

## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# The Great American Flag Scheme

**T**he Great American Dream Machine is about to produce the Great American Flag, and if you haven't heard about it, you will. The Great American Flag will measure 210 feet 12 inches by 411 feet, which translates into an Old Glory roughly one Park Avenue block high and two blocks long, or about two-and-a-half acres in size. It is currently being woven, dyed, assembled, or however you fabricate a two-and-a-half-acre flag, in Evansville, Ind. It is a far cry from Betsy Ross's little handmade number.

The Great American Flag is supposed to be installed on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, near the Brooklyn end of the span, where it will be "unfurled" on all flag holidays and national occasions. But one just does not "hang" a two-and-a-half-acre flag, anymore than one "unfurls" it. This flag requires 30 tons of support steel and nine synchronized motors. The Great American Flag is clearly a lot of flag; its sponsors refer to it as a "symbolic monument" and a "catalyst for America." It is also an environmental event; an architecturally scaled addition to a major example of construction art. The target date for its installation and display is July 4 of this year.

The cost of this Great American Boondoggle is estimated at \$850,000, and its life expectancy is 10 years. Of this amount, \$250,000 is being raised privately, and \$600,000 is to come from the public, or you and me.

The concept, as if you couldn't guess, is something run up by the advertising and public relations business, which sees this is a really Big Idea. It's got absolutely everything: plenty of patriotic hoopla with quotations from Carl Sandburg and Abraham Lincoln for starters; glorious, motherhood-type publicity for big corporate names supplying material, money or expertise, and terrific promotional gimmicks like Star Sponsors, "one for each of the Stars of the Flag" (their capital letters) who pledge gifts of \$10,000 or loans of \$25,000 as an advance on construction to be repaid when the public money comes in. The sponsors include the advertising and public relations firms of Interpublic; Doyle, Dane, Bernbach; and Hill and Knowlton. Corporate support is coming from Pfizer, Milliken and Time Magazine, among others. Materials and services are being donated by such firms as Allied Chemical, Celanese and DuPont. The publicity releases will be studded with their names.

With that star-spangled — you should pardon the expression — roster, one would wonder why the nickels and dimes of the public would be sought at all. We are informed that the flag (oops, Flag) is to be "a gift from the people to the people," to provide "a source of continued inspiration to us all."

For so monumental a project, for something so enormously big and so inescapably visible, for an object that will become an important part of the city scene and of a public

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structure, there has been a surprising absence of public information. It seems incredible that this undertaking should have proceeded to the actual manufacture of the flag, with completion expected next month, while its involved and costly engineering is being actively pursued, totally without description or debate. It is even more curious that the city has played no role whatever in this public endeavor. There is a point where location, size and conspicuous display become questions within the public domain. Waving the flag won't make those questions go away.

The waving is about to begin in earnest with a fund-raising media blitz, even as construction proceeds. Everyone will soon be hearing a great deal about the Great American Flag, in television commercials and through other promotional channels. The public drive, we are told, will consist of "a mass media campaign, fund-raising projects from supporting non-profit organizations, and special promotions by supporting businesses." Wrapping themselves in the flag, of course, won't do anyone any harm. And if there

should be some legitimate doubts about the suitability or necessity of this bit of patriotic oversell, no one is prepared to be the only rotten kid on the block who doesn't love his country. Those who refuse to contribute to this campaign, for any reason, run the risk of being branded as churlish pinkos.

I am willing to be the first rotten kid by saying that I have run the idea up the flagpole, and it doesn't fly. There are a number of things seriously wrong with it. There is, for one, the inexplicable absence of municipal or other official responsibility for such a major installation. And for another, there is evidence that badly needed corporate funds will be diverted by this project from business support of the city's cultural affairs.

In view of the fact that the present city budget, among other painful cuts, has had to drastically reduce funding for the Department of Cultural Affairs, this can only be a threatening development. Grants from the National Endowment in Washington and the State Arts Council have also been declining. The only good news is that corporate contributions have been taking up the slack. This fact — the one ray of sun-

shine in a bleak forecast for the arts — has been identified as the critical factor for the future by the report on New York's cultural affairs just issued by the private, not-for-profit, Cultural Assistance Center.

To have any of that corporate support siphoned off in this fashion endangers activities that are far more vital to New York than this silly scheme. Some businesses have begun to respond to requests for the kind of aid they normally give to urban and cultural causes — help that is more urgently needed than ever — by saying sorry, we've contributed to the Great American Flag. Surely the opportunities afforded by a dance group in Harlem, or the community efforts of a block association in the Bronx, speak more appropriately of the real American spirit. The availability to all of New York's great collections of literature, history and art is a far better demonstration of the democratic ideal. Creative activities enrich and revitalize a city; they raise both its spirit and its economic base. The arts are New York's best growth industry, but you can't salute them.

The unanswered question is who has allowed this simple-minded, vainglorious proposal to go ahead? Has it been done through default or tacit consent?

The Triboro Bridge and Tunnel Authority, which constructed and operates the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, has approved. But the bridge was built with a public bond issue; it is not T.B.T.A.'s personal property. Is this action really in the city's larger interests?

Where is the City Art Commission? Only recently, it had to make the public announcement that it was responsible for the esthetic review of New York's bridges. That fact was being ignored while every politician and his brother was busy picking colors for them. Where are the city's cultural watchdogs, the Municipal Art Society and the various architectural associations?

Finally, there is the matter of the project's unassailable inspirational and patriotic intent — the factor that has made it so hard for anyone to say no to its sponsors. This is the saddest and funniest aspect of the whole affair. Within clear sight of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge stands the greatest monument to freedom in our history, the symbol of this nation as an open and compassionate society with the highest democratic ideals — an image that dominates New York Harbor and the American dream. Does anyone really want to spend \$850,000 to upstage the Statue of Liberty? ■