Waterfront City
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Sometimes it seems accessible only to the gulls, or to those native explorers who know how to find their way to it—but New York's waterfront is the city's lost resource. There are 578 miles of it, and a wide variety of conditions from parks and wetlands and luxury housing to residual industry and rotting piers, and in their own way New Yorkers love and use—and misuse—it.

There is also a tremendous potential for pleasure in a waterfront city, and about as many conflicting views on how to use it as there are possibilities. All this is addressed by a comprehensive study called "The New York City Waterfront," prepared by the City Planning Commission. "The waterfront," the study states, "is an entity that is more than some of its parts."

These parts have developed, as with most cities, according to expediency: shipping, industry wanting the convenience of water transport, business and institutions looking for cheap land. They have usurped the city's greatest natural asset. As some of these uses have atrophied or moved, it has become clear that other uses would be better.

At this time, whole new waterfront communities are being created (Battery Park City and Manhattan Landing) and old communities are demanding greater control. Queens and Brooklyn waterfronts are being transformed residentially and commercially. The future of the West Side Highway hangs fire. A new passenger ship terminal and convention center are being built in Manhattan, and only yesterday it was announced that a huge housing project was now being planned for Penn Central yards along the Hudson. So much along the waterways is in flux and change, and so much of this land is city-owned, that New York must plan now if the second opportunity is not to be lost more irrevocably than the first.

This means balancing economics and environment; reconciling production of jobs and the preservation of natural systems. There are technological problems of waste, pollution and transportation. The future of the waterfront is a massive land-use project of delicate balance and intricate interrelationships.

But above all, it means returning the waterfront to the people, making the rivers and bays usable again, providing parks, recreation, marinas and promenades, building housing without walling off views, streets and availability.

In the nineteenth century New York was a great port city, and its pleasures included watching its ships and enjoying the commerce of the sea. In the twentieth century, only the increasingly rare deep-throated horns signaling ship arrivals and departures suggest the romantic maritime past, as the sense of island life has retreated Today, needs and uses are different, but the reality and beauty of the city as an island must be regained. The waterfront must be a part of New York life again.