

Architecture

City of Hope, Despair

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ANY examination of the handsome and imaginative plan for lower Manhattan released by the City Planning Commission this week, with its wealth of computer-derived statistics and solutions and striking architectural visualizations of the near and distant future, will raise New Yorkers' highest hopes—and dash them to the depths of despair.

The over-all plan for the area from Canal Street to the Battery is a powerful, imaginative stimulant, demonstrating with sophisticated expertise New York's genuine potential as a beautiful and livable city of unparalleled dramatic excitement.

The over-all problems of implementation, however, combined with this city's traditional economic *laissez faire*, familiar administrative stumbling blocks and the myriad critical priorities that must be met with limited resources, present mountainous hurdles to the realization of the plan's most promising and tantalizing features.

First, Second, Third

These features are, first, a network of pedestrian streets for lower Manhattan's older thoroughfares, as part of a re-organized circulation system of expressways, walkways and arterial avenues. Second, there is the potential of the coordination of large-scale construction scheduled within the next five years, and a future land use plan to create a healthy, workable mix of business, residential and recreational needs.

This construction includes the proposed 16-acre, \$525 million World Trade Center, the 15-acre Brooklyn Bridge Southwest renewal area, the 31-acre Washington Street renewal area, the Civic Center, and a projected 16 million square feet of new office space to be constructed in the next ten years.

Finally, there is the development of a stunning, peripheral system of "windows on the water" consisting of

public parks and pedestrian plazas along the presently mutilated, but potentially magnificent riverfronts. This would all be built on newly-filled land, at the bargain price of \$25 a square foot. At this stage, optimistically labeled with the year 2000, there would be walk-to-work riverfront housing and the pedestrian streets would be connected to the new waterfront amenities, tying new and old construction together with water views through from the commercial core.

The Lower Manhattan Plan has already achieved considerable pre-release word of mouth fame among professionals, in part, perhaps, because it has come out of New York, a city that has earned an easily documented reputation for provincialism among the better planned capitals of the world. It has been prepared over the last year and a half by a group of consultants recognized as representative of the most progressive and imaginative thought and experience in the planning field. Retained by the City Planning Commission and working under its supervision, they are Alan M. Voorhees and Associates, Inc., traffic experts of Washington, D.C.; Wallace, McHarg, Roberts and Todd, landscape architects of Philadelphia; Whittlesey, Conklin and Rosant, architects of New York; Jack C. Smith, coordinating consultant. The results of their study demonstrate a de-

gree of design quality and creative scope with which the city is almost totally unfamiliar. With this scheme, New York comes of planning age.

It does so, however, on paper only. Without decisive and rather sweeping administrative action, including setting up a development corporation with the power to control and coordinate land and design, that is where the plan will stay.

Damage

Nor, for all of its brilliance, is the proposal without pitfalls. The first is the matter of the elevated east and west highways. The consultants and the City Planning Commission state frankly that, unless the highways that cut off the waterfront with surgical precision are depressed within the new landfill, the scheme is null and void. Partial reconstruction is already a possibility for the west side.

There is also the question of still more of the kind of damage to small business that has been one of the most regrettable side effects of urban renewal. To operate at all, many small, specialized enterprises must have the low rents of the older quarters that the new schemes eliminate. They are the tragic victims of both city programs and private developers, who like to classify them as "inefficient" or "marginal."

A special genus of electronics store and gourmet food shops has already been driven

out by the World Trade Center. The painters and sculptors who made Pop Art one of the city's leading cultural enterprises have been evicted from the Brooklyn Bridge urban renewal area, where they found excellent old lofts after Greenwich Village became overdeveloped and overpriced. Loss of "incubator" (another real estate term) arts and industries is a large price to pay.

The proposal fails also to urge the retention of any existing values that are not economic or glossily new. The planner sees rotting wharves decaying warehouses, narrow streets jammed with trucks, smells fish and cheese, and dreams of cleaning up. What he does not see, except for some lip service to landmarks commission lists, is the city's living character and tradition in its shabby, small-scale streets and buildings, many of which are derelict but still strongly evocative of urban roots in time and history. Planners seldom prowl the old streets that they redesign beyond an initial inspection. They might grow fond of them, and even begin to prize their sense of history and humanity, and accept the challenge of keeping some of their authentic references to the city's past. Instead, they bury them under superblocks.

A study has just been made by the New York State Council on the Arts with the objective of preserving the pitch-

roofed, homogenous, 19th-century brick buildings of New York's sailing age that still stand at the east end of Fulton Street. These, and the Front Street area Greek Revival commercial buildings, are acknowledged briefly as being on several lists of historic structures, but the planners do not consider them "important enough to be retained." Many have already succumbed to demolition by parking lot, civic sloth and decay.

Basic Consideration

There is also the extremely critical question of whether Governor Rockefeller, who has already come out in support of a plan under his own sponsorship, will get behind this one, which is obviously deeper, broader, more colorful and far better coordinated with the needs of the downtown core. State backing is necessary, as is that of the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association, headed by his brother, David Rockefeller. There is a potentially troubled area of politics and personal relationships.

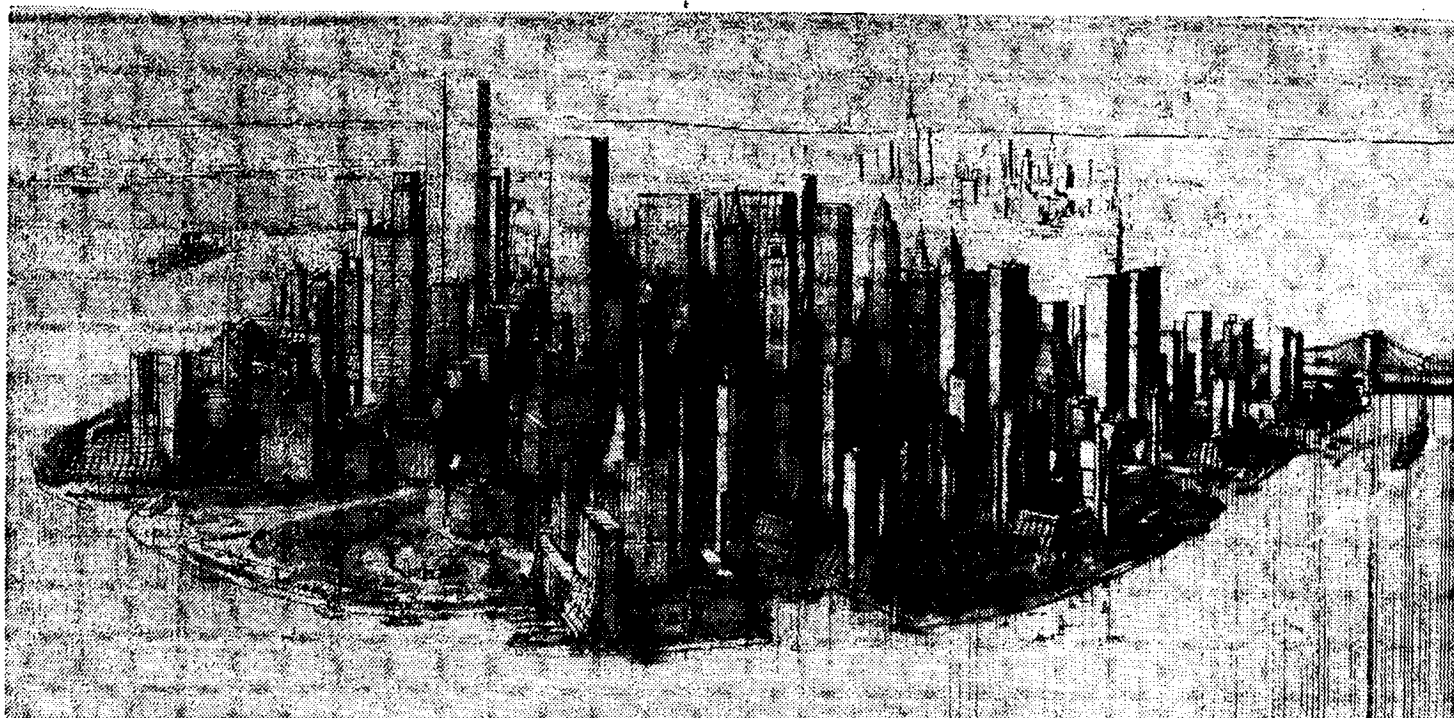
But the basic consideration really is whether New York can make plans on this scale with any possibility of carrying them out at all. At present, the planning function is firmly bottlenecked by a series of departmental dead ends. The Planning Commission proposes and other agencies dispose. Planning falls between policy and action in

a series of standardized snafus that have made New York infamous in design and renewal fields.

Although the ultimate answer under the circumstances is the development corporation, as it has been successfully utilized in other cities, some courses of action are open right now. The city can negotiate with the Port Authority not only on taxes, but on the possibility of the Authority carrying out parts of the plan involving the rebuilding of the West Side Highway. The Authority has a large stake there in tunnels and a possible passenger pier.

The Planning Commission can start on the proposal's short-range objectives; for example, the circulation system. (As a discouraging illustration of how really short-range the city's objectives are, the Commission has just selected Chambers Street, a major pedestrian way of the plan, to use as a tunnel exit for the revised Civic Center traffic pattern.) But until the public, the powerful financial community, the politicians and the special interest groups are convinced of the plan's necessity and value for the city's future condition, there will be neither climate nor cooperation for its execution.

The cynics aren't placing any bets. New York has a long tradition of defaulted dreams.



A view of lower Manhattan as it might be in the year 2000
A stunning peripheral system of "windows on the water"