An Appraisal: Concept Points to 'City of Future' Pointing to 'City of Future'
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pg. 434

An Appraisal

Concept Points to 'City of Future'

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Ten years after a major revision of the city's zoning code, New York is proposing one of the most sophisticated zoning devices to be produced by urban man. (Urban man is that unusual animal who suffers the most sordid indignities for his dreams and sometimes comes up with the great advances of society.)

What the city has devised is a new type of special development district. How it would work appears in specific detail elsewhere on this page. But it is meant to be a coordinated attempt to order a whole piece of the urban environment.

The proposed Greenwich Street Development District is in the direct path of the spectacular commercial rebuilding going on in Lower Manhattan. This is one of the places where the New York environment has style. It contains a few gems of substance such as Cass Gilbert's Beaux Arts Brady Building on West Street, the cool glories of Cunard, and the baroque splendors of the Custom House, about to be replaced by quarters in the World Trade Center. Construction has been slowed by tight money and a decline in the office market, but the district also offers many prime "soft" sites.

Looking south toward the Battery just above Bowling Green, the 17th-Century curve of Broadway is walled tightly with the classic dignities of New York's first skyscraper age. The sedate, stone rhythms of pre-and-post-World War I cornices and colonades lead the eye to the green end of the island and the harbor.

To the east of the district, the towers of the financial center rise higher, romantically spired or square-topped and thin-skinned in today's taut taste. The profitable fusion of art and economics fills and darkens the narrow streets.

At the northern boundary, the world's biggest buildings are going up—the 110-story twin towers of the Trade Center, covered in lacy aluminum grilles like some outsize faerie fantasy.

Near the Trade Center is a pair of older twin towers, the 41-story shafts of the Equitable Building that outraged New Yorkers as they rose to their full height in 1914. The outcry led to the city's first zoning ordinance.

That was in 1916. Half a century later, the buildings and the problems have grown a great deal bigger. The questions of infringement on light and air that seemed so immense with the Equitable Building have now become monstrous matters of urban strangulation as the scale and bulk of the city's construction continue to break every previous standard. Barring fis-

Continued on Page 7, Col. 6

Pointing to 'City of Future'

Continued from Page 1

cal collapse, revolution or the bomb, and given the approval of the Board of Estimate, the Greenwich Street Development District is the city of the future. Ordinarily in New York, the city of the future would be the city of the immediate past. What the planners are saying is that there must be a better way.

The better way is a district plan—a firm area framework of prescribed circulation and service features such as underground concourses and shopping arcades that must be constructed with the buildings. The elements of the plan are written into the law with total specificity for city and builder. There are risks and unknowns, because planning is the empirical process of problem solving, but in concept the development district is a quantum leap in environmental design and control.

The development district has three basic objectives. It establishes the ratio of services to new development and population. It seeks to integrate the immense constructions of the adjacent Trade Center and Battery Park City with the fabric and functions of Lower Manhattan. And it is intended to preserve and enhance the kind of retail and pedestrian uses that are almost always lost through large-scale commercial construction, and that will be needed more than ever for the huge population influx of the Trade Center and Battery Park City.

It does not control design. It merely lists the conveniences and amenities the city says must be constructed. The developer makes his choice and builds. He does not have to "barter" bonuses for improvements because the process is automatic. This eliminates city-builder negotiations for special features as the price of special permits. No permits or variances are needed.

When the pieces—all of the building lots—go together, the result is to be a coordinated system of pedestrian circulation for the entire area, including bridges, underpasses, arcades, loggias and plazas, improved subway connections and platforms, direct connections with the World Trade Center and Battery Park City, and the integration of this better circulation and transportation with retail shopping and consumer services. The most distinctive feature would be a two-story "shopping way" along Greenwich and Liberty Streets.

"The basic point," says Richard S. Weinstein, director of the Office of Lower Manhattan Development, who has labored with builders, staff and lawyers to put the legislation together, "is that if you add people you must add improvements to handle the people. By making the improvements, you help not only the new people but the ones who are already there."

What has to be determined, often with more instinct than data, is the workable ratio between density and improved services, the point at which the city is better off with the new construction than without it. This is the proposal's point of vulnerability. But construction will come anyway, at slightly less density and measurably more chaos, without the plan.

All this is a far cry from the original limited zoning concerns of saving light and air through controls of building bulk and size. It is a whole new zoning ballgame.

When the 1916 formula were reshaped by the 1961 zoning, it took almost another decade to see the resulting environment whole. The trouble was, simply, that it wasn't whole. It was a spot-zoned, lot-zoned patchwork. Only the size and shape of the individual building and the space at its base were affected, by a series of essentially negative regulations. Each lot line abutted smugly on anarchy.

Third Avenue, built largely under the old zoning, shows simply how economics, left alone, drives out vital urban variety. The Avenue of the Americas' sterile towers on vacuous plazas, void of interest or use beyond banks and business showrooms, offer a now familiar and depressing three-dimensional demonstration of how the revised 1961 zoning works. It is a mortuary formula.

The need for amended zoning became clear, and the efforts that have followed include the special theater district, now in operation. Essential urban features, such as connections to the future Second Avenue subway, have been wrung out of builders as the price of zoning variances. The results are good but the negotiations have been scored as "deals." The discretionary powers the city took on through the process are looked on darkly as an avenue to corruption.

Accusations of erosion of the zoning code and fears of discretionary powers are countered by Donald H. Elliott, chairman of the City Planning Commission. "We see this as a natural, evolutionary kind of zoning," he says. "The idea is to make an area function by supporting it with technical facilities. By making this part of a specific plan, you eliminate the discretionary element completely."

There are some precedents for this kind of zoning plan, but no city has gone so far as New York. San Francisco has a general statute giving bonuses for improvements. London's Barbican has a series of elevated walkways executed as part of the design of a group of postwar buildings.

But New York is the first city to legislate precise planning results. It is first to make mandatory circulation patterns part of prescribed retail and recreational uses. And it is the first to tap its builder strength—a unique New York feature—to make these improvements possible through profitable cooperation of the private sector.

The Greenwich Street Development District is an extraordinarily shrewd and progressive scheme, at once a visionary and pragmatic investment in the future. If It succeeds, it will put New York on more than the zoning map.