

## An Appraisal

# Elegance Clinging To Avenue, But It Too May Pass

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

I have been a Madison Avenue watcher for more years than female vanity will let me enumerate. It is the New Yorker's street of streets.

It began when I was taken to Sunday school on the Madison Avenue streetcar — you see why I've stopped counting. As we waited, the neatly ranged fruits in Grstedte's window at 85th Street seemed polished and larger than life in their green tissue paper wrappings. Once on the streetcar and seated, Madison Avenue became a series of architectural anecdotes at child's eye-level.

The second floor shops of the four-story and five-story buildings were a passing parade of services for the rich or shabbily respectable enterprises that had apparently been there forever: repairers of objets d'art, domestic employment agencies, purveyors of lamps and linens and dress shops not quite as grand as those on the ground.

Above that, were rows of brownstone windows of varying degrees of Renaissance recall, with an occasional gable, oriel or other architectural eccentricity that became markers on the weekly trip. I remember in particular a glass-enclosed entryway at the top of a flight of brownstone steps always filled with flowering plants, worthy of Beacon Hill.

It never seemed to be raining. I see it all in sunshine. The low buildings had a quiet elegance and a profligate open sky.

As a teen-ager and beyond, my interest shifted to the street level. The shops, the wonderful shops! The mannikins were always gowned for a society ball and the impeccable accessories arranged casually at their feet glittered with suggestions of champagne.

To walk along Madison Avenue was to experience the treasures and pleasures of the world — antiques, jewels, furs, furniture, china, haute couture, fine leathers, superb foods and wines. It was an incredible 40 blocks of continuous pedestrian titillation, anchored at the south by Brooks and Abercrombie's and fading into exclusive residential serenity at the north. It had the best of everything old and new and all the beauty and luxury that money could buy. You had only to say the name. Madison Avenue, New York.

Change came to Madison Avenue after the war. It was not the sweeping and sudden transformation of midtown

Park Avenue from residential to commercial, from brick to glass. The new Madison Avenue office buildings went up from the 40's to the 60's, and apartment houses rose in the 70's and 80's, but the radical changes were more above street level than on the ground. Old shops remained, and new boutiques joined them. Groceries became supermarkets and expensive dry cleaners multiplied like rabbits.

But two early postwar buildings pointed the way to the future: the CIT Building that went up at 59th Street in 1957, and the new Parke-Bernet Building constructed at 76th Street in 1950.

The first offers a refined version of the postwar glass office building mode, with setbacks (old zoning) and a bank and investment company in its base. This was the formula that was to sweep New York's more important commercial avenues. Add a few corporate showrooms and airline offices for kicks and you have the street of tomorrow.

The second, a careful exercise in reticent modernity enlivened by facade sculpture of nude male and female (36B) floating figures, tipped the art world balance from 57th Street to upper Madison Avenue. Innumerable galleries followed, magnetized.

But the symbolic blow came in 1951, when the Ritz Carlton Hotel at 46th Street was demolished. With it went the oval salons where people had time to sit, summer lunches with ducks in the Japanese garden, proms and afternoon teas. (Tea can still be had at the Plaza, with teabags.) In its place came 600,000 square feet of Uris offices. The handwriting was on the street. Madison Avenue, arbiter of elegance, became Madison Avenue, master of the sales pitch. Savonnerie to gray flannel. A good corporate address. Madison Avenue, U.S.A.

The most elegant of sales pitches, the art gallery, mushroomed. Banks and boutiques were the new order. A worldly mix with a common denominator: money.

In its own special way, the avenue was following the city's immutable law: charge what the traffic will bear. Land prices go up because they will support luxury or corporate rentals, which will support rising building costs, which require luxury or corporate rentals, which make land prices go up. As costs and rentals increase, less

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profitable shops and services leave and higher profit ones come in.

Pushed to its logical end, as has already happened on Sixth Avenue and is currently being demonstrated disastrously on Fifth Avenue, everyone ultimately gets priced out except banks, TV and business machine showrooms and ticket and investment offices. Even the midtown side streets, where New York's most characteristic and best shops and restaurants have flourished, are beginning to be eaten away.

Madison Avenue is having a false spring. In some areas, it is fulfilling its role as purveyor of sophisticated luxuries more glitteringly than ever. French boutiques, Jensen's next to Bonnier's (not exactly Gimbel's next to Macy's), intensify the avenue's traditional role, updated and uppriced. With store rentals still cheaper than on Fifth, Fifth Avenue's losses are Madison Avenue's gains. Temporarily, anyway. And business had better be good.

Because every block of old buildings has its potential purchasers, already in there fighting to buy, demolish, and build. Every new block built today at premium purchase and construction prices will house only immensely profitable retail stores, corporate loss-leaders, or, if the cost spiral continues, that deadly assortment of banks and showrooms that is becoming increasingly familiar.

A subtler, less visible change is taking place—corporate purchase of boutiques and small luxury businesses. Possibly this could save them. Corporate owners can carry deficits and high expenses that individuals or small businesses cannot. (Even if something does seem to happen to the luster of a Belgian chocolatier owned by Campbell's Soups. It's like finding out that a diamond is really glass or the Italian princess is a phony. Will they bring out a pepper pot chocolate in those pheasant feathered boxes?)

But, ultimately, any corporation will sell for an office building or apartment house replacement if the price is

right.

What is threatened by the inexorable course of New York real estate is one of the finest pedestrian streets in the world and a fortuitous example of first-rate urbanism. The first is apparent to any ambulatory New Yorker; the second is a concern of professional planners. It is threatened by escalating land prices, by the disruption of the street with meaningless plazas under the new zoning, and by New Yorkers' blithe unawareness of what makes their increasingly unbearable city still an attraction for the civilized world.

On Madison Avenue it is as simple as the fact that until recently the pedestrian experience has consisted of an almost totally uninterrupted, unflagging series of visual and sensuous adventures and joys packed tightly together on a continuous, human, pedestrian scale. To interrupt it is lethal.

Lacunae are beginning to show. What started with the CIT Building and the bare pink plaza of Union Carbide is a spreading and potential-

ly fatal disease. The camouflage of some jazzy arcades and lighting does not add much to the ground floor ennui of a recent office building at 49th Street. General Motors has made a desert from 58th to 59th Streets with two banks and a set back building entrance. The block is dead. The National Cash Register showroom at 61st Street is a pedestrian bore to anyone not enchanted by computers.

Small branch banks formerly disguised by genteely fake 18th-century fronts to blend with sedate residential neighborhoods (right move, wrong technique) have taken over countless corners with bland corporate assurance. The days of the brownstones are numbered, and the numbers have dollar signs in front of them.

So a few tears shed into the champagne at the next boutique or gallery opening might not be amiss. You'll notice changes if you've been away a week. Everyone's waiting for the pocketful of cash. Hello, Madison Avenue; goodbye?