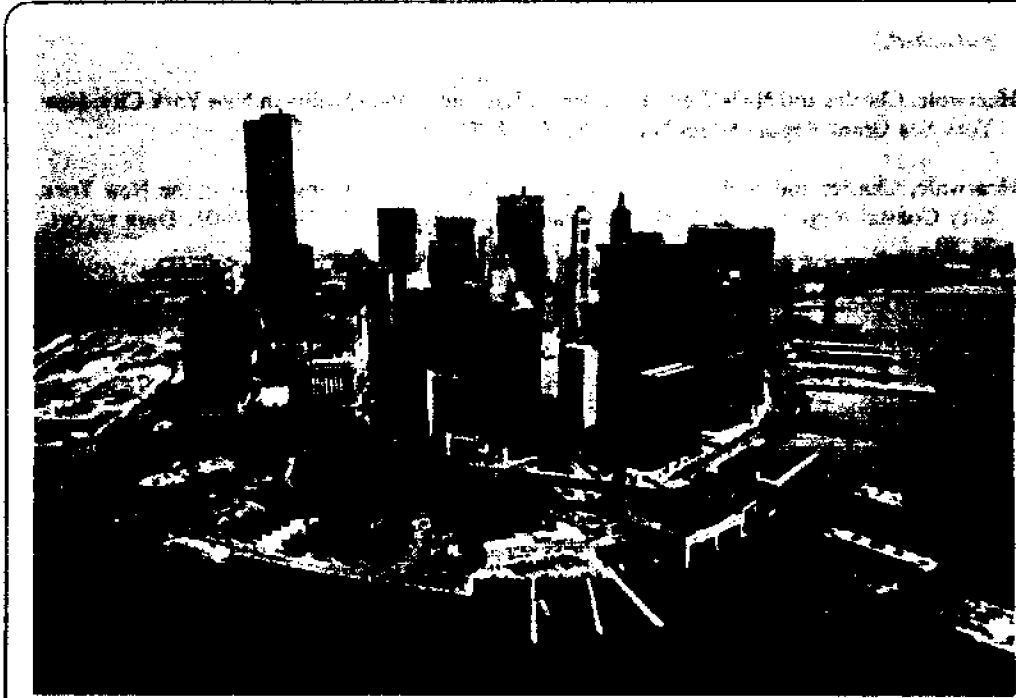


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New Prospects for the New York City Waterfront

By Mitchell Moss

 New York Sea Grant Report Series 

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NEW PROSPECTS
FOR THE
NEW YORK CITY WATERFRONT

Mitchell L. Moss

Graduate School of Public Administration
New York University

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ABSTRACT

The New York City waterfront is in the midst of an economic and physical renaissance. After years of neglect, municipal agencies, citizen groups, and private developers are focusing their attention on revitalizing the city shoreline. Moss is hopeful that the Koch administration's emphasis on waterfront redevelopment has improved the prospects for revitalizing New York City's coast and recommends the following for New York City's agenda:

- * reduce regulatory barriers to waterfront construction;
- * improve access to existing beaches and waterfront parks;
- * stimulate tourism on the waterfront outside Manhattan;
- * foster marine recreation on the city's waterways;
- * take an active role in federal policies affecting the waterfront.

Moss believes that an intelligent waterfront policy should both generate revenues and improve the liveability of the city.

WATERFRONT RENAISSANCE

The New York City waterfront is in the midst of an economic and physical renaissance. After years of neglect, municipal agencies, citizen groups, and private developers are focusing their attention on revitalizing the city shoreline. Proposals for new uses of the waterfront, the result of new policies adopted by the Koch administration, regularly appear in the news. Although it is too soon to judge the outcome of these initiatives, clearly, there has been a remarkable shift in the prospects for revitalizing the city's coast. The renewal of New York City's waterfront is part of a process that is occurring in almost all American cities: once-active shipping and industrial facilities are being converted into new residential and commercial developments.

New York has been remarkably slow in taking advantage of the opportunities presented by its 578 miles of coastline. Ten years ago there were great hopes and expectations for the revival of the New York City waterfront--Battery Park City, Roosevelt Island, and Manhattan Landing were heralded as steps toward creating what one observer foresaw as a "New Venice." With the notable exception of the South Street Seaport and Operation Sail-- when the tall ships paraded in New York Harbor during the bicentennial--those dreams and visions have remained largely unfulfilled. Although millions of New Yorkers jam the public beaches on a hot summer day and although several communities actively use their waterfronts, the average citizen is completely cut off from the shoreline.

WATERFRONT ACTIVITY

The New York City coast is not a simple, homogeneous waterfront, but a complex system of bodies of water. It encompasses rivers, straits, canals, bays, creeks, and portions of Long Island Sound and the Atlantic Ocean. Within the city are the Hudson, East, Harlem, Bronx, Westchester, and Hutchinson rivers. The larger bays include the Upper and Lower Bays, Jamaica Bay, Raritan Bay, Flushing Bay, Little Neck Bay, and Eastchester Bay. Other major waterways include the Kill Van Kull, Arthur Kill, Ambrose Channel, and The Narrows. The activities that occur on the city waterfront can be classified roughly into four main groups.

Traditional Port Industries

The New York Harbor, the Port District, includes much, but not all, of the city waterfront. The harbor encompasses the northeast coast of New Jersey and much of the five boroughs of New York City. This district was established in 1921 when the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey was created to develop and administer transportation terminals in the bi-state region. Although the region's busiest airports are located in New York City, the Port Authority built its major marine terminal on the west side of the Hudson at Port Elizabeth, New Jersey. And, although New York City works jointly with the Port Authority on some maritime matters, it continues to operate its own piers and docks. The city's port facilities are scattered along the Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Staten Island shoreline. Cargo warehouses and transfer terminals designed to support shipping activity are situated next to the waterfront as are industrial plants that still depend on waterborne goods and materials.

Residential Neighborhoods

The neighborhoods that line the waterfront range from some of the city's best communities, such as Riverdale and Brooklyn Heights, to some of its worst, such as East Harlem and the South Bronx. Between these poles are a variety of specialized communities that have developed around shoreline activities. City Island in the Bronx is the center of sailing and boatyards; the Upper West side of Manhattan is closely linked to Riverside Park, which abuts the Hudson River north of 72nd Street; and Mill Basin has a substantial number of private homes with boat slips.

Beaches and Beach Communities

The city's 18.4 miles of beaches provide an important safety valve for millions of residents during the summer months. Coney Island, Orchard Beach, and the Rockaways attract more people on a peak day than do the Yankees and Mets combined in an entire season. Distinctive communities, such as Sea Gate and Manhattan Beach, have grown up around beach areas. Moreover, an enormous concentration of nursing homes and senior citizens' housing projects are located next to the boardwalk in Far Rockaway. Coney Island remains the City's premier amusement park despite the city's ill-conceived efforts at urban renewal there. Breezy Point continues to be an active and vital colony of beach bungalows and cottages.

Undeveloped Areas

Valuable wetlands and open space remain in Jamaica Bay, Eastchester Bay, Arthur Kill, and Raritan Bay. These land-use categories are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they highlight the fact that the city's waterfront activities are often mixtures of different land uses that planners often value.

The scale and diversity of the waterfront presents both challenges and opportunities. Fundamental components of the city's physical infrastructure--highways, power plants--located on the city's shoreline present distinct problems for enhancing access and use of the coast. At the same time, some of the city's leading tourist attractions are situated on or next to the city shoreline--the Statue of Liberty, the United Nations, and the World Trade Center. Thus, policies for waterfront management must take into account the diverse uses of the waterfront and the enormous range of activities that it could accommodate.

The New York City shoreline might be compared with a multi-product firm that provides recreational, residential, and industrial goods and services. It includes the historic Throg's Neck section of the Bronx, the oil storage tanks on the Arthur Kill, and the recreational neighborhoods on the north shore of Queens. No single policy or set of projects will be sufficient to cope with this mix of uses. A flexible and adaptive strategy is needed to match the magnitude and variety of the city's coast.

DECLINE AND REVIVAL

In the mid-1970s, while cities throughout the nation were rediscovering their waterfronts, New York's coast was a shambles. The collapse of the moral obligation bond and the city's fiscal crisis delayed or effectively stopped several projects such as Roosevelt Island, Battery Park City, and the proposed Hudson River Convention Center. As the result of changes in transportation technology and the city's economic structure, traditional users of the city's waterfront, such as shipping firms, railroads, and industrial firms, reduced their activities on the city's coast. The shift from break-bulk to container cargo made Newark Bay, not the Hudson or East rivers, the center of cargo shipping in the Port of New York. However, New York City's Department of Ports and Terminals seemed either unaware of the potential value of the municipally owned waterfront or unable to manage it in such a way as to maximize economic or social benefits. With the exception of Robert Wagner, Jr., and Henry Stern, few politicians were willing to risk the wrath of the International Longshoremen's Association and talk about the need for redeveloping the waterfront for nonmaritime uses.

However, a variety of events have brought about a fundamental change in the city's orientation to the waterfront. Operation Sail in 1976 was clearly the turning point. Put together by an ad hoc citizens' group, this landmark event stimulated a new awareness and involvement of the city's most valuable natural resource--its waterfront. The success of other cities in renewing their docks also contributed to increased concern for New York's coast. And the city's improved economic health led the private sector to renovate old buildings and warehouses on or near the waterfront for housing.

But the most fundamental change occurred when the municipal government shifted its priorities. The Koch Administration places a new emphasis on waterfront redevelopment. New procedures for seeking bids on waterfront parcels have been adopted and the city aggressively markets its waterfront through advertisements in national, international and local newspapers. Unused piers have been converted for recreational uses; requests for bids have been sought for several East River projects; efforts are underway to renovate selected waterfront properties and to improve neglected areas like Sheepshead Bay.

These municipal programs have been complemented by a number of initiatives by the private sector, community groups, and state and regional agencies. The success of River Cafe, at Fulton Ferry in Brooklyn Heights, has demonstrated the value of a waterfront location for restaurant dining and has provided a prototype for future developments that combine revenue-producing uses with public areas. At the local level, efforts by citizens groups to clean up the Bronx River shoreline and to convert the old East River Asphalt Plant and an unused fireboat pier into a community environmental center have generated new community involvement. Local community boards have taken an active and positive approach to renewing their waterfront areas. Further, as part of the state's coastal management program, the New York City Department of City Planning recently completed a comprehensive analysis of land use on the city waterfront and has proposed management policies for the city's coastal resources. The Department of City Planning and the city's Environmental Protection Administration are jointly involved in a program to clean up the city's waters under Section 208 of the Federal Water Pollution Act of 1972.

A new Urban Development Corporation plan for Battery Park City designed by former Planning Commissioner Alex Cooper combines both intelligence and common sense in its approach to rescuing this financially troubled and long delayed project. In addition, the positive effects of the new Convention Center planned

for the 30th Street rail yards should spill over to the adjacent waterfront. The Rouse Development Corporation, which scored a major waterfront success in Boston's Quincy Market, has proposed a major renovation of the South Street Seaport and the New York Maritime Museum. Although the Rouse Corporation has impressive credentials in urban waterfront revitalization, serious questions have been raised about the compatibility of a "Bloomingdale's-by-the-Sea" with maintaining the historic character of the South Street area and meeting the physical requirements of the Fulton Fish Market. Since the South Street Seaport has yet to realize its full potential, New York should avoid the homogeneity of style and content that characterizes waterfront redevelopment in other cities. Despite these objections, the Rouse proposal highlights the growing private sector interest in the city's coastal resources. Lastly, emphasizing its new concern for stimulating economic development in the New York region, the Port Authority is encouraging the development on the city's waterfront.

Apart from these efforts, much work remains. The city waterfront can accommodate a wide range of activities, but the city needs a new agenda to develop a variety of uses along its waterfront. Such an agenda should do the following:

- * Reduce the regulatory barriers to waterfront construction. The city's rules and regulations impede coastal construction by private initiatives. For example, the city's building code prohibits issuing a certificate-of-occupancy to buildings that do not have foundations. As a result, structures such as floating restaurants are technically illegal in New York City. Although this regulation was originally designed to assure a structure's physical safety, exceptions must be made so that new and appropriate forms of coastal construction can achieve legal status and continue to be developed.

* Improve access to existing beaches and waterfront parks. Although Robert Moses built many of the city's beaches and shorefront parks, he is also responsible for the construction of the band of highways that wraps around the waterfront and impedes access to the shorefront. As the energy crisis intensifies, the value of the city's waterfront as a recreational resource will continue to grow. New access paths, walkways, and directional signs are needed for the city's vast network of coastal parks. In addition, express buses and subways to the city's beaches should be initiated for summer weekends and holidays. If the Metropolitan Transit Authority can have express subways to Aqueduct Racetrack and the Kennedy International Airport, why not to the city's beaches?

* Stimulate tourism on the waterfront outside Manhattan. The city has an array of coastal attractions that are hard to reach and poorly promoted. The New York Aquarium at Coney Island, the restaurants on City Island, the historic buildings on Ellis Island, and the magnificent vistas from Fort Wadsworth on Staten Island would constitute a major waterfront attraction in any other city. New York needs a deliberate and systematic policy to encourage tourism at these and other locations in the "outer boroughs." As a first step, a Waterfront Loop bus similar to the city's successful Culture Loop bus should be initiated. If conditions on the Staten Island ferry boats and terminals were radically improved, they, too, could be promoted as a major tourist attraction.

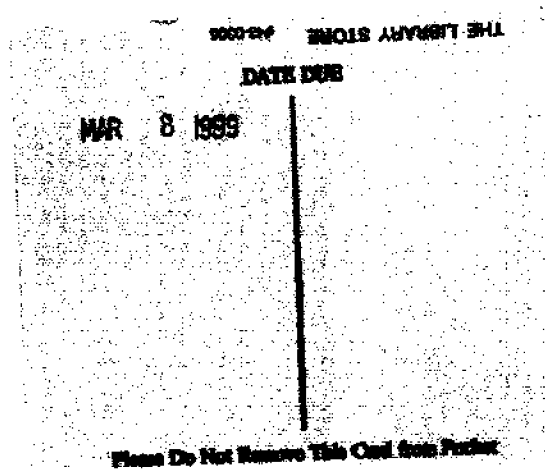
* Foster marine recreation on the city's waterways. Apart from the Staten Island Ferry and the Circle Line Boat Ride around

Manhattan, there are only limited opportunities for citizens to experience the city's waterways. Several forms of water-oriented recreation should be encouraged: improved marinas, rent-a-boat operations, and an expanded network of privately-owned waterborne transportation, including hydrofoils. A strategy to plan, develop, and promote water recreation facilities is essential.

* Take an active role in federal policies affecting the waterfront. New York's competitive position as a port has been hurt by both Conrail and the Interstate Commerce Commission. The city needs to actively articulate its position to federal agencies. In addition, it should press for a greater share of the state and federal coastal management funds. Although Congressman John Murphy is chairman of the House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee, his influence has not been used sufficiently to direct federal coastal funds to the city.

Given the city's fiscal crisis, it would be unrealistic to expect the waterfront to be treated equally with municipal services such as police protection, firefighting, and education. But, fortunately, municipal policy for the waterfront based on private development yielding public benefits need not be costly. In fact, an intelligent waterfront policy should both generate revenues and improve the liveability of the city. The basic role for the public sector should be to offer a positive climate in which the energies of citizens and private firms can be harnessed to provide social, economic, and environmental benefits to the city. While there is a great deal of enthusiasm about the city's waterfront renewal, this is nothing new. It is wise to remember that a similar emphasis

prevailed in the late 1960s. But with perseverance and public and private cooperation, it is just possible that we will inspire a waterfront renaissance.



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