

Creative Plan for River

An Architect and a Builder Find Key: Gain Sponsorship at the Top for Project

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York's most popular current planning sport is the proposal of offshore development along the rivers' edges. It is popular because it is a good idea. It is an even better idea when the proposal is the product of sound planning and imaginative design, as it is in the case of the residential-recreational development called Waterside, just released by the Housing and Redevelopment Board. Waterside is the product of five years of hard, frustrating work that included overcoming every familiar barrier of interdepartmental conflict and delay.

An Appraisal by the Housing and Redevelopment Board. Waterside is the product of five years of hard, frustrating work that included overcoming every familiar barrier of interdepartmental conflict and delay.

It started as the idea of two men of a high level of professional competence who care deeply about New York, a builder with an unconventional commitment to design quality, Richard Ravitch of the HRH Construction Company, and an architect who is not interested in rubber-stamp housing, Lewis Davis, of Davis, Brody Associates. They simply never gave up.

They took their idea to the Housing Redevelopment Board, which supported it. They researched costs and techniques and explored every avenue of Federal and state financial and procedural aid.

One Step After Another

Planning control was wrested from the Department of Marine and Aviation, which has jurisdiction over the waterfront. Legal ownership of offshore land was determined. A Federal law was passed declaring the waters of the area non-navigable, to avoid the technicality of seizure without compensation for obstruction of navigation.

An obstacle course was run through city and local agencies, boards, committees and institutions. Open space and traffic patterns were worked out for the adjoining United Nations school. The planning cooperation of the architects of scheduled expansion at Bellevue and New York University hospitals just across the East River Drive has been enlisted.

What turned the trick at the end of five years is discouragingly simple: sponsorship at the top. Without it, bureaucracy produces no plans of stature and no bold designs.

"The proposal got nowhere under the previous administration," says Mr. Davis. "This thing has been dead a hundred times." It now has the active backing of Housing and Development Administrator Jason Nathan and the Mayor.

Trend-Setting Project

The project is a trend-setter for New York in every sense of the term. It is an urban concept that utilizes the waterfront for housing and recreation in a distinctly urban way. The design level is able, sophisticated and creative.

The standard that it establishes for mixed housing, commercial, recreational and open-space uses, in a coordinated, multilevel complex with parking and facilities underground, is found in leading design publications, and is beginning to appear in other cities. It is still only on paper in New York.

This could be the city's first large - scale breakthrough from the norm of sterile housing clichés and arid open space that has been the bureaucratic or easy-profit formula. Waterside would be a standard-setting development for any waterfront city in the world.

It achieves this status because it does not use the cur-

rently popular idea of fountain-studded plazas, pedestrian walkways along the water, and cafes and shops as detached gimmicks with easy eye-appeal, but as sound instruments of the highest level of comprehensive planning. These stylish amenities are set into a solid functional framework of pedestrian and vehicular circulation, parking and servicing.

Just how sophisticated and comprehensive that planning is can be seen in the fact that, unlike Lincoln Center, for example, it does not stop at its traffic boundaries. Meant to be a city facility, rather than a purely local one, the development will be connected with the community across the East River Drive.

The same architects are working with the Housing and Redevelopment Board on a total neighborhood plan for the Bellevue area from 23d to 30th Streets, between Second Avenue and the Drive.

They are also the designers of houses in the Bellevue South urban renewal area, and of a middle-income cooperative, Riverbend, in construction on Fifth Avenue from 138th to 142d Street.

Resolution of Conflicts

The Waterside proposal also comes to grips with the conflicts and inconsistencies built into all big-city projects.

"Renewal must reconcile good design and cheap rents, quality and speedup, the immediate needs of the ghetto and the middle-income housing shortage," says Mr. Ravitch. "We have tried to resolve these factors without reducing the scheme to mediocrity."

Although New York has a clear score of zero to date in realizing its more progressive proposals, there is a good chance that this one can be more than paper planning.

To anyone who talks to Lewis Davis and Richard Ravitch, it becomes clear that the factors that have brought the plan this far are almost unmentionable in a cynical commercial city like New York. They are ideas and convictions for which experienced and knowledgeable men are willing to sacrifice time, energy and money. It can't happen here, but it does.

"We still don't know just how or what we will be paid for all that we've put into this," Mr. Davis says. "The satisfaction has been working with people in the city who understand your level of competence and how it should be used. This administration makes you feel like a professional."