

# Planning a Better Manhattan, Faster

The draft development study for midtown Manhattan that the city's planners have just released does not exactly make light summer reading. Its proposals include a major revision of tax incentives and a complete revamping of the city's zoning. Both are badly needed.

The East Side is being overbuilt in ways that mock the original purpose of New York's zoning law — to preserve light and air. And while developers vie in ingenious ways to squeeze large buildings onto small sites in the city's fashionable core, the areas to the south and west remain depressed, and Times Square teeters permanently on the brink of renewal. To help market forces make the courageous leap to the West Side, and to get Times Square renewal moving, some kind of effective strategy is clearly necessary.

The planners propose ending the tax breaks for builders in midtown and shifting them west and south. They would also use urban renewal powers to redevelop the most stagnant areas, emphasizing public investment where it will help most, such as the Convention Center and Times Square improvements. And they would alter zoning rules to make a much greater variety of sites appealing to developers — rewarding greater size in underbuilt areas and smaller size in overbuilt areas.

All of these suggestions are on the right track. Unfortunately, they won't be available overnight. The zoning changes will require months of consultation. Changes in the law may take two years. But at least those actions that can be taken fairly quickly, like tax

incentives, can now be part of a total strategy; construction that fits the new planning pattern could get the kind of boost that would make the right thing happen faster, and in a form most useful to the city.

The study acknowledges that the state of the zoning art is quite different in 1980 from what it was in 1961, when the last zoning overhaul took place. In major office buildings, the 1961 ordinance encouraged an "ideal" tower in a plaza, regardless of effect on the surroundings. Now the aim is to reinforce rather than destroy desirable shopping avenues and neighborhoods where they exist. The proposed zoning shows an admirable new concern with context, while reviving a necessary concern for preserving light, air and view.

But the draft does not go far enough. By stopping at 60th Street, the planners ignore the obvious threat of overlarge and overconcentrated building uptown. The disruption of older residential avenues, from West End to Park, by sky-blocking structures is just as damaging as the commercial jockeying in midtown. The same principles worked out for midtown apply to the north, and they should be extended quickly.

Speed is the essential operative word. Areas like Times Square hang in the balance. If discussion and revision take too long, these promising proposals will become another set of good intentions. Some could be acted on immediately. All could go a long way toward building a better city.