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NOT BUSINESS AS USUAL
Five New York City-based landscape architects and one architect donate their time to reimagine the East River waterfront. By Alex Ulam

THIS PAST JUNE, in one of the most remarkable planning exercises in recent New York City history, six leading American design professionals donated their time to collaborate in a daylong charrette at a vacant storefront at United Nations Plaza to produce a bold new vision for the redevelopment of Midtown Manhattan’s forlorn-looking East River waterfront.

The six New York City-based designers included one architect, Ricardo Scofidio of Diller Scofidio + Renfro, and five landscape architects: Kate Orff, ASLA; SCAPE studio; Margie Ruddick, ASLA, WRT; Ken Smith, ASLA, Ken Smith Landscape Architect; Matthew Urbanski, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates; and Brian Jencek of Hargreaves Associates.

Most of the area on which the designers focused, between East 38th Street and East 42nd Street, is presently a no-man’s-land that bears the imprint of a period in city planning when automobiles were given priority over pedestrians. The dominant features include a three-city-block-long site that was formerly home to a Con Edison plant and has since been cleared for development. North of the construction site is a block surrounded by busy automobile traffic arteries and occupied by a black-topped playground and a massive ventilator shaft building. Across FDR Drive, at the base of the highway’s massive elevated off-ramp, the section of riverfront considered by the designers comprises a former parking lot strewn with trash and surrounded by a barbed-wire fence.

The goal of the charrette, which was held under the auspices of the Municipal Art Society (MAS), a prominent civic organization devoted to urban planning and design, was to open pedestrian access to the East River and to create a great civic space by coordinating the development agendas for four proposed projects: the United Nations expansion, the renovation of FDR Drive, the extension of Manhattan’s greenway on the East Side, and the redevelopment of the nine-acre former Con Edison site into a complex with luxury residential towers and an office building. “We are trying to bring all of the players together,” says Kent
Barwick, president of the MAS. “The purpose was not to do the vision, but a vision—something to get the private sector and the public agencies interested in what could happen there.”

On the morning of the charrette, the designers first listened to presentations by various Midtown East stakeholders and their representatives before they got out their drawing pencils. James Corner, ASLA, made a presentation showing plans for a landscape he is designing for the former Con Ed site, which is being developed by the East Side Realty Company with a master plan by Richard Meier and David Childs. Another presentation was made by Manhattan Community Board Six, which ranks second to last in terms of open space per capita in New York City. The community board was looking for more parkland and also for connections that would provide access to the river. The New York State Department of Transportation (DOT) presented its plans to rebuild the FDR viaduct, and the New York City Parks Department presented its plans for extending the Manhattan greenway, which eventually will extend around the circumference of Manhattan. The parks department has hired landscape architect Kathryn Gustafson, ASLA, and Allied Works Architecture to design a potential 62-foot-wide esplanade that would run along the edge of FDR Drive from 41st to 51st and cantilever out into the East River.

Although the various agencies and the East Side Realty Company are planning projects that will abut one another and substantially transform the entire area, this was actually the first time that their representatives (with the exception of the United Nations) discussed their objectives in the same room. In some ways the different visions presented appeared to be irreconcilable. For example, some of the stakeholders presented plans showing options for decking over FDR Drive to provide access to the East River, a popular idea that community groups and the city have been exploring for the past several years. But for the New York State DOT, there are major design constraints on building a deck that connects to the waterfront, most notably the FDR’s elevated 42nd Street off-ramp.

“The purpose was not to do the vision, but a vision—something to get the private sector and the public agencies interested in what could happen here.”
It was clear at the charrette that significant features of the various designs presented by the different stakeholders could not be reconciled with one another; however, their objectives had to be addressed for the charrette to be a success. "I think that we realized that if this was going to be something that was considered viable, we would have to take care of the pragmatics," says Scofidio, principal at Diller Scofidio+Renfro, adding, "We realized that whatever we did would have to please the DOT."

Most of the area on which the designers focused is presently a no-man's-land that bears the imprint of a period in city planning when automobiles were given priority over pedestrians.

Scofidio, as the only architect among the six designers, says the experience of working with a group of landscape architects was quite different from what he expected it would have been like with a group of architects. "With a group of architects there is always a little edginess that creeps in as to who is going to be the top dog," he says, "and so I was wondering how they would work together, but there was no friction at all."

On the Sunday afternoon following the charrette, the designers unveiled their vision before a group of several hundred interested New Yorkers, which included a group of city and state elected officials who cosponsored the event. Smith, who presented the design with Jencek at the event, says that the designers had been motivated by two main criteria: "the need to get to the river" and "people are more important than cars."

The design links together the proposed development projects by expanding a 33-to 36-foot-high elevated deck, which is due to be built on the three-block Con Edison site between 38th and 41st streets, up to 42nd Street and partly over FDR Drive. The design also incorporates Corners
"With a group of architects there is always a little edginess that creeps in as to who is going to be the top dog, and so I was wondering how [the landscape architects] would work together, but there was no friction at all."

The greenway along the waterfront between 41st and 51st. Instead of the parks department's proposal for a deck cantilevering out into the East River, a plan that faces considerable regulatory obstacles, the charrette opens up the possibility for the greenway to loop inland at 42nd Street along the edge of the United Nations terrace.

Barwick says that although the Midtown East charrette is unique, there is precedent for civic groups realizing similar visions. He points to the compromise made more than a decade ago between developer Donald Trump and civic and community groups (in which the MAS played a significant role) that resulted in a modification of a large development project and the creation of Riverside Park South on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, designed by Thomas Balsley. However, at this point in the process, Barwick says that the MAS charrette for Midtown East is more oriented around getting people to think about...
The MAS design reconnects the Midtown East neighborhood to its waterfront and fills in a significant section of the missing link in a greenway that will eventually run all the way around Manhattan.

possibilities. "I think that it is an interesting plan, but I don't think that anyone expects to go from this charrette to working drawings," he says. Still, the fact that a score of federal, state, and city officials helped sponsor the charrette and that many of them took the time to attend the unveiling of the design on a sunny Sunday afternoon indicates that this is a plan with political clout and that its objectives have a serious chance of being realized.

Jasper Goldman, a planner at the MAS who helped organize the charrette, says that he hopes the event will help change the business-as-usual approach to big redevelopment projects that has prevailed in the city in recent years. "In a lot of places the public space has an improvised quality because it becomes secondary to the primary development concerns," Goldman says, adding, "As the different parties are finalizing their open space plans, it will be useful for them to have in mind the product of this charrette, because it shows what is possible and it raises the bar."

Alex Ulam is a freelance journalist who writes frequently on architecture and design for publications such as The Architect's Newspaper and Architectural Record.

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