

# ARCHITECTURE VIEW: 'DEVELOPMENT' AT THE SEAPORT 'DEVELOPMENT' AT THE SEAPORT

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## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

AND LOUISE HUXTABLE

# 'Development' At the Seaport

In 1960, Peck's Slip looked like the picture on this page: six small, old, vernacular Georgian houses of the 18th and early 19th Century standing against the splendid backdrop of the Brooklyn Bridge — one of the city's oldest and rarest, intact architectural survivals.

The same picture taken on the same spot today shows an impeccably aristocratic Georgian facade and an improbably stylish Greek Revival arcade with a view of the bridge beyond. It is all illusion; the buildings and the view are actually painted on the blank side of a Con Ed substation built in the early 1960's. All of Peck's Slip, except the single building at the far right, or river, end, was demolished at that time. One fake old house was built next to the one real old house, in a curious attempt to diminish the damage, and the rest was replaced by a particularly hideous blank wall.

The trompe l'oeil mural on that wall comes to you

courtesy of Con Ed, City Walls, and the Landmarks Preservation Commission. It is the work of Richard Haas, the master of make-believe who specializes in binding up urban architectural wounds by painting what either no longer exists on walls that shouldn't be there, or by restoring missing parts or creating outright fantasies with great skill and wit. The mural is far more attractive than a plaque commemorating the destruction of the landmark would be. But when there is talk about designating the mural as a landmark, then illusion becomes delusion, at the total expense of real values.

We know that all is illusion, of course, if we believe our literary sources. And it also follows that reality is often more problematic (and considerably less profitable) than make believe. In an ironic sequel, the Peck's Slip mural is a symbol for what is happening to the South Street Seaport, the area that directly adjoins it.

The South Street Seaport, conceived by Peter Stanford and aided and administered by many fine people, has been struggling for about 15 years to achieve its objective of setting up a maritime museum in the Schermerhorn Row — a block on Fulton Street similar to the original Peck's Slip, but not quite as good — and restoring the area's buildings in a way that would preserve both their historic character and the scale and ambiance of these old streets, of which so few remain.

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Much progress has been made, but the Seaport's financial problems have been overwhelming. Now they appear to be solved. The Seaport has just signed a contract with the Rouse Corporation — the developers of Boston's fantasti-

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Garth Huxtable

**A 1960 view of buildings at Peck's Slip—most have been demolished**

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# 'Development' at the Seaport

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cally successful Faneuil Hall Market in the restored and remodeled Greek Revival Quincy Market Buildings of the 1820's — to do the same sort of thing in New York. With the help of the architectural firm that did the Boston work, Benjamin Thompson Associates, the Seaport will be transformed into a similar preservation-merchandising complex. Its museum operations will be shifted to the vicinity of Burling Slip, adjacent to its pier and ships, and its restored 19th Century shops will remain.

The project is actually already in its second phase. Phase one consisted of a \$250,000 study by the Rouse organization, funded by the Astor Foundation, which determined that the commercial development of the Seaport was feasible. Phase two is the preparation of plans for adapting the old buildings and designing new ones, which will be presented in May.

What the Rouse people consider necessary for the success of this kind of venture is 200,000 to 250,000 square feet of contiguous retail space. This will be achieved by creating a shopping "corridor" on Fulton Street. The first two floors of Schermerhorn Row will be turned over to commercial uses, and a new building will be constructed oppo-

site on the empty site of the old Fulton Market, possibly of the greenhouse type that has been added to the Boston complex. There is a future possibility of a pier-platform continuing over the water at the river end.

This complex is expected to yield a percentage of profits for the Seaport of about \$1 million the first year, with rising expectations after that. Beyond the money, the advantages and appeal of the plan are obvious. It will "save" the Seaport; it will "recycle" the old buildings to a useful end; and, as in Boston, it will add profit and pleasure downtown, where both are needed.

How can one quarrel with both salvation and success? I am less than happy with some of the details of the Faneuil Hall Market transformation, but I can only commend the genuine concern for the past with which the job has been done. Strict design and retailing standards have been observed.

But the fact is that Boston's Quincy Market complex, which consists of unified, axially composed, block-long structures focused on the strong, domed market in the center, can hold its own architecturally and urbanistically against the overwhelming paraphernalia of a chic and trendy shopping center. That is a balance that will be very hard to establish in the more modest and scattered Seaport buildings.

Can one really create 200,000 square feet of contiguous shopping in a fairly random bunch of small, frail 19th-century buildings without essentially destroying them? To make the space, will they all be "restored back" to neat and sanitary stylistic uniformity as was done in Boston by the Redevelopment Authority? Is it possible, or desirable, to avoid an inevitable total metamorphosis of the area? Does destruction by any other name smell sweeter because it also smells of money and success?

What Rouse and Thompson have pioneered in Boston — and they have done it extraordinarily well — is a highly civilized advance on the banality of the suburban shopping center and a brilliant way of revitalizing downtown.

The results are already being imitated, and it is quite possible that a number of good old buildings will be saved. But the approach is well on the way to becoming a formula, with all of the standardization and exploitation that this implies, even with the best intentions.

I have very mixed feelings for the Seaport. I guess that what I am really doing is saying goodbye. Because what will surely be lost is the spirit and identity of the area as it has existed over centuries — something that may only be important to those of us who have loved the small, shabby streets and

buildings redolent of time and fish, or shared the cold sunlight of a quiet winter Sunday morning on the waterfront with the Fulton Market cats, when the 19th century still seemed very much alive.

The project is now appropriately called the Seaport Development. It seems guaranteed to save the Seaport from an uncertain future. But it is not the preservation of a place. There are a lot worse things, as long as we do not fool ourselves about what we are doing. It is a little hard for some of us to accept the reality that what is at the end of the preservation rainbow is the shopping center.

Which brings us back to the Peck's Slip mural. I eye its charms dubiously, because it does nothing whatever to make up for the loss of the landmark buildings that stood there for so long, and that should have been preserved.

My reasons for preferring reality over illusion have to do with the culture of cities and the qualities of place, and how such places, when they survive, give a city the irreplaceable, enriching references of history and style. You don't do this with paint or clever merchandising. I still feel pain for the loss of Peck's Slip, and for the Greek Revival warehouses on Water Street destroyed for street widening, and the splendid 19th century mix of Brooklyn Bridge Southwest destroyed by the urban renewal bulldozer. There is never any substitute for the real thing.