

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Is This the Last Chance for Battery Park City?

If the present plan for Battery Park City goes ahead, it will be the sixth version — give or take a plan or two — since 1966. If it fails, the state and city will have to write finis to one of the more curious chapters in New York's planning history.

That prime waterfront land along the Hudson River edge of Lower Manhattan should go begging is curious enough in itself. The 92 acres of landfill created in part from the World Trade Center excavation and completed over a 10-year period by the Battery Park City Authority, was meant to be the basis for an ambitious master plan. The possibilities of development in this spectacular location could not be more breathtaking; the site promises an unparalleled opportunity for an attractive commercial and residential mix with waterfront walks and parks and splendid river and harbor views. That promise has never been kept, for a variety of instructive reasons. Nothing has come out of 13 years of high hopes and struggles except a barren expanse.

In a last ditch rescue attempt, the New York State Urban Development Corporation has taken over the Battery Park City Authority and prepared a new development proposal. Part of UDC's strategy to make something happen is a far less ambitious plan than any previously envisioned.

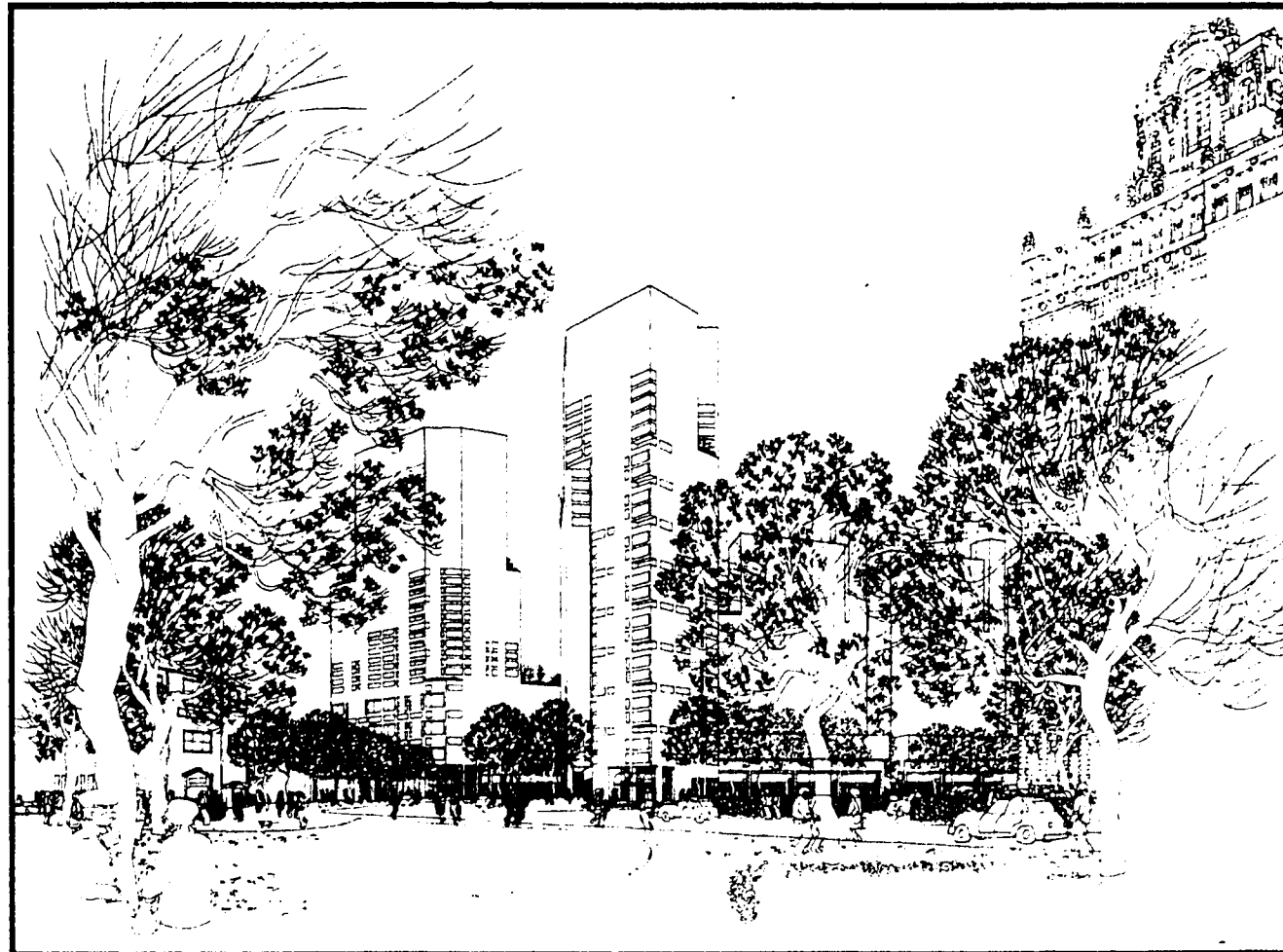
The only other courses at hand are singularly grim. Either New York State will default on the Battery Park City bond issue next year (it is the last of those troublesome moral obligation bonds), something that is unthinkable in terms of the state's credit rating, or it will have to ante up anything from \$131 million to \$310 million to redeem the bonds, depending on the speed at which they are paid off.

Default or bailout are not happy alternatives. Measured against either one, UDC's proposal looks good; in fact, it would look good, simply as planning, even when not viewed from a back-against-the-wall position. UDC is asking the state legislature to gamble \$8 million over the next four years for a much more modest kind of development, with the hope that this can make the whole thing go.

That \$8 million would, essentially, buy time while keeping the Battery Park City Authority bonds afloat. To begin, the state would have to condemn the land. During that four-year period, UDC would need to market part of the land successfully. It proposes to do so by concentrating on attracting commercial development immediately adjacent to the World Trade Center through very substantial tax advantages. With the new American Stock Exchange Building now committed to that area, and a stronger office market downtown, this seems like an opportune time.

Another \$35 to \$50 million of state funds would be needed for streets and utilities and other initial costs. Assuming a profitable venture producing the desperately needed cash flow, the state could be repaid and the bondholders satisfied. With expenses and debts taken care of, the land would then revert to the city.

The present proposal has been put forward by Richard A. Kahan, who is head of both UDC and the merged Battery Park City Authority, on the basis of a study and a new master plan by Alexander Cooper Associates and a team of urban experts. Mr. Cooper is an architect and former member of the City Planning Commission who combines a thorough knowledge of the city's tough urban realities with professional design expertise and not a little vision.



A view of Battery Park City as envisioned in the current proposal—"It has the virtues of simplicity, flexibility, logic and a reasonable scale."

The strongest thing going for the scheme is that it is Battery Park City's last chance. But it also has some very real virtues; among them are simplicity, flexibility, logic and a reasonable scale. Instead of grafting an alien arrangement of streets and buildings onto Lower Manhattan, this plan relates to the city's familiar grid, with one brilliant twist: Battery Park City's streets would follow the diagonal Broadway axis rather than the later, right-angled grid that was imposed on it. This would create "bias" streets with long waterfront views, and the chance of interesting intersections. Meant to be a schematic framework for flexible development, the plan would need more specific park and open space study if it goes ahead.

This concept is in marked contrast to the former plan, which consisted of overreaching design ideas of epic complexity muddled by endless political juggling. A multi-level

eled megastructure was locked into a tortuous city-state lease of demanding design specifics that made it virtually impossible to build.

The new plan still faces serious obstacles. These include the current unreliability of the investment economy, the endless Westway battles that create an abyss of uncertainty at Battery Park City's western edge, and the strong psychological barrier of perceived failure thus far. Even the plan's sponsors speak of it with carefully qualified optimism. It is presented as a gamble with considerable odds, but with a chance of success as against total disaster.

What went wrong with Battery Park City? Was it just the victim of fate, politics and finances? Or is there a planning object lesson in its history?

Battery Park City was the kind of monumental blue-

Continued on Page 40

Continued from Page 39

print that Daniel Burnham had in mind — in scale if not in style — when he exhorted his colleagues to make no little plans. But the trouble wasn't that Battery Park City's sponsors were thinking too big; it is that they weren't thinking at all. This was a scheme unrelated to the past, present or future in either economic or environmental terms. The history of Battery Park City has elements of tragedy, comedy and the absurd; it is Gilbert-and-Sullivan planning in which the marvelously elaborate process of compounding errors takes on a life and a momentum of its own.

In 1966, when Nelson Rockefeller, a confirmed empire-builder, was governor, and John Lindsay was mayor, the governor announced the scheme in a press conference that caught New York City's planners by surprise. They were deeply involved in a comprehensive Lower Manhattan-waterfront plan of their own, and were not expecting it to be blown out of the water on one side.

The problem was not only that the state's plan didn't fit into the city's plan, but that it wasn't nearly as good. It was a tear-off-at-the-dotted-line box-top kind of design that related to nothing at all. The lack of political and architectural rapport between the governor and the mayor was no help. A team

of architectural matchmakers came up with a face-saving compromise — a "linear-city" megastructure much in vogue in planning circles at the time.

When the bottom fell out of the office building market, the financial base fell out of the scheme. Developers brought in by Battery Park City Authority's head, Charles Urstadt, in a search for housing alternatives, brought their own cookie-cutter designs. Again, the plan doctors were brought in. Max Abramovitz added "pods" and platforms, and the landscape architects, Lawrence Halprin Associates, tried to soften the cumulative errors with remedial open space.

To put it succinctly, the plan was an abortion. It was ill-conceived to start with, overdesigned to continue, modified and muddled beyond reason, and unrelated to market or neighborhood realities. Each attempt to fix it made it worse, or only slightly better, and no one could fix the economy.

The moral is to think in terms of what can actually be built without a miracle of faith, financing, and entrepreneurial and municipal timing. Visionary Vallhallas may be exhilarating exercises, but they rarely get off the presentation boards. The new, scaled-down flexible Battery Park City plan, with its more immediate and incremental sensitivity to the city, is the way we look at planning now. With more than a little luck, this time it might even make it. ■