Master Plan:

For a New and Presumably Better City

Now that New York City's master plan is out—all six volumes and 440,000 words of it with the final big gun on Manhattan fired off last week—the question being asked is what chance there is of ever seeing any of it on the city's streets.

The Manhattan volume, in particular, outlines ambitious schemes for growth, ordering the city's large-scale commercial construction in a massive pattern of controlled development. For example, the plan's proposal for the midtown west side would construct a "spine" of office skyscrapers along 48th Street, to be served by a new crosstown transportation link to the river. The layout would eliminate tall building shadows, and parks and public improvements would add amenities to expanded commercial uses. Below ground, complete new utilities would take advantage of the natural slope of the land. The plan explores innovative financing and even promises that elusive miracle, housing.

Is this Utopia? Is the whole plan pie-in-the-sky? Haven't similar proposals in the past simply been academic exercises? There could be differences this time. This program, developed by the City Planning Commission, is not meant to be measured by a conventional "before and after" building box score. It is an immensely sophisticated, long-range planning document—one of the most advanced proposals in terms of goals, priorities, programs, urban standards and relationships of social and physical objectives to be produced by any major city.

The master plan is realistic, then, not in terms of the probability of immediate, visible changes in midtown and elsewhere. Its pragmatic strength is in its recognition of the fact that the only certainty is change itself, and that any workable plan that is not outdated on publication must act as a very flexible yardstick to shape that change over a long period of time for a better environment. Such a plan must be based on a specific idea of what a city is to be. It establishes goals independent of immediate conditions. Future administrations may, or may not, choose to honor them. That is in the lap of the political gods.

Manhattan has always been the nation's front office. The city's planners believe that this is its unique strength, and that Manhattan must continue to play this role. But it can do so only by providing the support services that will make the city work better than it does now.

The planners point out that today's chaotic and sordid malfunction is the cumulative result of a failure of planning with the increasing construction over the years. It is desperation by default. The support structure, utilities and circulation, created for the 19th century with a considerable built-in margin of expansion, has reached its limits. As things break down, corporations, harried and unhoused, fade away into the suburbs with an alarming part of the city's tax base.

The master plan, therefore, is a corrective as well as a development prescription. But at best, the act of planning is an empirical and conjectural process. Even the crushing amount of available computerized data cannot give New York all the answers it needs. The city knows that the study is far from complete.

How realistic, then, is something as grandiose and specific as the west midtown scheme? Some of the business community has assessed it as promising enough to consider establishing a kind of private development corporation to put all the parts together.

That was before the slump. Now investors are sitting tight. Whether Manhattan has really overbuilt its office market, or whether this is a temporary effect of the business downturn and the space will be absorbed, remains to be seen. New York real estate has a roller coaster history.

On the other hand, public investment is the necessary kick-off, and the first step of the scheme, a convention center which would pull in private capital, was dealt a stunning rebuff by the State Legislature. Planning is a tortuous, stubborn process and only a fool would give it odds.

The decisive factor, no matter how expert or reasonable the plan may be, is its total dependence on the city's politics and economics. In New York, both are in trouble. They are finding it difficult to deliver anything from the simplest amenities to the basic necessities of life and it is doubtful if the city can produce the master plan. That is the ultimate reality that New Yorkers, and the plan, must face.

—ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Taxis:

Strange Hush

●At Penn Station the subway doors slide open and a worried out-of-town face peers out and asks: "Does this go to Times Square?"

●Outside Grand Central, an expense-account type, complete with British officer's overcoat and slim attache case, negotiates a fare to Wall Street with a furtive gypsy cab driver.

●There is a strange hush to the city's main arteries, no useless honking, no screeching brakes, no manic lane-switching, no yellow cabs hurtling through narrow traffic gaps at 40 miles an hour.

For a week now, the 6,816 fleet cabs and 4,963 driver-owned cabs have been gone from the city streets, their 36,000 drivers and 1,200 inside workers wondering when the next pay day will come and 800,000 regular riders groping with the unfamiliarities of the city's public buses and subways.

For most of New York's 8 million residents, though, all a taxi strike means is a quieter city with less crowded streets. A few Fifth Avenue stores complained of a slight drop in business. Car rental companies and firms for chauffered limousines quickly ran out of stock. Traffic to the airports, one of the main uses of cabs, went pretty much as usual as Carey Transportation and others laid on extra buses and limousines. For gypsy cabs and out-of-work drivers willing to take a chance with their own cars, there was a thriving business in making illegal pickups at bus and train stations and other high-traffic points. While the money was good—most drivers charged double and even triple the meter rate—there were also risks. The police issued more than 600 summonses to illicit drivers in the first week of the strike.

But most of that took place on the crowded streets of midtown Manhattan where the majority of the city's taxi fleet normally plies its trade. In other boroughs and in black neighborhoods such as Harlem, cabs are relatively rare and the people who want taxis often use the highly efficient fleets of gypsy cabs, which give door-to-door service (but are not allowed to make pickups on the street, though most do anyway), charge about the same as the medallion cabs and are not on strike.

At week's end, the prospects for an end to the strike remained, at best, uncertain.

—PAUL L. MONTGOMERY