

# Avenue of the Americas

On a clear day you can see the future—on the Avenue of the Americas. On a hot summer day, when the city levitates, but relaxes, some of the splendor of the season transfers to the streets.

On the Avenue of the Americas these fine days, where broad, landscaped plazas mark the new buildings nearing completion that extend Rockefeller Center westward, people are less preoccupied with urban problems than with catching sun, watching water, or strolling along a newly elegant promenade. The Avenue of the Americas, which has been noted until now for the sterility of its buildings and disconnected spaces, appears to have burst suddenly into bloom with the latest round of construction.

What has changed is not just the position of the sun. It is the power and persuasiveness of the city's planners. On the Avenue of the Americas, in east midtown, in lower Manhattan, under the guidance of the municipal planning offices, the art of the speculator is being turned into the art of the environment.

What has also changed are the practices of the developers. They are building according to the vision of the planners. The new tools the city has devised and is using, in addition to negotiation over variances, are incentive zoning and special zoning districts. The key concept is amenity. A decade ago, every developer built in a stock, profit-formula vacuum, and amenity was not part of the New York urban vocabulary.

Today, the fruits of what the British call amenity planning are beginning to show. The large new plazas fronting the Avenue of the Americas now relate to each other, almost as a continuous park strip—a rarity in any large city and rarer in New York. Behind the new buildings is the start of a continuous series of midblock passages that will connect from 46th to 50th streets, as alternating malls, shopping arcades and miniparks. The first three new theaters in the recently established special theater district are completed. All this has been legislated by the city and is being paid for by reluctant developers, for whom space bonuses for amenity planning lessen the pain. The bonus to the city is clear.

The huge new office buildings do much to vindicate and justify the basic thesis of the city's Master Plan—that construction growth can continue if high densities are controlled by design. The Avenue of the Americas, in its latest form, is becoming an object lesson in how this works. The buildings are not architectural masterpieces, but that is not the issue. If build we must, for a more prosperous New York, this is a better way to build it.

*Dolce far niente* on the casual old Sixth Avenue, with its nostalgic, small-scale pleasures, was never like this. Today there are benches to sit on, and trees to sit under, and fountains and people to watch, and a grand urban vista. This New York is closer to Haussmann's Paris and Nash's London, and it will still be an impressive achievement when the sun is gone.