

Environment Key to Downtown Plan

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

What is involved in lower Manhattan is not just a billion-dollar development plan, but the skilled manipulation of one of the highest density areas in the world and the most expensive real estate for a particular goal: the quality of the environment. That is usually not a com-

ponent of real-estate packages. There are two kinds of glue that hold together a proposal of this

magnitude: money and planning. It is no secret that the resources David Rockefeller commands or influences can make things happen, and that he is personally selling the city's financial institutions on the desirability of providing the necessary investment. This is known in some circles as power, in others as leverage and in all as money.

Privately Financed

In addition, the commitment of such developers as Uris and DeMatteis to substantial chunks of what will be a largely privately financed plan tells more about its economic viability than any theoretical studies. Traditionally, New York realty men deal in nothing less than a sure thing, as witness Welfare Island's troubles in finding builders.

A profitable building boom already exists in lower Manhattan. Gambling on the return of the commercial market and barring a spectacular downturn in the economy of the kind that recently threatened Battery Park City, the chances for construction are real.

The deals involved are enormously complex, there are still a lot of pieces of paper to sign when the Board of Estimate says go. There also is always the possibility of a totally destructive political climate. But this massive addition to the New York shoreline and skyline is not just another slice of pie-in-the-sky.

Follows City Policy

Given economic reality, and the staggering size of the undertaking, the kind of planning going into it becomes of paramount importance.

The planning here is of a sophistication and complexity virtually without parallel. A kind of planning glue has been used to cement real estate into an urbane environmental unity that adds a whole new dimension to the building of a city.

In recent years, and without much attention being paid, New York has adopted the most advanced machinery of professional urban, or en-

Concept Called Good Because of Care in Its Design

vironmental, design as a part of city policy.

Its application in lower Manhattan, through the city's Office of Lower Manhattan Planning and Development, headed by Richard Weinstein, is spectacular in scope and scale. And the quality of this professionalism, demonstrated in the city's increasing use of specific tools and controls for an unusually sensitive understanding of the urban functions and fabric, is more spectacular still.

For example, the construction of the nearly completed building adjoining the proposed development, at 55 Water Street — currently the world's largest privately sponsored office building—is already being influenced by city guidance aimed at long-term results.

Agree on Shape and Mass

The city and the developer, Uris Buildings Corporation, agreed on the structure's mass, shape and placement. Uris has not only contributed a new and completely redesigned Jeanette Park adjoining the building, but has also incorporated an elevated plaza into it, which is now on exactly the right level—through design, not accident—to connect with the new waterfront construction.

Another example: Under the city's plan, Jeanette Park will be the culmination of a "scenic corridor" pene-

trating the old part of the city and providing water views from it. Other scenic corridors at Broad Street, Old Slip and Wall Street will be made by specifying how and where buildings can be massed and where open space is to be left.

The South Street seaport, a particularly intricate exercise in renewal, preservation, air rights zoning transfers and financial and urban vision, is seen as providing shops, restaurants and recreation for the new residential community.

Total Relationship

In addition to supplying necessary amenities—water views and parks and the affirmation of the city's island and water beauty—the network of open spaces is meant to aid density and circulation.

To facilitate this, new buildings inland and offshore will be required to incorporate lower-level passageways, street-level arcades and plazas, through-block promenades and upper-level bridges for improved movement and connections to the new subway.

The 150-foot-wide public waterfront promenade, proposed to run from the Battery to Brooklyn Bridge, will be created by requiring each builder to include a segment of an esplanade.

Everything relates to everything else—functionally and esthetically—something no New York development does voluntarily.

The city does not just pull these features out of a hat. It is done through a kind of creative horse-trading with builders.

Variances a Factor

For the zoning variances, street closings and changes in height and bulk that developers need to turn Lower Manhattan's historic small lots into profitable real estate, the city imposes desirable building patterns and requires the construction of amenities.

The details are written into city-builder agreements according to the provisions of an area master plan. One even specifies an arcade-framed view of Fraunces Tavern.

This process, which has included the earlier invention of the special zoning district, has been codified and super-refined in lower Manhattan.

Formerly, there were two ways to build a city. There were no controls at all, or real estate rampant, as in New York, which led to a kind of urban rape. Or there was an "enlightened" but rigid physical plan, with all site uses spelled out with such inflexible specificity that it became a procrustean nightmare.

Building Toward Goals

The present approach relies on adaptable constraints. Limits are spelled out to preclude the most damaging kind of development, while leaving private options open. Everything builds, step by interlocking step, toward general goals. These goals were originally set forth in the Lower Manhattan Plan of 1966 by Conklin & Rossant, Wallace, McHarg, Roberts & Todd, and Alan M. Voorhees.

With all this in its favor, the proposal is extremely vulnerable politically. It is frankly aimed at the re-establishment of the economic health of the downtown community. The argument is that the strengthening of this financial base is essential to the provision of the services that the city needs. The housing and commercial facilities, largely privately financed, will be for an upper middle-income group in an upper middle-class enclave.

As a result, battle lines could be drawn between spokesmen for the Establishment and spokesmen for the poor, between long-term logic and immediate desperation. It could be the city's future against the city's tragedy. If this happens, it will be a traditional no-win confrontation.