

Behold, a Battery Park

After looking at vacant landfill for nearly 15 years, New Yorkers will think they are seeing a mirage when Battery Park City's office towers begin to rise along the Hudson. Though a cluster of apartment houses is reaching completion, there have been so many failed plans that the announcement of a waterfront esplanade inspires some skepticism. There have been too many architects' drawings and too many broken promises of parks.

But Battery Park City is an idea whose time has come; construction has already started on the first section of the Esplanade. This mile-long, 70-foot-wide green strip that begins the process of reuniting the West Side with the river does not depend on the fickle generosity of any builder. It is part of the Urban Development Corporation's excellent master plan. Both the design and the execution are being paid for with money from U.D.C. bonds.

The Battery Park City Esplanade is the first waterfront park to be built in New York since the

Brooklyn Heights Esplanade in 1951. When, and if, Westway goes ahead, its parks will be connected to the Esplanade, extending public waterfront uses from the Battery to 42d Street.

As a prototype, the Battery Park City design is something to cheer about. There will be no concrete pots for shrubs, but rows of rooted trees. It will use classic park elements, like hexagonal paving blocks, in the Olmsted manner. A low iron railing topping a sea wall will incorporate classic lighting fixtures creating an illuminated necklace at night along the river's edge. The design suggests the character and tradition of New York, rather than a trendy shopping mall.

Battery Park City will add much more to New York than spectacular new buildings. For most New Yorkers, however, seeing is still believing, and until they can sit under the trees at the river's edge, the Esplanade will not be real. That will be possible between Liberty and Albany Streets next spring.