

Boon to Harlem—or Disaster?

The new State Office Building for 125th Street, whose design was unveiled yesterday, promises to be exactly what was hoped for: a landmark and boost for the Harlem community. It also opens unlimited development possibilities for the city's investors and builders.

The fact that commercial capital is now looking uptown to the ghetto is a fine thing and it would be encouraging to believe that all the vistas are superb. But whether the investment infusion will be a boon or a disaster is already a matter of delicate balance.

Sparked by the State Office Building, 125th Street has been staked out by an alert real estate community as a potential bonanza. How that can be translated into social purpose will be a major problem for the city.

Clearly the question is whether the ghetto will attract a mere invasion of office buildings—one pulls another, like potato chips—or whether economic regeneration will be matched by environmental improvement. The results—in terms of people, not profits—will depend on how well the administration can channel into Harlem's real needs the multiple private proposals that are now being made.

The city could not be in a worse position to take the lead. When speed is needed, it is slow; where efficient processing would help, there is cumbersome machinery; where decision is critical, there is a tradition of equivocation. But for the first time the City Planning Commission has a practicing Urban Design Group that is aware of the purposes of ghetto redevelopment and professionally knowledgeable about how to achieve them. The commission is actually attempting to execute its master planning function.

If it can provide this guidance and make it stick in New York's jungle of frustrations and cross-purposes, the Rockefeller-sponsored Harlem office building will be a success. If it fails, nothing will have been generated in an area of tragic need except some sleek new real estate and new grounds for bitter discontent.