

# Developing Lower Manhattan

The city has finally given its official backing to the Lower Manhattan Plan released by the Planning Commission last June. An Office of Lower Manhattan Development has also been created to carry out the plan and to coordinate the city departments and agencies and public and private interests involved.

As rational as this action sounds, it is nothing short of revolutionary. Planning in New York is traditionally a kind of hesitation waltz. It has been customary to move toward commitment and then back away, in an utterly predictable pattern, creating a planning vacuum that the most ordinary speculative development rushes in to fill. In this climate of inertia it has become axiomatic for New Yorkers to expect the worst and to get it.

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Perhaps it was the shock of excellence—the Lower Manhattan Plan is considered one of the best in the country in the brilliance of its vision and the quality of its urban design—that stunned the city into a six-month delay before accepting its recommendations. But the late endorsement is more than made up for by the fact that it is clear that this is not to be a pious paper exercise.

There are serious problems to be worked out. Huge, independently conceived projects for the downtown area, such as the World Trade Center and the off-shore Battery Park City, must conform to the intentions of the plan if they are not to sabotage them. Powers like New York State, the Port Authority, Federal and state highway commissions and the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association, accustomed to autonomous action, will have to trade *laissez-faire* for cooperation with the plan's guidelines for the greater city good. These guidelines, it must be remembered, are flexible; the plan is a creative, generalized scheme for orderly potential development along broad, imaginative lines beyond the limitations of conventional investment building. It is meant to channel future growth, not to freeze or dictate it.

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These objectives cannot be achieved by the usual planning giveaway, New York style—a curious and characteristic form of municipal collective bargaining with private or political interests in which public values are pre-sacrificed and planning principles compromised out of existence before construction begins. This ambitious project will require sharply elevated standards and a degree of total commitment that is a New York novelty.

The biggest job for the Office of Lower Manhattan Development is going to be to convince everyone concerned, from the business community to politicians, that things have really changed. The city is taking the responsibility for its future in terms that go beyond speculative self-interest and short-order building. It is accepting a mandate for excellence with the challenge of growth.