

Proposed Monument Under Glass at the U.N.

But Economic Value of Such a Structure Is Called Doubtful

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

If the United Nations Development Corporation builds the \$300-million, two-square block structure envisioned by its architects, Kevin Roche-John Dinkeloo and Associates, New York will have a genuine architectural spectacular.

It is as if half of the Rocke-

feller Center site were to be covered with a massive 40-story construction, focused on a 540-foot-

high central court at its heart, into which the 370-foot dome of St. Peter's in Rome, or a 363-foot Saturn or Apollo rocket could fit comfortably with more than 150 feet to spare.

The immense, faceted forms of its three joined office towers and connecting hotel wing would be covered with a sleek skin of reflecting glass panels, giving the city back to itself in a kind of monumental architectural dissolve. The building is a superb tour de force, a giant trick with mirrors.

There is general agreement that the Roche-Dinkeloo project is a brilliant design. But in spite of its splendor, there are reservations about how well it relates to and promotes the city's own policies for midtown development. (It is worth adding, parenthetically, that the city never had policies before.)

Indeed, if the whole thing collapses by the weight of its own expense, which could prove to be far above present estimates with the soaring construction costs, and has to be sent back to the drawing board, there will be a sigh of relief in some official planning quarters.

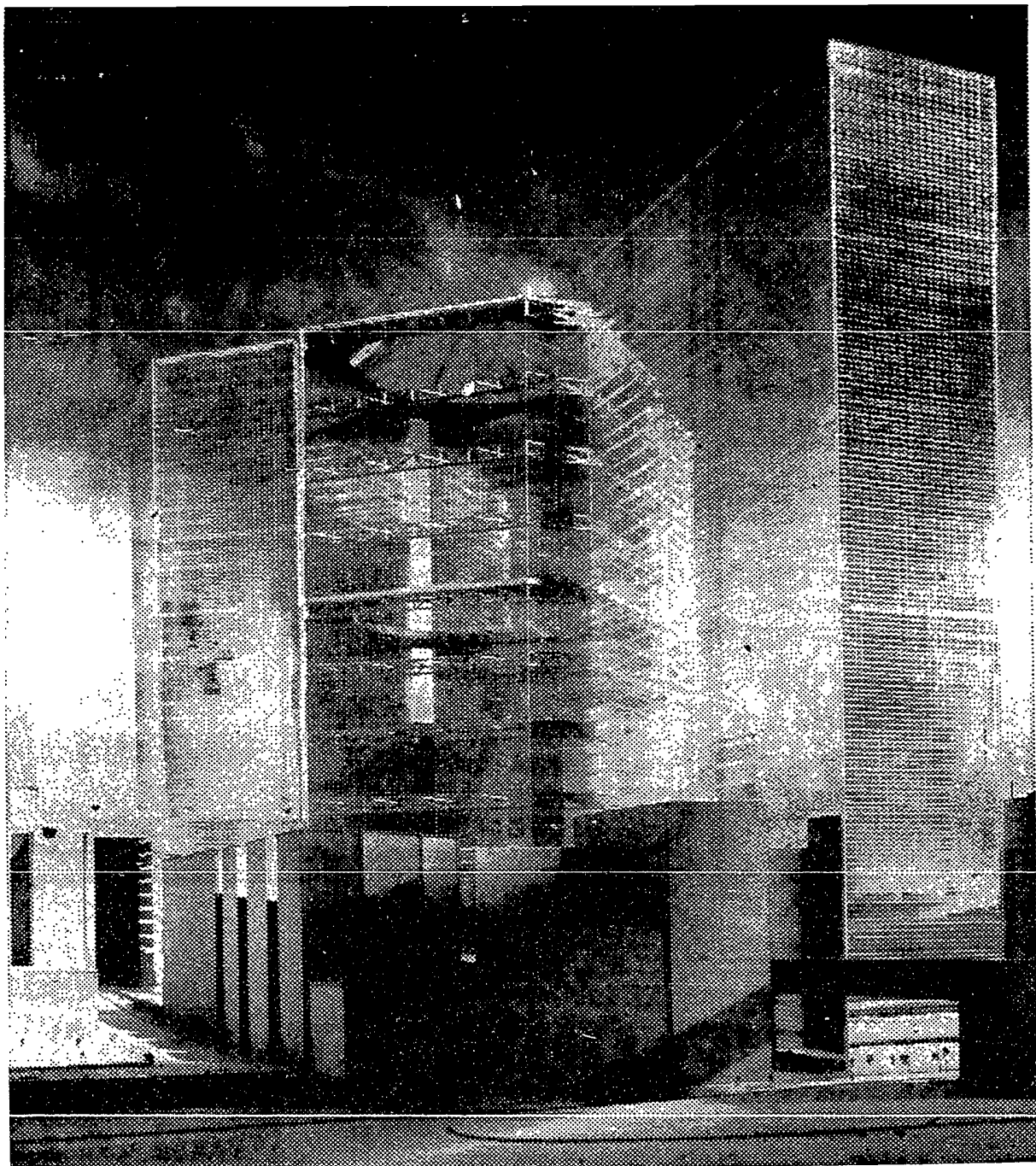
Waterside Project Involved

The strongest factor going for the United Nations plan is a deal that the development corporation has made with the sponsors of Waterside, the city's highly publicized, mixed-income housing scheme to be built on a platform in the East River from 25th to 30th Streets.

Waterside is the trend setting, tax-abated, planned neighborhood that the city considers its bellwether for future housing. At present, it is at a standstill, because it cannot obtain financing in the tight money market.

The development corporation will back Waterside's construction with some of its own tax-exempt bonds in exchange for priority for relocation of dispossessed residents and businesses from the United Nations district in Waterside's apartments and stores. So if city officials don't like it—any many don't—they are prepared to take the bitter with the sweet.

Donald H. Elliott, chairman of the City Planning Commission, who is also a city representative on the board of the development corporation, is more sanguine than other municipal planners.



Buildings designed by Kevin Roche-John Dinkeloo & Associates for the United Nations Development Corporation are depicted towering over Tudor City and other structures.

"I am personally very enthusiastic about the proposal," he says. "The advantages to the city and to the U.N. are very real and sufficiently important to go with it. There is no question about the need for space and the symbolic value of New York's concern for the continued existence of the United Nations here."

The architect, Kevin Roche, is considered one of the country's best. He is the successor to the late Eero Saarinen, with whom he worked on New York's C.B.S. building, and he is responsible for the provocative and much-admired Ford Foundation headquarters.

The design of the United Nations superbuilding skillfully marries public, semipublic and private use, joining United Nations mission offices, commercial office space, a visitors' center, a hotel and public space with shops and services of local and international character.

It does so by massing the huge bulk that serves almost a citywide range of operations around a central rotunda and concourses, topped by that awe-inspiring 40-story domed court. This skill in planning and conceptualization of program, combined with a high sense of design drama, is not to be belittled.

On the other hand, the city's

planners are trying to break up the trend toward what the Regional Plan Association has called "slab city," in which huge, high bulk buildings permanently shadow the areas to the north of them.

There is also a feeling that the first plan, proposed a year and a half ago and subsequently revised to be financially self-supporting, was more successful in the resolution of the tie-up between the United Nations buildings and their immediate environs, to create what could truly be called a "U.N. district."

Such a district was established by the 1968 State Legislature, which set up the development corporation and gave it powers to assemble land and issue tax-exempt bonds to create an over-all plan and development scheme for the area.

Housing to Be Subsidized

The question being asked is whether the corporation, with its quasi-public status, tax-free bonds and substantial city tax abatement, is emphasizing the master planning job for which it was created, or putting up some elegantly speculative real estate.

The argument for the massive amount of straight commercial construction proposed is that it is needed to subsidize some moderate-income housing,

the first 200,000 square feet of space for smaller, poorer nations out of a total of 600,000 square feet for missions, and rentals for the modest neighborhood shops to be included. It must support the visitors' center and other United Nations services.

Of the three million square feet of office space to be built out of the project's 4.2-million-square-foot total, half will be for rental at the going market rate. The same rental scale will apply to the major part of the mission space.

Density has been pushed up from the zoning index of 12 F.A.R. in the first proposal to 18 F.A.R. in the present scheme, a figure indicating the amount of floor space to be built in relation to the area of the plot. At what point in the balance of United Nations-oriented services to speculative space, it is being asked, does public interest shift to private enterprise?

Though it may be the ultimate irony in New York to argue for economics over esthetics the proposal raises this central issue: whether the development corporation is underwriting an extravagantly beautiful design that will be an international monument, but may not be the optimum solution in terms of urban design or rational economics.