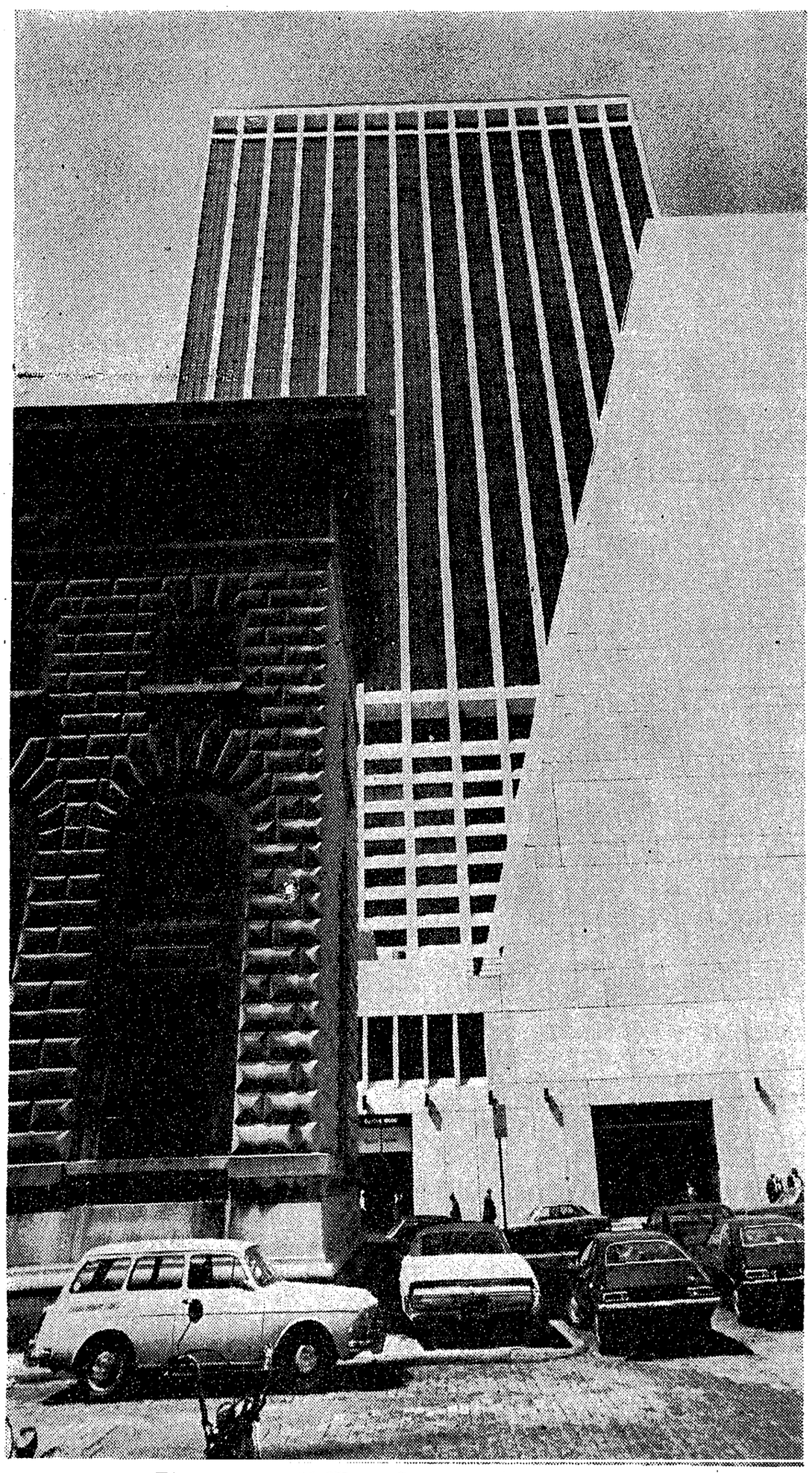
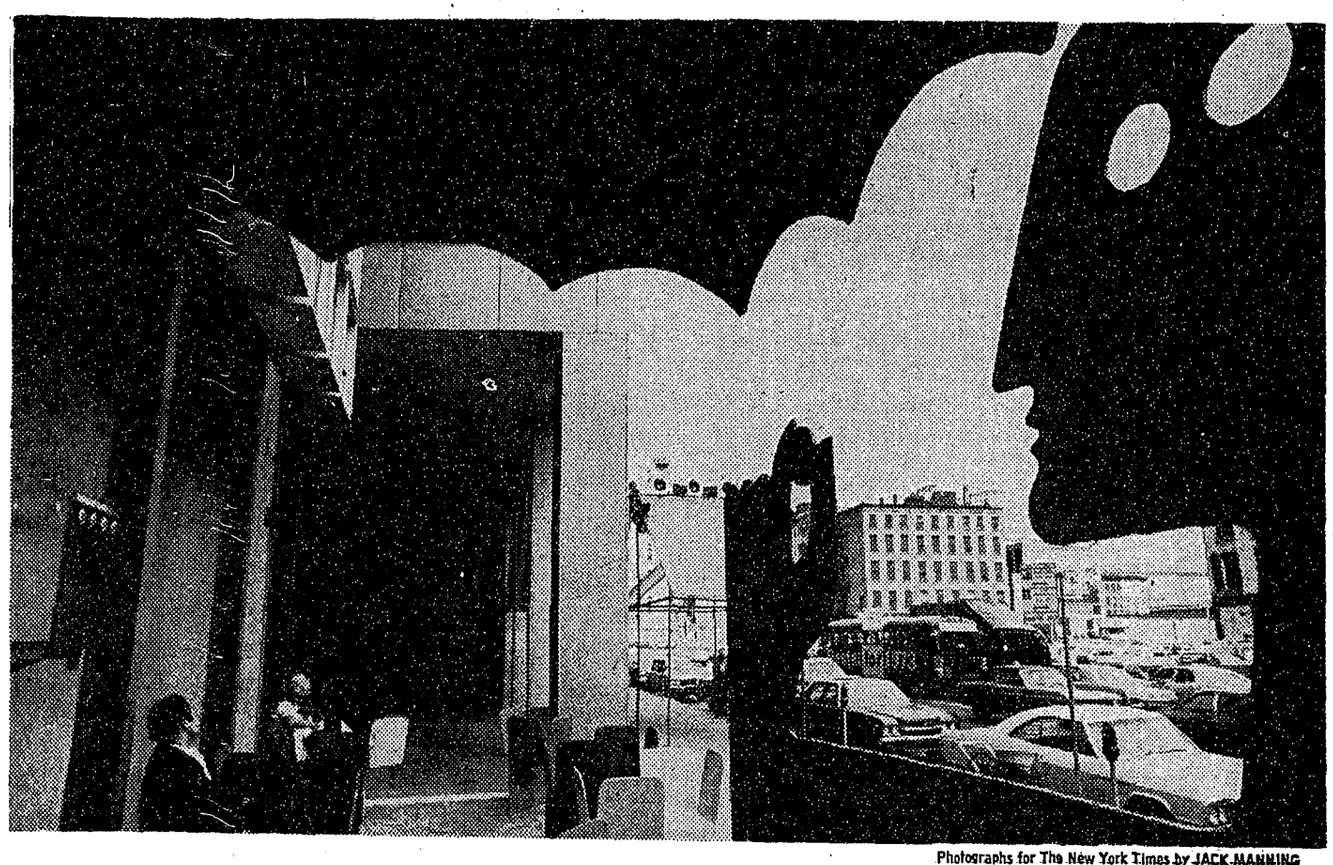
Innovative Design and Planning Take Shape in Lower Manhattan



The vast new 55 Water Street towers over Old Slip police station



Photographs for The New York Times by JACK MANNING

Tables and chairs and an unusual telephone booth at right are part of new scene

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York destroys and renews itself periodically—for better or worse. Consensus and cynicism usually have it for worse, but there are exceptions to every rule. The exception right now is Lower Manhattan, where a combination of economic vitality, determined business leadership and revolutionary urban design are creating a new city while erasing the old one. The difference is that the new construction is not a result of traditional speculative building processes, but of the city's conscious care and guidance and original planning thought. That, in New York, is a definite novelty. The transformation is proceeding on a grand scale, and it is beginning to be strikingly visible now.

An Appraisal

The philosophy and techniques that are reshaping the oldest part of Manhattan are being realistically translated into design and law by city agencies, and into steel and glass by private developers.

The specific site plan, so long a staple of the planning business, is considered obsolete. One hesitates to call the process city planning, because it barely resembles that discredited discipline of neat and wishful blueprints of the future. That kind of future, tricked by the perverseness of destiny, never arrives. The methods and results in Lower Manhattan are so innovative that they are being watched by the rest of the world.

In the process of carrying them out, there are losses and gains. Some results are good and others disappointingly bad. History is taking a beating. But much of the quality of the new downtown development, in terms of increased sensitivity to the city's character and needs, and in the provision of unprecedented amenities, has an unaccustomed humanity and even occasional excellence. For New York, that is a novelty, indeed.

In Lower Manhattan, the future is now.

¶On Water Street alone, 17 million square feet of office space have been built in the last five years, in structures that range from handsome to banal. The best are 88 Pine Street, a design of sophisticated refinement by I. M. Pei, and 77 Water Street, a sleek skin building by Emery Roth and Sons. Prodded by the planners, most make provisions for future

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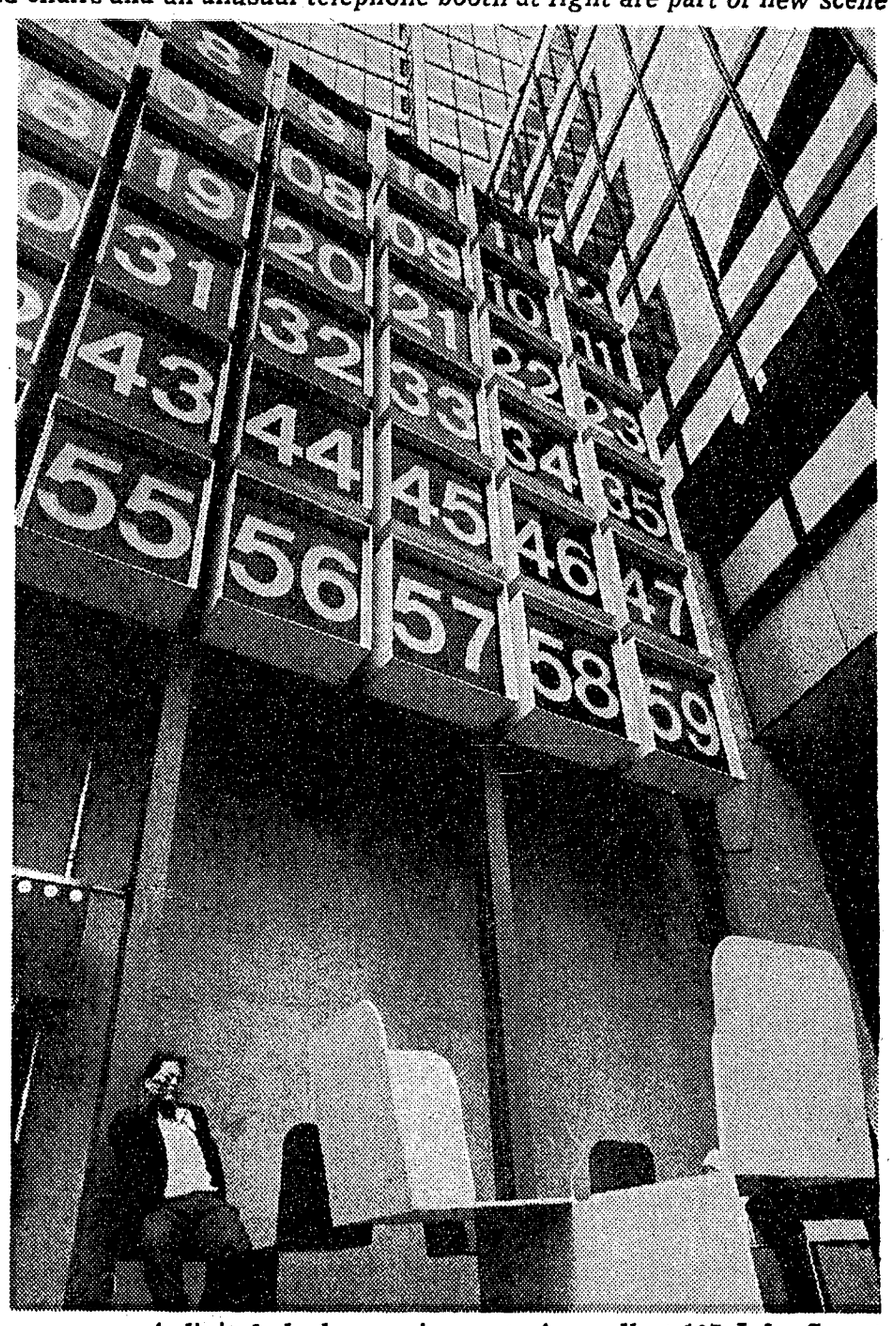

A digital clock occupies part of a wall at 127 John Street

A Progress Report On Downtown Area To Be Given Today

The Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association, the group of prominent businessmen that has helped spark the redevelopment of the southern end of Manhattan, has announced that it will hold a news conference this morning to report on the redevelopment efforts thus far and on what is projected through 1980.

This will be the fourth report by the association, which was founded 15 years ago, when some businessmen had begun to fear that Lower Manhattan was dying.

The first report, in 1958, recommended the redevelopment of large sections of the area and the widening of some streets. Subsequent reports noted the progres made in these efforts over the years and made additional recommendations.

The association also has been involved in fostering such projects as staggered work hours to relieve subway congestion, and it helped convince the city that the first stage of the planned Second Avenue subway line should be extended south to the Financial District, rather than ending at 34th Street.

The association also sought to coordinate the various governmental agencies dealing with lower Manhattan, an effort that led to the establishment by Mayor Lindsay in 1967 of the Office of Lower Manhattan Development.

The association's impact is related in large part to the prominence of its members — "no mean bunch of guys to fool around with," as one person close to the association put it. The chairman of the association is David Rockefeller, chairman of the Chase Manhattan Bank, and the association's pre ident is Edmund F. Wagner, chairman of the Seamen's Bank for Savings.

Construction Costs For Downtown Put At Over $5-Billion

According to Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association figures, more than $5-billion in city and pirvate funds has been spent on or committed since 1958 to new construction and planned development in Lower Manhattan.

This includes two city-size new communities—Battery Park City and Manhattan Landing—that will extend the existing boundaries of Lower Manhattan into the Hudson and East Rivers.

Battery Park City will be built on 91-acres of landfill in the Hudson River, from the Battery to Reade Street, at a cost of $1.1-billion, for 45,000 residents and 30,000 workers in office, retail and service facilities. There will be 14,100 apartments occupying 81 acres. Plans call for schools, a library, a health center, shops, restaurants and recreational, police and fire facilities. Twenty-two acres will be devoted to public plazas and a waterfront park and esplanade.

Manhattan Landing is estimated at a total of $1.2-billion in construction costs and will occupy 113 acres on platforms in the East River, to be built between the shore and the pierhead line from the Staten Island Ferry Terminal to the Brooklyn Bridge. It will contain 6,500 units of housing, 6 million square feet of commercial space, a new Stock Exchange, a marina, a shopping center, two new parks and the 33-acre South Street Seaport. It will also feature a riverfront promenade.

The Downtown Lower Manhattan Association estimates that there will be three times the present residential population—100,000 people—in new housing in lower Manhattan by 1980.

Since 1958, office space in the downtown business district has doubled, with almost 47 millior square feet of new construction

Innovative Designs and Planning Are Beginning to Take Shape and Transform Lower Manhattan

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connections to the proposed Second Avenue subway and have sidewalk arcades.

¶At 55 Water Street, the largest privately built office structure in the world (Uris Buildings Corporation and Emery Roth and Sons) is now complete, eclipsing the Pan Am Building. It features a system of underground shopping concourses and an upper pedestrian plaza that will link directly with the $1.2-billion, 113-acre housing and office construction of Manhattan Landing, a project to be built on platforms in the East River.

¶The Uris Buildings Corporation has also paid for the design and construction of a completely rebuilt Jeanette Park adjoining 55 Water Street and will maintain it for the city. The once seedy little space is now a brick-paved plaza with cascades and pools, steps and benches, designed by M. Paul Friedberg and Associates.

Although the park is handsome, it is oppressively hard-surfaced, and one longs for parks in the Olmsted or English tradition. A bit of greenery can go a long way, but even landscape architects seem to be allergic to it.

¶Both 77 Water Street and 127 John Street, put up by the builder Melvin Kaufman, have open ground floor areas with a galaxy of pedestrian novelties. These include tables and chairs, pebbled streams, abstract sculpture, anthropomorphic phones, a candy store and a giant digital clock—a quasi-carnival of sometimes corny delights.

¶A block-size park between Broadway and Greenwich Street, from Liberty to Cedar, has resulted from a city arrangement with the neighboring U. S. Steel building, which allowed the developer to put maximum bulk on one block to leave the other clear.

Unfortunately, the result, by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, is bleak and uninviting. The new downtown "parks" are hard-won victories for open space, but they raise serious questions about the nature of open space design.

¶The lobby of 100 William Street, the superior Chubb and Co. building designed by Davis, Brody Associates and constructed by Sylvan Lawrence, is a demonstration of the sensitive resolution of the circulation problems of crowded urban areas. Instead of a conventional entrance, it provides a dramatically handsome, multi-level public passage from one street to another. It typifies the arcades and passageways required by the new downtown plans.

¶On the site of the historic Washington Market on the West Side, many blocks of small 19th-century buildings that served the old produce market have been demolished. Massive Mitchell-Lama housing is rising in its place, and a short row of the old houses, in a pathetic gesture to historic loss, is being preserved.

¶New York Plaza, where bulldozed historic streets and houses once stood adjacent to the Battery along the East River, is a private development of singularly aggressive lack of distinction or urban coordination, built without city design supervision. Such insensitive commercial trade offs with the past raise other serious questions.

¶The most obtrusive change is the World Trade Center. This, too, was built not by private investment or city guidelines. It is an autonomous product of the Port of New York Authority. It is bigger, but not better than previous development. The huge, scaleless towers set in equally huge, scaleless plazas are the world-of-the-future of 40 years ago.

¶South of the Trade Center, the Fisher Building now in construction makes an invisible boundary between the urban failures of its neighbor and the start of the Greenwich Street Special Zoning District. It covers 24 blocks from Broadway and West Street to the Battery and the Trade Center.

The special zoning district is one of the prototype devices initiated by the City Planning Commission and its special planning offices—here the Office of Lower Manhattan Development headed by Richard Weinstein—to turn development into an instrument of public benefit rather than a tool restricted solely to private profit.

Zoned into the Greenwich Street District are the kinds of circulation, shopping and recreational facilities that are desirable and essential in a high-density area. Each developer must supply a piece of the jigsaw, in return for bonuses of extra floor space to offset the costs.

When work is complete, Greenwich Street will have a construction to the World Trade Center. Other connections are mandated to Battery Park City, the community for 75,000 being built on landfill in the Hudson River.

"We are trying," Mr. Weinstein says, "to make development responsive to some human purpose."

No Holds on Design

These trend-setting zoning devices are being worked out with even greater sophistication for the over-all downtown area. A legal framework is being set for present and future construction that is a little like drawing a picture of a city by joining numbered dots.

When it is done, there will be views and walks to the water, a 150-foot-wide esplanade along the East River, new parks, improved circulation patterns, provisions for light and sun, and unprecedented pleasures and conveniences.

Much of the innovative planning has been devised by Mr. Weinstein and his group of young city architects and urban planners in the Office of Lower Manhattan Development, with the cooperation of the Downtown Lower Manhattan Association.

Totally dedicated to New York, keenly aware of its strengths and weaknesses, and determinedly progressive in their use of design and law, these planning professionals are threatened with extinction by almost every budget-minded mayoral candidate.

Mr. Weinstein defines New York less as a place than as "a critical mass of energy."

"It exerts savage strains on the systems that support it. We are not trying to make Lower Manhattan serene and peaceful," he explains to those who oppose more high density development. "It will only be serene and peaceful when it is dead."

"What *is* dead is the 'city beautiful' mentality," Mr. Weinstein says. "We are trying to understand the infrastructure of the city those things that make it special."

The objective of this kind of planning is not to dictate architecture or make grand schemes. "We're not interested in socialistic planning, you tamper with social and cultural ecology at your risk. Construction can only be incremental."

The new premise that the city is operating on is that you attempt to control only the points where the public interest meets the private domain.

You can legislate the requirement that a builder respect the traditional street pattern, for example, or provide public waterfront promenades as part of his construction, or conform to historic urban configurations, or include multilevel circulatory system or arcades.

But beyond those requirements, there are no holds on how he designs or builds. He is no longer subjected to costly, time-consuming reviews, political delays or bureaucratic caprice.

The instruments used at the interface between public areas and private development are called performance controls.

"Visual corridors," for example, are required along Chambers Street, the Bowery, Wall and Broad Streets, allowing both views and walks to the water.

Developers must "build to line" as specified by the city to reinforce desirable street patterns and building relationships.

Performance standards do nothing to guarantee beautiful buildings, but they work toward a better city.

"This is not the Renaissance, or an age of uniform standards of beautiful buildings," Mr. Weinstein explains. "Everyone values everything differently today. The basic question is how to plan for a pluralistic democracy where no one agrees on anything."

New York believes that it has found some of the planning answers, using the strengths of private investment and initiative while imposing significant environmental restraints.

Most difficult, however, has been the matter of historic preservation. The city's South Street Seaport project is going ahead only because of the economic wizardry of a concerned business community, and it is an isolated triumph. History and the irreplaceable contrasts of scale and style in Lower Manhattan are rapidly disappearing.

That is the ultimate irony of success. Long live New York. Old New York is dead.