

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, New York



Photo Bradford Bachrach

|| **What distinguishes the current American crisis from all earlier ones is the total exclusion of the architect from any practical solutions** ||

America and Urban Crisis

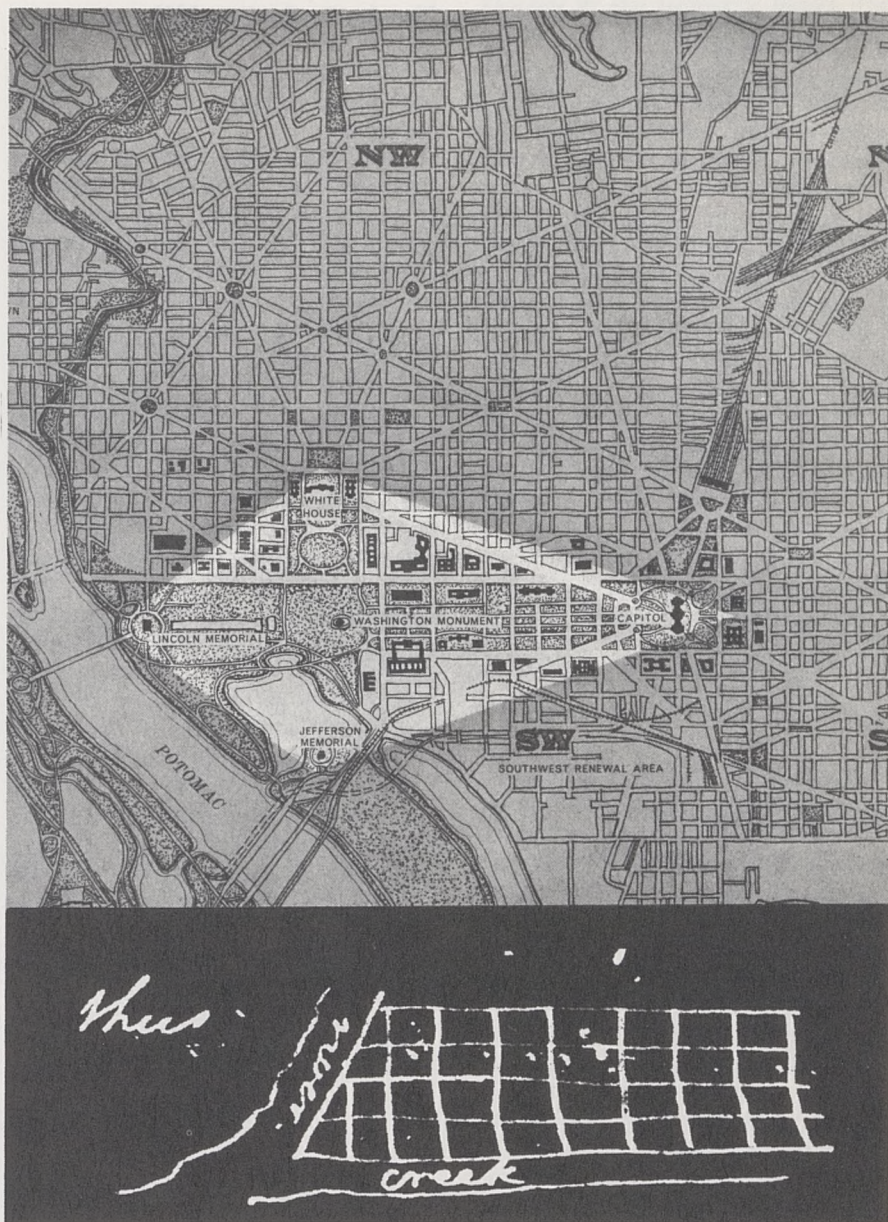
This report on the architectural scene in the United States at the close of the year 1968 will deal with general urban problems rather than with individual buildings or architects. Not that these no longer exist. They do produce designs worth mentioning. But the fact is that at present their importance has been obscured—as has all other individual achievement—by a gigantic tide of Collectivism, sweeping over America. This maniacal obsession with anonymous group action has many symptoms—from student revolts and war protests to religious sects and nudity cults which strip the individual to a mere member of the species. In the planning and building of physical environment the collective catchword is

Urban Crisis.

Cities have been declared moribund and a state of emergency is assiduously maintained by huge groups who are gainfully employed in perpetuating 'the eleventh hour'. These flourishing crisis practitioners fall into three main groups:

- planners,
- speculators, and
- expressway engineers.

Their growing influence is the direct result of the historical process that shaped the American town. Neither planning nor design have ever been an intrinsic part of American culture. Washington, the capital, was pieced together in 1791 by a French army colonel from Roman tradition, Le Vau's Versailles, and Wren's replanning of London, after Thomas Jefferson, the transatlantic *uomo universale*, had tried his genius as cityplanner (fig. 1). All other sizable cities were planned under the single aspect of 'promoting the best way of buying and selling real estate', as Kasimir Goerk, the masterplanner of New York, was to say in 1811. In architecture there never was a native-style evolution, shaping a lasting record of a cultural evolution. Notwithstanding the isolated and short-lived achievements of The Chicago School and the unappreciated work of Frank Lloyd Wright, the general public image of a desirable building was eclectic—from Williamsburgh Georgian to Skidmore Owings and Merrill Miesian. At the root of this indifference to archi-



1 Plan of the United States Capital by Charles l'Enfant, 1792, and Thomas Jefferson's plan for a National Capital, 1790.

Plan de la capitale des Etats-Unis par Charles l'Enfant (1792) et plan de Thomas Jefferson pour une capitale nationale (1790).

Plan der Hauptstadt der Vereinigten Staaten von Charles l'Enfant, 1792, und Plan von Thomas Jefferson für eine Nationalhauptstadt, 1790.

tectural or urban self-expression lies the anti-urban tradition of America. Puritanism associated city living with sin, and the greed for land, characteristic of all settler societies, considered towns mere temporary waystations in which to make money and then move on. City lots and the structures on them were and are commodities like any other merchandise, to be bought and sold without any emotional or traditional considerations. In the second half of the 19th century a successful capitalist oligarchy became the leading element in the cities. They imported *Beaux Arts* taste as a status symbol. A sharp division occurred in the rapidly growing cities. Public buildings and individual villas were expressing financial power in a prestige historiography that mixed styles like cocktails, and which Frank Lloyd Wright called 'Early Peorian'. Factories, schools, hospitals, and the endless tenements of the working population were constructed to return an instant profit at no aesthetic or structural expense.

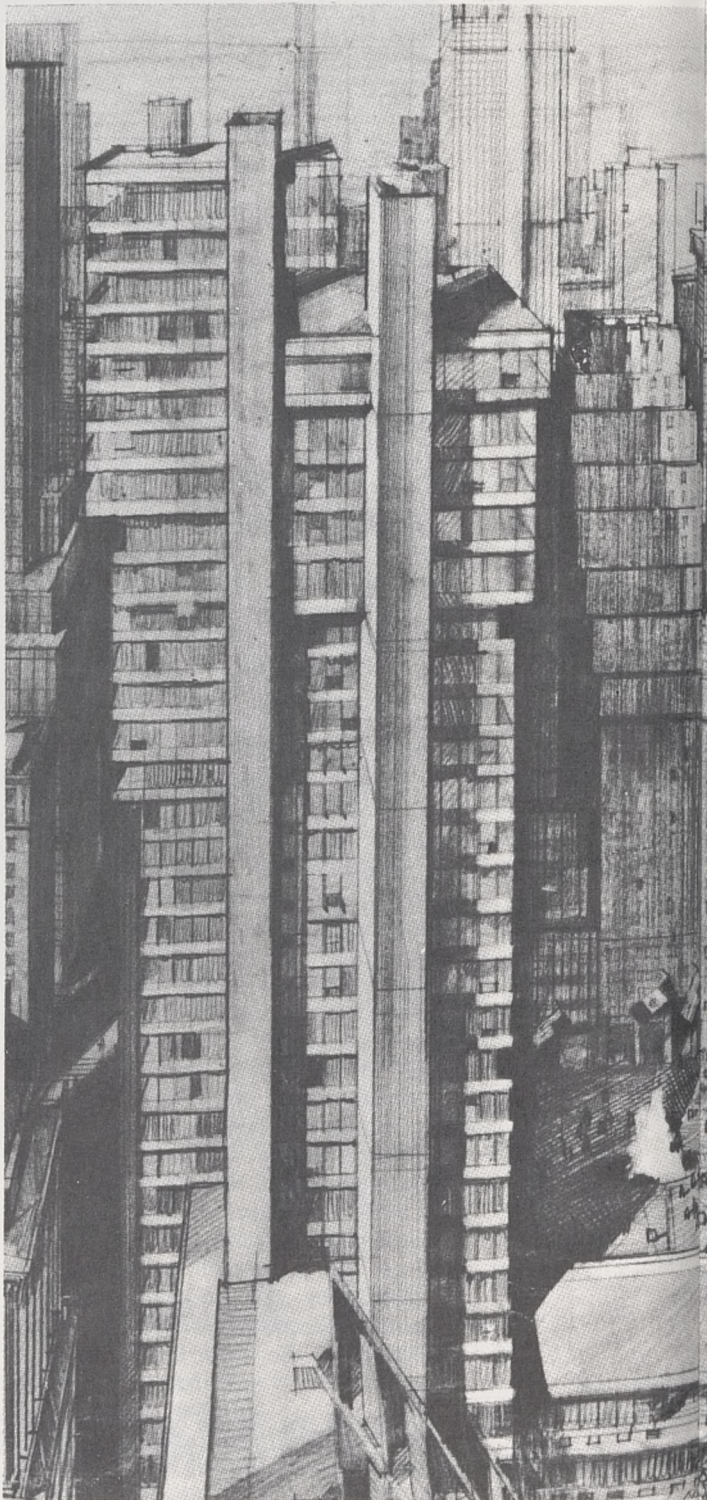
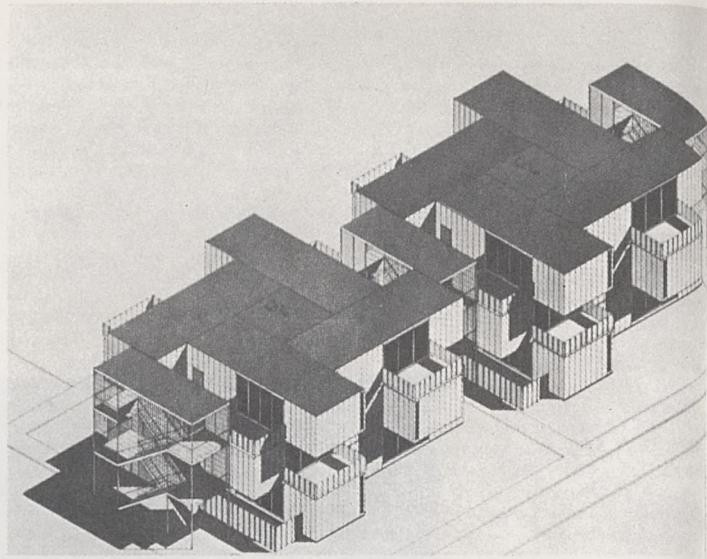
The current urban crisis derives from a sudden realization of government agencies and dissatisfied minority groups that America has the ugliest and most unlivable towns on earth, inherited from the 19th century 'boom and bust' economy. Slums became tax-delinquent, communication turned chaotic, and commercial cores were deserted. Minority groups, especially Negroes and Puerto Ricans, discovered that an escape from the slums into the suburbs was barred by prejudices and high-income levels. Young intellectuals, disaffected by war and recruitment, attacked corrupt politicians and economic inequality. The scapegoat on which administrators, slum dwellers, and Hippies heaped the symptoms of the Urban Crisis was architecture. For the new community-oriented collectivists the art of designed buildings became symptomatic of an oppressive and obsolete power structure and of what William Morris had called 80 years earlier 'the swinish luxury of the rich'. The term architecture, transcendent and revered for 5,000 years, has been replaced by

Planning for the Year 2000

at which date the Urban Crisis will have been solved by planners, speculators and engineers.

In the larger cities (and it must be interjected that no-one pays any attention to the plight of small and rural communities) two pairs of opposing planning teams are fighting each other in the public arena as if it were a two-ring circus. In one corner are the municipalities, trying to rehabilitate their residential and commercial areas according to local traditions and funds. Their efforts are checkmated by the Federal agencies in Washington headed by HUD, the Department of Housing and Urban Affairs, which in turn controls a vast network of subsidizing, mortgage lending, and supervising agencies. They have all the money, \$5.3 billion appropriated by the Housing and Development Act of 1968 alone. In practice this means that, on the positive side, the government has the means to experiment with new mass-housing construction methods and designs (fig. 2), which have the sad fate of never getting built. On the negative side the government can liquidate any large rebuilding schemes, worked out by local architects sensitive to the historical character of their city, and replace it with minimum cost blueprints that offer maximum profit to a government-sponsored developer. The case of Manhattan's downtown riverfront project is a tragic example (fig. 3).

In the other corner of the public planning arena we see the Citizen's Advocacy Planners and the Scientific Systems Planners in a deadly confrontation. The ideology of the first group is derived from Jane Jacobs¹, and is a contemporary version of the American Savior Complex. Ever since 1630 when Winthrop, leader of a tiny band of ragged Puritans, declared that the eyes and the moral hopes of the entire world were on their Holy Experiment in the Wilderness, has each social ill been met by an organization of belligerent messiahs. The latest contingent are the urban sociologists who advocate that the people have a right, a duty, and the ability to decide their physical environment, from whole city sectors down to the color of the schoolteacher and the kitchen walls. Store-front planning offices and local



¹ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961).

2 Prototype low-cost housing, developed for HUD, the federal housing agency, by Housing Research Inc. Ronald Goodfellow, Director (1967).

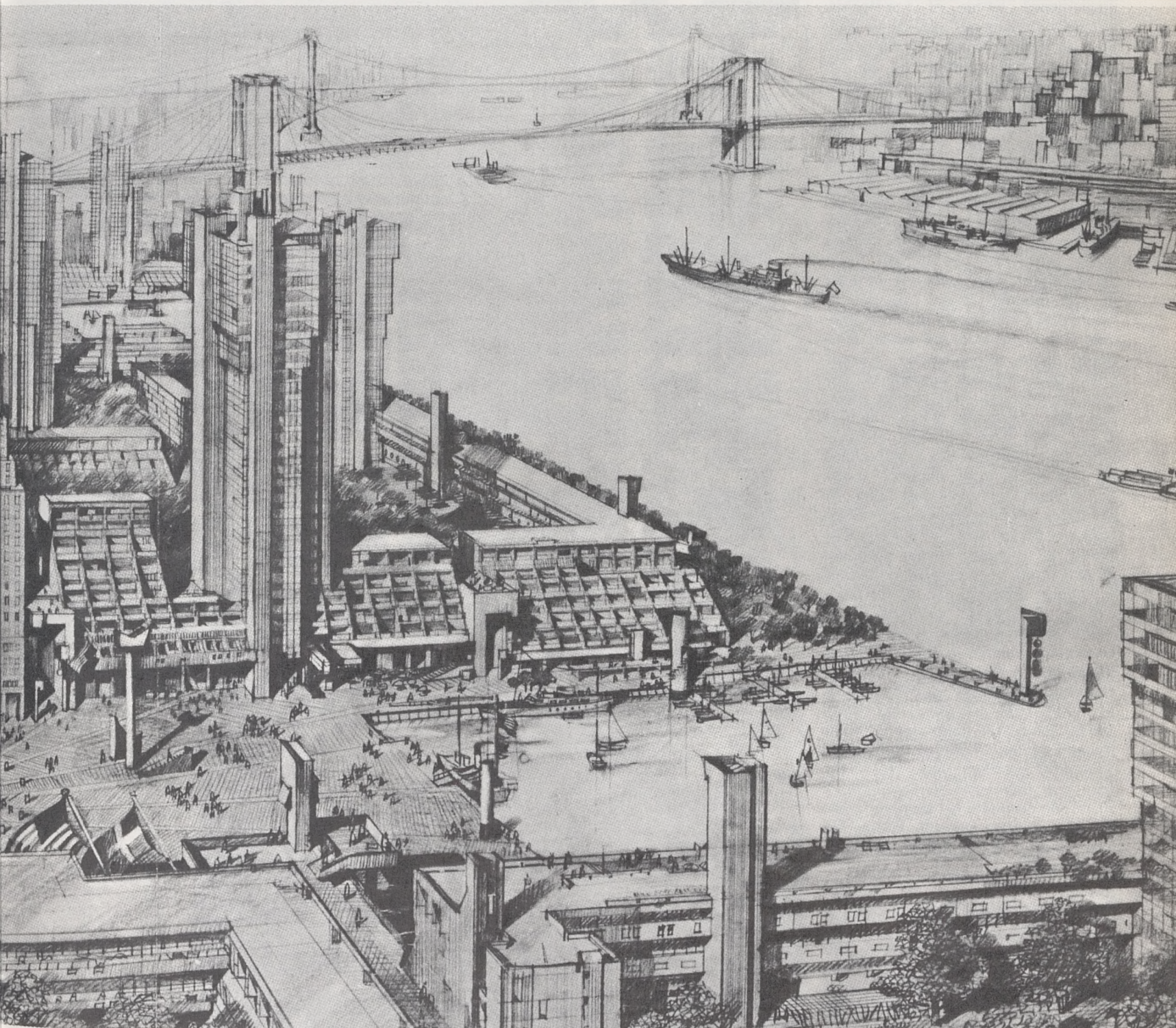
Prototype d'un logement bon marché mis au point pour la HUD (agence fédérale du logement), par Ronald Goodfellow, directeur du Département de la recherche en matière de logement (1967).

Beispiel einer billigen Wohnung für die HUD, Bundeswohnungsagentur, von Ronald Goodfellow, Direktor der Wohnungsforschungsabteilung (1967).

3 Lower Manhattan Plan, a brilliant proposition for a combined commercial-residential community. Conklin & Rossant in collaboration with others. James Rossant's rendering of the major plaza, facing the East River. The project was killed by Governor Rockefeller who substituted a commercial development of offensive mediocrity.

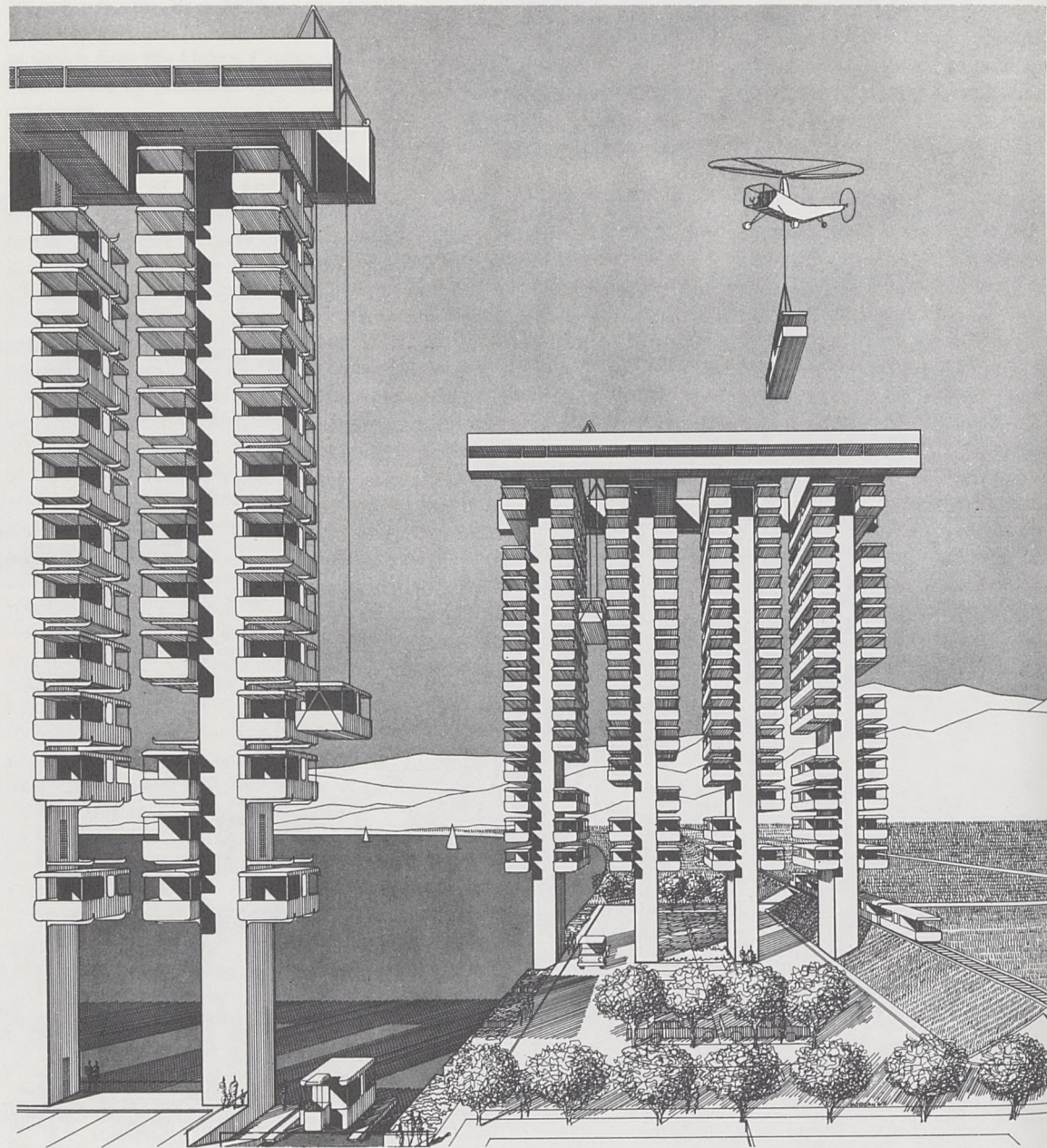
Plan de Lower Manhattan, une brillante proposition de communauté combinée commerciale-résidentielle. Conklin et Rossant en collaboration avec d'autres. Face à l'East River, la grande place vue par James Rossant. Le projet a été refusé par le gouverneur Rockefeller qui lui a substitué une exploitation commerciale d'une offensante médiocrité.

Plan des Lower Manhattan, ein ausgezeichneter Vorschlag für eine kombinierte Handels-Wohnsiedlung von Conklin, Rossant u. a. Gegenüber dem East River der von James Rossant geplante grosse Platz. Das Projekt wurde vom Gouverneur Rockefeller verweigert und durch ein Handelsunternehmen von verletzender Mittelmässigkeit ersetzt.



citizens councils, totally incompetent to deal with highly specialized problems, are taking refuge in sociological dialogues that remove their neighborhoods farther and farther from any concrete rehabilitation. Professional advocacy planners are submitting their skills to the unquestioned advice of sociologists, feverishly working out local-ethnic solutions, as if the community patterns of a volatile immigrant population did not change radically in less than a generation. The dense fog of saintly altruism generated by 'social planning' has been highly successful in hiding the raw power struggle in local politics and preventing either municipal or federal housing projects to make any progress whatever. The direct challengers of the advocacy planners are the urban system planners whose patron saint is Richard Buckminster-Fuller. Ever since the inventor of the geodesic dome managed to manipulate a well-known structural principle into a philosophical system sanctioned by a technologically oriented God,² have computer planners of 'systems, sub-systems, and plug-in mega-structures' endeavored to steal the halo of the savior from the social advocats. While the self-determining neighborhood planners believe in the mirage of a new city in which every individual desire will be fulfilled, the Computer City technicians believe in Buckminster-Fuller's 'One City World', in which each person, regardless of race, creed, or nationality is assigned a modular cellspace, and all his needs will be serviced and supervised by a central electronic control system (fig. 4). Numerous conferences, usually held in Massachusetts which is the center of electronic research and teaching, millions of dollars from the Ford Foundation and the Federal Government to electronic planners for the automated world of the Year 2000: Comsat, Honeywell, Lockheed and IBM, and an avalanche of charts and diagrams, reducing the Urban Crisis to abstract symbols, occupy the 'task forces' in all major American cities (fig. 5).

Although sociology and computer science take opposed views on how to make America safe for collective living, they share a decisive common denominator. Both profess that minimum housing for the largest number is all that cities and citizens need for a happy future—a view



4 Pod (Kapsel) Project by William Morgan, Florida. A city assembled from prefabricated cells over an express highway.

Pod (Cosses). Projet de William Morgan, Floride. Une cité faite de cellules préfabriquées au-dessus d'une autoroute.

Projekt von William Morgan, Florida. Eine aus Fertiggzellen zusammengesetzte Stadt über einer Autobahn.

² R. Buckminster-Fuller, *No More Second-hand God; Ideas and Integrities* (1963); and other publications.

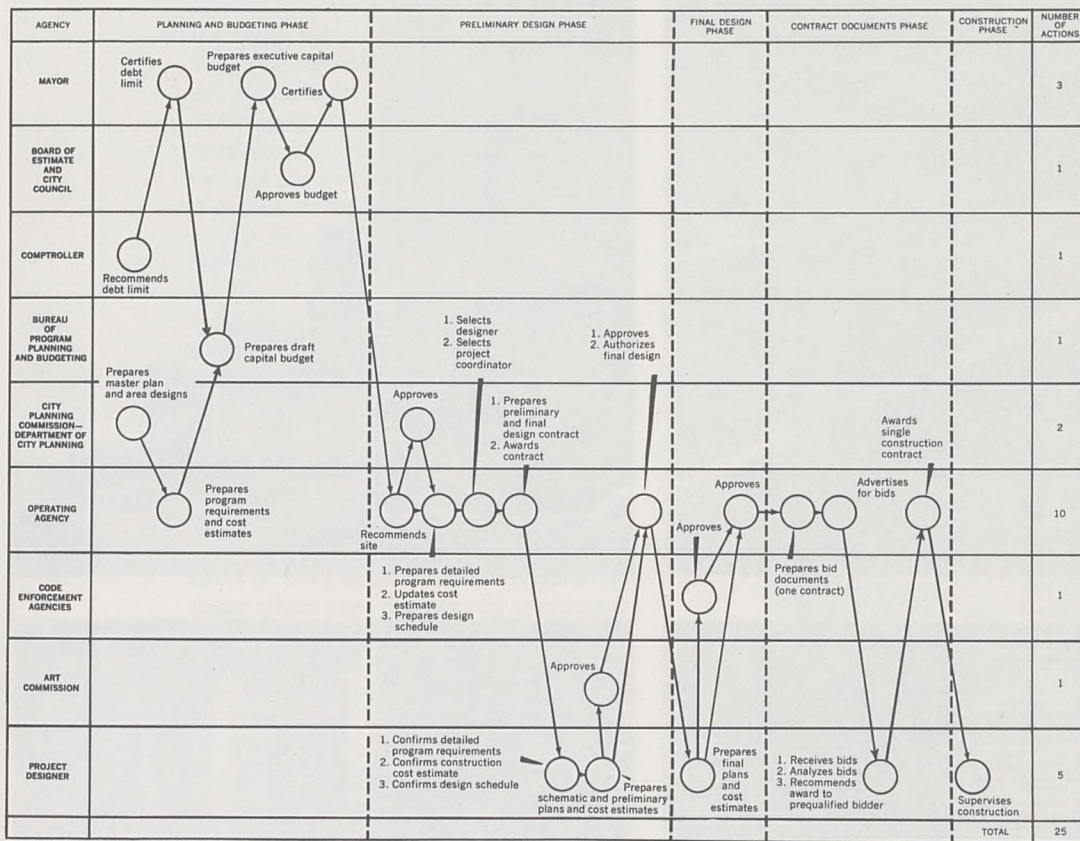
³ Constantine Doxiades, *Architecture in Transition* (1963), and other publications.

5 Typical computerized 'projection chart' showing the Project Designer (the cursed word Architect is omitted) as the lowest Man on the Totempole after eight superior agencies have made their decisions.

«Projection chart» typique, due au «computer». Elle place le dessinateur du projet (le mot courant d'architecte est omis) tout au bas de l'échelle, après que huit agences supérieures ont pris leurs décisions.

Typische «Projection chart», ein Werk des Computers. Der Zeichner des Projekts wird auf die niedrigste Stufe gestellt (der übliche Ausdruck Architekt wird weggelassen), nachdem acht höhere Agenturen ihre Entscheidungen getroffen haben.

CHART II/MAYOR'S TASK FORCE ON URBAN DESIGN/ RECOMMENDED PROCEDURES FOR CAPITAL PROJECT DEVELOPMENT *



*Excludes public hearings and financing steps.

6 Best-selling imitation farmhouse with unfinished attic of the Levitt Corporation, largest suburban construction company in the world.

Ce qui se vend le mieux: la ferme imitation avec son interminable attique, modèle dû à la Levitt Corporation, la plus grande compagnie de construction suburbaine du monde.

Was am meisten verkauft wird: Imitations-Bauernhof mit Dachgeschoss. Modell von der Levitt Corporation, der grössten Baugesellschaft für Vorstädte der Welt.



first advocated by Constantine Doxiadis whose influence on American urbanists almost equals that of Buckminster-Fuller.³ It has aroused no-one's attention or sarcasm (except that of an anachronistic architectural historian) that the followers of Jane Jacobs and of Buckminster-Fuller could sustain their parochial and technocratic arguments only because they simply ignored the rock foundation of the entire American system: the sanctity of private property. The competitive profit economy of free enterprise prohibits any revolutionary replanning that would infringe on land speculation, and any revolutionary architecture whose cost would exceed the expected profits. While the saviors, whether humanitarian or computerized, drown their anxieties in verbose theories, the speculator as the archetypal counterplayer of the American messiah, has turned the Urban Crisis into a gigantic asset.

He caters to the dream of most middle-class Americans whose parents were immigrants that 'to own property' is worth a life-long bondage to the mortgage banker. In the name of relieving urban congestions thousands of acres of farmland are covered each year with giddy imitations of medieval cottages (fig. 6), bogus 'villages', and New Towns. The inhabitants live a new form of ghetto existence, isolated from any contact with different income groups and urban culture, all clothed and fed by the same supermarket, and entertained by the same television programs (fig. 7).

On the cheapest land on the outskirts of cities rise 'Lefrak cities' and 'Cooperative cities', an assembly of the cheapest type of high-rise towers which draw the population from the run-down neighborhoods along the old city streets, and which will be the slums of that miraculous Year 2000 (fig. 8).

The core of the big city, gradually drained of a solvent population, is golden ground for the skyscraper profiteer. Pointing to the diminishing returns from retail and small manufacturing enterprises, traditionally run by one family, they propose to create new tax income for the city and the federal government by concentrating office skyscrapers in the smallest possible areas. Through competi-

7 Typical supermarket shopping center in an ocean of identical speculation shacks near Detroit.

Supermarché typique dans un amas de cabanes de spéculation identiques, près de Detroit.

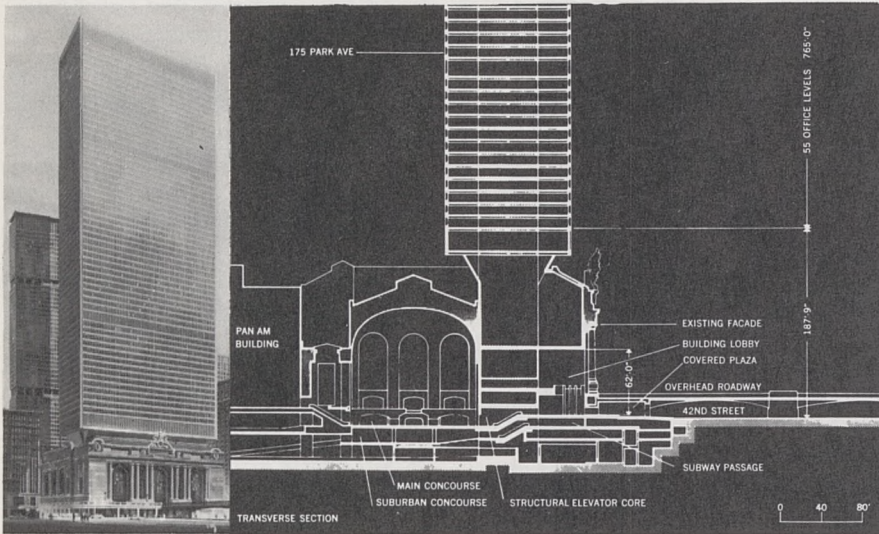
Typisches Einkaufszentrum bei Detroit in einem Meer von gleichartigen Spekulationsbuden.



8 Housing project, completed 1967, in New York.

Projet de logement réalisé en 1967 à New York.

Wohnungsprojekt, das 1967 in New York ausgeführt wurde.



9 Marcel Breuer, Office Tower to be built over the Grand Central Terminal in New York. The building will be 55 stories high, cost 100 million dollars, and will obscure the Pan American Building whose design consultant was Walter Gropius, Breuer's teacher.

Marcel Breuer, une tour («Office Tower») à construire au-dessus du Grand Central Terminal, à New York. Le bâtiment aura 55 étages, coûtera 100 millions de dollars et obscurcira le Pan American Building dont le dessinateur-conseil a été Walter Gropius, le maître de Breuer.

Ein von Marcel Breuer über dem Grand Central Terminal, New York, zu errichtender Turm (Office Tower). Das Gebäude wird 55 Stockwerke umfassen, 100 Millionen Dollar kosten und das Pan American Building beschatten, dessen beratender Gestalter Walter Gropius, der Lehrmeister Breuers, war.

10 World Trade Center Towers by Minuro Yamasaki in the Miesian Manner. The buildings will be 110 stories high.

Par Minuro Yamasaki, les tours du Centre mondial des affaires, à la manière de Mies Van der Rohe. Elles auront 110 étages.

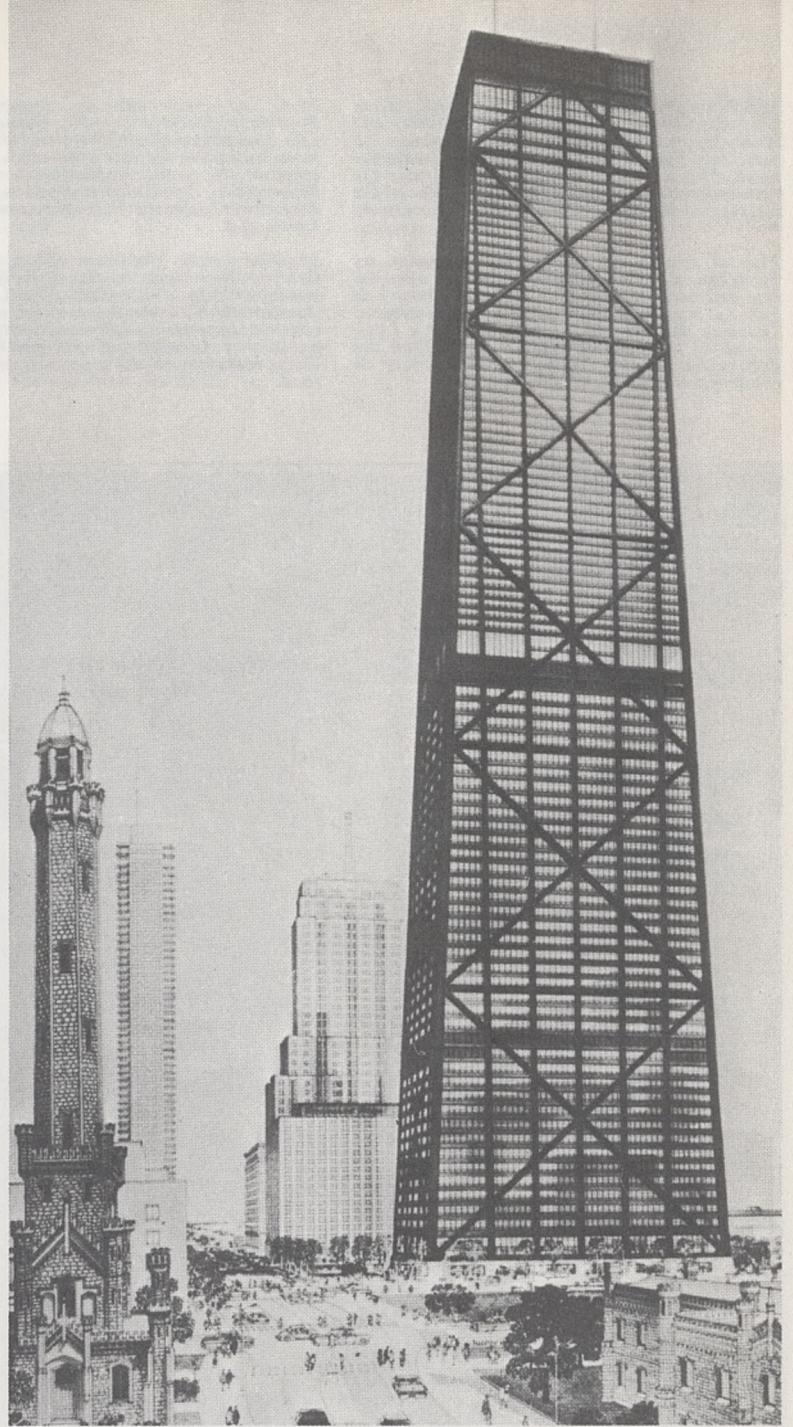
Die Türme des Weltgeschäftszentrums von Minuro Yamasaki in der Art von Mies Van der Rohe. Sie werden 110 Stockwerke umfassen.



tive bidding every square foot (meter) of ground is converted into pure gold till the space hysteria has reached the point where air rights over railroad stations and streets are traded as 'real' estate (fig. 9). The core city is thus reduced to a five-day economy which is dead over the weekend, making the survival of a mixed urban economy impossible.

Under the iron law of maximum return for minimum investment, the speculators, in their own words, 'have no time to haggle over inconsequential elements like aesthetic designs' in housing projects. For the more expensive office skyscrapers the famous names of old-guard functionalists are bought as 'design consultants' to add prestige to a standardized construction of rigid frames, modular curtain walls, and loft spaces partitioned into identical cubicles. There is hardly a town of more than 2 million inhabitants today which does not have its cardboard edition of the Seagram building, signed in a perverse self-plagiarism either by Mies van der Rohe himself or by any of his imitators.

Competitive bigness is so firmly established in the American mind as the equivalent of competitive greatness that Yamasaki's 1,335-ft. high World Trade Center Towers (fig. 10), which will destroy a large area of Lower Manhattan, are presented as a miracle; and Nathaniel Owings, who is responsible for the most brutal and destructive skyscraper in Chicago, the 100-story John Hancock Center, was recently lauded by 'Time Magazine' as the foremost advocat of beauty in American architecture (fig. 11). In sharp contrast to the antagonism between federal and municipal planners, and social advocates and electronic systematists, the third party in the trinity of Urban Crisis practitioners is the speculators best friend. He is the expressway engineer. Highway taxes, collected by the government, must be spent on road construction or revert back to the treasury. This is welcome news for the builders of subdivisions who must sell their 'country homes' with the advertisement of fictitious driving distances which apply only between midnight and 6 o'clock in the morning. Commercial skyscraper syndicates insist on more and more automobile access routes for customers and executives although streets and parking spaces in the densely built-up



11 John Hancock Center, Chicago, designed by Bruce Graham for Skidmore Owings and Merrill. Nor further comment.

Centre John-Hancock, à Chicago, dessiné par Bruce Graham pour le compte de Skidmore, Owings et Merrill. Sans commentaires.

John-Hancock-Zentrum, Chicago. Entwurf von Bruce Graham für die Skidmore Owings & Merrill. Ohne Kommentar.

cores have long proved inadequate. Towns are cut into unconnected areas by endless concrete ribbons, and all commercial and civic activities die along the expressways.

Urban crises are nothing new in the long, stormy history of cities. Ours today is tame compared to the upheaval that must have accompanied the conversion of Bronze Age City States into orthogonal empire cities, or of medieval single-focussed cathedral towns into multi-centered Renaissance cities. What distinguishes the current American crisis from all earlier ones is the total exclusion of the architect from any practical

12 Plan and section for the Negro college Tougaloo in Michigan by Gunnar Birkerts and Associates. An imaginative combination of a basic modular unit will permit gradual enlargement. The natural hillside is used to raise the university above the road approaches. One of the most gifted designs in American campus construction.

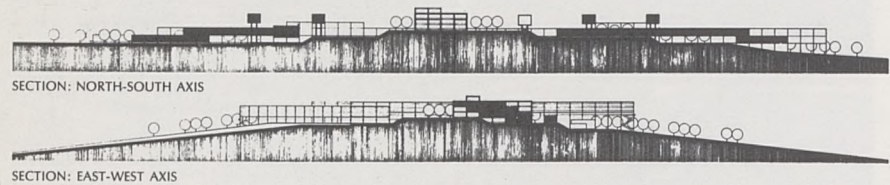
Plan et section du collège noir Tougaloo, au Michigan, par Gunnar Birkerts et des associés. Une astucieuse combinaison d'unité modulaire de base qui permettra un progressif agrandissement. La pente naturelle de la colline permet à l'université de dominer les voies d'accès. L'un des dessins les mieux réussis dans les projets de construction d'un «campus» américain.

Plan und Ausschnitt des Negergymnasiums Tougaloo, Michigan, von Gunnar Birkerts Co. Eine ausgeklügelte Verbindung von Grundmodelleinheiten, die eine beständige Erweiterung erlauben. Die natürliche Hanglage ermöglicht der Universität, die Zufahrtswege zu überragen. Einer der gelungensten Pläne einer amerikanischen Universität.

13 Fine Arts Building, State University, Geneseo, New York, by Edgar Tafel, Associate-in-Charge of Myller-Snibbe-Tafel, Architects Associated. A highly successful combination of contemporary form with traditional materials—red brick and copper roofs—to match the English Tudor buildings on the other side of the central road.

Ecole des beaux-arts, Université d'Etat, Geneseo, New York, par Edgar Tafel, Associate-in-charge (architecte exécutant) de Myller-Snibbe-Tafel, architectes associés. Une réussite dans la combinaison de la forme contemporaine et des matériaux traditionnels — brique rouge et toits de cuivre — pour répondre aux bâtiments anglais Tudor de l'autre côté de la route centrale.

Kunsthochschule, Staatsuniversität, Geneseo, New York, von Edgar Tafel, Associate-in-Charge (ausführender Architekt) von Myller-Snibbe-Tafel, vereinigte Architekten. Erfolgreiche Verbindung der zeitgenössischen Form und der traditionellen Materialien — roter Backstein und Kupferdächer —, um sich den gegenüberliegenden englischen Tudor-Gebäuden der Zentralstrasse anzupassen.



solutions. While whole areas are torn down and delivered to the highest bidder for 'development', architects invest incalculable amounts of money and time into redevelopment projects of high architectural quality which are either never built, or so corrupted that nothing remains of the original intentions (fig. 14). Leading magazines which enthusiastically publicize the most absurd and criminally destructive schemes, such as filling in the rivers around New York for more speculation housing⁴, do nothing to sustain the architects in their struggle to gain influence on a new urban landscape, and neither does the American Institute of Architects. The only large-scale design opportunities open today for the American architect are the university campuses which spring up in large number all over the country. In a continuation of the 19th-century fallacy that prestige buildings are architecture, but housing and commercial buildings are not, the best design talent is confined to remote locations, far from the cities whose life had been shaped for milleniums in the matrix created by the urban designer (fig. 12 and 13).

The question is: how long can a large well-educated and wealthy nation be fooled by the assumption that the Urban Crisis is to be solved by the very professions which perpetuate it, namely the planner, the speculator, and the highway engineer? How long can compliance with failure and corruption last? The best hope for change, for an awakening and a return of the architect as the maker of human environment, lies with the student generation and with their teachers. It is up to their conscience and their ability to educate America to an acceptance of Le Corbusier's dictum: 'Only the architect can strike the balance between man and his environment.'

Edgar Tafel Myller-Snibbe Tafel

⁴ Architectural Forum, Novembre 1968.

14 Project for speculative housing on Staten Island, one of the five boroughs which make up the city of New York. The architect, Paul Rudolph, has succeeded in combining high urban density with a rich variation in scale, terraces and balconies facing the Atlantic Ocean while maintaining a modular construction principle that would reduce cost.

Spekulatives Wohnungsprojekt in Staten Island, einer der fünf Städteinheiten New Yorks. Der Architekt Paul Rudolph verband erfolgreich grosse Bevölkerungsdichte und zahlreiche Niveauvarianten, Terrassen und Balkone, die dem Atlantik zugerichtet sind; die Beibehaltung des Prinzips der Modellkonstruktion verursacht weniger Kosten.

Projet de logement spéculatif à Staten Island, l'une des cinq unités qui composent la cité de New York. L'architecte Paul Rudolph a obtenu une réussite dans sa combinaison de haute densité urbaine et de riche variété de niveaux, terrasses et balcons faisant face à l'Atlantique, tandis que le maintien du principe d'une construction modulaire permet une réduction des frais.

