

Good Start for a Convention Center

Something called "fast-track" construction is the method by which the state's Urban Development Corporation hopes to erect New York City's convention center — which has been on anything but a fast track until now. The method enables a builder to put up the basic structure while detail drawings are still being made. It is essential if the convention center is to be held within the projected cost of \$375 million.

If things move on schedule, which would be something of a miracle in a city that specializes in death-dealing delays, that cost should prove realistic. But the success of the center, the largest and most important public building that New York has undertaken in a long time, will depend as much on the quality of design as on holding the budgetary line.

This is not just a matter of esthetics. The way the huge structure is designed will determine the future of an area in serious need of revitalization. Located at 34th Street and pointed north toward 42d Street, the convention center offers hope to both areas.

The virtue of the delay so far is that we can learn from the mistakes of other cities. Most have demonstrated how not to build a convention center. Billed as tools of downtown rebirth, these massive boxes turn their backs to the street and deaden everything around them. There is no way to make a container for 750,000 square feet of space seem cozy; it is impossible to humanize that scale. Therefore the treatment of the detail becomes crucial. So do the visual connections between the building and surroundings and the provision of landscaped open space, pedestrian facilities and

public amenities to offset the inevitable motor ramps and entrances. To leave improvements for later grafting would guarantee only further delays, greater expense and ineffectual redesign.

Above all, New York should take a positive role in programming the land uses around the convention center, and this needs to be done at the initial design stages while the area is "soft." Such planning pays off. In Dallas, the design of the Municipal Administration Center (a big box raised to architectural distinction) included the 14 acres around it. The controlled and handsome result has so upgraded depressed downtown blocks that the city was able to sell one site to the Federal Reserve and pay for its entire land purchase.

The architect of the Dallas project was I. M. Pei, who is rumored to be the architect chosen for the city's convention center. That would put it in expert hands. The Urban Development Corporation has also taken the unprecedented step of carrying out a four-month, detailed design feasibility study, in which a prototype has been drawn specifically enough to enable a major construction company to calculate realistic costs. In addition, a committee has been set up to monitor both design and cost every step of the way.

New York could have a world-class building that would be an international tourist attraction, like Paris's Beaubourg, even when trade shows are not there. At last the city is moving on the right track, if it can stay on the fast track.