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The Heat Is On to Open the Waterfront

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By Mitchell Moss

It was 95 degrees in New York City on Saturday, a new record for heat on June 19. There were 20,000 visitors at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, about 35,000 at Yankee Stadium, and 153,500 at the city's beaches. With the arrival of summer, New York City's beaches come alive. Last summer, more than 10 million people used them - more than twice as many as attended Yankee and Met games all last season. Beaches are a principal source of recreation for most New Yorkers, those without backyards, air-conditioning or second homes in the Hamptons or Litchfield County.

There are almost 20 miles of beaches in New York City, including 7.5 miles at the Rockaways, 3 miles at Coney Island, 1.1 miles at Orchard Beach, plus 4 miles that are part of Gateway National Park. New York's beaches are among the few places where all types of people - old, young, straight, gay, white, black, brown and, of course, nude - thrive in close proximity to each other. Perhaps it is the throbbing sound of the surf or perhaps it's the community of sunburned flesh, but beaches seem to diminish rather than aggravate the differences among people.

Most public agencies and politicians focus on the Manhattan waterfront - a small part of the city's 500 miles of waterfront - even though most of the city's population relies on the ocean beaches outside Manhattan. As a result, we hear

about the beaches only when a whale inadvertently winds up on the sand or the Golden Venture tries to turn the Rockaways into Ellis Island.

One of the paradoxes of our weak economy is that the priorities of the 1970s and '80s have been turned upside down; the city is no longer being defined by cash and concrete but by people with energy and ideas. And this is especially apparent on our beaches and waterfront. For example, in January, 1979, Mayor Ed Koch announced, "If there is one capital project I want my administration to be identified with, it is that we brought the harbor back to the City of New York, that we built on our greatest treasure, that we opened the waters to the people of the city." Well, if there is one area where the Koch administration was an unmitigated disaster, it was on the waterfront. Rather than bring people to the shoreline, he built expensive floating prisons, fostered the comatose Homeport and promoted the uninspired Riverwalk on the East River.

Now, with less money, but more ingenuity, lots of people are working to put beaches and promenades all over the waterfront. Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger wants to build a 20-acre Harlem Beach Esplanade similar to esplanades on the Chicago and Seattle waterfronts, and the city Planning Commission is encouraging access to the shoreline in its new waterfront plan. The Hudson River Park Conservancy has come up with a thoughtful proposal that combines a boulevard with rehabilitated piers, bike paths and new park space. (Some of the same people who derailed Westway are now fighting this new proposal; they clearly would rather keep the waterfront in its deteriorated condition.)

Ironically, the weak regional economy is generating this new approach to the waterfront, one that relies less on high-rises and more on recreational activities - eating, biking and boating. During the 1980s, a plethora of waterfront construction projects was proposed, but few came to fruition. With the exception of Battery Park City, the 1980s represent a decade of inertia on the waterfront.

Too often, New York's leaders have bet our money on the tourist trade rather than making life more enjoyable for the millions who live here. Can anyone imagine what would happen to New York during July and August if there were no beaches?

Perhaps, in the 1990s, we should try to foster a new approach to urban life

with a network of beaches and esplanades throughout the city.

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