Guest Observer

Alexandra Lange: Rebooting the Festival Marketplace

Time, Illustration by Wilson McLean, August 24, 1981

Once upon a time in the 1970s, the festival marketplace was a treat. Its co-inventor, architect Benjamin Thompson, wrote: "The natural pageantry of crowds and goods, of meat, fish and crops from the fields, of things made and things grown, all to be tasted, smelled, seen and touched, are the prime

source of sensations, experience and amusement in the daily lives of whole populations — were and still are, in most nations except our own." Faneuil Hall, which opened in Boston in 1976, was his riposte to dying urban downtowns and everywhere-the-same malls. It was supposed to be more than commerce. It was an everyday fair.

Developer James Rouse and Benjamin Thompson & Associates attempted to replicate Faneuil Hall's success on similarly obsolete waterfronts in New York (South Street Seaport) and Baltimore (Harborplace). Baltimore worked, New York didn't. Until recession struck this fall, seaport owner General Growth Properties, which bought the Rouse Company in 2004, was finally going to do something about it.

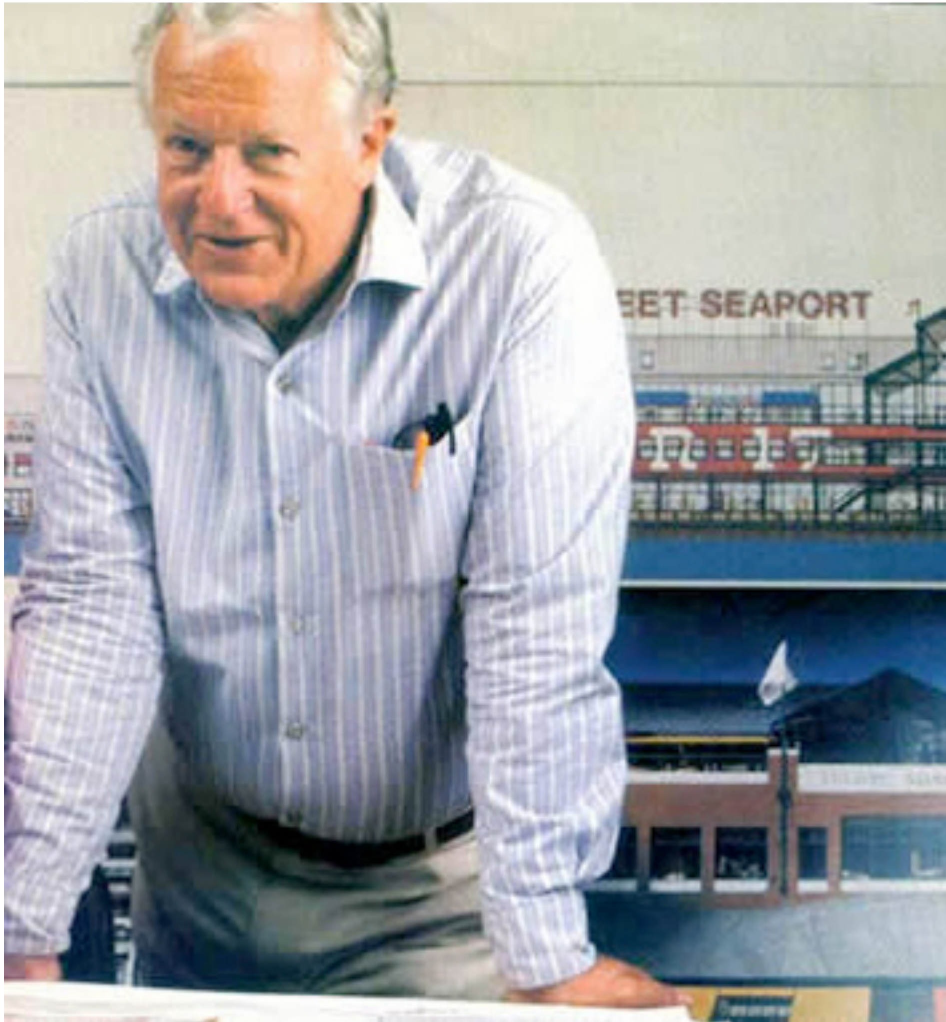
In June 2008, GGP officially unveiled its plan designed by up-and-coming New York firm SHoP Architects. In November 2008, the Landmarks Preservation Commission declined to vote on the redesign, sending GGP and SHoP back to the drawing board. In December 2008 GGP, deep in debt, put all three of the Rouse/Thompson projects up for sale. GGP says they are primarily looking for investors (though they would sell for the right price), and they and the city still hope to go ahead with the redevelopment.

The recession has put many redevelopment projects on hold, some good, some bad. The New Seaport isn't terrible, but it is worth using this unasked-for pause to talk about what's wrong at the seaport, then and now. The details — developer, architect, architecture — may change, but regardless of who ends up in charge, the owner needs to understand why Faneuil Hall worked and the South Street Seaport didn't. It wasn't the fault of Thompson, or a sign that the festival marketplace was a flawed idea. New York just didn't — and doesn't — need a fake fair.

The "festival marketplace" was never right for New York. In his generally positive of the new South Street Seaport, published July 29, 1983, then-*New York Times* architecture critic Paul Goldberger says this straight out. He praises the innovations of Rouse as creating public squares where there were not. "In those [other] cities it was bringing a kind of activity to urban areas that had relatively little to start with. But in New York, the streets are already crawling with life and vitality — and so there was the very real question of whether this kind of neatly packaged urbanism would really make any sense here."

The seaport had the proper scale: the little old rowhouses, subsiding into fill, were a last vestige of port city in a jumped-up downtown. The south side of Fulton Street, made into a cobblestone pedestrian walk, had a continuous row of old houses. On the north side, BTA and Beyer Blinder Belle would fill in the blanks with some new old buildings. But even in the early days, the mix of stores skewed commercial rather than experimental. Ann Taylor and other clothiers to appealed to the office crowd; by the 1990s, the "unique" offering was J. Crew's only New York store. It wasn't the carefully curated collection BTA had assembled in Boston. By the time the BTA-designed Pier 17 building opened, the seaport began to focus inward, never fully connected to the still-changing city around it.

Plus, New York has a way of curating its own shopping streets, better than Ben Thompson's best finds. First there's a pioneer, then an imitator, then an offshoot, and suddenly you have Smith Street, or, as recently profiled in *New York Magazine*, Franklin Street in Greenpoint. Even Soho, the first locus of original modern shopping, keeps a bit of high-low action amid the chains. The sidewalk sellers on Prince Street are among the best in the city, and smaller storefronts still have only-in-New York offerings. The streets are too narrow for the public ballet Thompson engineered at Faneuil Hall, but a little of that happens inside the Apple Store, with its openness and views from level to level, and was meant to happen at OMA's bi-level Prada store. Meanwhile downtown, the pedestrianized block of Fulton Street on a recent Saturday was merely a pass-through, its center empty and expectant.



Ben Thompson, in front of an SSS rendering, photo by John Goodman

Ben Thompson was also an early proponent of adaptive reuse (most D/R stores were in old buildings). Ben and Jane Thompson told *Architectural Record*: "Our goal is *genuineness*. This is a better word than authenticity, which is too often used to mean a good imitation of something genuine. Genuineness is the real thing." Adaptive reuse today seems no longer worth commenting on, as neighborhoods like Soho and Dumbo have ever fancier shops and ever higher rents. In New York, the architecture becomes an afterthought, but it is the quality of the cast-iron, and the romanticism of the cobblestones that attracted the artists, that attracted the speculators and so on. What took a concerted, public-private partnership to do in the 1970s — save the seaport — might well have eventually been taken on by individuals and private developers, fixing up individual structures or specific blocks.

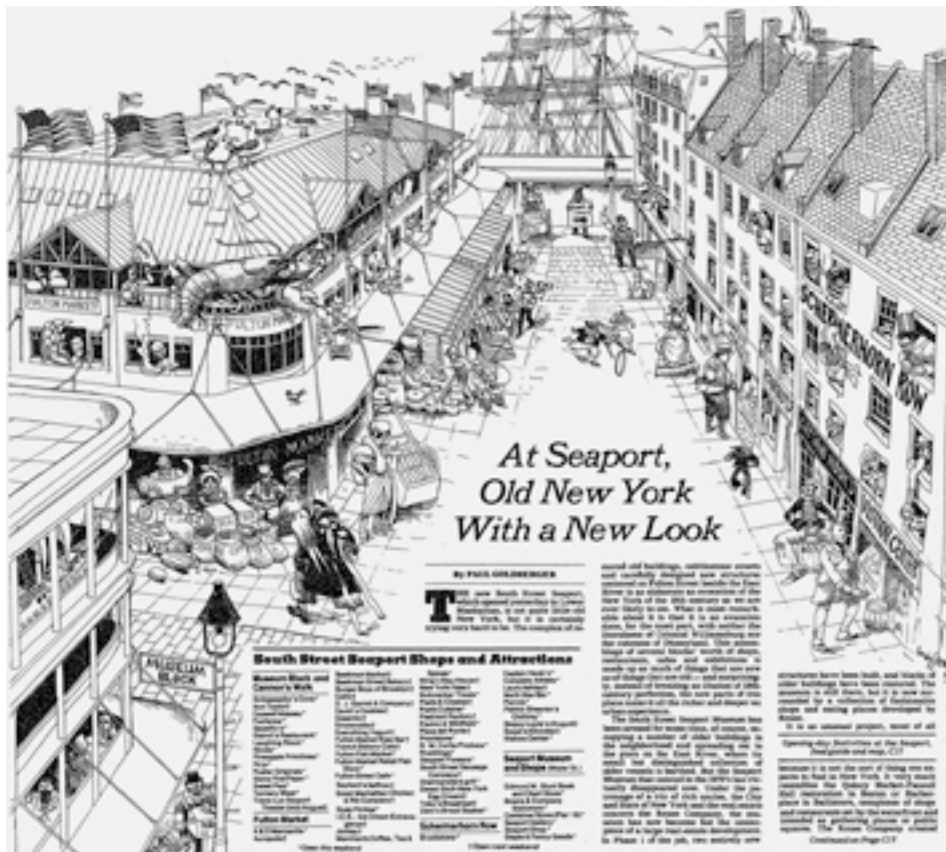
At the Seaport, there was too much scrubbing. Of Schermerhorn Row, the

Fulton Street early nineteenth-century centerpiece of the seaport old and new, Goldberger wrote, “the brick fronts have all been sterilized, made so clean that all sense of time has been wiped out; worse still, the distinctions between the houses that make up the row have disappeared, and so this block looks more like a single, overblown mass of brick than like a real 19th-century street.”

What disappeared along with genuine history was also genuine urban commerce. When the seaport opened in 1983, the Fulton Fish Market was still there, part of it but apart. Rather than expanding the wholesale fish stalls into retail, and adding other foods (as GGP now proposes in a limited way), there was a divide between work and play, between shops and services for office workers and those in the market. Goldberger thought the presence of the market was an essential part of the ensemble, a counter to the inevitable gentrification. But the two proved uneasy neighbors, and after federal lawsuits, trucking disputes, and development pressures, the market moved to the Bronx in 2005. The 1980s redevelopment did not provide continuity, but a break.

South Street Seaport’s market proved too narrow, its attractions too weak, to lure New Yorkers; tourists came to see the old ships, to eat at chain restaurants, and to shop for souvenirs at Pier 17. That lack of success had one interesting by-product: because it was never a real neighborhood, real estate prices in the adjacent low-rise blocks stayed low. There was preservation by neglect of the nineteenth-century blocks north of the seaport, just as architecturally rich as those face-lifted by Rouse. People moved in — a new generation who liked the edge-of-the-city feel, the small scale, the kind of people who might have moved to Brooklyn. Older office buildings in the Financial District started being converted into condominiums. Flashy new projects like Frank Gehry’s Beekman Tower were proposed. And suddenly there were locals hard by the seaport.

Interim development, spurred by the then-seemingly impervious Manhattan housing market, followed this organic shift. Historic Front Street, which opened in 2005, offered the green renovation of 11 historic buildings, and the addition of three new ones, not for more boutiques and restaurants, but for rental residences, and not in any simulacrum of historic style. The new contextuality had to do with size and color, not with simplified cornice lines and repeated materials. The buildings (by Cook + Fox, architects of One Bryant Park) are handsome and the block feels solid, replete.



At Seaport, Old New York With a New Look

South Street Seaport Shops and Attractions

Illustration by Randy Jones, for *The New York Times*, July 29, 1983

It is the opposite side of those blocks that are still a problem. Peck Slip is a parking lot, so the cosy scale just peters out into parking to the north, 1970s towers to the west. As you walk down Fulton Street from the closest subway, there's no indication that something picturesque lies ahead, beyond the sandwich shops and jeans stores and construction fences. Fulton makes a sharp jog at Gold, shifting from these older, low-rise buildings to two blocks of the newer high-rise downtown. Then you cross Water Street and the cobblestones suddenly begin. Within three blocks it feels like you've passed through three different neighborhoods, the sharp architectural distinctions elongating the distance. It is not so much the seaport architecture that needs improvement, but first its on-ramps and then its tenants.

When GGP revealed its plan in June, it nodded toward downtown residents with, of all coincidental things, a farmer's market, and offered the locals the second floor of Thompson's 1983 Fulton Market Building as "community space." Later, encountering opposition, they floated the idea of including a school as Gehry's Beekman Tower does — a classic developer move, also

recently used to sell the Dock Street project in DUMBO, because who doesn't want a school?

The other parts of the proposal are really just a festival marketplace rebranded and rebooted. There are odd angles and radical materials and allusions to ship's rigging, but it is still an outdoor mall. Its genuineness might increase with the new architecture — at least it would be a complete and hopefully well-made contemporary thing, instead of an over-groomed faux-old thing — but it would still have the effect of a separate island. The project website sells the connections of SHoP's architecture to known New York hard — the porthole lattice on the tower; the "floating structures" of the boutique hotel, whose wooden sides evoke a boat; the steel cables from which these buildings are to be hung, an echo of the Brooklyn Bridge suspenders. It is deeply hokey in a postmodern way, in which everything new must be justified by the old, despite the fact that the buildings couldn't be more up-to-date.

What New Yorkers really need is a new neighborhood — or rather, what the new neighborhood needs is the amenities it currently lacks: a green, a new school, mundane shopping options. The new plan pretends to be a new neighborhood while really trying to create a fancier, more contemporary tourist trap. The ground floors are entirely retail, up several stories. Above, it is primarily hotels, one boutique, one mass-market, set atop this podium of shops, some small, one large. The doors on those shops now open to new "streets" which cut across the pier (controversially, the Pier 17 building disappears). There's a blank open space on the pier awaiting jugglers. The landmarked Tin Building, a last vestige of the fish market, is gussied up and set out at the end as more stores and event space.

Urbanistically the craziest aspect may be the three-story retail space that wraps the bottom of that (way too tall) tower. The idea of putting destination, big-box retail on the water seemed nuts when IKEA moved in to Red Hook and despite the superlative landscaping and esplanade the Swedes put in, the blue box still feels like a waste of location. Yes, if General Growth installs a Nordstrom we will come, but that has nothing to do with the neighborhood or the site (which has limited parking, unlike Red Hook).

Then there's the open space. The plan disappears the Pier 17 mall in favour of smaller and fussier structures, opening a view of the Brooklyn Bridge from the end of Fulton Street as you step on to the pier and clarifying your

proximity to the Brooklyn Bridge. Broader than the Fulton pedestrian mall, intended to be programmed with markets and performers and activities, but still intended for the lunchtime crowds and the tourist visitors, not the neighborhood. It looks exposed and bland and like it is for circulation and not repose. If history is any judge it will soon be taken over by restaurant seating, as are the many exterior decks at Pier 17 and disappear as a community amenity.

Modern preservationists have rallied to save Thompson's Pier 17. The building, which made frequent appearances as an after dark establishing shot in "Friends", is not a terrible piece of architecture, adapting a pier shed into a multi-level structure, adopting a maritime vocabulary of white-painted steel and levels of decks, and looking festive indeed when lit up at night. But as it has aged it has, more than any other seaport structure, turned inward. If you walk due east from the first-floor entrance, you can see the East River at the end of the mall, but you have to peer past the spangly New Year's Eve dresses at Express. The upstairs decks are largely deserted. From the outside, the bulk of the building blocks not only views of the bridge but sight of the end of the pier. You can go out there, right to the edge of Manhattan, but you can't see what will be there when you arrive. It's hard to see why you or me would go to the end of the pier, or to the seaport at all.

Faneuil Hall felt special, a treat within a city with other centers but a hole at its heart. It was Ben Thompson's adopted home, and the partnership with Rouse let him give Boston what he knew it needed. What New York needs, then as now, is something different. The problem at South Street Seaport is the same as it was in the 1980s: how to make it feel like a fair for New Yorkers. Something with distinct smells and sights and sounds, that makes the most of the view and forges links with the new Brooklyn Bridge Park across the water, to lower Manhattan to the west, to Wall Street to the south. Locals don't need more café chairs, but a real lawn; they don't need picturesque fruit stands, but a real farmer's market. It needs to feel as if work is still going on, not as if the architecture is merely a false front.

Alexandra Lange is a journalist and architectural historian based in Brooklyn. Her work has appeared in *The Architect's Newspaper*, *Metropolis*, *New York Magazine* and *The New York Times*, and she teaches architecture criticism at the Design Criticism MFA Program at the School of Visual Arts.