

Battle of the Burger

The battle of the burger continues in New York, generating heat and litter. Community protest increases as the number of fast-food places grows. "Protest is a fact of life which we accept," says one McDonald's spokesman. "We must be doing something right," says another, referring to an apparently insatiable demand for Big Macs.

Undimmed opposition from almost every neighborhood threatened with the blessings of Burger King and its brothers suggests more clearly that they must be doing something wrong. The message just doesn't seem to be getting through their demographic data.

City neighborhoods are more than population figures indicating potential markets. The impact of fast-food chains in an urban setting is completely unlike the effect on suburbia or the open road, because the environmental patterns are different. It has taken planners decades to find out what makes a successful city neighborhood tick. It works because it is a strongly individualized collection of close-knit, small-scaled, personalized, related living, service and amenity facilities stacked together in tight pedestrian proximity. The balance shifts constantly and precariously, but these are the stable constants. It can be ruptured easily, and physical damage can lead to social dislocation.

Therefore it is not a question of esthetics, or decorum, or the good will of the franchisee. The promise of voluntary policing, or cleanup, or changes in design to make fast-food outlets more acceptable neighbors are beside the point. What is fatal to city residential neighborhood character is the mass market formula itself, with its high volume turnover and mass-produced plastic image that sabotages individuality and a sense of place.

Fast-food places are neighborhood-busters before one burger is bitten or one redundant wrapper dropped. It is a matter of scale, style and standards that are destructively incompatible with the urban fabric and functions. They simply do not cut the mustard in New York.