

Architecture

Hard Questions for Harlem

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WHEN Governor Rockefeller announced a Harlem site for a state office building in December, 1966, the move was viewed as a commendable effort to bring new life and some physical upgrading to one of the city's most depressed ghetto areas. The Governor set foot where no real estate investor had dared to tread.

What no one visualized was the speed with which the developers would start wheeling and dealing along 125th Street. The new state building was the match that sparked an explosion of construction proposals. The question now is whether this potential embarrassment of riches can be resolved into the necessary social and urban objectives of ghetto revitalization.

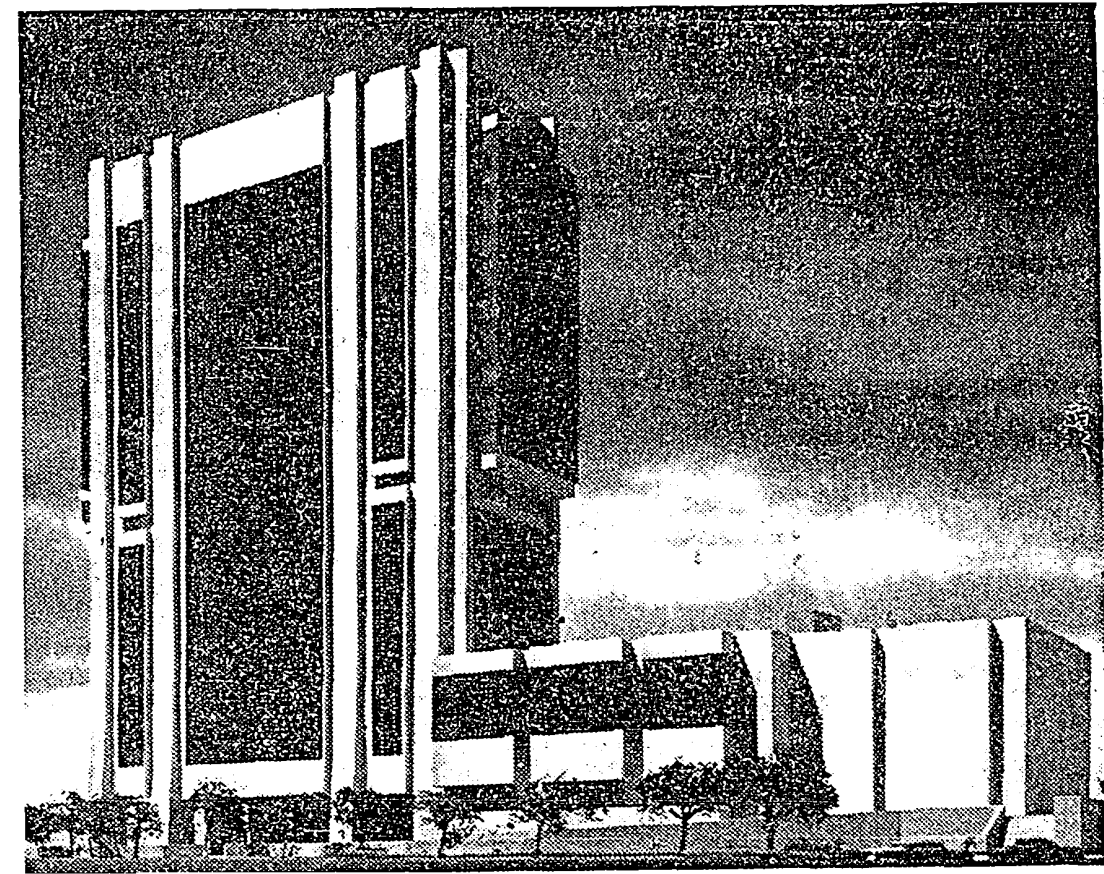
From Park Avenue to the Hudson River, 125th Street is in ferment. The state office building, by Ifill, Johnson, Hanchard, will be at the west end of the fully rebuilt block from 125th to 126th Streets between Seventh and Lenox Avenues. The rest of that street will be occupied by an arts and cultural center being designed by Philip Johnson, who has done the site plan for the entire block. Just to the west, across Seventh Avenue, a privately erected city office building will rise almost simultaneously with the state building.

A multiple tower residential project sponsored by Columbia University with a community group is proceeding for the Hudson River end of 125th Street. Published renderings show a series of slabs on a podium base, all of unmitigated monotony and soulless scale. The design of this project has a long way to go.

Knickerbocker Hospital is seeking urban renewal assistance for a \$75-million, seven-block expansion program on the north side of 125th Street between Convent and Amsterdam Avenues. The architects are Max Urbahn Associates and the model indicates an ambitious supercomplex.

Gian Carlo Menotti's project for a Harlem Opera House, being designed by Edward L. Barnes for a site on or near 125th Street, now has possible city support.

There are at least three proposals for using the air rights over the railroad tracks at 125th Street and Park Avenue. Commercial suggestions range from office buildings to sports palaces. Explosive pressures have been building up in Harlem for covering the tracks and providing low-cost housing, and some decisions will have to be made



Louis Checkman

Model of New York State office building for 125th Street
Where no real estate investor dared to tread

fairly soon. Two large insurance companies have shown investment interest, but are waiting for feasibility figures before making commitments.

On other parts of the street, there are ideas for a new department store, small store space and municipal garages.

Meanwhile, the city is holding the would-be developers' hands and trying to get money for its own feasibility studies on the area's needs, from housing to transportation. These studies will have to be made on a crash schedule to determine the necessary and proper guidelines for the new construction if it is to make any sense at all. Otherwise it will quickly deteriorate into real-estate deals, pure, simple and familiar.

Last week, the design for the state office building was unveiled to a chorus of praise of every coloration, from establishment to militant. It is a dignified structure by what could only be called an integrated firm headed by Negro partners. (It is hard to make a case for "separatist" architecture, although even that can happen today.) The new building will add status and style to 125th Street.

But the questions and problems that it raises in terms of development objectives are not being faced officially by anyone except the City Planning Commission, which, like the Governor, is also moving into areas where no one previously had dared

to tread. These are areas of planning decision. Beyond that there is the problem, almost unbeatable in New York, of how to make such decisions stick once they are made.

What to condemn, what to build, how to deal with the railroad tracks, where to put housing, how to relate community facilities, what part is to be played by the city, the newly merged Penn Central and the private developers, how the 125th Street transportation pattern could tie in to new projects and functions; admittedly none of this is within the realm or responsibility of the speculative builder. Nor are other real Harlem needs: coordination of zoning, the provision of low-rent housing and cheap commercial space.

The Planning Commission has already made a small, good start with the sponsors on matters of setbacks and open space on the Seventh to Lenox Avenues block, and it has substantially modified by "advice" the design of the adjacent office building for the city's use. But the big issues are yet to be resolved.

With a 10-man urban design staff and still without study funds, the Planning Commission is hoping to sort out and make sense of the Harlem "renaissance." The alternative, no matter how construction may boom, is social failure. This is a kind of failure that no one can afford. It has never been measured by the real estate or institutional groups that

may build for profit or space on the edges of slums. It is measured in crushing human and economic costs in larger urban terms and the losing battle of keeping a city viable. There is no column for riots in the businessman's books.

As things stand now on 125th Street, we have in hand two office buildings, some institutional construction and an assortment of cultural monuments.

Is this really community revitalization? Beyond the fact that it represents the badly needed economic impetus of new construction, what does it do for Harlem? Is it not, perhaps—oh, dreadful thought—a fine collection of those middle-class values that the black community keeps telling the white community not to impose on it?

Has anyone ever really looked at a cultural center during those hours when there are no performances? When the lights go up, they are lively. At other times they are among the city's dead spots, deserted except for a few desultory ticket buyers. Much of the time, Lincoln Center is a virtual Sahara. No architectural style, no galaxy of star designers, makes up for this elegant sterility. Culturally, to cite one existing example, the Harlem community already has the finest ethnic book collection in the city, but the library is not exactly jumping. Government office buildings hardly jump, either.

Where is the action? On shopping streets, at drug-store counters, newsstands, continuous-run movies, in luncheonettes, bars, book and record shops, any place where a lively mix of activities and surface attractions offers constant pleasure and distraction without effort. This is life, and the easy, elementary values involved are black, white and universal.

Life on 125th Street has become increasingly sordid and marginal. The new buildings are meant to be anchors for a revitalized community. But too many anchors can sink a ship.