

concept of using block configuration as a way to inhibit complete market flexibility, while tentative in this plan, is an important area of research for urban design. But this variety must be tested at a microeconomic level: Is each of the specific building types economically robust enough to be feasible in a market economy? Are there enough fat and flexible parcels in the overall plan to spur first-phase development, thus adding value and reducing risk for the less flexible parcels later in the development?

Consistent with the compositional language of the Battery Park City method, the East Bayfront Plan introduces inflections and exceptions into an otherwise smooth and vaguely axial grid. These exceptions are justified by existing site conditions, including the geometry of “gateway” streets (that connect the district to the city under the Gardiner Expressway) and the alignment of the expressway itself. In this case, as in many examples, the nervous ticks that provoke compositional variety do not threaten the insistent grid of the overall district. As a result, all the architecture can do is politely lie there, awaiting instructions for architectural variety from “Design Guidelines”—the typical adjunct to a master plan that qualifies cornice heights, special features at corners, and the location of building entrances, service bays, and so on.

Ken Greenberg’s master plan for Kendall Square in Cambridge, a precursor to his plan for Northpoint, pushes the irregularity of the street and parcel plan to a point that an overall grid is no longer legible—a solution originally shaped by the site’s environmental problems.⁷ The streets avoid areas of major contamination to delay the costs of remediation to the individual development projects. This knowingly ad hoc strategy has benefits beyond visual variety, including its overt pragmatism (heroic and costly efforts are not required to create a resolved plan). More importantly, the idiosyncrasies of the master plan may provoke more interesting architectural responses.⁸ For example, a street that dead-ends on a real estate parcel may invite a unique programmatic response or architectural elaboration. This approach suggests a more general principle: the more specifically idiosyncratic (and pragmatic) the master plan, the less important are prescriptive design guidelines. In fact, a highly permissive, guideline-free master plan may create precisely the variety hoped for in city building.

Rather than rely on design guidelines to frame (and some architects would say restrict or limit) the architectural options for a project built within a master plan, a master plan framework could be conceived