

The Convention Center

The proposed Convention Center is the key to one of the most potentially dynamic development areas of Manhattan: the midtown West Side.

With the adjacent new ship terminal, it is the beginning of realistic reconstruction of the entire area in the West Forties from the river to Eighth Avenue. It also sets in motion the forces of community versus commercial development—in this case, the Clinton residential community's continuing fight to preserve itself from the new investment desirability of the area and from the building boom that will inevitably follow.

New York needs a convention center; and this one is being competently designed. The project has been moved to its present offshore site from an inland location as the result of neighborhood protests, but there is no place where such an immense facility would not cause disruption of some sort.

As it is, the building's bulk is to stretch for four blocks along the river's edge, a policy we decry because, as stated in an editorial earlier this week, it cuts off the city from the waterfront. The Convention Center will offer instead a rooftop park and recreation area and public restaurants. The danger here, as always, is that such amenities, even when budgeted, have a curious way of disappearing with rising construction costs, and they do not replace lost water vistas through the streets from the center of this island city.

The local planning board and the Clinton community are asking the city essentially for the same kind of priority for neighborhood needs as the city is obviously giving to this large commercial undertaking that promises such economic benefits. The request is fair enough and the City Planning Commission has responded.

But the city is sitting on top of a speculative volcano; the West Side is its last frontier. The problem for the planners will be the preservation of the existing community against rising development pressures. New construction proposals—there are already announced plans for 4,000 luxury and Mitchell-Lama apartments—will have to be dealt with skillfully and sensitively, using zoning and buffer areas to control the location and kind of development and to keep the present community alive.

It is not the fact of the Convention Center that is the issue, but its effect. It can go the usual route of gigantic, sterile commercial trade-off or be turned into a generator of the kind of vital and varied assets the city needs. This cannot be done without planning commitment and controls in this and future administrations. And the question remains, in spite of the obvious traffic advantages of the island's periphery and the almost insuperable difficulties of an inland location, whether it should be on the waterfront at all.