

Housing in the City--II

Unless the trend described in these columns yesterday is reversed, the city administration faces complete frustration in its housing and planning programs. The situation is not being helped by the current confusions concerning Waterside, the imaginative plan for housing on a platform in the East River, which is sponsored by the Housing and Redevelopment Board and is about to be voted on by the Board of Estimate.

Criticism of Waterside centers on the small proportion of low and moderate income housing in relation to more expensive units, and on the tax abatement given to the developer. Both criticisms miss the point.

Waterside is just the kind of housing that the city urgently needs to maintain its vanishing middle-class base, a productive and essential part of the population that has so much to do with keeping the city alive. It is the kind of imaginative and progressive planning that is essential to make the city a better and more humane place to live. It involves the kind of financing—utilization of private investment to encourage limited dividend housing—that is being desperately sought by cities everywhere as the effective answer to housing shortages.

Without city aid, equivalent apartments would be built to higher rents and lower standards. Without city sponsorship, there would be no coordinated provision for desirable riverfront amenities, and they would be for private, not public, use. Whatever the city will receive in taxes for building over the river will be found money, since the area returns no revenue now. What the city gives is a subsidy for the kind of superior land use which no private builder will provide without incentive.

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This is not, as charged by the opposition, a subsidy for housing the rich. It is not extra money in the builder's pocket, an equally ridiculous accusation in a limited-profit project. It is a way of reducing rents below speculative luxury levels. It does not subtract in any way from resources for housing the poor. Suggestions to the contrary are irresponsible distortions of fact.

This superior scheme with so much environmental potential has been creeping along since the Wagner administration, which is par for the course for New York housing action. Mortgage interest rates and rents are already higher than they would have been six months ago. With constantly rising costs, financial backing is jeopardized by further delays. New York's housing decisions have been largely based on a kind of cautious cynicism that holds up, or holds over, all progressive plans.

If Waterside is defeated, and that would be a defeat for New York, it will no doubt be the victim of the spurious reasoning that is sabotaging so much of the city's current efforts—the kind of irrational, emotion-charged hostility aroused by any housing except that for the poor.

The poor are not helped by finessing other housing needs. Admittedly, only low-cost housing makes popular politics. To vote against Waterside would be a dubious political ploy for obvious political hay, or a willful misunderstanding of New York's requirements. It would give the Board of Estimate the doubtful distinction of keeping the city's curious housing record intact: few hits, many errors.