

Planning by Compromise

Compromise is the name of the game in New York; it is also the name of the planning process. Two zoning amendments just adopted by the city—for the design of livelier and more useful open space in midtown and the conservation of natural areas in Riverdale—emerged in their final form through careful negotiation of the objections of local institutions and community planning boards. Although at times both situations looked hopeless, the compromises finally became law.

It may seem odd to say that a time-consuming, disputatious and frustrating procedure, loaded with distortions and delays, is a good way to plan. Success depends in large part on the city's ability to be patient, flexible and receptive to community planning board ideas while keeping a firm eye on the goal. In these cases, the promise of plazas filled with services and pleasures instead of sterile concrete, and of trees, hills and views preserved where they still exist, represents a notable environmental achievement.

Chaotic and exasperating as the participatory planning process may appear, these and other recent victories that have come by the same route are proof that the process can work. There is no easy, automatic way to a better city.