

Project, Planned 10 Years, Has Been Called Unsound: Work Starts on Total Renewal Project

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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After almost 10 stop-and-go years, during which plans have been drawn, scrapped and revised, work on one of the first and most controversial of New York's urban-renewal areas, Brooklyn Bridge Southwest, is finally going ahead.

Demolition is under way in the 15-acre site bounded by Beekman, Fulton, Frankfort, Pearl and Nassau Streets, just below the bridge and east of City Hall and the Civic Center.

When this \$80-million project is complete in 1970, it will provide expanded facilities for the Beekman-Downtown Hospital, an enlarged Pace College, new commercial construction, and housing for 1,600 middle-income families.

In the process, it will erase all traces of the past in one of the most historic sections of the city. From site selection to final design, every aspect of the renewal process in Brooklyn Bridge Southwest has been viewed with serious reservations by experts in the planning and redevelopment fields. Many consider it a casebook of urban-renewal errors.

Initiated in the late nineteenthies under the Slum Clear-

ance Committee, which was headed by Robert Moses and was the city's first renewal agency, the project was inherited by the present administration. A total bulldozer plan, as were all of New York's early renewal efforts, Brooklyn Bridge Southwest is materializing just at the time when the city has officially renounced the bulldozer approach.

At present the area is a half-razed ghost town below the bridge. This week the last of the solid granite columns and lintels of the classic brick buildings of the eighteen-thirties and forties are going down like tenpins on Ferry Street. They will be followed by the destruction of a curved-corner Greek Revival structure of a rare type described by Talbot Hamlin, the historian, in "The Greek Revival in America." Also listed in the book is a companion structure in the area, the Lorillard Building of 1837, demolished earlier by the city.

Jacob Street, for which the curved facade formed an entrance, was part of the city's early street pattern, evocative of New York's ship and sail-

ing days. Already closed off by wooden horses, its narrow outline blurred by rubble, Jacob Street will disappear into a modern superblock of skyscraper apartments.

This superblock, to be bounded by Gold, Fulton, Pearl and Frankfort Streets, will eliminate Ferry, Beekman and Cliff Streets as well as Jacob Street. The names and buildings

were redolent of New York history, and the scale was the human one of the 19th century.

This new seven-block, \$34-

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million development, to be carried out by the Tishman Construction Company, will feature three sets of twin apartment towers 25 to 30 stories high, with a kindergarten-through-second-grade school in the ground floor of one tower, four six-story residential buildings, two block-size, eight-story commercial buildings, and shops.

Some of the new six-story buildings will stand almost where the five-story historic rows were demolished. There is no rehabilitation or preservation in this plan.

Between buildings, there will be two open plazas and landscaped terraces over covered parking. Public walkways will permit passage through. The architects are Kelly & Gruzen, a New York firm responsible for some of the city's more progressive middle-income housing.

A Product of Revision

Compared with an earlier scheme of massed tower blocks, the present design represents the addition of a number of amenities intended to ameliorate the vastness and impersonality of new construction on this scale. The changes have been brought about by constant review by the Housing and Redevelopment Board, with responsive revisions by the architects and sponsor.

At the Tishman superblock's upper, or western boundary, Gold Street will be bridged by an overpass to the new \$13,-200,000 Pace College superblock, bounded by Gold, Spruce, Nassau Streets and the Brooklyn Bridge.

A continuous five-level structure will cover the entire two-block site, topped by an office and dormitory tower. The architects are Eggers & Higgins. This, like the Tishman scheme, is also a second, radically reworked version by the architects, which followed earlier studies by another firm.

Paralleling the Pace superblock will be the \$4,250,000 Beekman Hospital superblock, between Spruce and Beekman Streets. William Street will be eliminated from both projects.

Here the bulldozers are having a harder time. On the Pace site, the Tribune Tower with its massive additions to the original Richard Morris Hunt Building is in process of demolition.

10 Stories to Fall

There will be difficulties also at the corner of Gold and Ferry Streets, where the Tishman project begins, and where one of the city's sturdier examples of the proto-skyscraper style, the 1890 Healy Building, stands. Its 10 stories of tightly laid, intricate, rounded corner brickwork with terra-cotta inlays, much admired by historians and connoisseurs of the building art, will not give way as easily as the earlier, hand-crafted Greek Revival product.

Before the bulldozers moved in, Brooklyn Bridge Southwest was a shabby, but far from unsound, area of small businesses in low-rent, 19th-century commercial structures that ranged from the historically important and esthetically satisfying vernacular Greek Revival style to pleasant and serviceable Victorian.

Some buildings were in poor condition; others were well preserved. Land uses were a mixture of business and residential. New York's artists' colony, priced out of fashionable Greenwich Village, was finding its lofts and atmosphere hospitable. It was never a hard-core slum.

City officials are rueful, but they believe that they have had no alternative to letting the wrecking ball swing.

Long-Standing Commitments

The Housing and Redevelopment Board points to long-standing verbal commitments of land to the sponsors from the initiation of the project, all of whom have paid out substantial architectural development fees on the city's promises. The board's staff has invested substantial time and effort in the development of the proposals, since it took over from the Slum Clearance Committee in 1960. The lengthy relocation of tenants is complete. Off the record, the city admits to trying to make the best of a bad thing.

Critics of Brooklyn Bridge Southwest call it a compendium of just about everything that can go wrong in the renewal process. They consider it a negative object lesson for the large renewal programs now planned or in process in New York.

Differences of opinion begin with the selection of the site. The district was the typical "fringe" area that was favored by the city's early urban-renewal schemes - not really blighted enough to make the commercial developer shy away, but "gray" enough so that improvements could be quickly profitable. These sites were often arbitrarily chosen, according to the preferences of the real estate developers who offered to take on the job.

Second, critics cite sponsor selection. Developers were awarded the sites of their choice, on which they carried out their own plans, not the city's.

The Logue Report on Housing and Neighborhood Improvement in New York has summed up the procedure. It observes that this city's urban renewal in the nineteen-fifties was handled by the Slum Clearance Committee as a real-estate operation. There was no attack on the problems of the hard-core slums and the deteriorating stock of lower and middle-income housing. Economic, not social criteria, were employed.

In addition Brooklyn Bridge Southwest had two institutional tenants sorely pressed for space. Under urban renewal, the land write-down made pos-

sible by Federal grants made expansion very much more attractive than if expensive land were purchased at commercial rates.

Given three willing sponsors, verbal agreements were made that have been considered binding by later administrations and agencies, even though urban-renewal policies have since been drastically overhauled.

These commitments were formalized in 1960 and later when the Housing and Redevelopment Board succeeded the Slum Clearance Committee after a series of scandals broke about its operation. Questions were raised about methods of sponsor selection, delays in initiating projects and the prevalence of new luxury housing on renewal sites.

Only in Board of Estimate action this year, however, is title to the land and streets being transferred to the sponsors, over serious protests by some of the city's renewal-watchers, including the Architects Council of New York City.

Professional protest revolves around a larger issue: the lack of an over-all plan. The project has no relation to any of the surrounding downtown developments directly on its borders.

It has been contended by Nathan Ginsberg, the architect-watchdog of the Civic Center, in stormy Board of Estimate hearings, that the commitments in Brooklyn Bridge Southwest have become a peculiar instrument of urban paralysis.

Critics agree on these points:

Any flexible growth of the adjoining Civic Center, now under development, has been cut off completely by the renewal area's boundaries.

Any logical choice of possible solutions to Brooklyn Bridge traffic problems have been choked off. Bridge approaches are hamstrung, traffic is forced back into the Civic Center, and Civic Center decisions are being made of permanent functional and design inadequacy.

Within the area of the project experts fault the planning process further. In terms of urban design, the project never touched base with the history and character of the old city streets.

The streets themselves will disappear under skyscrapers and superblocks. There were no celebrated monuments, to save, but there were scattered stands of homogeneous brick

and stone-street architecture of the early 19th century that knowledgeable observers prize for pleasant proportions, a disappearing vernacular Georgian style and historic associations. This was punctuated by some notable Victoriana.

An 'Ambivalence' Felt

According to Jordan Gruzen, of the architectural firm of Kelly & Gruzen, "We felt ambivalent about the nice old brick buildings."

"The thing had gone so far," he said. "We had worked through a dozen versions since 1957. It was just always understood that it was to be total site clearance."

No architectural historian was consulted by the Housing and Redevelopment Board during the planning process; the Landmarks Preservation Commission had not yet come into existence.

The best urban renewal today is defined by urban-renewal administrators such as Edward J. Logue of Boston and Edmund Bacon of Philadelphia as the sensitive, efficient combination of new and old.

Preservation and rehabilitation retain the city's historic fabric and neighborhood character. It also keeps older housing and commercial spaces operative. New construction provides improvements and modern facilities. Together, the two create the elusive synthesis known as urban character.

With the urgent problems of the hard-core slums and the limited funds currently available for renewal in New York, many noncritical renewal area plans have been dropped. In city circles, Brooklyn Bridge Southwest is looked on as a kind of inherited bureaucratic juggernaut. It moves ahead with the ponderous relentlessness of the bulldozer itself.