

CASE STUDY

The Theater and other districts, New York, NY, USA (1967–74)

In 1961, a comprehensive zoning revision in New York City introduced the use of zoning incentives to create specific physical designs. The goal was to encourage property developers to build plazas as part of any new development. Having more open space within the dense environment of Manhattan was perceived to be in the public interest. Crowding and high population density (by no means synonymous) were perceived to be major urban problems. Given a society based on democratic principles and individual property rights, the new zoning code involved the bargaining over the provision of public open space between city officials with incentives and property developers with a desire to build. The hope was that piece-by-piece more open space would be created. There was also an aspiration to get high-quality architecture and to offer developers space bonuses for 'good design'. The legal problems in defining 'good design' operationally proved too great and the thought was not pursued.

In changing the zoning ordinance those professionals involved in designing cities were working in a new way. They were policy designers working at the precinct level rather than urban designers working on specific conceptual designs or master plans. They were working as 'merchants of allowable building space' trading public interest needs for allowable floor space in the private rather than the public realm. They were not, however, dealing with the whole range of problems of the declining hearts of cities that John Lindsay and city planners had to face when he became Mayor of New York in 1966.

The 1960s and 1970s were a period of turmoil in the United States. Inflation rates were high by North American standards, major labour disputes slowed progress, and racial riots demonstrated the frustration of minority groups. Homosexuals and civil libertarians battled for gay rights. The morality of the Vietnam War and political assassinations sent the citizens of the United States and many other people around the world into much soul searching. The physical fabric of the cores of cities in the country was in rapid decline as people and industries moved to the suburbs and to other parts of the continent. It was felt that urban policies had to be developed for specific precincts of cities in order to make a difference. In New York urban design became policy-based and the distinction between urban design and standard physical (and, indeed, social and economic) planning became blurred.

John Lindsay was a two-term mayor of New York, holding office from 1966 to 1974. He had a deep-seated belief that the future of the United States lay in 'bustling, diverse and dynamic cities' and that market forces would neither shape cities positively nor stem their decline. He also realized that attempting to compete against market forces was foolhardy; they had to be harnessed. In harnessing them he felt that the ideas of community groups also had to be considered. Planning had to be at the district level. Importantly, in terms of this book, he established an Urban Design Group to initiate projects that would stop the 'haemorrhaging' of the city's life. Lindsay gave the group unequivocal support during his term in office.