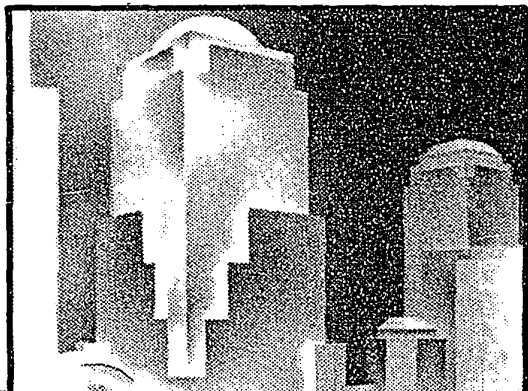


ART VIEW

JOHN RUSSELL

Where City Meets Sea to Become Art

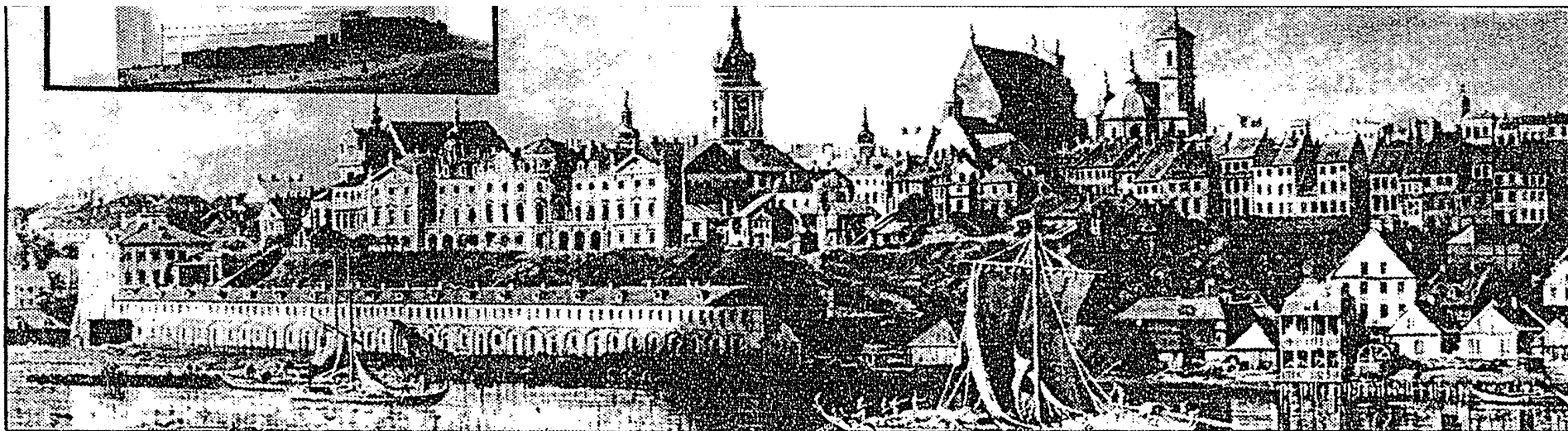


The good news from Manhattan is that if all plans mature the partnership of art, architecture and landscape gardening in Battery Park City is likely to be as innovative as it is intelligent. That was the word at any rate from those who attended the crowded press conference at the Whitney Museum at which the plans in question were made known. As to when those plans will become reality, the word is that the waterfront plaza that was the chief object of interest on that occasion should be completed by mid-1986.

Battery Park is just across the water from the Statue of Liberty, as everyone knows, and it therefore occupies a particularly sensitive position. In every great city by the sea there comes a moment at which land meets with moving water. If the city is doing a

good job, whether accidentally or by grand design, we feel at that moment that great cities and the sea are predestined partners. Their interaction can turn whole cities into works of art.

It was always so. St. Petersburg had that quality from the start. No matter how unpromising were the marshes on which Peter the Great decided to build his city, people flocked to see it, and they were never disappointed. Constantinople has that same quality to this day. Alexandria had it, and lost it. Sydney, Australia, has it, as anyone knows who has left the financial district at noon and found himself in a restaurant on the beach 10 minutes later. And it found its apotheosis in Venice — so much so, in fact, that the Venetians thought of their city as the rightful and only true bride
Continued on Page 31



Battery Park City photographs by The New York Times / John Sotomayor

Above, Bellotto's 18th-century view of Warsaw, with an insert of a proposed design for New York's Battery Park City, across the water from the Statue of Liberty—Where great cities meet moving water, we can feel that they are predestined partners.

Continued from Page 1

Where City Meets Sea to Become Art

of the sea.

In this matter art, music and literature are one. Would the love duet at the end of Act I of Verdi's "Otello" have anything like the same impact if we did not sense in it the flux and reflux of a southern sea?

The notion of a great city on the sea powered both Hector Berlioz's opera "The Trojans in Carthage" and Gustave Flaubert's novel "Salammbô." It stands behind many of the greatest paintings of Claude Lorraine in the 17th century and of J.M.W. Turner in the 19th century. Ships and the sea are fundamental to their dynamic.

In our own century the "Alexandria Quartet" of Lawrence Durrell and the poems of C. P. Cavafy would not be what they are without the intoxicating presence of the seaboard city of Alexandria. Nor would the massacre in Pudovkin's classic movie "The Battleship Potemkin" have half its power if it did not take place on the huge flight of steps that leads down from the once-great city of Odessa to its pullulating harbor. A great city by the sea is humanity's powder keg, and it operates on a very short fuse.

On a more purely informative level, nothing can top the work done in the 18th century by Canaletto in Venice and by his nephew Bellotto in Warsaw. (Warsaw is not on the sea, to be sure, but the Vistula at that point has a symphonic effect that Bellotto knew full well how to capture.)

When Canaletto painted the Piazzetta in Venice he got everything right. He got the several-centuries' mix of buildings. He got the wonderful view of ships and the sea, and the distant prospect of a greatly loved

building, the church of S. Giorgio Maggiore. He got the human mix, too — the sense of the Piazzetta as a place where people walked and talked, eyed the funny-looking strangers from out of town, left the dogs off their leash and in general had a good time.

Equally well, when Bellotto painted the city of Warsaw as it rides high above the Vistula, he got precisely the sense of drama that is inherent in cities where water is fundamental to the life of a capital city. He knew of the waterfront above all as transitional ground, neither in the water nor out of it and charged with potential.

These are the criteria that New York City had to face when it asked the Battery Park City Authority in 1968 to build a city-within-the-city on a 92-acre landfill site at the lower end of Manhattan.

The stakes were high. This was, after all, no ordinary piece of real estate. Here was a huge empty space directly across the water from the Statue of Liberty. The site had, in fact, a potential for majesty that has not often been rivaled since the Emperor Constantine chose the site of Constantinople in the year 330 A.D.

Architecture, art and landscape gardening were all to play their part. If they did a good job, thousands of people would live and work in conditions that could set new standards of civility; and anyone freshly arrived from overseas would feel something of what Henry Hudson felt when he tacked across those same waters in

the year 1609. If they did not do a good job, the area had a potential for fiasco on a scale that would give renewed currency to the notions of asphalt jungle and air-conditioned nightmare.

The initial moves were well received. Cesar Pelli's designs for the World Financial Center had the kind of "monumentality with a human face" that people now look for in tall buildings. When the plans for the residential section called Rector Place were revealed not long ago, Paul Goldberger wrote in The New York Times that "it has taken a long time, but New York is finally beginning to learn from its own landscape." And when the designs for the three-and-a-half-acre waterfront plaza that will be a feature of the new city were made known they were received with jubilation. People really felt that they had been the first to hear of something that within the next ten years may consolidate New York's position as one of the all-time great cities by the sea.

The spontaneity of that jubilation was the more remarkable in that neither the names of the artists concerned nor the character of their involvement corresponded to the notion of big-city "public art." The accepted practice in big cities is that large-scale building projects are validated at a late stage by the purchase of huge and expensive sculptures. Those are the work of one or another of the very few artists who are acceptable to municipal bodies and boards of directors the world over. But in the plans for Battery Park City there was

no posthumous Picasso, no posthumous Calder, no Henry Moore, no Miro, no Dubuffet. There was not even a Mark di Suvero, a Richard Serra or a Michael Heizer, though all those artists are in line to take over from the big men who are now in their 80's and 90's.

Nor was there so much as a hint that monumental sculptures would be trucked in toward inauguration day, to be worn by the architecture the way a prize heifer wears its kingsize rosette. Guest stars were out, and the only artists scheduled to work on Battery Park City plaza were the ones who had been right in there from the beginning at the request of a particularly well-informed Fine Arts Committee.

Under the chairmanship of Victor Ganz, the New York collector who with his wife owns some memorably fine works of 20th-century art, the committee includes two art historians, Linda Nochlin and Robert Rosenblum; an architect who is very much in the news, Michael Graves; the editor of "Art in America" magazine, Elizabeth C. Baker; a curator of painting and sculpture from the Whitney Museum, Barbara Haskell; a collector much courted by Manhattan museums, Agnes Gund Saalfield; the director of Artists Space, Linda Shearer, and Calvin Tomkins of The New Yorker magazine. The membership also included Richard A. Kahan, the outgoing chairman of the Battery Park City Authority; Amanda Burden, its vice-president for architecture and design, and Carl D. Lobdell,

an attorney. Nancy Rosen, a youthful veteran in such matters, is project coordinator.

It was never in the cards that these people would come up with the same old answers. What they did was to redefine the respective roles of architect, artist and landscape designer in the planning of large-scale building projects.

Instead of being assigned pre-existing spaces in which to present works of art, the artists are to function from the outset as co-designers of the spaces. And the \$13 million waterfront plaza has in fact been jointly designed by Cesar Pelli, the architect of the World Financial Center that adjoins the plaza, by two artists, Scott Burton and Siah Armajani, and by a landscape architect, M. Paul Friedberg.

The general thrust of the plan was away from the hectoring monumentality of "public sculpture" and toward a kind of art that gets down off the pedestal and works with everyday life as an equal partner. Scott Burton is an artist well known for making objects that function both as sculptures and as working pieces of furniture. A granite chair by Burton has an unforced, almost nonchalant majesty, but it is also very comfortable to sit in. A table by Burton is a poetic object, but it also tempts us to settle in for a long evening of eating, drinking and talking.

Siah Armajani likewise makes nonsense of the traditional view of art as something that you have to stand back to look at. He could make exhibi-

tion sculpture if he wanted to, but it so happens that he lately made two pedestrian bridges for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Seattle, and is now busy with a bandstand for the town of Mitchell in South Dakota.

That is what I mean by not coming up with the same tired old answers. It is also relevant that although Scott Burton's plans for Battery Park City call for the inclusion of one or two traditional sculptures, they will not be by himself. They will be 19th-century sculptures that for one reason or another have lost their function in the city. Equipped with new plinths designed for them by Burton, they will occupy strategic positions in the two streets new to the city that will be part of Battery Park City. Instead of trying to make the rest of New York City look obsolete, the new grand design aims at a humane continuity.

Not only are these far-ranging plans, but they will be relevant to whatever finally gets to be done elsewhere on the deteriorated edges of the Hudson River. Battery Park Plaza has also been conceived in terms of the extremes of weather that New York sets before us. It will have shady arbors for July and August, and it will have places in which we can catch every last ray of the winter sun that brings light but not much warmth. The plaza will function as both stage and auditorium, and when we walk across it we shall feel twice ourselves. In association with the works of art that are being commissioned from Frank Stella, Nancy Graves, Richard Artschwager, Ned Smyth and Patsy Norvell, it should give us a new notion of public art.

That's the idea, anyway. Let's hope it gets carried through. ■