so much money on it. For the community it has become an odious symbol that must go.

Which leaves the Governor with his Vietnam. If he withdraws, and plans the development of the block without the State Office Building, he loses. Or does he? If the building is accepted by Harlem but used as a chance to drive a bargain for what it wants, the community loses. Or does it? Can there be an honorable, negotiated peace? Must there be unilateral withdrawal?

There is much to be gained for self-determination if the extraordinary legal and financial resources of the UDC available to Harlem can be used to carry out the projects that everyone wants. But the terms being dictated by activist leaders and the inability to unify community sentiment and representation into a working tool could weary the patience of God (mentioned by Mr. Innis but would He be acceptable to all other participants?) if they ever got that far. It is quite possible that the significance of the building is far less than whether the state and the community can get an effective partnership going. Both practically and symbolically, a lot of the American future rests on that.