

## 200 Water Street

Today, the City Planning Commission is considering the first application under the Water Street Upgrades Text Amendment, which was adopted by the Commission and the City Council in 2016 with the goal of transforming and improving the Water Street public realm. Despite Water Street's important role as a key commercial corridor in Lower Manhattan, the pedestrian experience along the street has long been unpleasant, lacking the activity and vibrancy that would be expected of the home to over 100,000 employees and a fast-growing residential population. For too long, Water Street's pedestrian experience has been dominated by barren plazas that lack basic amenities such as seating and planting. Water Street is also characterized by long, expansive lobbies that deaden street frontages, and a disconnected, underutilized – and at times somewhat foreboding – system of arcades.

The 2016 text amendment wisely sought to transform the experience along the route between the vibrant Seaport and the bustling Battery with visible and active ground floors; to provide retail and service uses for local residents as well as those who work in the area; to improve the quality of the public spaces with seating, planting, lighting, and other amenities; and, having learned the lessons of Superstorm Sandy, to encourage buildings to consider long-term measures for flood resilience.

The 200 Water Street application that is before us takes the important first step in contributing to an improved Water Street.

The plazas and arcades that define Water Street, like many other bonused plazas and arcades throughout the City, were provided decades ago when no amenities were required and - in some instances - were not even permitted. Their designs and configurations are generally a far cry from the standards to which we hold designers and developers of newly bonused plazas today.

Nothing in the zoning compels the owner of a lawful, 1970's era plaza, like 200 Water Street, to update the plaza to today's robust standards for plaza design and amenities. But both the Commission and the Department encourage the owners

of those empty, substandard public spaces to improve them so that they truly serve as inviting, vibrant public spaces – with comfortable and diverse seating options, abundant planting and trees, safe lighting, active and transparent ground floors, and other useful amenities.

We have before us a proposal that does just that – a voluntary proposal to upgrade a plaza that, while nowhere near what would be required today, is nonetheless lawful and could remain in its current form. While we might wish that every 70's, 80's, and 90's era plaza were upgraded to today's standards, our zoning regulations do not require that. Instead, in reviewing an application like 200 Water Street, we are called upon to assure that the redesigned plaza results in attractive public spaces, designed for people, by replacing a windswept plaza with blank walls and limited seating with activity and amenities that encourage people to linger and interact in an open space that offers relief and respite in such a dense and bustling commercial area.

The plazas at 200 Water Street – and along the corridor more generally – were a product of their time, a time when the city was contracting and there was little new building. When 200 Water Street was constructed in the early 1970s, the Seaport was not the destination that it is today, and it's somewhat whimsical plazas were appropriate destinations themselves. Today, the 200 Water Street plazas serve as a gateway, connecting Fulton Street and Water Street to the revitalized and still improving Seaport. We should not be freezing those plazas in time. Instead, we must adapt and embrace positive change if we want to see the Water Street corridor become a vibrant and successful street for today's growing number of residents and workers.

The 2016 text amendment that facilitates the 200 Water Street proposal was the result of a long and robust public process, where both the Commission and the City Council heard significant – and often opposing – input before deciding to approve the text amendment. We are not here today to re-litigate the merits of and rationale for a text amendment that was recently adopted. Instead, we want to send the message that spaces and places should be designed for people, and that Water Street deserves to see projects that, by following the 2016 text

amendment, bring eyes to the street and markedly enhance the quality of the current public spaces. The zoning thoughtfully and appropriately strikes a balance between predictability and flexibility, serving as an incentive for owners to improve the Water Street plazas.

We recognize the many comments and recommendations that were submitted by the Council Member, Borough President, Community Board, civic organizations and interested citizens that have demonstrated both great interest and passion for public space. While some commenters argued for further aesthetic enhancements to the 200 Water Street plazas, that was not called for in the 2016 text amendment that set forth the Commission findings. Other commenters noted that the owner of 200 Water Street will benefit from the partial arcade infill; this is true. But, the 2016 text amendment does not preclude this. Rather, it focuses on the benefit to the public.

With the proposed changes, the public will benefit from greatly improved open spaces that create a vibrant and attractive link among Water Street, Fulton Street and South Street Seaport. We would hope to see this vibrancy spread along the Water Street corridor in future applications under the 2016 text amendment.