

## The Editorial Notebook: A Squint at South Street

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### The Editorial Notebook

# A Squint at South Street

Few dreams have foundered as often as that of the South Street Seaport in Lower Manhattan. The small, fragmented enclave of 19th-century streets and piers on the East River is about all that remains of New York's sailing days, and bits and pieces of it keep slipping away even as efforts are made to save it. The South Street Seaport Museum, using Federal grants, is carefully restoring some buildings. But the museum's debts are mounting. Plans for the historic block called Schermerhorn Row disturb its artist-residents. The Seaport is being encircled by development. The smell of fish and the sight of somnolent cats on the cobblestones of the Fulton Market are among the area's only constants.

A new plan has been announced by a shipload of state and city officials. The Rouse Company, a development firm that made the Faneuil Hall Marketplace the hottest property in Boston, has signed an agreement in principle with the South Street Seaport Museum, the City of New York and the New York State Urban Development Corporation. The Faneuil Hall Marketplace has become a model of historical "recycling" and successful merchandising for the rest of the country and, if the finances fall into place, Rouse will try the same formula here. A \$60-million development is expected to be the catalyst for an eventual \$210-million Seaport project that will preserve old buildings and construct new ones, for commerce and for culture.

### *Piecemeal Restoration Can Waste Its Charm In a Moment of Success*

So far, so good — although the Seaport does pose problems that Boston's old market did not. Faneuil Hall was and is a unified group of three long buildings. The Seaport area is a more fragile, discontinuous group of small structures. Moreover, the new Seaport plan calls for uninterrupted retail space that would push the museum's facilities upstairs and around corners. The main emphasis would be on lively, trendy shops and restaurants, and Fulton Street would become the area's retail spine. The plan is a far cry, in short, from the original idea of a nostalgic street of sailing ships.

Yet if the project in Boston is a model, Rouse's standards will be high. And if the result is a shopping center rather than a Seaport, it will be the answer to the museum's most ardent prayer: income thrown off by the commercial activities would pay its debts and support it in the future.

Besides the Rouse Company's stake, \$28 million will be needed in Federal, state and city funds. This public investment raises a few issues of public policy. The artists in the area who started the revitalization feel that the plan should put more emphasis on "recreational, cultural and educa-

tional opportunities." Their suggestions deserve consideration.

But perhaps the plan's most ironic deficiency is that its success would threaten the Seaport itself. Although the area is listed on the National Register of Historic Places from Brooklyn Bridge to John Street, the designation provides no legal protection, and some of its best blocks are neither owned by the Seaport nor covered by the plan. They will therefore become instantly vulnerable to market pressures that trade on the area's historic character and charm while at the same time destroying it.

The Seaport proposal will accelerate the changes that have started. Sites for luxury housing have already been assembled. Buildings are being converted into condominiums. A large office tower is about to rise two blocks away. Owners of some smaller, historic structures who have been carefully restoring them feel shadowed by big building.

Any plan for the Seaport must also protect the old blocks and buildings surrounding it. Unless appropriate measures are taken, the Seaport's survival will be guaranteed only through the sacrifice of its architectural context.

The message that hasn't arrived from Boston is that Faneuil Hall is part of an official, effective master plan. The New York proposal is welcome, but it needs more thought and work. **ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE**

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