

## Architecture

# Sugar Coating A Bitter Pill

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

I SUPPOSE only a super-scooge could take exception to the superproject—that the United Nations Development Corporation has come up with to solve the UN's space and security problems in New York. You would have to be against the pursuit of peace, the brotherhood of nations and man, and the importance of the UN internationally and to New York—6,000 income-producing visitors a day and \$6-million in increased taxes to the city.

The two-block-square, \$310-million proposal, bounded by 43d and 45th Streets and First and Second Avenues, has been passed by the City Planning Commission (five to four after notable controversy) and is due for Board of Estimate consideration on March 12. The plan provides urgently needed offices, mission space and hotel and apartment accommodations for UN personnel, a visitors' center and funds to run it, a car and bus garage, exhibition and meeting facilities, public spaces and room for future expansion. It does so in a 40-story behemoth that takes up almost the full two-block-square and devotes more than half of its 4.2-million square feet to prime commercial office space.

Since this is a complex package deal, being against the UN plan also means being against Waterside, the city's stalled, model mixed-income housing development. Part of the UN plan is to use the tax-free bonds that the United Nations Development Corporation can issue as a public development agency to build Waterside, in order to provide the relocation of residents and businesses required by the state legislation that set up UNDC in 1968. Waterside has been unable to find financing in the tight money market, and this looks like its salvation.

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In New York, of course, there are people to be found against any and all of these things. But the arguments for honoring the city's commitment to the UN are strong ones, morally and economically. The price, however, appears to be acceptance of the mammoth construction that UNDC has calculated to be necessary to support United Nations needs. A number of experts and planners, in and out of city government, are profoundly unhappy about it.

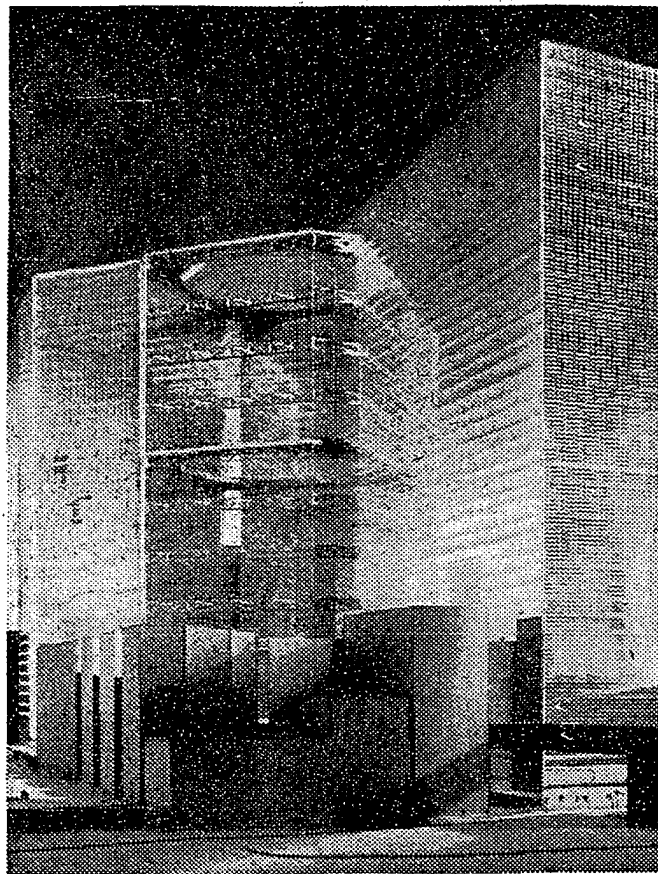
Because the price, unfortunately, is high. The irony of supporting the UN project is that it does just about everything we know we should not be doing in New York. In the form it has taken—and the question being raised here is whether that form is right or inevitable, artistically or economically—it is inimical to the city's best environmental interests. It accomplishes its laudable objectives through a monolithic construction of crushing bulk and density and questionable community impact, total ghettoization of UN functions (at considerable convenience and security savings, to be sure), and the enshrinement—as urban design, no less—of the discredited real estate rule of "the highest and best use of land" being its most profitable use; that is, luxury office space in midtown Manhattan.

What UNDC proposes, actually, is a gargantuan speculative office building, of which more than half will be for market rental. This, in turn, will be used to support some UN quarters and functions. In spite of its "public benefit" mandate and tax-free bonds, city tax abatement and city assistance in land assembly, UNDC says it cannot figure out any other way to build for UN needs and make ends meet. It has chosen a real estate operation, not an exercise in social planning or urban design. Its narrow definition of neighborhood improvement is specious and familiar real estate reasoning. Even the present and future proportions of commercial and subsidized, taxable and tax-exempt space, are still unclear.

That this overblown conventional formula and its undesirable side effects will serve to subsidize UN accommodations, including some housing (at \$70 instead of \$120 a room), sugarcoats a bitter pill. And the glittering architectural form given to the whole unhappy business by one of the country's best architects, Kevin Roche, of Kevin Roche-John Dinkeloo and Associates, merely sugarcoats the bitter pill further.

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The question that must be examined is how the proposal reached this form. The architect's first scheme, in 1967, was quite different. Two tall, but slender, diamond-shaped towers and four smaller buildings were to rise from a mid-block park, con-



Superbuilding for the United Nations.  
*Beautiful monster, created by monstrous economics*

nected to the UN plaza. This humane and elegant complex stressed the relationship of people to buildings and open spaces in terms of movement, vistas and public amenities. It also put far less strain on circulation, transportation and services. That proposal had the backing of the community; this one does not.

In the superblockbuster now proposed, public spaces are largely interior—a poor substitute for a neighborhood park—and the chief public feature is a spectacular, 40-story-high, glassed-in court. The drama is undeniable. But among unanswered questions are such architectural curiosas as whether that court could be less of an amenity than a terrifying source of vertigo at this height and scale, and the effects of two-block-long, 40-story-high, mirror-glass facades in close urban quarters in terms of blinding glare and bird slaughter.

The plan was changed, we are told, because an anticipated Federal grant never came through, and the program had to be made self-supporting. Costs had risen alarmingly and more commercial space was needed to carry out the project. The public development corporation had been created in the meantime with distinguished members of the banking and realty communities prominent on the board. Redesign was ordered.

In spite of its bond-issuing powers, the corporation's original intention was to finance as much of the project as possible through higher cost, conventional market

sources, like any real estate investment. With market money out of sight, bonds will now be used. But the revised design was clearly predicated on the concept of practical commercial financing, based on estimates of one of the city's leading evaluators of cost and income levels in commercial construction. It was, therefore, inevitably cast in a practical commercial mold. The mold was then turned into a monument by the architect.

The result is an undeniably superior building. But there is a lot more to "public purpose" in urbanistic terms than wrapping up conventional investment economics in a smashing architectural package. That is an arbitrary and irrelevant kind of excellence. Kevin Roche is known to the profession as a superb, and expensive, architect. He is, in addition, by talent and inclination, a producer of monuments. It is part of his personal and esthetic integrity that he will not settle for less than the best as he sees it, and his best is admittedly costly.

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This is no plea for a cheap, or mean, UN building, or for maximum design economy. It is an appeal for reason. A sense of artistic and urban responsibility sent the UN to Roche in the first place. But one thing the UN has gotten, wittingly or not, is a building whose extreme high cost must be reckoned also in terms of the known extravagance of its designer's personal conceptualization and

its materials and techniques. It may be the one logical solution in this able architect's terms — and Roche's quiet, understated conviction usually sells the client the idea that it is—but there are other conceptual answers that would come out of a different design philosophy. And there are other ways to get the facilities needed.

In other words, what has pushed the price and the bulk of the project up is not just rising costs and the increased ratio of commercial to subsidized space that this mandates — as claimed. It is also the cost of a kind of design grandeur that, to some observers, is as megalomaniacal as it is magnificent. This is not a question of spending for good design; no one wants bad design. The question is to what degree have costs been escalated by a monument fixation? What is being subsidized — the UN's functional needs or the architect's esthetic needs? Or UNDC's edifice complex? And to what degree is this gift-wrapped real estate exacting a dangerous environmental price from the city?

Moreover, much of the subsidy is from the city. It is in the form of special zoning changes to permit that extraordinary bulk and maximized commercial space by allowing construction at an R18 density rather than at the present R10. Again, UNDC says it cannot make ends meet without it. But this is a city that cannot underwrite its own basic needs in housing or services, and many opponents, measuring these needs and their social consequences and seeing the massive amount of real estate investment, call it a land grab. Many speculators see it as an open sesame to zoning variances.

In the final analysis, the proposed building is a beautiful monster, created by monstrous economics, that can both damage the city and set damaging precedents. There are only two possible interpretations of what went wrong. The first is that the whole overbearing thing has been gone about back-end-to, conceived by men of conventional investment wisdom following status quo building practices, who have abdicated both the purpose of a public development corporation and the chance for a publicly-assisted and socially-oriented urban design breakthrough. The second, still more frightening, is that a public corporation building for public uses with privileged funds has no design options beyond the socially and environmentally unsatisfactory formulas of commercial construction. If this is true in New York — and we doubt it — the jig is up.