

How Not to Plan a City

New York's waterfront renaissance is starting late. Cities like Boston and Baltimore have been busy transforming their harbors from wastelands into places where people sail and stroll at the water's edge. Their esplanades, parks and recreation areas are part of long-term plans that have tied waterfront reclamation to downtown renewal. New York isn't only late, it is going about revival the wrong way; it has allowed, in fact encouraged, builders to turn once-only opportunities into political hassles.

That is what is going on now concerning an East River site from 16th to 24th Streets. Four investment groups are offering competing proposals, at the city's invitation, for more than 30 acres of platformed development on city-owned land and in the river. The proposals offer everything from housing to hotels and shopping centers. The housing plans range from 70-story buildings in a park to an instant Mediterranean village. Their gestures toward the water include a working marina, promenades of varying accessibility and not much more than expensive river views. The project would cost from \$200 million to \$300 million and the infighting is now intense. Pressure politics is rising and the idea of judgment on the merits is sinking fast.

Not that there are all that many merits to judge. The plans are uneven and the city has set no standards

for comparison. All offer financial benefits. But to judge them only in these terms would ignore the waterfront's irreplaceable assets. The site is the last natural cove for an East River boat basin. A marina and a park would be perfect partners. There should be easy access for enjoying the river's edge.

New York's government has come to this point with no concept of its own. Responding to one proposal, it merely threw the site open for other bids. But who has examined the effects on surrounding communities? What will the population densities and traffic flow do to housing and hospitals nearby? What are the connections of these large complexes to the city and its services? With a preliminary decision due by the end of the month, the City Planning Commission received its first briefings this week.

The suitability of these waterfront projects ought to be at least as important a standard as their profitability. What is needed is a collaborative design effort between the city's planners and private builders, producing a coherent policy for waterfront renewal and, as in other cities, guidelines for development. That is what has finally been proposed for the renewal of the Times Square area, after a similar clash of private proposals. The competition should be no less keen, the results infinitely better. The question now is how to fish the East River project out of the water.