

Architecture

New York, Life's Loser, Does It Again

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT may be the time of the year or the state of the city or a combination of both that induces the doldrums, but this columnist is about to disappear briefly in search of nepenthe or restructuring of the soul. We will be back, but we leave with you the case of the Brooklyn meat market site as an example of what finally breaks the New York spirit, which can take a good deal more punishment than most. Such tales have or need no moral; they simply show the city as it is.

The Brooklyn meat market, about to be moved from the Fort Greene or Atlantic Terminal area, will be located on virtually the last prime piece of New York's unbuilt, "in-city" waterfront land: 13 acres of Brooklyn shore between the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges, opposite the spires of lower Manhattan, with one of the most spectacular views known to history or man.

How and why this site was chosen—it was an action of the Site Selection Board, not an act of God—is not a story of corrupt or wrong-headed decisions by evil men, but of how events and circumstances in this city conspire to trap and lock decent people into actions that seem obviously and ludicrously wrong by any objective standard. Examined carefully, these "solutions" lead back into a miasma of conflicting political, economic and human claims, all of which combine to give reason a total pasting, and which add up, step by step and compromise by compromise, to decisions of pure and inevitable disaster.

The meat market is to be moved as part of the Atlantic Terminal renewal plan. An essential supplier of food and employer of minorities, the market is also rat-infested and neighborhood-blighting, and has a deadline to meet Department of Health regulations.

Removal of the market, basic to the area's rehabilitation, has been talked about since the late 1950's. The renewal designation of the Fort Greene-Atlantic Terminal area was made in 1963, and renewal plans were finally ap-

proved in 1968. The Site Selection Board, which has been considering possible market locations since October, 1967, introduced the present site in May, 1968 and approved it in October, 1968. Bedlam has accompanied the process every step of the way.

The Atlantic Terminal is a black community suffering from a number of serious environmental, economic and social ills, including the customary long delay between the city promise of delivery by renewal and any visible action. The slowness of the market's removal has become an inflammatory issue. There have been demonstrations and threats of violence.

Sites have been proposed and rejected. Canarsie and Gowanus, to put it mildly, were unreceptive. Each nomination was fought to a political standstill locally, as cries for action grew louder. And so the city acted. It picked the waterfront site between the bridges. It seemed a fool-proof answer: an almost empty, largely city-owned, area with minimum relocation, containing little except a few 19th-century warehouses, a ferry station, a city building of the 1930's, and truck parking, backing onto an area of light industry.

There were only a few things wrong. It was one of the city's last pieces of undeveloped, central, waterfront land, and an official policy of using or reclaiming

the waterfront for people had been announced by the administration with considerable fanfare. It was an irreparable loss, in this context, for waterfront housing and recreation.

The adjoining Brooklyn Heights community pointed out that it was also the last chance to integrate its neighborhood and the low income Farragut houses beyond with a joint-use school that both blacks and whites had requested—uniquely in the city—and to provide a linking shoreline park and recreational area between them, according to the most desirable planning principles. With the housing crisis making headlines, it was also clear that an impressive number of incomparably located apartments could be accommodated. And there was that million dollar view of the river and the Lower Manhattan skyline, unparalleled by anything short of coming in by ocean liner.

A public increasingly sophisticated in urban matters and desperately concerned about housing mounted a protest. The city's site selection was scored as a tragic misuse of waterfront land; an expeditious political settlement born of familiar civic desperation; a short-term compromise that would be a long-term, locked-in mistake.

A crash study was embarked on by the Housing and Development Administra-

tion to prove to critics that everyone could have his cake and eat it, too—that the site could be developed for dual use, combining the meat market and recreation. But in a curious and quite unprecedented case of bureaucratic non-conformity, some HDA people came to the conclusion that the two uses were not compatible. Convinced that the site should be used for housing, a school and a park as the critics maintained, they prepared a study model accordingly. It was schematic, but it made the point. If there is no medal for this kind of apolitical behavior, one should be struck by an appropriate citizens' group immediately.

HDA was not being capricious. Part and parcel of its scheme was the apparent willingness of the Bethlehem Steel Company to trade another site, adjacent to the Brooklyn Army base and the heavy industry of Bush Terminal, for the site between the bridges. The Bethlehem land would then be used for the meat market, and Bethlehem, which has been eyeing the construction field, would build housing on the liberated waterfront.

One of those really colossal meetings that only government is capable of was held, replete with HDA, City Planning Department and Economic Development Administration officials and Bethlehem representatives, and the city said no. A spokesman for the Planning Department

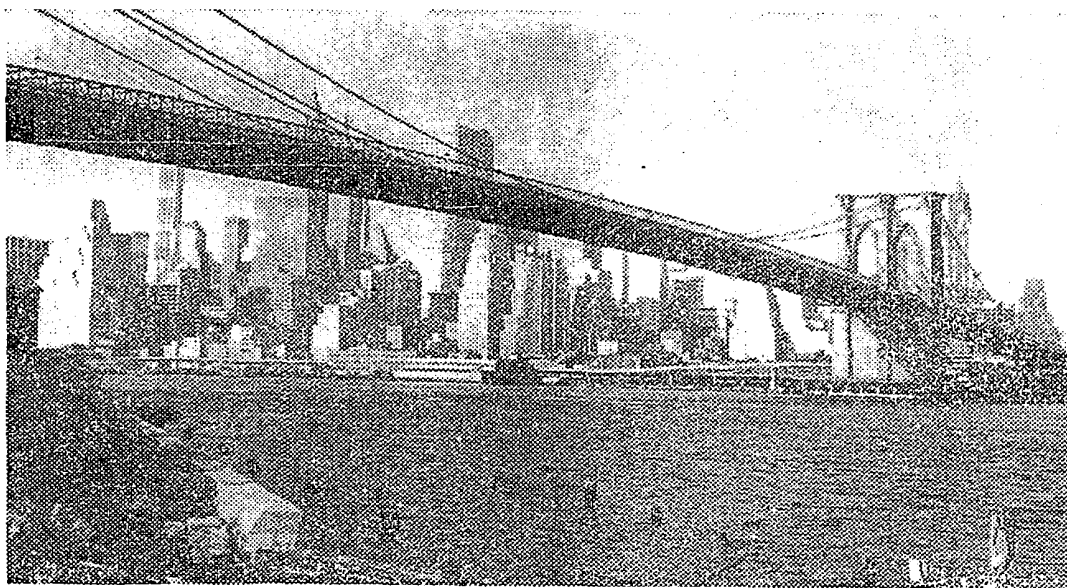
explains that the land preparation of the Bethlehem site would be more expensive and take longer. This added preparation time, plus a repetition of the site selection process, would mean at least eight months' to a year's further delay. Redoing the site selection alone would take a procedural minimum of four months—count them, four—assuming no political complications. A spokesman for EDA says the money doesn't really matter; the only deciding factor is time.

There is still one other real and rational possibility—putting the meat market in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which is being developed for industrial uses. This alternative was eliminated in earlier considerations because the Federal government was playing interminable footsie at that time over the transfer of the yard to the city. With the change in administration, the Navy Yard was dropped suddenly and magnanimously into the city's lap.

EDA Commissioner Richard Lewisohn tells the city that the market cannot go in the yard. He has told this reporter that the possibility is being "re-researched." All agencies now pass the buck to CLICK, the community-based Brooklyn organization to which the city has given the yard for development, and which has absolute authority in its charter to decide who the occupants will be. No time-consuming site selection process would be necessary. CLICK has yet to be heard from. The market, desperate but still cooperative, simply wants "to have the city stop waltzing it around."

The Bethlehem solution would provide both a market site and new housing. The delay—eight months after eight years—seems a viable tradeoff for proper land use and the alleviation of a desperate housing need.

If the Navy Yard group relents, relocation of the market could be even quicker. And if Ed Logue's State Urban Development Corporation would build housing on that showpiece site between the bridges—something it is eminently qualified to do—New York could be a winner, for once. That is the way to have one's cake and eat it.



View from the meat market