

Architecture

Down Town Blues

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

HURRY, hurry, hurry, as the pitchmen used to say; last call for anyone who wants to see the wonders of old New York, the real, live, genuine, remaining bits of the old city in lower Manhattan, sitting at the feet of the most famous skyscrapers in the world. Come see the biggest buildings on the smallest streets, the newest next to the oldest. One soaring present and the small-scaled past. There is no doubt about it; this jam-packed mass of spectacular stone and steel with its dash of historical seasoning is the most spontaneously romantic and shatteringly magnificent cityscape ever known.

But if you can't get there fast, forget it. In a few short years lower Manhattan will be just another Third or Sixth Avenue.

Good enough, if you fancy the bland, commercial homogenization of postwar Third and Sixth Avenues. Their chief fanciers, however, are those builders and investors whose sense of environmental esthetics is limited to the calculable beauties of rentable square footage by the square block, and who do more to plan, construct and seal the fate of this city than any combination of officials and municipal agencies theoretically entrusted with the job. A government man on the highest Federal level of urban renewal once remarked to this writer that New York is the only major city in the country planned exclusively for profit and built to that pattern by its businessmen with the city easing the way.

New Yorkers who do not build the city but merely live in it, frequently fancy other values. They have a fondness, based on sound instincts of what a great city should be, for the enrichment and contrast of the kind of early buildings and intimate streets that are grist for the speculator's mill.

They esteem the cobbled slips and lanes, the Greek Revival coffee and spice houses just above the Battery that are rapidly disappearing and taking with them the sense of the harbor's historic sailing age; the shabby Georgian-Federal structures redolent of fish in the old Fulton Market; dormered and pitched-roof brick houses against the Gothic stone and spiderweb steel of Brooklyn Bridge; the granite blocks and Greek lintels that still face ropeworks and casual bars and beaneries in the old city; the 19th-century breaks in the 20th-century skyscraper-lined canyons that let in the sleety New York sky and the ghosts of New York history. It is all going, going, gone.

In lower Manhattan, historic streets have been demapped and eliminated by the City Planning Commission to make profitable superblock parcels for private builders. Historic districts in the path of powerful business interests have been left undesignated by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. What has not already been destroyed or damaged waits resignedly for the speculative developers, who are known to be assembling more superplots.

In every possible fashion, city agencies have aided and abetted the process, in the biggest urban giveaway of past and future ever nego-

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Singing the Downtown Blues

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tiated for cash or taxes. What it has put its stamp of approval on is one of the largest standard-model commercial developments that New York has yet seen. With few exceptions, the names are chillingly familiar—Uris, Rudin and Rose, Emery Roth—the “style setters” of commercial midtown. Downtown, here they come.

It isn't just that New York has had no muscle; it has had no vision. Whatever amateur or archaic attempts it has made to guide redevelopment have been tacitly understood to be totally subservient to commercial prerogatives. Until recently, it set no standards and made no plans. No other large city can make this statement. Whatever has gone wrong, whatever triumphs or fiascos have resulted, cities such as Boston, Philadelphia and many more have had a framework for some kind of coordinated construction and urban design. That same Federal official quoted earlier found New York's lack of plans and standards unique even in the roster of mediocre urban renewal efforts across the nation.

Obstacles

The problem, now, with an awakening consciousness of the quality of the environment in municipal circles, is that the old pattern is set. In the financial community, the old blinders are still on. The old priorities are considered inviolate.

With a lower Manhattan plan belatedly on the city's books, its potential is being eaten away by New York's relentless *force majeure*, the divine right of real estate economics. Said one of the architects involved in a major downtown project, “We only wish that there had been a more cohesive city plan from which to work than the bits and pieces left over by the wheeler-dealers.”

Examples? They abound. The investment firm of Atlas-McGrath assembled enough prime lower Manhattan land not only to frustrate the city's urban renewal designation for the area, but to make it possible to create, with ease and art and single ownership, a small-scale Rockefeller Cen-

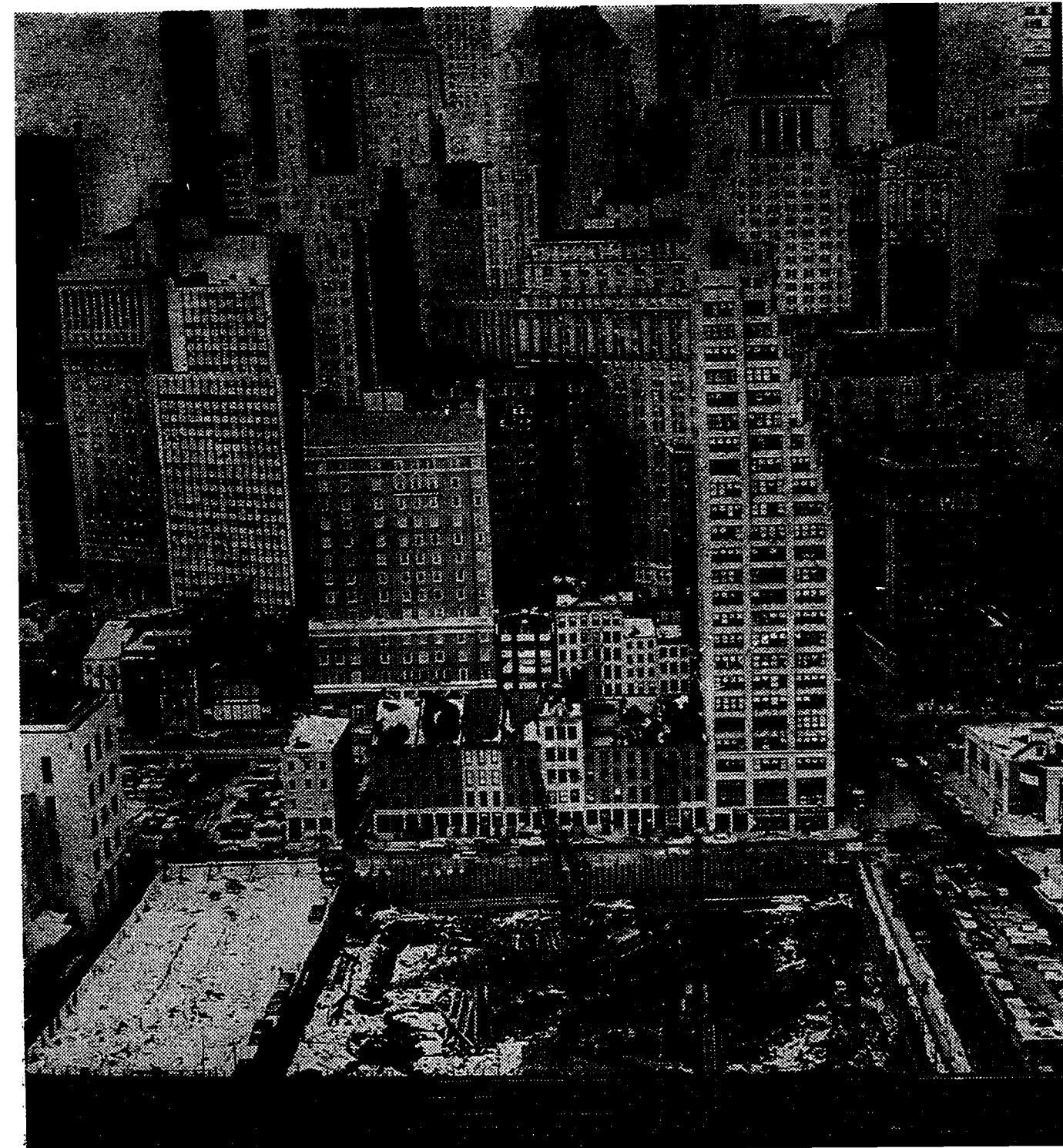
ter on one of the city's most superb waterfront sites. This would have been compensation for historic destruction. It is not being done.

Instead of coordinated planning and design, the *modus operandi* has been simply to milk the most out of each separate, negotiable parcel, independently. The architects of the blockbusters for two of the huge plots have no idea what will be on the third, and their relationship is cordial, but not collaborative. Actually, it is quite clear what will be on that third site: the biggest deal possible. Community waterfront uses? Parks and plazas united in open space planning? Human amenities? Urban esthetics? Municipal sense? Public good? None of it balances against private profit.

And so the city closed the streets and handed them over to the developers, moved Jeanette Park and widened Water Street, all in the most pragmatic way possible. There will now be two huge commercial superblocks with oddments of open space that result not from thoughtful urban design, but from the bonus provisions of the zoning law, which gives height increases (read rentable floors) for setbacks from the street.

It makes it hard to take the city's talk seriously about using street closings as a negotiating tool with the World Trade Center. As it stands now, the Port Authority is throwing away the remarkable spatial opportunities that this massive project creates, for just another big commercial venture. There will be plazas, yes. But since the Authority seems determined to burrow all circulatory activity underground to concourse level, those plazas promise to be vast, desolate, dull, windswept and empty most of the time. This, where so much could have been done to improve pedestrian functions and pleasures.

It is equally hard to take the Port Authority's gesture of cooperative planning with the city seriously, based on its claim that city officials have sat in on meetings and concurred in decisions from the time of the project's inception. Looking at the record,



The New York Times (Carl T. Gossett, Jr.)

Going, going, gone—historic brick buildings, center, against soaring skyscrapers in Lower Manhattan.

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it is impossible to take past municipal planning efforts seriously at all.

Consider another downtown planning example: Water Street. To provide a broad traffic artery among the narrow, congested streets of the old city, all of the buildings on the east side of Water Street were ripped out some years ago, the road enlarged, and the gaping wound filled with parking.

Now the entire length of Water Street south from the

bridge is a city-made, esthetic slum. It consists of the raw backs of houses revealed mid-block, enhanced by raw parking lots. This is one of New York's best examples of official urban mutilation. The objective now is as obvious as it is insensitive and commercially oriented: clear out whatever old, interesting structures still remain just beyond on Front Street, and bring on the superblock developers.

They will undoubtedly build banks. Most of the new down-

town buildings are banks. They are, let it be said, fine and necessary institutions, but *en masse* they make street scenes of suffocating dullness. There is, in fact, a kind of creeping bank disease laying a cold, dead hand on New York wherever the shiny new construction appears. Try counting, for example, the new banks from 47th to 59th Street on Park Avenue; add up the number of banks on ground floors of new buildings everywhere. It is as good as count-

ing sheep. Soigné ennui.

Downtown, the days of small shops for fresh-ground coffee or odd electronic gadgets or conviviality in a not-too-pure circa 1827 bar are past or numbered. (It's not very convivial in the personal credit department of a bank and the place smells of computers, not coffee.) If New Yorkers survive the rape of the city, or just crossing the street or breathing the air, there is one last, lethal urban hazard: boredom.