

Park Plaza East

New York is the place where dreams go monumentally awry. The New York City Educational Construction Fund had the fine idea of getting money for badly needed schools by building schools with offices, stores or apartments above them. Now plans for the fund's most ambitious undertaking to date—Park Plaza East, on what is known as the Asphalt Site at York Avenue from 90th to 92d Streets—is being bitterly attacked by its neighbors. Its opponents are calling it another Forest Hills.

That descriptive ignores certain critical differences. The Forest Hills project, in a small-scale, middle-class neighborhood, was never a well-designed development; it was false scatter-site housing inappropriate to the community. Park Plaza East, adjacent to luxury, high-rise housing, does not share these blatant defects. What both developments do share as a common basis for opposition, however, is fear—fear of change in a neighborhood, fear of outsiders, fear of extra burdens of density that could be a “tipping point” for community services and a reasonably comfortable status quo.

Before examining these fears at the Asphalt Site, it helps to set the record straight on several factors. The Educational Construction Fund did not impose its plans but worked closely with the local planning board and other concerned groups. The school, which the opposition claims is not needed, will replace three turn-of-the-century structures that no longer function properly; it could serve the large Ruppert Brewery redevelopment nearby.

The plan displays unusual sensitivities and promises much more public and community amenity than has been provided by surrounding luxury private development.

Density and rents have become the opposition's rallying cry. Here, too, the record must be set straight. The density, while high, is less than the site allows. Unplanned speculative construction would be far more destructive of the city's livability. The dilemma of run-away housing costs in New York is that nothing can be built without subsidy in any price range, and existing subsidy programs fail miserably to bring rents down to a level most people can afford. That problem is city-wide, not limited to Park Plaza East.

In fact, the basic problems here are the same issues that threaten this and virtually every housing development proposed in New York: catastrophic housing economics, proven municipal inefficiency and unproven resident fears. The city does not help in such matters as transportation, where its appalling no-planning policy takes the form of a “wait-and-see” attitude. Most ominous of all for the future of housing in New York, under the twin pressures of fear and uncertainty, the process of planning and design has become violently and irrationally politicized.

Fear and uncertainty build nothing, and politicization builds bad compromises. When a project such as Park Plaza East demonstrates a level of design and planning objectives so far above the private norm it should be encouraged, not victimized. No one has absolute answers to New York's housing challenge, but this proposal at least is worth trying.