

The Washington Market Plan

The Washington Market urban renewal area has finally been parceled out, and in the best New York tradition everyone will have a piece of the pie. There will be a community college, an industrial complex, middle-income housing with some subsidized low income units, luxury housing and office buildings—each marked off by the tidy boundaries of compromise.

If it is a compromise, however, it is also a kind of triumph in that it involves the scrapping of an earlier plan—a simplistic commercial-industrial project of the sort that raises the tax base and sanitizes the life of cities. The present scheme has been reworked to be part of the city's sound and imaginative lower Manhattan plan, which starts with the premise that environment and people have priorities equal to commercial development. There are such promising details and amenities as the Chambers Street plaza and pedestrian walks, aimed at giving the river back to New Yorkers again. There will be a coordinating architect so that each separate part will not be built in an esthetic and environmental vacuum.

With land scarce and costs sky-high the competition for any site becomes fierce. When it is urban renewal land, which is bargain land because of city assembly and write-down of costs, institutions that cannot afford land by the solid gold inch on the open market join the infighting. Each need—and they are all real—is backed by political pressures. In the past, the lifeless result of lines drawn on maps to parcel out the spoils has had little resemblance to urban design.

The new project is a considerable step forward but it raises serious questions. The low-cost Washington Market land is ideal for badly needed low and moderate income apartments but it will have only a token because in other compromises housing has been allocated to Governor Rockefeller's Battery Park City, where the high cost of the newly made land makes it far less logical than here. Where will the community college expand out of its present precise share? What about additional space for the industrial complex when it will inevitably be needed? Will there be any proper integration of the landmark houses saved by the city or will they just be historic pariahs?

The city has worked long and hard and with increasing planning sophistication on the Washington Market site against the cross currents of costs, needs and special interests that are the real urban form-givers of our time. Political and economic compromise build a city, New York style. And there is at least a chance that it won't turn out to be mincemeat this time.