

Architecture: How Not to Build a City

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

NEW YORK, as has been noted, stumbles on. In the third installment on the process we continue to question some of the city's largest and most important planning projects. Concern has been expressed here about the Metropolitan Museum's master plan (destructive and dubious in policy, urbanism and esthetics), Welfare Island (high marks for policy, low for procedure) and now, Battery Park City (read on). We are viewing with alarm.

Battery Park City sprang full blown from Governor Rockefeller's head—building projects have a way of doing that, like Athena from the head of Zeus—on May 13, 1966, much to New York City's surprise. New York had been engaged on its own Lower Manhattan Plan, but the news had apparently not reached the Governor's office. The state's scheme, unveiled in "artists' drawings," neither paralleled nor suggested the city's thinking. The only point in common was the starting premise of building on landfill that would extend the Manhattan shoreline north from the Battery, in this case on the Hudson River side.

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Beyond that, the Governor's proposal was a heart-chilling cliché of standard towers in a non-environment of vacuous spaces, a familiar formalism grown weary and stale since the 1930's when it was hot from Le Corbusier. The city's plan was a far more sensitive effort that emphasized a blend of human-scaled residential and recreational waterfront uses for a rich urban mix with the existing massed drama of the financial center.

Still, extending and vitalizing lower Manhattan with riveredge landfill was a great idea, and basically, the city and state shared it. It was, and is, an exhilarating opportunity. There followed a period of arduous design negotiation in which the firm of Philip Johnson and John Burgee was brought in as a kind of architectural marriage broker to promote a shotgun wedding between the Governor's architect, Wallace

K. Harrison, and the city's chief architects for the Lower Manhattan Plan, Conklin and Rossant.

What finally surfaced from the consortium on June 4, 1968, after a rocky (no pun) course of Lindsay-Rockefeller conflict, was a much-changed proposal of considerable vision, followed by a lease between the state-created Battery Park City Authority, headed by Charles J. Urstadt, and New York City. The state has given seed money and contracts are being let. In other words, Battery Park City is in business.

The revised Battery Park City plan is a broadly schematic design that would have a towering office and commercial development at its south end, with four residential neighborhoods above, to be joined by a north-south, multi-level service "spine" containing transportation, circulation and utilities. The plan has not been taken beyond this dramatic and still undeveloped "concept" stage. "A good show," someone has called it.

Engineering studies are in process for the landfill. This month, the Battery Park City Authority let two important

contracts. It selected Gibbs and Hill, Inc., and Tippetts-Abbett - McCarthy - Stratton, both engineering firms of solid reputation, as the general engineering and architectural consultants to carry out the plan of the 91-acre project. According to Commissioner Urstadt, their responsibility will be "to take the conditions outlined in the master plan and translate them into specifications and working drawings." These drawings will serve as guidelines for the Authority and for private developers, who will then complete the job with their own architects.

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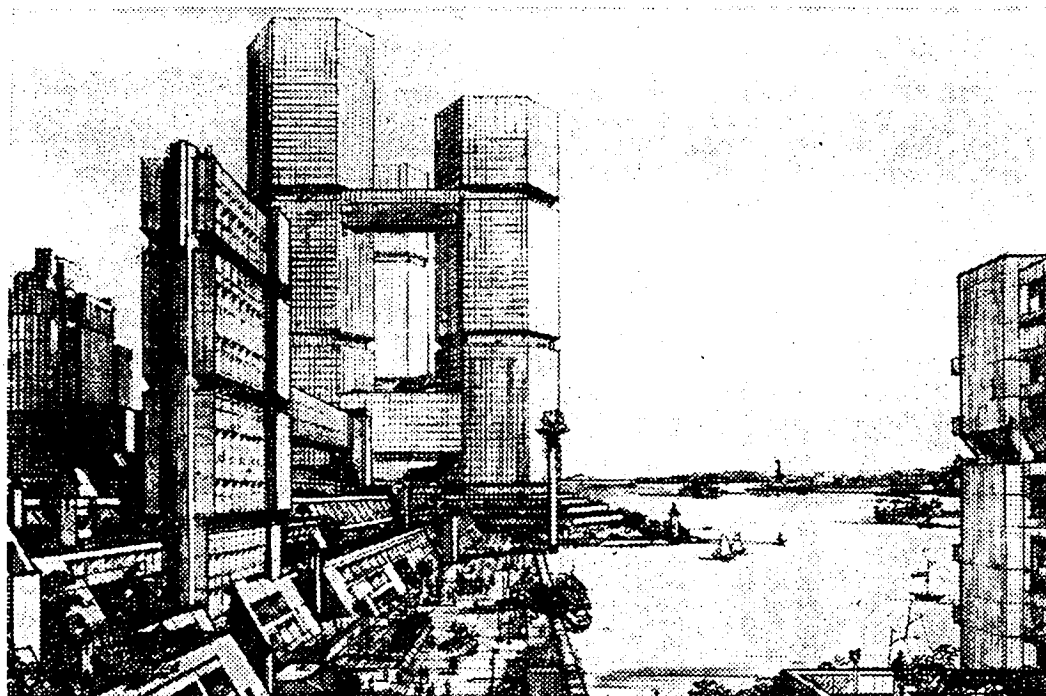
Although the Battery Park City Authority is sincerely and conscientiously dedicated to its master plan, this procedure raises serious questions. First, the master plan is schematic in the broadest sense. It follows quite naturally, and with no perjorative connotations, that all kinds of bugs exist that must be resolved in working from the general to the specific. This kind of problem solving is the process of planning.

Problems will arise constantly during development that require rethinking, and even redesign. It is not a nuts

and bolts operation. The name of the game is flexibility. This is still a conceptual stage: the critical time when design skills and urbanistic insights must meet pragmatic realities in terms of programmatic objectives. What results is the real plan.

But the planning architects have "finished" their job. They are through. They are not to be part of the engineering team commissioned to carry out their ideas. The engineering firms are free to consult the planners when they hit the inevitable clinkers, and they have architects on staff, of course. But that is no substitute for the proper development-planning process, which is being dangerously misunderstood.

There are still some very large conceptual problems to be faced. The basic idea of the plan is to relate the city to water views and uses. Depressing the West Side highway is part of the scheme. But the necessary north-south circulation with all service functions in that multi-level, linear spine means that the spine itself could become a waterfront barrier. Only two east-west cuts through the mass are anticipated—where a break could be made be-



Drawing of Battery Park City plan, looking south toward office towers
The architects are through. Will the engineers really care?

tween commercial and residential areas and between Battery Park City and the World Trade Center without circulatory dismemberment. Moreover, a 60-foot podium base is needed on the landfill to accommodate the layered service functions.

Will this make a Chinese wall against the river? Is there enough grade down to the river to compensate? Will the engineers care?

There are other problems. Inflation has already shrunk the Authority's seed money. The office market has gone soft. And yet the entire plan rests on the initial construction of three huge, hexagonal office towers at the project's southern tip, which would provide the lever to finance the housing and neighborhoods above. These economics will no longer work, and the Authority knows it.

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Assuming that this means a showdown rather than a dead stop, what is about to happen is distressingly predictable.

The engineers will now proceed to design and locate the service infrastructure according to the frankly generalized and incomplete suggestions of the master plan. That will lock in the plan. Once that is done, it will no longer be possible to make necessary or desirable plan modifications; too much money will already have been invested in the service infrastructure. The aborted plan will then be parcelled out to developers and their architects, whose designs are to be approved by a review board written into the city-state lease. In a soft market, they could simply refuse to negotiate, if they choose to come in at all. As things stand, procedurally and economically, there is no place to go but down.

Is this any way to build a city? We asked that question when the master plan appeared, with its refreshingly constructive ideas of multi-level use and emphasis on community as neighborhoods and waterfront as pleasure. The answer at that stage was yes. At this stage, it's no. Battery Park City is a potential tragedy of errors.