

The Tudor City Parks

In an unusual public hearing today, the City Planning Commission will offer a set of alternative options to the destruction of the Tudor City parks, two quiet green islands suspended above the compacted chaos of East 42d Street in the privately owned Tudor City development.

This is an out-of-the-ordinary hearing. Significantly, it is the first time the city has developed a set of such options for this kind of difficult urban issue instead of letting nature, or real estate, take its customary course. It is an almost unprecedented municipal response to a community cry for help. And it attempts to find answers to some hard, recurrent questions in the urban dilemma.

The alternative solutions suggested by the planners are all aimed at the preservation of the parks, in whole or in part, through a set of proposals to give Harry Helmsley, owner of Tudor City, his cake, and allow the city to eat it, too. These small parks are an irreplaceable amenity in congested midtown. It is assumed that they would become public, rather than private as they are now.

The city's proposals are based either on the present zoning law or its logical extension. They recognize that air is often the most valuable part of Manhattan land because air rights represent the size of the building that can be constructed. They mean money to the investor in the most real sense. The city is therefore suggesting a number of shifts of air rights that would make it possible to move the two buildings that Mr. Helmsley plans for the parks to other locations in order to save the open space. These include construction of one very large building on a bridge over 42d Street that Mr. Helmsley is said to favor. This Pan-Am-type of monumental obstruction would block the East River except for a view under its nose. It is a poor solution.

By far the best proposal is one to shift the air rights over the parks to another part of midtown Manhattan entirely, anywhere within the central business district, subject to safeguards on density. This represents two important innovations: transfer of air rights within an entire district rather than just to neighboring properties, as now practiced, and "banking" of those rights for future construction. In both vision and flexibility, this has immense advantages in the planning and preservation of a city's amenities. It is a responsible, sensitive, progressive and creative answer within the framework of law, economic reality and the growing awareness of the environment.