

Battery Park City

With the announcement that Harry Helmsley will be the builder of the three large office buildings of Battery Park City, the huge development to be constructed on landfill in the Hudson River moves closer to reality. Since these towers, the size of three Pan Am Buildings, are also the financial anchor for the rest of the planned community, including all of the housing, this is an important step forward. But carrying out this ambitious "new town" project for the western side of Lower Manhattan is far more complex than naming a developer.

Mr. Helmsley has won the potential plum of some of the city's most prestigious and profitable office space—provided the commercial rental market firms up. There's risk involved, but the payoff is impressive.

The terms of the lease signed by New York City and the Battery Park City Authority state that the approved Battery Park City plan must be followed. If there are changes, they must be reappraised by the city. In that original plan, those three large office buildings are rather terrifying hexagonal towers. The talent and practicality brought to bear on these preliminary schematics are crucial. Fortunately, there must be approval for these buildings by the Architectural Review Board set up under the lease, and by the city's Office of Lower Manhattan Development, charged as well with seeing that the huge project is a functional amenity, not a liability for the downtown community.

Even more critical than the buildings is the development of the plan itself. The complex, multi-layered scheme that skilfully separates social and service functions threatens to loom mountainously at the water's edge if engineering studies find it too costly to build below water level on filled land. Its basic planning premise then becomes dubious.

The analysis and design work, being carried out now by the Authority's consulting engineers, will determine the character of the entire development. It will be extraordinary if no changes are necessary, in plan or buildings, and the quality of those changes will cast the community's die. The nature of the whole project, in fact, and particularly of its badly needed housing, is in doubt. A new community of 55,000 people must be checked for the quality of its environment, as well as for the viability of its real estate, every step of the way.