

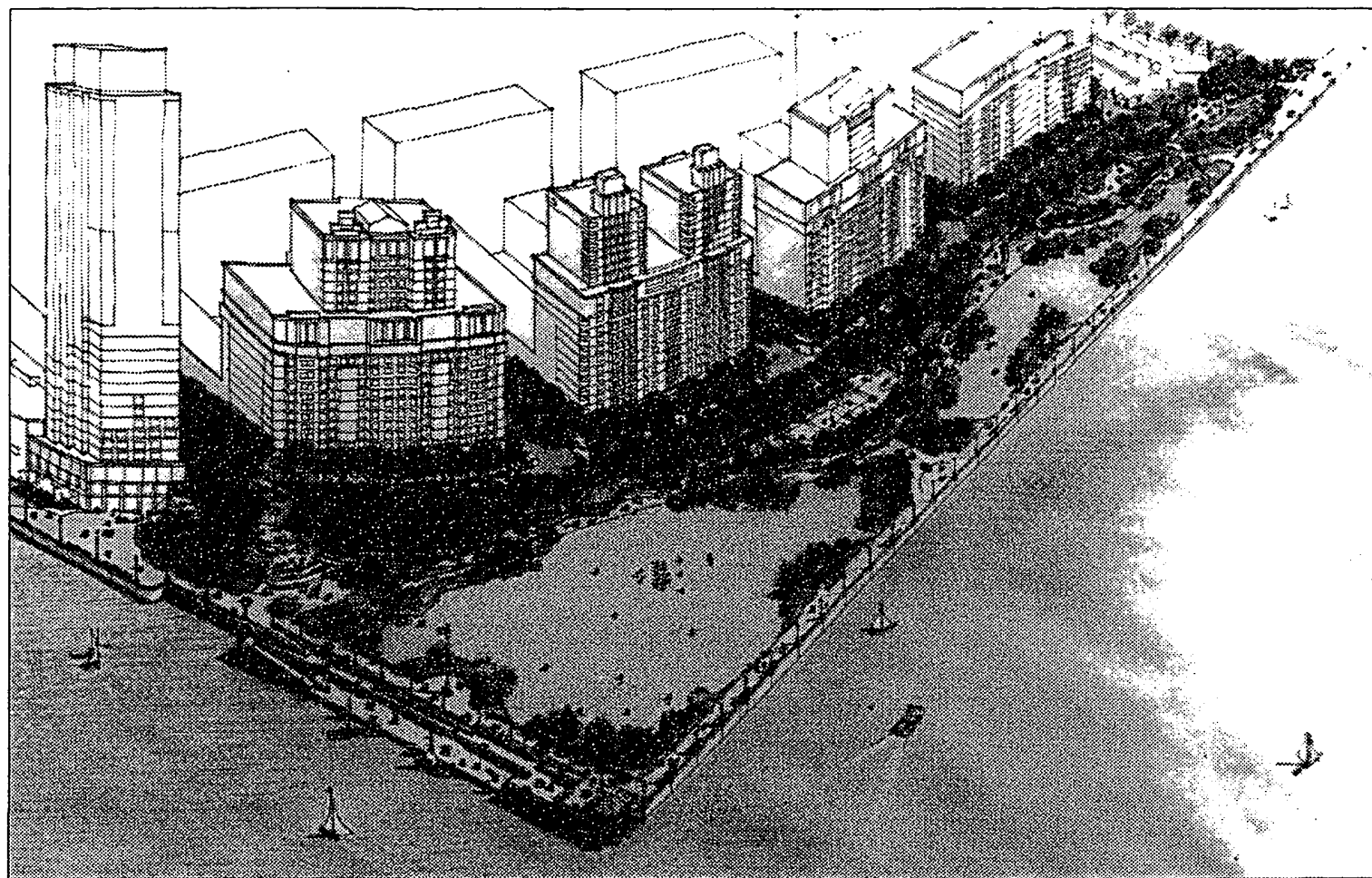
ARCHITECTURE VIEW/Paul Goldberger

Public Space Gets a New Cachet in New York

THERE WAS A STRANGE MIX OF hype and glory to the announcement earlier this month by Governor Cuomo and Mayor Koch that a 50-acre waterfront park system would be created at Battery Park City in lower Manhattan. The parks themselves aren't hype; they are among the best public spaces designed for New York City in a generation. But they have actually been around for a while, since they were all part of the much-acclaimed master plan for Battery Park City drawn up in 1979, creating its system of riverfront parks and esplanades, several sections of which are already complete. The 50 acres of parks that the Governor and the Mayor announced were the same parks that have been underway for all of this time — they were just repackaged to mark the opening of an elaborate exhibition called "New York's New Riverfront: The Many Parks of Battery Park City and Beyond."

I mention all of this not to observe that politicians tend to exaggerate, or to deflect attention away from the parks themselves, but to note how much the Governor and the Mayor apparently have come to value the creation of parkland as a political asset. It must be a strong political plus if they are so eager to make such a fuss over what is not, in fact, brand new. The last generation has seen an enormous devaluing of concern for public space. Parks and open space have not mattered much to a financially strapped city, and the responsibility for creating them has often been turned over to the private sector. But Battery Park City has represented an extraordinary renewal of energy and commitment on the part of the public sector, and it is not surprising that everyone now wants to get on this bandwagon.

For this is the real significance of Battery Park City — not the specific designs of its parks or its buildings, good though they are, but the message this large complex sends about the importance of the public realm. There has been nothing like Battery Park City in New York or anywhere else in our time — a 92-acre complex of housing and office buildings in which parks, waterfront promenades, streets and public art rank as important as the buildings themselves. The master plan for Battery Park City, designed by Alexander Cooper and Stanton Eckstut, is an indication — perhaps the strongest one we have — that our age has not lost all sense of how to design a city. Instead of plopping buildings down in open space, Mr. Cooper and Mr. Eckstut laid out traditional streets connecting to a system of parks and a riverfront promenade, and required all buildings to conform to this larger urban design. The result is



The North Park planned for Battery Park City, rendered by Carr Lynch Associates, seen from the Hudson River

a place, not a project.

To visit the current exhibition, which will be on view in the lobby of 1 World Financial Center at Battery Park City through June 23, is to see a coherent work of urban design in which the sense of a public realm is paramount. There are elaborate models of all of the parks and public spaces at Battery Park City, and their collective impact is enormous. The esplanade along the river, designed by Mr. Cooper and Mr. Eckstut with Hanna/Olin Ltd., has been since its completion in 1983 one of the city's most treasured public places. A recent visit to two other public areas in the complex that are nearing completion, the plaza of the World Financial Center by Cesar Pelli, M. Paul Friedberg, Scott Burton and Siah Armajani, and the South Cove by Mr. Eckstut, Mary Miss and Susan Childs, suggests that the quality of the esplanade was no

accident. For these new areas have the same commitment to a public realm that possesses both civic grandeur and serious artistic intention, and aspires to join these ambitions to a sense of ease and visual comfort.

The designs for the newest group of parks, still to commence construction, are similarly encouraging. Most important, there will be a considerable mix of types of public space. The North Park by Carr Lynch Associates and Oehme, van Sweden & Associates inspired loosely by Riverside Park, will have eight acres of rolling fields and meadows by the river. The South Gardens, designed by Alexander Cooper with Jennifer Bartlett, will comprise an intricate and dense series of 24 "rooms" of different kinds of plantings.

But it is not only the product at Battery

Park City that is impressive — it is the process by which it is made. That process stands in stunning contrast to the normal way of doing business in New York, or in most large cities these days. Too often, government agencies are so devoid of both money and vision that they turn over the entire process of planning, and the responsibility for creating public space, to private developers. Thus do we have office buildings with plazas, office buildings with arcades, office buildings with vest-pocket parks, apartment houses with interior atriums, and "festival marketplaces" taking the place of traditional streets and public plazas. In each case the private sector owns and controls public space, since it, and not the public sector, had the money to build it. This is not, of course, a case of philanthropy; in exchange for agreeing to make and maintain a public amenity, the private devel-

The parks of Battery Park City are proving politically and socially important.

oper is generally permitted to put up a larger building than zoning would otherwise allow.

The sense in all of these situations — indeed, the sense in all of midtown Manhattan — is that however much the city's planners may set limits on what real-estate developers can do, it is still the developers who call the tune, since it is their dollars, and not the public's, that are creating the public space the city needs and wants. But at Battery Park City the opposite is true. The Battery Park City Authority, a public authority created by the State of New York, calls the shots. While the individual buildings are constructed and owned by private developers, for permission to build on these sites they must meet the authority's conditions, which involve conforming to the authority's strong master plan, following its strict architectural guidelines and creating meaningful public space.

Battery Park City does not represent a return to the old-fashioned system of the public treasury paying for everything — what it does, instead, is channel the dollars from private development into public benefits. The system by which this complex has been made recognizes that the private sector is where the money is, but it also recognizes that the public sector is supposed to be where the vision is. The philosophy at Battery Park City is that the public's interest as represented by the master plan is the priority, and that the private sector has no choice but to fit into these public priorities.

It is a despotic system. What made it work is that it has been managed by remarkably enlightened despots. The chief executive of the Battery Park City Authority under whom the master plan was created was Richard Kahan, who guarded it zealously and insisted on the highest level of architectural and landscape design as well as an unusually serious and ambitious program of public art. He was replaced in 1984 by Meyer Frucher, who quickly learned what a remarkable vehicle the Battery Park City system was, and who has become its most effective public proponent, talking frequently of his wish that Battery Park City's way of doing things be repeated elsewhere. It is indicative of Mr. Frucher's ambitions, surely, that the operative phrase of the current exhibition's title is: "Battery Park City and Beyond." □