

Wall for Manhattan

There is urgent need for some consciousness-raising about the city's waterfront. New York's most magnificent resource and amenity is being systematically blocked off—both visually and practically—from the life of the city.

Gigantic projects are now being designed and built that will permanently wall off the water's edge and destroy the crosstown vista that historically gives Manhattan much of its character and has fused this island with its river boundaries. Many of the current development plans offer peripheral "promenades," but these are no substitute for the sense and sight of the rivers at the ends of Manhattan's usual die-straight, east-west streets.

The visual lift and environmental delight that water provides is the touchstone of the city's geography, flavor and style. As surely as the sound of ships' sirens used to comfort New Yorkers' nights—and the wheeling gulls still remind the city that it is dramatically and superbly waterbound—that sense of island place, and that ultimate amenity, are being lost behind walls of concrete.

The evidence is beginning to ring Manhattan. While the proposed New York Hospital complex will block no more streets than at present, the scale and location of this huge construction on the East River cannot help but further isolate the waterfront from the city behind. Waterside, which by itself is an exemplary bit of mini-community planning near completion further south, will also cut the river from the teeming city to the west.

The planners of Manhattan Landing, that immense extension of the island's edge that will reach along the East River from Brooklyn Bridge to the Battery, showed they were aware of the problem by proposing "scenic corridors" to preserve some street-through vistas from the island's center. But platforming, huge scale and the costs of construction could reduce that amenity to tokenism—a particular tragedy for Lower Manhattan where the land-water drama is at its greatest and most traditional.

On the other side, Battery Park City—now being built on landfill in the Hudson River—will create a Chinese wall totally blocking visual contact with the river from the interior city. Public park or promenade treatment of the edge of the new construction hardly compensates for what amounts to the loss of the river's immediacy to all of the adjacent island. Farther up the West Side, in the Forties, the solid expanse of the new Convention Center will, as planned, close off four blocks of waterfront from the streets to the east—as huge apartment developments have already done a mile to the north, along Amsterdam Avenue in the upper Sixties.

This is a mammoth trend, heedless in its destruction of the irreplaceable. It is a trend that must be curbed, by radically redesigning future projects to preserve through-street sightlines and the consciousness of the surrounding rivers where the damage has not already been done. What is needed are serious second thoughts from planners, and a consistent citizen campaign to save the waterfront. In a sense, it is saving the city; for whatever its tragic faults and dangers, it is a unique and beautiful city of steel and sea and rivers—or was.