



Rendering of Waterside, mixed income housing for the East River from 25th to 30th Streets
"An urban design for urban purposes and pleasures"

Architecture

Housing: The Death-Wish City

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A HOUSING proposal has its greatest chance of success on the day it is conceived, according to an architect specializing in housing work, Seymour Jarmul, writing in a recent issue of *Progressive Architecture*. From then on, it is all downhill.

In New York it is usually a slow, sticky slide ending in a full stop. Waterside, for example, the superior plan for housing on a platform in the East River to be built by the HRH Construction Company and designed by Davis and Brody under the sponsorship of the city's Housing and Redevelopment Board, knocked its way through two administrations for six years, its prospects diminishing daily. In a kind of Christmas season miracle, it finally received Board of Estimate approval last week. Threatened with a taxpayer's suit and still headed for Federal negotiations, its troubles are not yet over.

New York has no development that comes remotely near Waterside's environmental potential. It represents the kind of environmental quality that is essential to the city's efforts to renew itself and its people. At no time, however, in all of the controversy surrounding and delaying the project, did this singularly significant consideration become an important, or even an understood factor.

Environment, an "in" word in the crisis of cities, is a poorly understood concept at best. As a word, it is meaningless. Its comprehension is a visual, emotional, sensuous, physical and visceral process; it is the direct, three-dimensional, individual and collective experience of one's surroundings; the sum total of external conditions and influences affecting life for better or worse.

In a city, the environment is made by man. "Made by Man" should be stamped across the blank towers and arid open spaces that are the equally barren contribution of both public and luxury housing at the two extremes of the scale. (One has art, the

other has vandalism in the lobby.) "Made by Man" should be branded on rotting piers and scabrous waterfront. It should be emblazoned on city-maiming expressways and the shadowed slums beneath them. It all comes off the drawing board at the start, whatever subsequent overlays of social disaster may add rich varieties of human blight.

The urban world is a conscious act; it is the work of some hand and eye and mind, no matter how mindless it may appear. The original blight was the designer's, the builder's, the developer's, the engineer's or the architect's. What is being designed privately and publicly in New York with alarming consistency is instant blight.

It does not matter how housing figures are juggled to favor rich or poor, how many releases publicize new projects, the New York environment is being sealed systematically into sterility and its social problems are being compounded and immortalized by substandard design. We are building blight for the next hundred years.

This is a tragically important fact—but no political battles are being fought over it. They are being fought, understandably, for the immediate problems of the poor and the minorities. There are two reasons why this is so. First, the ghetto is hideous, and housing is one of the city's hottest political issues. Second, there is little recognition of urban or housing design and how it affects the environment beyond the specialized professional level.

The standard-setting design of Waterside was eclipsed by an onslaught of economic and social criticism, almost all emotionally and politically charged. Its social and economic assumptions have never been grasped. It was attacked because its mix of upper middle income to low income housing was heavily weighted at the upper end. Under critical pressure, rent adjustments were made to bring more apartments into the true middle and low in-

come range. The final formula is 145 units at \$18 a room, 205 at \$30, 370 at \$40, 370 at \$53 and 378 at \$65.

The project is being attacked now by those who see it as a sinister indication that a policy of tax abatement—Waterside receives 50 per cent abatement to make the lower rents possible—is being established for housing for those who can pay over \$50 a room a month, or that the city is embarking on a course of subsidizing those who do not need it at the expense of those who do. Certainly Waterside could have been done without subsidy as a private development with free market rents of \$80 to \$100 a room and no controversy over tax abatement. But this kind of luxury compound helps no one.

Problems of circulation, transportation and public facilities, always serious in any area of sizeable new construction in New York, have also been scored. But little note has been taken of the fact that the city has an area study under way in recognition of those factors.

The arguments against Waterside dissolve with one look at the grim realities of housing prospects for New York. Any proper perspective sees the project's range of high to low income groups and combination of private investment and Government aids as a welcome formula in a city that ghettoizes both rich and poor and is virtually at the end of its housing rope.

The middle income housing tools that produced apartments for \$21 to \$22 a room nine years ago can no longer do it for much under \$40. Increased costs of money, construction, materials, labor, maintenance and interest rates are sending that figure spiralling. Middle income housing can no longer be delivered without massive tax abatement.

Construction, usually up 3 per cent to 5 per cent a year, skyrocketed 8 per cent to 10 per cent in New York last year, where building costs are the highest and sometimes the most eccentric in the nation. (Compute that increase alone in terms of

delays on Waterside and the effects on rents.)

The most effective tool for middle income housing, called 221(d)3 for the section of the Federal housing bill that authorizes it, keeps costs and rents low by a fixed, below market 3 per cent interest rate. The middle income housing that the city has in process or planning now—scarcely adequate by any measure—would take all 221(d)3 resources not just for New York, but for the entire eastern region, for the next two and a half years. At the low income level, public housing is far behind schedule and new Government tools, such as rent subsidies and turnkey housing are turning out to be unworkable in New York due to high costs and legal complexities.

Waterside's unconventional towers are much more than an exercise in sliding rent scales. They tie together a handsome new neighborhood created through design. There is variety and human scale and open space planning; a plaza with shops, cinema, restaurants and a waterfront promenade, all for public use, by private investment.

This is an attempt to put into practice the belief of experts that a combination of housing, commercial, recreational and open space functions, in a coordinated, multi-level complex with parking and services underground, is necessary for a livable city. It is an imaginative urban design for urban purposes and pleasures. It is also the most promising pattern to date for new housing development.

Certainly Waterside is not the complete and perfect answer to New York's complex housing problems. Without perfect answers, housing is torn apart by dissident groups, bottlenecked by bureaucracy, delayed by politics, confused by champions of the poor, sabotaged by planners without perspective, lost by inertia and incomprehension. Sometimes New York seems like a death-wish city. And sometimes, as at the beginning of this new year with Waterside's approval, there is at least a glimmer of hope.