Battery Park City, in 3d Plan, Hovers Between Dream and a Disaster

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

It is doubtful if any city has had so many incarnations before it was even born as Battery Park City, the new community to be built in the Hudson River at the edge of Lower Manhattan. The third official plan of Battery Park City is now undergoing review by New York City's Office of Lower Manhattan Development, as the first step toward City Planning Commission hearings and Board of Estimate approval.

An Appraisal

This is the version that the Battery Park City Authority intends to construct. The review process, called official by the authority and unofficial by the city's planners, gets the project moving. However, observers note that the moves are more like a slow gavotte than a headlong rush to acceptance by the city, with its planners known to be clearly unhappy with what they have been given.

Three versions make up a lot of planning since 1966, when the project was announced, and, except for one brief creative spurt in 1968, it seems to have been downhill all the way. The questions being asked now in professional circles are whether New York is getting a dream city or a disaster area, and why.

These are not small questions. Battery Park City will cover 100 acres of landfill in the Hudson River extending from the Battery to Duane Street, for a community of 90,000 people. This is a full-size city by any standard.

There has been continuous, concerned debate about density, transportation and services in relation to the already overburdened streets and systems of Lower Manhattan, exacerbated by the arrival of the World Trade Center.

The resolution of the "great divide"—the West Side Highway—is still being studied as state and city agencies argue the method of its mandated rebuilding. At present, it is a barrier between the landfill and Lower Manhattan.

Financing Altered

A large part of the basic financing for the project has had to be switched from office building with private capital, when the office boom collapsed, to housing with state funds. Although the New York builder Harry Helmsley has signed on as office developer, commercial construction will now be last instead of first, when the market permits. Commercial financing can no longer carry housing, schools and services, as planned.

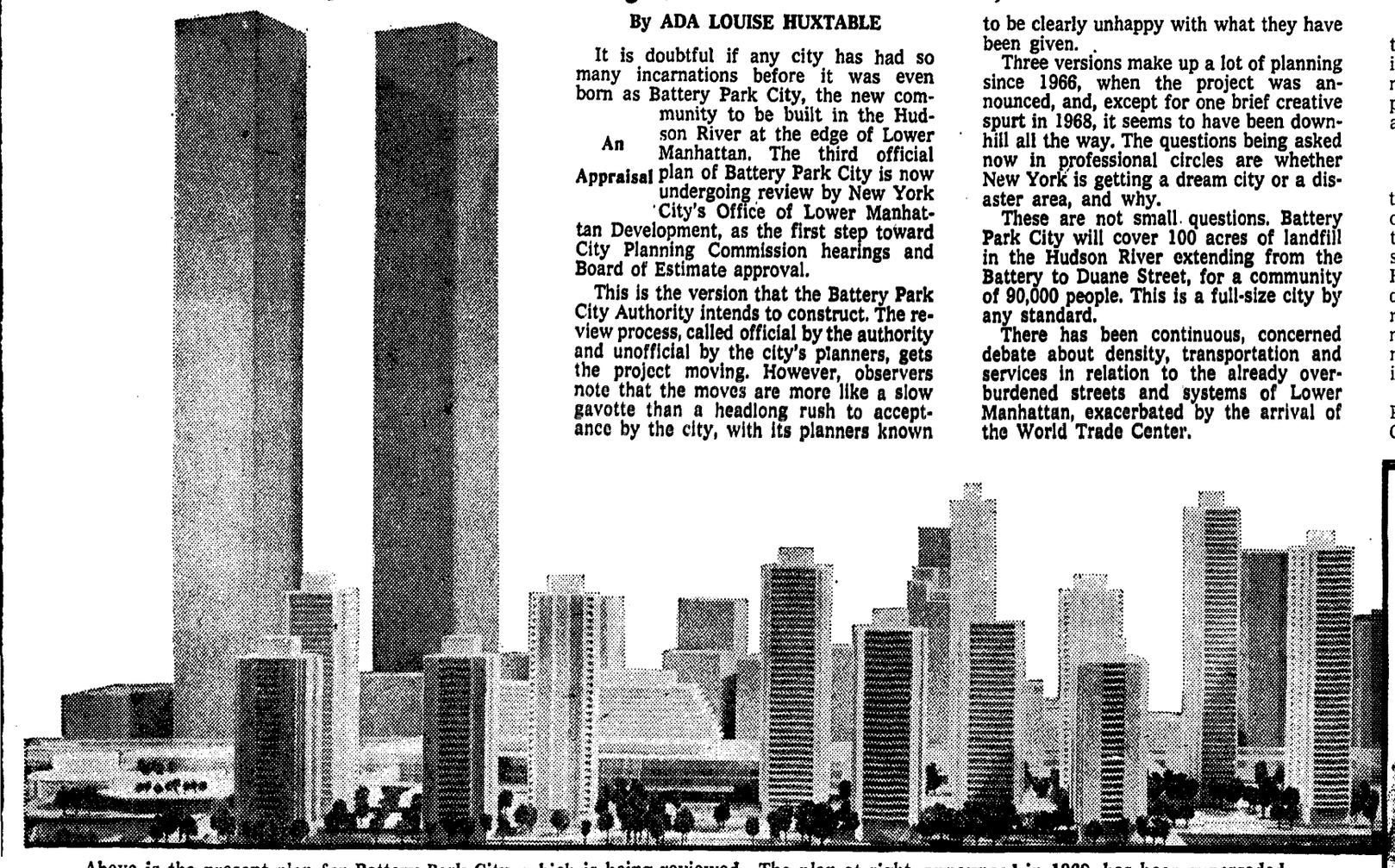
Bonds already issued by the Battery Park City Authority, which was set up by Governor Rockefeller and the State Legislature with power to plan, finance and construct the land and buildings, are troublesomely remote from yielding a return. There is speculation that the state might have to produce the revenue if the authority fails to do so in a reasonable time.

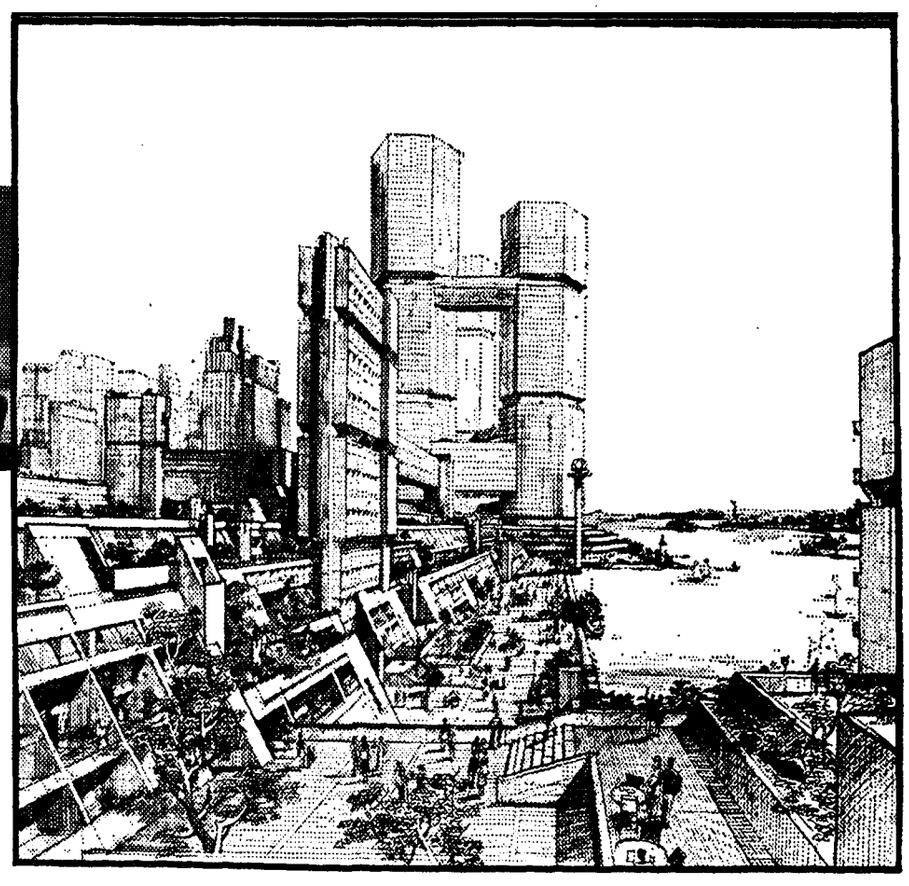
If these were not problems enough, the question of design authority, in this totally new piece of Manhattan, is confused and chaotic. Design quality is under attack. And costs mount daily.

At present, the Battery Park City Authority, headed by Charles J. Urstadt, sits high over the Hudson on Rector Street watching the landfill take shape.

A bit farther east, on Lafayette Street, the Office of Lower Manhattan Development is watching the Battery Park City Authority. City and state have been in-

Continued on Page 37, Column 5





Above is the present plan for Battery Park City, which is being reviewed. The plan at right, announced in 1969, has been superseded.

Battery Park City: Dream or Disaster?

Continued From Page 27

volved in a continuous hassle over what the project will be since the Rockefeller-Lindsay battles at its initiation.

'Box-Top Architecture'

The very first proposal, announced with great fanfare by the Governor in 1966, was a slick, brochure-type presentation of sterile high-rise towers in vacuous open space that caught the city completely off guard. It was pure "box-top architecture" —something that can be torn off at the dotted line, because it has no relation to anything around it.

Almost simultaneously, the city released a master Lower Manhattan Plan that had been in preparation for some time. This was a thoughtful proposal for land use, residential and commercial development and waterfront reclamation that set a new standard for urban-design sensitivity.

It also proposed landfill development. But it had nothing to do with Battery Park City, and Battery Park City had nothing to do with Lower Manhattan.

Some fast political footwork brought reconciliation and, in time, a new Battery Park City plan. In 1968, both the Mayor and the Governor unveiled a scheme developed by a team of designers that could only have been put together by a clubhouse deal or a marriage broker, or both.

The Compromise Plan

The coalition included the Governor's original architects, Harrison & Abramovitz, in addition to Conklin & Rossant, the New York architects of the Lower Manhattan Plan, which had also been prepared by Wallace, McHarg, Roberts & Todd of Philadelphia and Alan M. Voorhees and Associates of Washington. Architectural diplomacy was provided by the firm of Johnson & Burgee.

The result was a brilliant, schematic compromise to which all had contributed, containing urban-design ideas from the waterfront parks, inlets and marinas of the Lower Manhattan Plan to a multilevel "service spine" along the length of the development.

It was conceived as a "linear city" with a platform 28 feet above the river, and most of its features were predicated on the profitable, first-stage erection of three huge office towers at the southern tip.

The city and the state then signed a lease that virtually built in the plan's basic elements. The coalition architects dropped from sight.

The plan's virtues were its imaginativeness and its comprehensiveness—until that point, New York had been built as a series of disconnected, block-size speculative adventures. The plan was received enthusiastically, and then its troubles began.

The Manhattan office market went soft. That blew the three office towers and the scheme's essential financial base.

The city's urban designers at the Office of Lower Manhattan Development grew increasingly disturbed at the plan's lack of relationship to existing configurations of Lower Manhattan.

They were developing large plans of their own for contiguous areas, stressing waterfront promenades, views through to the water and an attempt to create human scale at the street level of massive new construction. They feared a "Chinese wall" effect offshore and wanted connections and continuity with the new development.

A Deadlock Design

Battery Park City now found its heralded scheme elaborately expensive, in conflict with the city's objectives, and financially inoperative. To keep it alive, the Authority switched from commercial construction to 5,800 units of housing as its base and first phase, using $4.5-million of Mitchell-Lama funds from the state. It began to redesign.

The Authority acquired, in a still-unconsummated relationship, Samuel Lefrak and the Fisher Brothers as potential housing developers. It also acquired an architectural consultant, Max Abramovitz of Harrison & Abramovitz, and a director of architecture, William Halsey. The developers brought their "in-house" architects and preset formulas. A design deadlock set in.

It is an open secret that there are bruising battles going on between consulting and city architects and the developers. Mr. Urstadt sits in a Solomon-like position, adjudicating the developers' demands and the architects' objections. So far, the result is a disastrous draw.

The new plan is a curious one. It started out looking a lot like Lefrak City. The "service spine" with its separate levels of cars and people and skylit gallery of stores and restaurants became a "future shopping center," and waterfront coves and inlets were reduced to tokens.

With pressure from the Office of Lower Manhattan Development and the consultant architect, some modifications have been made. But it still looks like outer borough limbo.

Cliché Planning

Those modifications include a slight staggering of the towers to form some relationship with existing Manhattan streets and the city's demand for water sightlines, a park backing on the World Trade Center, and some circulatory connections. The city-state lease has had to be totally rewritten.

The consultant architect has fought for, and gotten, underground parking by adding unpromising platform bases to the buildings. He has also fought for, and not gotten, low-rise units to temper the inhumanity of the towers.

As it stands now, Battery Park City is back to the clichés of bottom-line planning: a standardized high-rise formula in a standardized open space. Except for apartments with spectacular water views, and the consultant architect's insistence on ground-level waterfront access, it is back to the cooky cutter. The tragically missing element and amenity is urban design.

Since the developers' mortgage money will come from the Battery Park City Authority's Mitchell-Lama funds, higher standards and tighter controls have been possible from the start. The problem is whether those standards are really understood, and how a hopelessly fragmented and emasculated architectural setup can possibly achieve them.

"We are losing $50,000 a day while we sit and wait," Mr. Urstadt says nervously. The real question is whether the city is losing a $1.1-billion planning opportunity for the future.