

Faith, Hope and Muscle

City Proposes to Save Theater District From Perils of Commercial Blandness

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

No city ever got built on faith, hope and charity. The formula is profit.

In New York, where the real estate profit margin is frequently measured in feet and inches, charity could hardly be expected. What the city has just demonstrated, however, in its carrot-and-stick dealings with

developers leading to the proposed inclusion of two theatres in two new office buildings for the Broadway area, is faith, hope and muscle. These two new theaters, for the sites of the Astor Hotel at 44th Street and the Loew's Capitol Theater at 51st Street, were not in the investors' original plans.

The City Planning Commission believes that the theater district should be saved from the bland commercial homogenization of Third Avenue and the Avenue of the Americas, a process that has drained life and character from other neighborhoods and is obviously beginning along Broadway.

On the Astor site, which the commission considers the district's pivotal block, it proposed swapping extra height, or rentable square footage, for a ground-floor theater, in a series of bargaining sessions that reached from the commission's offices to Gracie Mansion.

The muscle was always there. New York, in fact, possesses a fine set of muscles in zoning and building regulations and project review-planning and design guidance (control is too strong and unpleasant a word) but has rarely, until recently, even flexed them.

'Played Us for Patsies'

The former head of a top Federal building agency once said New York had been planned totally by private investors for private profit, with the city administration consistently aiding and abetting the process. Or, as a municipal employe remarked of New York's builders and developers who were able in the past to obtain zoning variances, street closings and municipal services without exchange of urban amenities, "They played us for patsies."

The tools for the improvement that the city possesses are impressive. For example, where a site does not permit a big enough building for the cost of the land and construction, the builder goes to the city for the necessary adjustment. He gets it.

Usually the city gets nothing in return except a misplaced plaza that has no relation to anything else that is happening on the street, but allows a builder's bonus of more floors for open space.

An example of a lost bargaining opportunity is the Avenue of the Americas, where at least a quarter of a mile of totally unrelated skyscrapers went up virtually simultaneously, with a number of city permits, variances and adjustments involved.

It is said that a gentle municipal push at the right moment might have helped one recalcitrant builder to line up with other, more willing developers for the underground connections that would have tied the avenue together with multilevel circulation and a proper urban plan.

The city owns and controls streets. For profitable major construction today's builder needs a superblock, and he asks the city to close and eliminate streets, or in a sense, to cede them to him. He gets them.

Giving Away Character

In lower Manhattan, New York gave streets and the city's character away. Independent superblocks stand side by side, unrelated in terms of any comprehensive urban design objectives for the area. With no framework of a public plan, they destroy the scale, flavor and history of the city's heart. One more neighborhood bit the dust.

The Housing and Redevelopment Board, now part of the Housing and Development Administration, has always had design review powers. Dormant in the past, they are currently being used as bargaining tools.

Among the board's more powerful tools are the Mitchell-Lama financing, involving tax abatement for middle-income housing, and urban renewal controls, from the awarding of projects and sites to the acceptance of plans. To say that they have not been used in New York's unhappy renewal history is a triumph of understatement. But they have been there all the time.

An increasing number of investors and institutions are being handed back their plans by the board with instructions to raise design standards, a phenomenon unheard of in New York a decade ago. A Bronx hospital that had rejected its architects' proposal for a more standard solution was told to stay with the architects' superior scheme. One of the city's best-known developers is still reeling from a head-on clash with the board over construction and design. A showdown is shaping up over open space design that another builder considers a nonessential "extra."

For builders in open areas, the City Planning Commission must approve water and sewerage installations. Approval has always been routine. Recently the commission made a sewerage plant permit for a Staten Island builder contingent on changing a grid street pattern to a better layout.

The builder asked for help and got it. He was assisted by the commission's new Urban Design Group, 10 enthusiastic architects who represent the first design section that the Planning Commission has ever had. They also provide the technical persuasion necessary to prove that a theater was a structural practicality in an office building.

The improvements are just starting to show, like the tip of an iceberg. But on a clear day you can begin to see a better New York.