

## ARCHITECTURAL VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# Splendor Overcomes Snafu In Battery Park City

**A** lot has happened in the ten years since Battery Park City was conceived as a new mixed-use community and kicked off into the Hudson River. Most notably, the sky fell in on New York, and Battery Park City didn't get built. But if that sounds like the end of the story, it's not. As things go in this city, it may only be the beginning.

New York is supposed to thrive on adversity, and adversity is one thing Battery Park City has had plenty of. Conceived by then-Governor Nelson Rockefeller in one of his Baron Haussmann moods, the project was to be built in Lower Manhattan on landfill in the Hudson, made in part from the World Trade Center excavation. To be initially financed by state bonds, it soon became the embattled child of city and state, presided over by the Battery Park City Authority, under Charles J. Urstadt.

The history of Battery Park City's planning, design and financing is a star-crossed study in how things can be done wrong, or go wrong, in a city where the grand snafu is a familiar way of life.

• • •

The virtually stillborn plan, hopeless in its banality, was rescued at least twice by consultant architectural midwifery and revised substantially by the city's urban design prodding. While a running design battle continued, the project's developers backed and filled, the office building market collapsed, inflation pushed costs sky high, and even the Authority's eminently marketable bonds became untouchable as moral obligation funding went under in the city and state's financial crisis. At the moment, grass is growing on 100 acres of completed, but empty landfill.

And so this may seem an odd time to announce that the plan for Battery Park City has come from a near-total lack of architectural and planning distinction to an exemplary state of design. Now that the project is bucking both the money market and the Emergency Financial Control Board, it has finally developed a concept that would add immeasurable benefit and amenity to New York. Today Battery Park City is not only worth investing in; it is worth fighting for.

To backtrack a bit, Battery Park City originally planned to erect large office towers at the southern tip of the landfill, just off the Battery, and to use the income from this commercial construction to build housing, shopping and community facilities. (Land preparation, services and open space were to be paid for by Authority bonds.) This southern point is still one of the superb sites of the world for the right builder.

But when an overbuilt commercial market made that task impossible, the Authority turned to state-aid housing for the first phase of the plan. What ensued was a waltz with developers Samuel Lefrak and Fisher Brothers out of which little came but controversy. Although Mr. Lefrak is known as a housing developer of large projects, he is not known as an architectural overachiever. He and his architects pushed for cookie-cutter conformity.

• • •

Eventually, Mr. Lefrak's architects were absorbed into the Authority's design team, headed by consultant Max Abramovitz of Harrison and Abramovitz. Mr. Abramovitz clustered the buildings in "pods," or neighborhood groups, using platform bases to conceal underground parking and to create pedestrian and vehicular separation.

Lower buildings joined the towers for variety of scale and housing options. And Lawrence Halprin and Associates was called in to work with the architects in the integrated design of the open space.

It is the way this open space is handled that has brought about the miraculous transformation of Battery Park City from a wasteland to a place any lucky New Yorker would want to live. Except for the "view corridors" to the river that New York City's planners insisted on, the spaces were desolate. The change is in how the buildings are related to each other and to the waterfront, in the attractive landscaping and design techniques used to define public, private

and transitional area, in the character they are given and the pleasures they provide. There are places for repose, recreation, circulation and continuous visual delight.

What has finally been clearly understood and dealt with is the quality of urban life and how it can be created through urban design. (New York has been acquiring a significant number of small doses of this kind of essential environmental amenity in the plazas, through-block passages and bits and pieces of usable open space that have resulted from its innovative zoning. I submit that while there is a long way to go, and vast, impacted areas have not been touched, the city is becoming a more physically agreeable place.)

Plans are complete for the first of Battery Park City's neighborhood units, which will consist of 1,642 apartments for about 5,000 people. The foundations have been constructed for three 34-story towers and three low buildings that are six, seven and eight stories high. Financing is being sought now.

To help find that financing at a time when money is almost impossible to get, the Authority has made an application to the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development for mortgage insurance. With that guarantee in hand, and with the help of the state's programs, it hopes to get the rest of the funding. The future hangs perilously on HUD's action now.

Even at \$130 (currently) a room, there should be a stampede for these apartments. The drama and beauty of the Lower Manhattan waterfront is incomparable, and some of the planned features surpass Waterside and Roosevelt Island, both of which have set new standards for New York. (Another New York characteristic is that no one believes that anything better can ever be done, and when it is done, over formidable obstacles, it is promptly taken for granted.)

• • •

The current design for the buildings of Battery Park City is credited to Mr. Abramovitz with Jack Brown and Irving Gershon. Strikingly different from earlier versions, they make a real try for variety of form and apartment layout. The completion of these units would, in turn, make possible the construction of subsidized, less expensive housing that is projected to the north.

This first neighborhood unit is grouped around a central space about the size of Waterside or Gramercy Park. It will be reached by a pedestrian bridge from Liberty Street, over the West Side highway. The bridge will join a north-south pedestrian spine that is a shopping street. Automobiles are to be routed to streets and parking below.

This shopping street becomes the highest of five pedestrian levels leading down to the river. These levels tie together a variety of public and private spaces. The public spaces will flow around the housing and along the shopping street to a generous park that gradually steps down (there is an outdoor elevator for the handicapped) across platforms and pools, to a terraced promenade, plaza and seating at the river's edge. The public waterfront esplanade will run the entire length of the landfill.

The houses are arranged to enclose another kind of park—a semi-public green space for the use of the residents of the surrounding buildings. The town houses are to have private yards. When levels change, play space is included on landscaped roofs. There is an organic and functional rationale for everything, and "keep out" is only a subtle shift of use and location. The public areas will be the largest, with the liveliest facilities.

• • •

The major part of the cost of all this outdoor amenity will be paid for by Authority bonds; one point in favor of a development agency is that a private builder can rarely afford such special features. There will be a range of experiences from community activity to serene privacy, and for all, dramatic riverfront walks and spectacular water views.

Landscape architect Lawrence Halprin calls the plan a "vertical greenbelt town." As designed now, New York cannot afford to lose it. Battery Park City has finally come out like a rose.