

East River Change

There are no easy answers to institutional change or expansion in New York. The hospitals and universities that have made the city great have often had disastrous impacts on their neighborhoods. Local communities, remembering past hurts, bitterly oppose institutions' plans.

The institutions on and near Manhattan's York Avenue, which included the New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, Rockefeller University, the Hospital for Special Surgery, the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Center and the Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital, represent a tremendous asset to New York, forming one of the world's finest medical, research and educational complexes. The need at these institutions for new facilities is real; their legal right to build them is clear; and the advantages they offer the city are incalculable.

The institutions' plan to use the air rights over the East River Drive for their proposed new construction will cause no further separation of the city from the riverfront than already exists. In every other respect, it is a far more commendable procedure than the community dismemberment that would be caused if the institutions demolished property they own west of York Avenue. In exchange for the air rights, the city has worked out a meticulously detailed agreement requiring the institutions to adapt to the city's wishes and requirements their designs for everything from ramps, streets and site coverage to materials and furnishings for a new waterfront promenade. This arrangement includes city design review every step of the way. Contractual agreements of this kind, based on long-range goals and community viability, are a significant planning innovation.

The solutions are not perfect. Though the air rights plan requires no relocation, there will be pressures on the adjoining community for staff housing in the next decade, aggravating the citywide problem of low- and moderate-income housing. The architects have failed to find a way to create entry to the riverfront promenade except from the terminal ends of its eight-block length. Moreover, the materials, planting and other amenities specified in the city contract for the elevated waterfront promenade are all that save it from stony sterility.

Continuing attempts are needed to accommodate the community in terms of tenant protection, health services and river access. But it is clear that this is a careful effort to deal with the future of central-city institutions in terms of thoughtful planning and design. On balance, we agree with the City Planning Commission that the project should move ahead.