

Architecture

Sorry, Wrong Number

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

AND then there's the trade-off. It's subtler and more complex than the giveaway. The giveaway has no pretensions; somebody has gotten something for nothing, usually at someone else's expense. In the tradeoff everyone, supposedly, gets something. It is conducted on a much higher plane. The illusion is that one has sold one's soul, or bits and pieces of it, for a worthwhile purpose. It is the giveaway with conscience balm.

In New York the tradeoff, or soul selling, is not only a way of life, it is mandatory for survival. Crisis reaches the point of no return, a solution liberally barbed with undesirable and even catastrophic side effects is offered, and the city, *per forza*, takes the hook.

The current example concerns the New York Telephone Company, the City Planning Commission and Board of Estimate, and a public benefit corporation, the New York City Educational Construction Fund. The tradeoff has involved approval of a huge telephone equipment building, combined with a school, to be constructed on the edge of an older residential neighborhood in lower Manhattan.

This has been a matter fraught with angst and compromise, as anyone involved will tell you, and it bodes ill for almost everyone except the bankers and brokers and lucky residents who will get quicker dial tones and fewer wrong numbers, and possibly—but only possibly—for the city's educational plant. Looking at the whole deal and its future implications in terms of what happens to the best institutional and human intentions, we think this is a very large wrong number for New York.

The Telephone Company building for which the Board of Estimate approved plans with minor modifications last week, following approval by the City Planning Commission, is a 540-foot-high, \$80-million-structure to be built on a plot bounded by Pearl and Madison Streets and the Brooklyn Bridge, on the edge of Chinatown and an existing area of low-and middle-income housing.

Its mass is particularly in-

human because it is for machinery, not for people. It will contain close to a million square feet of automatic telephone equipment to serve the downtown community until the year 2,000. Among the concessions made by the Telephone Company in the tradeoff for the city's O.K. has been redesign of the building's blind bulk to include sham windows on three sides. Another concession was reduction from a proposed 700 feet to 540 feet, which represents a rather meaningless improvement from supercolossal to colossal monster.

Some people think the building will effectively destroy the visual quality of Brooklyn Bridge, considered one of the city's, and the world's, great landmarks of engineering art. This is a matter of judgment of urban esthetics.

But what the building will do beyond question is to plunge a considerable segment of the adjoining residential community into deep shadow. It casts a grim pall before it. The city, in its planning, has been at pains to maintain and protect this community. What the building will not crush through scale and sterility it will deprive of sun and sky. This is no small consideration in New York, where planners' studies have been concentrating on "sky and shadow planes" in assessing permissible developments at Manhattan densities.

"This is not the ideal building, nor the ideal location," said the City Planning Commission in its affirmative decision, with notable restraint. Two commissioners, Walter McQuade and Chester Rapkin, dissented with unqualified condemnation. How, then, was approval justified? The scenario goes something like this:

The city desperately needs telephone service. The situation has reached crisis proportions downtown. The city desperately needs schools. The Educational Construction Fund desperately needs money to build them.

The Telephone Company, therefore, gets the brutal building on a site of which the best that can be said is that it is somewhat less destructive than earlier pro-

posals, after the city had pushed it hither and yon in innumerable delays. (Any account of the grotesqueries of building and planning around Brooklyn Bridge and City Hall makes even the most absurd conceits of "conceptual" architecture pale.)

In exchange for the blighting building, the financial community and local residents will get better telephone service and the city will get the new school. In addition—and this is the big payoff—the Educational Construction Fund will get about \$4 million from the Telephone Company for air rights over the school, as well as payments in lieu of taxes, which will not only finance this school but others as well.

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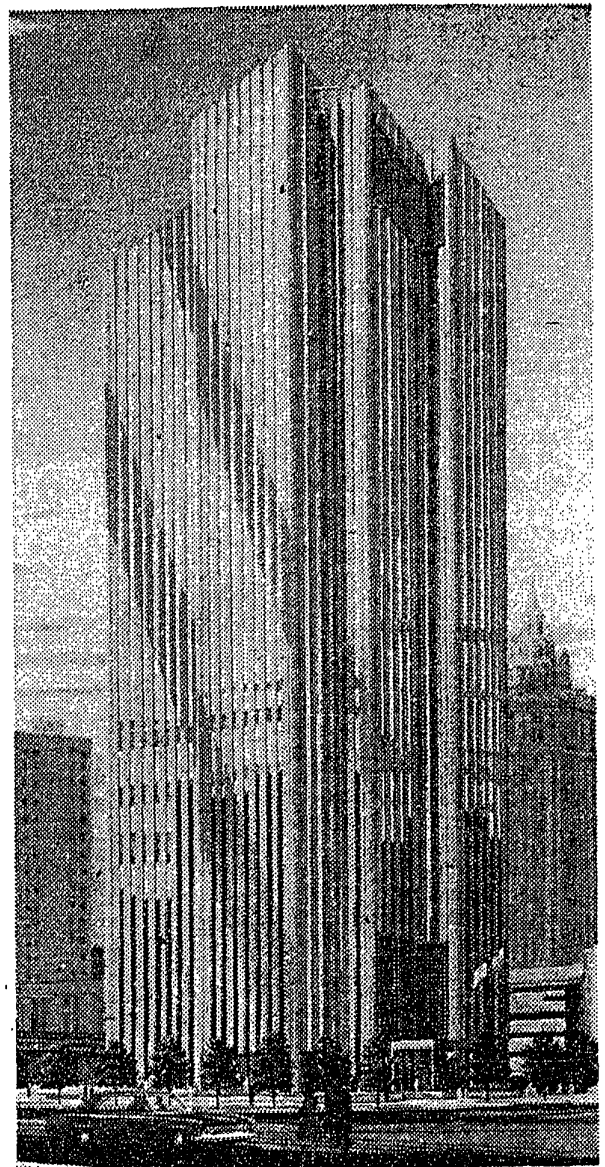
The deal is further sweetened for the city by some extras won from the Telephone Company. Chief among them is the word of the company that it will not "develop" another downtown residential site that it owns for at least 10 years. Unfortunately, 10-year grace periods have a way of gliding by.

"Maximizing" the present site, a euphemism for getting the most out of it commercially, means minimizing the school's recreational facilities. Therefore the Telephone Company has agreed to build an East River recreational area of approximately eight acres south of Brooklyn Bridge at a cost of \$5.5 million.

That's the tradeoff. And the illusions? The Educational Construction Fund is obviously operating on the unassailable principle that money is the lever of power, the only thing that will give it clout in dealing with the city and the Board of Education. No one will deny that it greases the way.

The Fund says it will now be able to build the schools it wants and that the city needs. It says that from this profitable commercial deal—it also has the power to issue bonds—it can pay for innovative concepts in program and design. It aspires to educational and environmental progress.

The City Planning Commission has already questioned the program. Designs that have been publicized to date are appallingly undis-



The proposed Telephone Building in lower Manhattan
From supercolossal to colossal—but still a monster

tinguished, but there is a beginning of some better future plans.

There is, then, the illusion of follow through, or getting what is promised. The Fund's word is as good as present personnel (subject to change) and present policies and commitments (subject to change) can make it. Its actions are susceptible to the immutable law that turns all such autonomous agencies and authorities, sooner or later, into self-perpetuating strongholds of conventional thought and practice. Its results are vulnerable to the political process of design in New York, where the relentless municipal juggernaut grinds down anything new or better into the same old budget-bureaucracy, cookie-cutter pattern.

The danger increases in view of the fact that the Fund is set up to circumvent some of these municipal bottlenecks to get the schools built—including some that it should not bypass such as Art Commission review—by transferring its schools to the city after they are finished. The air rights sale procedure opens a Pandora's box of situations where this highly touted opportunity can turn into an opportunistic, environment-wrecking debacle. (Here comes Con Ed?)

Only a non-New Yorker would bet on whether the giant tradeoff will produce progress or pottage. From here, the chances look more like pottage, at a pretty stiff price. No one has beat the soul-selling rap yet.