

East Side Plan

The ambitious plan for the offshore development of the east side of Lower Manhattan unveiled this week has a long way to go before it becomes reality, but in size alone its impact on New York would be historic. It is not a question, however, of a dramatic change in the skyline.

The days when real estate operations were equated with progress and no one bothered about their connection to society and the environment are gone. There are deeper issues involved, of planning and purpose, that must be weighed with an objectivity almost impossible today in a city pressured by crisis and human tragedy.

The physical planning of the huge proposal is an exemplary exercise in urban or environmental design, the result of a sensitive and informed professionalism of which New York for once can be proud. But this is, to put it plainly, a plan for the haves, not for the have-nots. Its commercial and residential development is aimed specifically at bringing back to New York the upper middle class on which the downtown financial community—and the city—depend for stability and, ultimately, existence.

It would be easy and popular to condemn it out of hand for its lack of low-income housing and call for something with more social justice and democratic appeal. That has become a political panacea. But the fact is that a housing "mix" would be suicidal on land that costs \$40 a square foot to create; the available subsidies are not adequate or simply do not exist to make low-income housing possible there without actually penalizing the poor. The extraordinary costs which would devour subsidies would also produce far fewer units than could be built on other sites.

Even if this were not so, the need for strengthening the city's economic base remains critical. It is the only real hope for providing the services, including housing, that New Yorkers so desperately need. There are strong arguments, in terms of the city's future stability and resources, for the plan. And there are strong arguments for the quality of the plan, with its promise of intelligent, sophisticated development, and of a vastly improved downtown environment with pleasures such as the South Street Seaport and waterfront parks for all.

But the priorities of this city have a tragic polarity—it is hard to make a moral reconciliation of the urgency of poverty and the adequacy of the tax base. Significantly, support for the plan is being solicited on the premise of the use of its revenues to better the human condition in other parts of the city, and specifically to build more housing elsewhere. Is that pitch also an easy political panacea? And will the business community and the administration commit themselves equally to the city's poor?