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Les rives du Bas Manhattan revisitées

Ann L. Bittenwieser

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The Lower Manhattan Waterfront Revisited

Ann L. Bittenwieser*



Introduction

Riverfront development in New York City has shifted from the expensive and expansive projects of the flush 1980s to more modest plans and efforts in the fiscally constrained 1990s. The Lower Manhattan waterfront is a microcosm of this shift. Situated at the confluence of the world-renowned New York Harbor, the historic Hudson River and an estuary (the East River), Lower Manhattan is the financial capital of the world. It is also a place where more than 25 million tourists congregate annually to visit waterfront icons such as the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island and, more recently, the South Street Seaport.

In the 1980s, plans that envisioned the continuation of Manhattan's high-rise silhouette on acres and acres of landfill began to come to fruition. Battery Park City, with office towers, housing and a mile-long public esplanade came on line. South Street Seaport, a festival marketplace and museum designed to lure tourists to the remains of the nine-

teenth century port, opened on a brand new pier and in renovated, historic upland structures. Plans were also drawn for South Ferry, an office tower over the Staten Island ferry terminal; for five blocks of mixed-use development on a platform in the East River between the ferry terminal and the Seaport; and for an upscale restaurant in a late nineteenth century pier.

By 1990, of the grand developments planned, Battery Park City was half built and only the Seaport was complete. South Ferry and the East River platform development were abandoned. A new program for Pier A included a visitors center for a state cultural program.

Using these waterfront projects as illustrations, and the 1980s plans as the starting point, this paper will document a shift in planning focus and the reasons behind this change in direction. These reasons involve everything from changing environmental and urban design philosophies, fiscal and physical constraints and controversies over the public and private use of waterfront property to serendipitous events. The cases and issues provide lessons for any contemporary riverfront project.

1980s: Large Scale Waterfront Development

In 1966, in an attempt to superimpose some order on the growth of Lower Manhattan, the city's Planning Department published the Lower Manhattan Plan. In a form traditional to the historic growth of this former Dutch province, planners recommended providing more space for solving the city's economic, residential and recreational problems by simply pushing the island out further into its surrounding waterbodies. Envisioned was the creation of six riverside development areas containing housing, commercial and office space for 85,000 residents and half a million workers.

By the early 1970s, zoning work and public and private planning and development studies had begun for what would be designated as the Manhattan Landing Special District - over a mile and a half long new commercial, residential and recreational complex on landfill or platforms in the East River between the Manhattan Bridge and the Whitehall Ferry Terminal at the southern tip of Manhattan. On the West Side, the northern end of Battery Park City, the only proposed development area that would actually come to fruition, had been filled in with new land. Work was also progressing on the re-use and renewal of the South Street Seaport buildings and Pier 17. Only a small portion of this project had been included in the 1966 plan. This was an era of urban renewal, when historic preservation and rehabilitation of old buildings that had once been an important part of the functioning of the city, were unknown. At the last minute, through the efforts of the Seaport Museum (the focal point of the project) and a nascent group of preservationists, the Seaport was added to the Lower Manhattan Plan.

The 1980s began flush with the availability of public funding and easy developer financing for these Lower Manhattan projects. Federal monies in the form of a \$20.45 million Urban Development Block Grant and a \$7.6 million of Economic Development Action Grant enabled the construction of Pier 17 at the Seaport and improvements to the Seaport Market Place, the Fulton Fish Market and the Museum Block. The New

* Mrs. Ann L. Bittenwieser is vice president for Waterfront Planning, New-York.

York State Urban Development Corporation contributed \$10 million toward the design and construction of the landmarked Schermerhorn Row. New York City added at total of \$25.8 million in capital budget and (Seaport) sales tax funds for infrastructure and utilities and museum renovations. On the private side, the Rouse Corporation helped to convert an historic building into a theater and to construct the three-story Fulton Market Building and retail pavilion on the city-constructed Pier 17. In 1984, another developer constructed a 35-story office tower adjacent to the upland retail complex.

With the help of former Governor Rockefeller the Battery Park City Authority had been created in 1968 with its own bonding powers. By 1980, through the use of Authority funds, much of the infrastructure was in place in the southern portion of Battery Park City. This included 325,000 square feet of magnificent, innovative esplanade and waterfront park space. Planned were 12,000 market rate apartments, six million square feet of office space, a Holocaust Memorial and museum, hotel, high school and zoo. The Canadian firm of Olympia and York, was chosen to develop the commercial center. By 1988 with \$2 billion in private financing and \$50 million in public investments the entire planned office space was complete.

In the mid 1980s developer interest in the Lower Manhattan waterfront reached a peak. To capture this interest, in 1985, the New York City Department of Transportation and Department of Ports and Terminals issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for up to \$1.5 million square feet of commercial and/or hotel development to be built atop the city-owned Whitehall Ferry Terminal. Also requested was the adaptation of the adjacent, landmarked Battery Maritime Building (a nineteenth century ferry terminal, the slips of which are still in use by the federal government to transport residents and workers across the East River to the Governor's Island Coast Guard base) for a cultural facility. A year earlier the Public Development Corporation (PDC - forerunner of today's Economic Development Corporation, the city's not-for-profit development authority) had signed a lease with the Charthouse restaurant chain for an upscale restaurant in Pier A, a landmarked, city-owned fireboat pier immediately to the south of Battery Park City.

William Zeckendorf was chosen to develop the Whitehall site which quickly became known as South Ferry Plaza. Planned, in a sleek, 61 story tower and the BMB, was a million and a half square feet of office space, a new ferry terminal, 35,000 square feet for

cultural use, a restaurant, esplanade and viewing pier, and a reconfigured park on the upland side of the tower.

To further capture this wave of developer enthusiasm, PDC - leading a task force of city agencies - began an extensive planning effort in order to create one of the new development areas that had been pinpointed in the 1966 plan. On the four city-owned piers in the East River immediately south of the Seaport, was the opportunity for approximately 750,000 square feet of new land on platforms. Envisioned were three to four million square feet of commercial office space, 540 to 1,400 units of housing, more than two city blocks of open space and possibly a high-rise hotel.

During the 1980s the environmental conscience that had been born in the '60s reached its maturity. Citizens now aware of the fragility of the planet, even in the vastly complex ecosystem of New York City, took action against projects that might adversely affect it. The waterfront became the forefront of their New York City battle. In 1985, a federal judge responded to a suit to prohibit the Army Corps of Engineers' issuance of a permit for the creation of new land between the bulkhead and pierhead line that would have allowed construction of a new, underground peripheral highway on the West Side of Manhattan. The court ruled that a permit was improperly granted because the Corps had failed to take into account that this project might cause the destruction of the spawning grounds of the striped bass. The project stopped - as it were - dead in the water.

1990s: Refocused Renewal

Fiscal uncertainty and a greater governmental sensitivity to environmental concerns were ushered in with the 1990s. The East River Landing project was abandoned in the planning stage when developers failed to materialize and it was apparent that there would be no political support for new platforms. Four piers in various states of decay stood between an esplanade that was supposed to run from Whitehall Terminal to the Seaport, but dead-ended four blocks short of its destination. However, there were also signs of new life: several active commuter ferry slips, dinner cruise boats and actively-used tennis bubbles.

The Zeckendorf team failed to take up its option on the South Ferry project, leaving the city's major ferry terminal in a growing state of disrepair. The two cultural users, which had been awarded the to-be-renovated space in the Battery Maritime Building, were left without a backer for their new home.

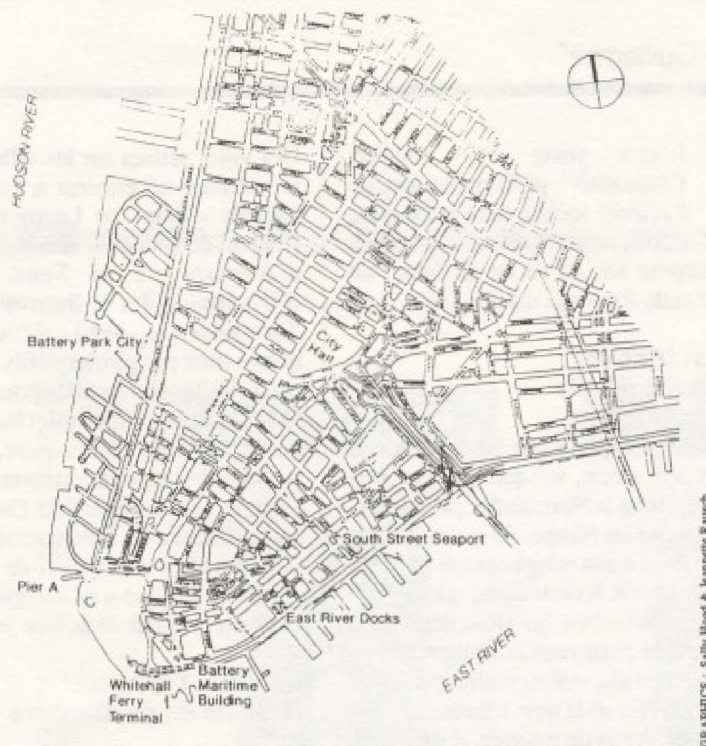
At Battery Park City developers had secured private financing for only one-third of the planned housing units. Few of these were reserved for low-income families. The reasoning had been that because of its waterfront location, with incredible views of New York Harbor and the Statue of Liberty, this could be a self-supporting, upscale community. Scarce public funds need not be applied here and could be reserved for more needy areas of the city. Luxury apartments, furthermore, were necessary to keep corporate leaders from moving to the suburbs. Underlying these rationales was a dilemma: if the pioneer tenants were poor, wealthier residents might never move in.

Even BPC's open space came under attack. Until now, most of the parks and esplanades had been completed by the Authority prior to occupation of the residential units. The planned South Garden (a patchwork-quilt botanical display designed by artist Jennifer Bartlett) would be installed after many of the apartments were occupied. The garden was shelved by the Authority after intense criticism from citywide political and advocacy groups and local residents. The latter joined the fray, fearful of the greater influx of *outsiders* should the garden be connected directly to the adjoining city-owned Battery Park. They also questioned the appropriation of a portion of their rent surcharge for open space maintenance on what was considered an *extravagance*.

Pier A fared better during this period. Although Charthouse backed out of the project in 1986, a lease was executed between PDC and a new developer at the end of 1990. In addition to the restaurants, the new lease includes a public landing for visiting boats (to be provided by the developer) and a visitors center for the city's Urban Cultural Park. This is a \$4.2 million state-funded effort which celebrates the maritime and immigration history of the city. A substantial portion of the state grant will be applied to overall rehabilitation costs for Pier A.

Fire, which historically has prompted renewal on many North American waterfronts has brought hope of new life to the Whitehall Ferry Terminal and its surroundings. The terminal was severely damaged in September 1991, by a fire inadvertently set by a group of squatters. This incident has provided the city with an opportunity to revise its priorities for the area encompassing the former South Ferry project. New goals include building a beautiful and efficient ferry terminal, identifying associated revenue generating opportunities and providing services for

FIGURE 1: Lower Manhattan Waterfront
New York City Economic Development Corporation



tourism. Recently EDC was charged with rebuilding the terminal.

Just as the U.S. bicentennial in 1976 also revived countless North American urban waterfronts, the 1992 Columbus Quincentennial has spurred renewed interest in the decaying piers adjacent to the Seaport. Renamed the East River Docks, EDC is completing an urban design study of the former East River Landing site. Considerations of height and bulk on platforms have been replaced by quality of life goals and interest in facilitating immediate use and public access on existing structures. EDC will issue a Request for Bids for the interim re-use of two piers for tourboats and other water-related activities, outdoor eating establishments and public recreation. EDC will also undertake modest street improvements to open the piers to the public. These include finishing the existing esplanade and connecting it to the Seaport, installing decorative pavements, signs and banners announcing the piers, and realigning existing parking spaces to widen pedestrian entryways. Funding for this project, which is estimated at around \$75,000, will be raised or defrayed through the use of existing city services, such as intersections painting and highway cleanup, EDC support and donations from

downtown businesses which front on the docks.

Lessons Learned


Although the recession has curtailed many potentially economically lucrative projects, waterfront cities could use such moments to reflect. New York, relieved of developer pressure on individual parcels, has had the luxury to plan for the entire downtown waterfront. EDC's work on Pier A, Whitehall Terminal and East River Docks allows examination of broader issues such as connecting important tourist destinations (Battery Park, Whitehall Terminal and the Seaport); increasing economic activity and tax revenues by improving the attraction of Lower Manhattan; and bolstering a 24-hour community by the addition of new nighttime activities.

Public involvement in new waterfront projects should be an ongoing process. The Battery Park City Authority is embarking on a new design for South Park, the former South Garden. Because this is mapped parkland, the Authority is philosophically committed to resolving the conflict between residents' and outsiders' use. The East River Docks, located in a primarily business district, might be used to house potentially noisy nighttime

activities that are important to the 24-hour vitality of the waterfront.

The environmental issues must be addressed on a case-by-case basis. The Pier A developers, in order to meet fire codes and to provide public berthing space, plan a 24-foot wide apron around the pier. A non-navigability designation for the surrounding waters was recently obtained from the federal government. However, the project must still be approved by the Army Corps of Engineers and city and state landmarks authorities.

Cities should always take advantage of serendipitous events to advance the development of their waterfronts. New York looks forward to the July 4th weekend when once again the harbor will fill with vessels of all shapes and sizes to review the tall ships and the replicas of Christopher Columbus' fleet. This is a time when the city can show the progress it has made in cleaning up its waterways and gain constituents for the thoughtful and economically beneficial re-use of its shores.

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Les rives du Bas Manhattan revisitées

Ann L. Buttenwieser

Le Bas Manhattan est la capitale financière du monde. En ce lieu, plus de 25 millions de touristes se rassemblent annuellement pour visiter certains monuments ou sites à voir, tels que la Statue de la liberté, Ellis Island et, plus récemment, le South Street Seaport.

Le développement des rives à New York a connu des changements de grand envergure et le Bas Manhattan est un microcosme de ces changements.

En effet, dans les années 1980, les plans envisageaient un développement à grande échelle. Plusieurs projets sont entrepris ou envisagés, entre autres, le Battery Park City avec ses édifices à bureaux, ses logements et une esplanade d'un mille de long. Le South Street Seaport désire offrir aux touristes un ensemble d'espaces commerciaux et de musées.

Le développement de ces projets est encouragé par la disponibilité de fonds publics qui rend facile leur financement. De ce fait, plusieurs infrastructures étaient déjà en place dans la partie sud de Battery Park City dans les années 1980. Vers 1985, l'intérêt des promoteurs des rives s'est encore accrue mais, vers la même époque, la prise de conscience des problèmes touchant l'environnement, née vers le années 1960, a atteint sa maturité. Désormais, les citoyens savent que leur planète est fragile et qu'ils peuvent prendre partie contre des projets pouvant affecter cet écosystème complexe de la ville de New York.

Finalement, à ce jour, seul le Seaport est achevé et les autres projets sont abandonnés ou à moitié construits. On remarque maintenant que les plans de développement des rives et les efforts fournis à cette fin deviennent de plus en plus modestes. Aussi, il va sans dire que la récession n'a pas aidé à augmenter le potentiel lucratif de ces projets et des questions environnementales, urbaines, fiscales et matérielles restent à résoudre.