

# Litho City: Hit or Flop?

## Union Housing Plan Meets Snag in Bid for 'Greatness'

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

One of the city's largest privately promoted urban-renewal projects—the 5,000-family community called Litho City—is riding a bumpy road to greatness or oblivion. It will be either one of the biggest things architecturally ever to hit New York, or it will never see the light of day.

Litho City is a 10-block-long, four-layer-deep complex of housing and cultural facilities sponsored by Local 1 of the Amalgamated Lithographers of America.

If it overcomes hurdles of design, financing and city approval, it will be built on the air rights over the New York Central tracks bordering the Hudson River, from 60th to 70th Street.

If Edward Swayduck, president of the local, has his way, the project, as officially described, will represent "the finest architectural thought and expression obtainable in the world." Or as he put it personally and a little more characteristically: "It won't be just great. It will be the greatest. It's got to be an architectural triumph, or I won't touch it."

### Star Architect Sought

This resolve has led Mr. Swayduck to Europe this week, where he is interviewing notable architects, among them Le Corbusier. He will select a star architect, either abroad or here, to work with the New York firm of Kelly & Gruzen, which has developed the project thus far. If his mission succeeds, there is little doubt that New York will have 36 acres of greatness. The impact will be stunning.

Kelly & Gruzen has made a detailed investigation of the site and studies of building types.

Litho City appeared briefly in the news in August, 1961, and disappeared almost as quickly in the controversy about traffic problems that its massive buildings might create on the burgeoning West Side. Its site parallels Lincoln Center and adjoins Lincoln Towers, The New York Times plant, and other recent housing.

In October, 1962, after a study, Litho City received Traffic Commissioner Henry A. Barnes's blessing. At the same time the City Planning Commission approved the area as an urban-renewal site. In the intervening year the sugar plums of greatness had been dancing in Mr. Swayduck's head.

"I've watched a lot of labor housing going up," he says. "I didn't want to contribute to those red brick monstrosities."

### Above Middle Income

Changes have been made. The project which had been considered as middle-income housing only briefly at its inception, has moved into higher brackets (the average yearly income of members of the Amalgamated Lithographers is \$12,000), so that many apartments will be above the \$30-a-room top middle-income rental set by city agencies.

Albert Mayer, a consultant, with Kelly & Gruzen, restudied the plan in terms of the whole Central West Side. A United World Center, to provide housing and academic social facilities for international students, and possibly for United Nations personnel, was announced as the heart of the scheme. It symbolizes, in the words of the well-lithographed brochure, "international brotherhood in a new age of responsible trade unionism."

In the pursuit of greatness, as in lesser matters, one thing leads to another, and the desire for art and brotherhood led Mr. Swayduck to August Heckscher, cultural adviser to the White House.

"We want greatness," said Mr. Swayduck. "Tell us how to proceed."

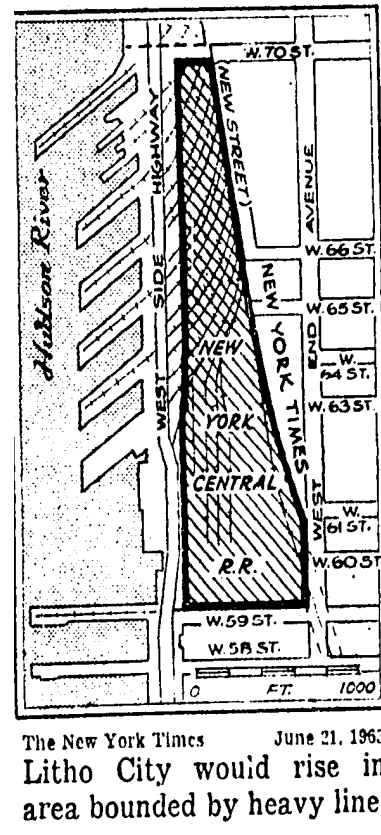
Mr. Heckscher is reported to have responded with surprise and delight, and a committee of distinguished architectural advisors, which he headed, was formed. Other members were Edmund Bacon, director of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission; Peter Blake, managing editor of The Architectural Forum; Charles Colbert, dean of the School of Architecture at Columbia University until his resignation this spring, and Aline Saarinen, author and critic.

### Architects Recommended

After a lively one-day meeting last April, the committee recommended these architects: Aldo Giurgola of Philadelphia, Philip Johnson of New York, Paul Rudolph of New Haven and Shadrach Woods of Paris. The office of Eero Saarinen was also nominated in Mrs. Saarinen's absence. But the not-so-secret hope is that Le Corbusier may be available and interested, and Mr. Swayduck's dynamic enthusiasm is known to be catching.

In New York some observers are less than enthusiastic, and others are frankly skeptical. Opinion is divided as to whether Litho City will be a monument or a monumental headache. Webb & Knapp, realty developers, are worried about the view from their Lincoln Towers apartments when the new tall buildings go up. The City Planning Commission has been lukewarm to the project, or at least is taking a wait-and-see attitude.

City agencies are understood to be reluctant, after a few traumatic earlier episodes, to endorse anything above the middle-income level in an urban-renewal area. Litho City's costs and complexities have moved it out of that range. But at the same time the city is particularly anxious to find a sponsor for the redevelopment



The New York Times June 21, 1963  
 Litho City would rise in area bounded by heavy line.

of the downtown Washington Market site, and Local 1 has proposed to take that on as well.

### Financing a Mystery

Costs are another question, and financing of the huge undertaking, estimated at \$175,000,000, remains mysterious. Litho City will not qualify for the usual assistance or tax abatement given to middle-income projects, and getting Federal Housing Administration insurance on the mortgage will be difficult, because at present there is a surplus of high-priced apartments in New York. Whether the nonprofit dormitories and educational facilities would make it eligible for some kind of aid is extremely doubtful.

Mr. Swayduck's attitude is sanguine. "We already have a commitment of \$135,000,000 from a New York savings bank, and we are presently negotiating for an additional commitment to cover the United World Center," he says.

To the advisory committee, interested primarily in more distinguished building in New York, Mr. Swayduck is the greatest potential client since the Bronfmans put up the Seagram Building. Litho City has room for at least a dozen Seagrams. It is generally agreed that if all the pieces—economic, esthetic and political—fit together at the right time in the right way, the Amalgamated Lithographers will have pulled off a notable achievement.