

# VISIONS FOR NEW YORK CITY: HOUSING AND THE PUBLIC REALM



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public realm strategists



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Prepared by



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For

The Economic Development Corporation  
The City of New York

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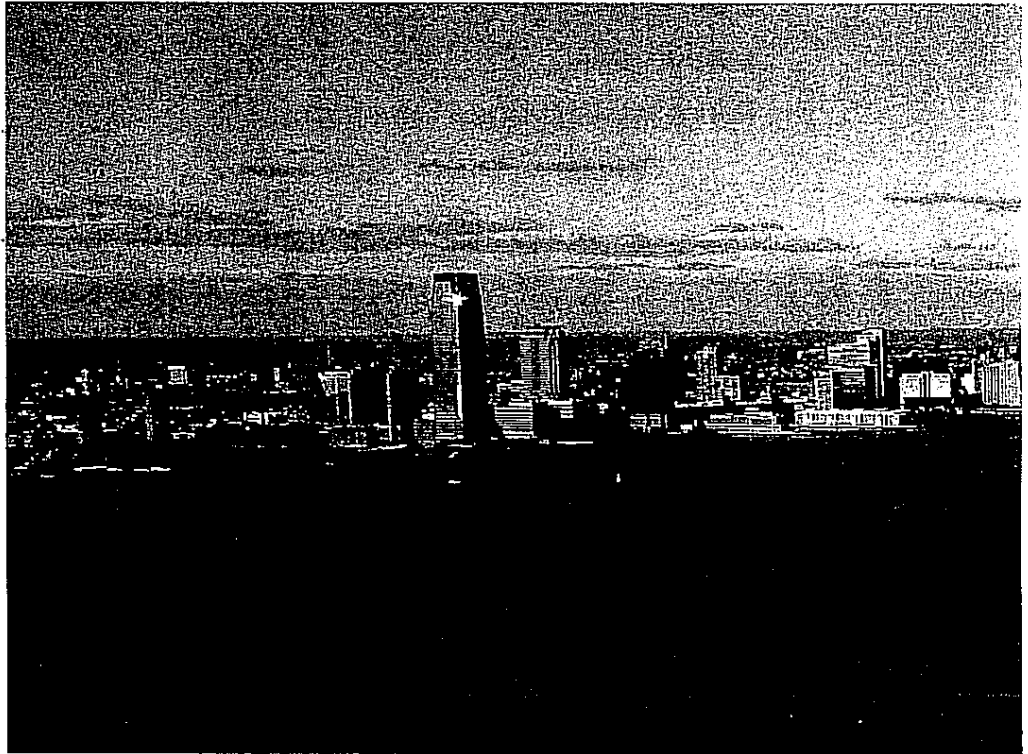
# Executive Summary

New York City has a growing population, a growing economy, and a growing reputation as one of the world's safest cities. To accommodate this growth and success, New York must add hundreds of thousands of new residential units to its housing supply. At the same time, the city must grow in a way that improves, rather than degrades, its quality of life. Specifically, the city must invest in its public realm to prevent unplanned growth from undermining its competitive advantage. This report, prepared by Alex Garvin & Associates for the Economic Development Corporation of the City of New York, presents opportunities to build between 160,000 and 325,000 housing units, with virtually no residential displacement, and to dramatically improve city's public realm through strategic capital investment.

This report identifies three kinds of housing opportunities: construction of platforms over infrastructure, development of underused waterfronts, and investment in transit to stimulate development in areas without nearby subway service. None of these strategies displace existing residents, and each project would increase the city's housing supply and enhance the adjacent communities.

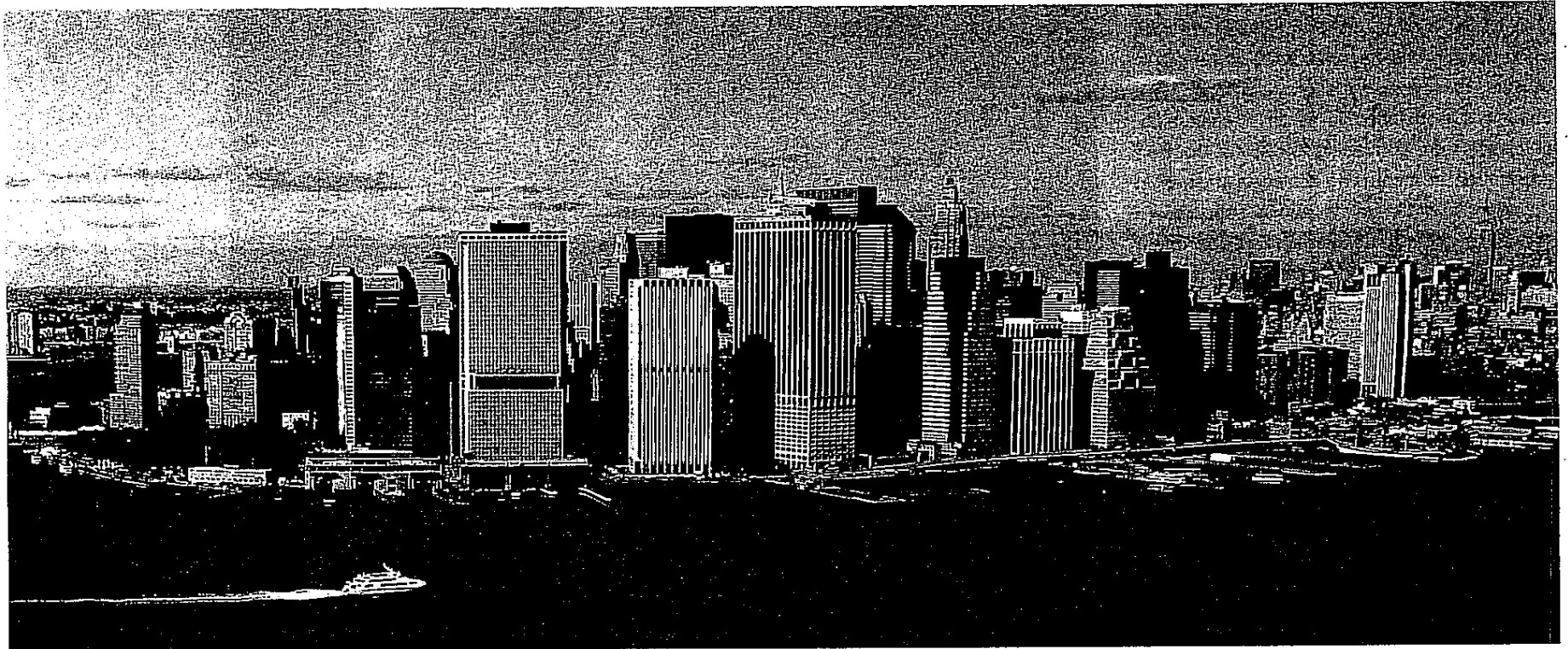
This report also recommends strategies to improve New York's public realm. The city's streets, sidewalks, parks, and plazas can become a "mixed-use" public realm that balances pedestrians and cyclists with motor vehicles and mass transit. Greening boulevards, protected bike lanes, Sunday closings, and pedestrian reclamations are four strategies to create this balance on streets throughout all five boroughs.

If the city acts promptly and decisively to implement these improvements, New York's economy and population will continue to grow. Each opportunity will stimulate private development and make the city a better place to live. Collectively, these opportunities will help New York City to prosper in the global economy.



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# Introduction

By almost any measure, New York City is in vibrant health. Having rebounded from the recession that began in 2000 and the 9/11 attacks, the economy is growing vigorously. The city's population is at an all-time high, crime rates are continuing to decline, housing production is increasing to levels unseen in decades, and the city's public schools are improving under the mayor's new Department of Education. In short, New York City is stronger than ever.

New York is growing because it offers its 8 million citizens a strong economy with abundant jobs, a comprehensive, well-planned infrastructure, and a high quality of life. A population study by the Department of City Planning projected that the city's existing population of over 8 million will exceed 9 million by 2030, if not sooner.

However, as the city continues to grow, it faces an inherent dilemma. The assets that have allowed the city of 8 million to flourish will be insufficient for a city of 9 million. If the city's infrastructure does not expand, those same assets will become liabilities, hindering the city's ability to accommodate growth. Because New York competes on local, regional, national, and international scales with cities as different as Stamford, Boston, Los Angeles, and Tokyo, unbalanced and unplanned growth will undermine the appeal of living in the city and reduce New York's



competitive advantage.

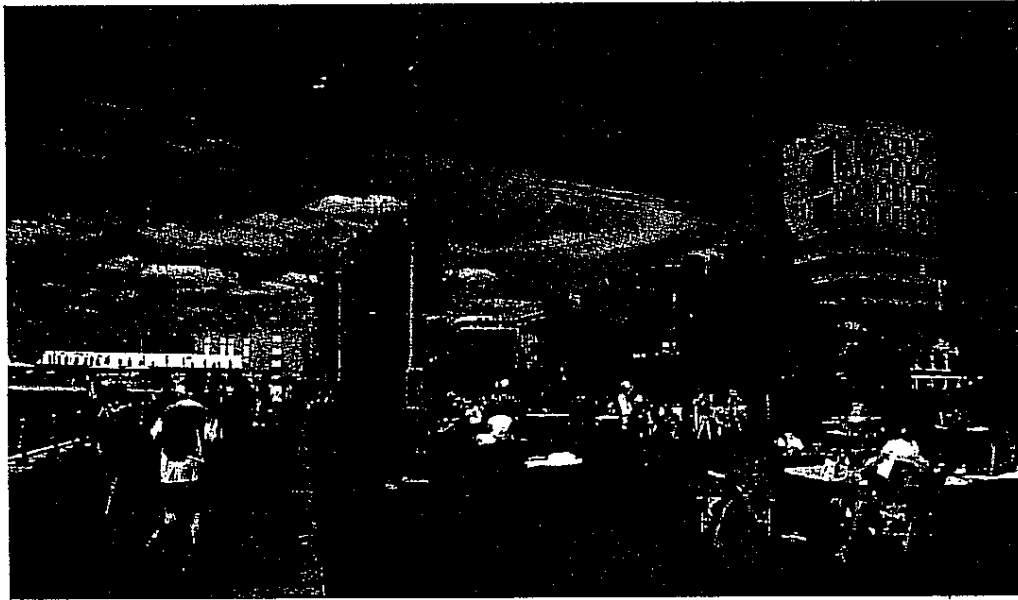
As the city's population has grown, so too has the demand for housing. Because housing production has not kept up with demand, housing prices have risen. If housing production does not accelerate to match the growing population, housing prices will climb still higher. Such an expensive housing market will make it difficult for New York to attract the world's top companies and employees, to retain an economically and culturally diverse population, and to continue expanding opportunities for every New Yorker.

New York's existing infrastructure is

already having difficulty accommodating current growth. The transportation system, for example, is reaching capacity and efficiency limits, thereby inhibiting new commercial and residential development. If the city's infrastructure does not expand to accommodate new growth, the city will not be able to provide its citizens with the high level of service that past residents have enjoyed, and which has made the city so competitive.

If New York makes strategic investments in new housing, along with improvements in transportation and infrastructure, it can provide residences for its growing population,





offer the framework of services necessary to support this new population, and trigger additional development in areas that have not yet reached their market potential.

New York's competitive position, however, does not depend solely on its ability to accommodate growth: it also depends on quality of life. That quality of life depends on the city's ability to balance many distinct but related components of city living, including housing, transportation, safety, recreation, retail, jobs, and education.

Today, the city's unparalleled quantity and variety of employment, cultural, and

entertainment opportunities give it a real competitive advantage. But jobs and activities alone do not constitute quality of life. Quality of life also depends on the quality of everyday experiences—the streets and squares, the sidewalks and public buildings, the waterfront and parks. We may call this the public realm. A city's quality of life largely depends on the quality of its public realm.

New York City currently offers a magnificent public realm. However, the city must ensure that its public realm is even more magnificent after the population increases by 1 million. This is no easy task. There is no one

governmental agency or program that controls the public realm. Rather, the public realm embraces a number of components: roads, shops, parks, schools, etc. Each component falls within the purview of a different city agency, yet they are forced to co-exist within the same public realm. In short, New York City's public realm is mixed-use.

If New York City is to have a premier public realm, the city government must enact programs that better coordinate and balance these disparate components to create a more unified, mixed-use public realm of the highest quality.

This report, prepared by Alex Garvin & Associates for the Economic Development Corporation of the City of New York, recommends public actions that, in conjunction with initiatives already in place, will improve the city's competitive advantage:

- Increase the housing supply
- Improve the quality of the public realm

While the actions recommended in this report support and reinforce one another, they are fundamentally different. The former absorbs the city's growth, while the latter helps ensure that growth occurs in the first place. Taken together, they create a mixed-use public realm framework around which the city can prosper.

# Introduction

## Methodology

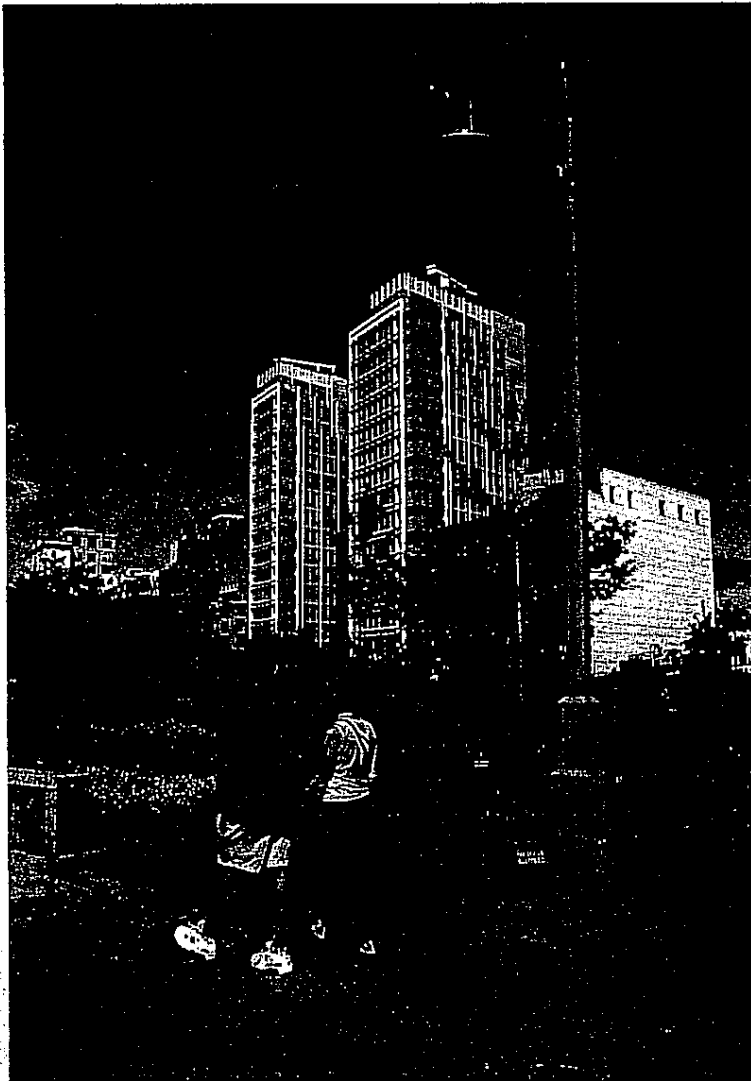
Planners commonly attempt to quantify the public's needs—real or perceived—based on polls, surveys, studies, and other types of data. They then recommend projects based on their analysis of that data. This method is commonly referred to as a "Needs Analysis." By its very nature, any Needs Analysis is reactive rather than proactive—that is, it reacts to existing conditions or projections, rather than guiding and driving future conditions. The data from which these "needs" are derived may be inaccurate, outdated, or theoretical, and ultimately, what constitutes a "need" will inevitably be arbitrary.

This report presents an "Opportunity Analysis." Rather than asking "What should a city do?", without considering the feasibility, an Opportunity Analysis asks "What can a city do?" In some cases, the outcome may be the same. But in many cases, asking the latter question yields opportunities that would not even be considered based on Needs Analysis. Opportunity Analysis saves time by immediately eliminating those options that are not feasible—whether the reason is physical, financial, or political. Rather than responding to vague social needs, this report presents a variety of physically and financially feasible options which may be implemented as they

become relevant, depending upon market conditions. Most importantly, Opportunity Analysis is entrepreneurial in nature, and seeks to identify an overlooked market or to create one that currently does not exist.

Striving to implement the goals of the report—increasing the housing supply, and improving the mixed-use public realm around which it can grow—the authors began a broad search across all five boroughs of the city to identify opportunities. Using maps, high resolution satellite photos, site visits, and helicopter flyovers; Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data of ownership, land use, and tax assessments; and Alexander Garvin's expert knowledge of New York City, the project team built a broad and extensive list of potential opportunities.

Development sites were identified because they were vacant, currently underutilized, or because market conditions have changed sufficiently to justify new or adjusted land uses. Public investments in infrastructure were identified where they would improve access to housing, work, recreation, and retail, thereby stimulating widespread and sustained private investment in the surrounding neighborhood. Public realm opportunities were identified because they offer reasonable return on



Right: Hudson River Park

## **Private Market Reaction**

*Developers have always been quick to grasp the importance of a new subway, bridge, or park. As soon as a strategic public investment is in place, there is usually a prompt market response. Between 1921 and 1928 when the #7 subway opened on Main Street in Flushing, land values along its route increased tenfold, clearly demonstrating the private market reaction. When the Verrazano Narrows Bridge opened in 1964, it triggered development of thousands of new homes in Staten Island. West Street was a congested, unattractive thoroughfare for years before the Hudson River Park opened. Once the park opened, West Street became a choice location for developers of new housing.*

# Introduction

investment, benefit a wide spectrum of the population, or could stimulate a sufficient private market reaction to recover the costs through increased tax revenues.

The initial list identified hundreds of potential opportunities that varied in size, scale, cost, and impact. The team researched and analyzed each opportunity in order to select only those with the greatest combination of potential and feasibility for inclusion in this report. As part of this feasibility process, the identified opportunities were filtered through "Guiding Principles," to ensure that they would:

1. Respond to existing and future market conditions
2. Anticipate changing land uses
3. Utilize existing infrastructure & resources
4. Minimize disruption & dislocation of residents and businesses

Many initial opportunities are not included in the report because they did not adhere to the Guiding Principles, or because, upon further analysis, they were deemed unfeasible. Due to the wide range of opportunities identified

in this report, however, the full extent of that feasibility varies for each project. Therefore, each potential opportunity is ranked according to its current level of feasibility: a) those ready for implementation; b) those that require further feasibility analysis; or c) those which do not appear to work now, but may in the future— 5, 10, or even 25 years from now.

Several noteworthy opportunities are ready for implementation, and several more could prove even more transformative if more detailed analysis demonstrates that they are feasible.

In short, this report is a list of opportunities from which the Administration can choose in order to plan and manage the city's growth. Every attempt was made to ensure the recommendations are consistent with the Administration's policies, but this report is fundamentally not city policy. Rather, it is an independent analysis of potential strategic capital investments. These investments were selected in order to yield the greatest benefit in improving New York City's competitive position in the region, the country, and the world.

