

West Side Highway

New York's disorderly but democratic planning processes, marked equally by vision and paranoia, sometimes produce surprisingly good results. The latest issue that has struggled to a notably improved solution is the controversial rebuilding of the West Side Highway.

The city's just-released recommendation for a modified "outboard" plan is far better and more workable than the five alternatives offered previously by the West Side Highway Project. It scales down the original assumptions of size and traffic and offers significant gains in the refinement and sensibility of its proposals.

A careful land use plan defines landfill development and assesses the impact of that development on adjacent areas. Beyond the elimination of a blighting, decayed and divisive elevated highway, the intention is to restore the waterfront to the city through parks, promenades and bikeways, and to add reinforcing and appropriate new construction and generous open green space.

Given this desirable plan, a few realities must be faced before unreason sets in. There is no real alternative to the Interstate designation, which is being fought by opponents of the highway; only an Interstate road brings the essential Federal and state funds. There is obviously no city money available. The alternative is a romantic ruin.

Interstate designation also brings trucks, but with the Interstate restricted to a 59th Street termination, the trucks will be those doing normal city business; there will be no through route uptown to augment their number. Absence of a trucking highway will keep those trucks on city streets, which means keeping noise, air pollution and congestion inland where they are most harmful and least desirable, and painfully evident now.

Most important is the fact that these Federal funds provide the only, and probably the last chance to rebuild a substantial section of the city's deteriorating peripheral West Side. To lose the opportunity to do so would be both unreasonable and tragic.

While the city has answered the primary question of land use, other questions remain. The too-tentative designation of two lanes for buses and car pools in rush hours only is an inadequate and unsatisfactory commitment to mass transit that must be part of a rebuilt road.

It is not clear whether the proposal for a container-port, if it is indeed realistic, will ease traffic or generate more. No city parking or bridge toll policy exists that will ultimately control traffic volume. Zoning, in the form of a special transportation corridor district, will have to be much more specific to maintain neighborhood balances and to secure access and views to the water—especially unobstructed sight-lines westward along midtown cross streets through to the Hudson River.

The choices the city faces, quite simply, are rot or renaissance. But if unreason does not sink the scheme now, New York is on its way to a constructive and creative solution of two of its major problems: traffic and West Side redevelopment.