

Selling the Seaport

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It is too late now to debate whether creating a marketplace in New York's South Street Seaport is a good idea. The project is in motion, with Board of Estimate approval, the promise of a \$20 million Federal urban development grant and the Rouse Company committed as developer. What matters now is the plan for the project.

In the Seaport's preoccupation with economic survival and the city's concern for economic development, details have been disturbingly vague. What will the development actually be like? What impact will it have on the Seaport's historical and architectural integrity?

Drawings and descriptions suggest something much like Rouse's extremely popular Boston and Baltimore waterfront projects, and there is no reason to doubt that their success can be duplicated here. Boston's historic Faneuil Hall buildings and Baltimore's newly constructed Harborplace both offer food and specialty shops, restaurants and pedestrian spaces. A carefully planned and controlled merchandising formula has produced a skillful if precarious balance between history and stylish marketing.

In the case of the Seaport, however, there is as much reason to fear as to welcome such changes. The Rouse proposal calls for features including glass sheds and canopies to extend the commercial space of the old buildings. There would be widened tree-lined streets,

which this area never knew, to accommodate a 400-seat cafe, and pushcarts, luring people in large numbers. The question of traffic, including tourist buses, is still unresolved.

Some of the features have already been modified to meet Planning Board objections. But these are essentially the same elements, and the same image, that worked for Boston, where a much stronger and more unified architectural complex supports them. There is no way that such additions and alterations can be imposed on the last few pleasing and unpretentious Georgian and Greek Revival buildings of this small historic district without turning it into an entirely different kind of place.

It is time to admit that while this kind of development may be good business, it should not be called good preservation. It is a mistake to represent a sophisticated 20th-century commercial complex as compatible with the area's historic 19th-century market, as the Seaport Museum has done. The present concept is more dependent on the spirit of modern retailing than on any older spirit of time or place.

In a sense, the Seaport has sold its birthright. Its job now is to see that the transition to Boutique America can leave something of that tough, plain, honest and genuinely evocative remnant of New York's 19th-century working waterfront.