

## Can Fifth Avenue Be Saved?

There is an urban disease in New York called Sixth Avenueism. It is an expensive new kind of blight created by land values and zoning. A creeping redevelopment wasteland of anonymous office buildings and vacuous plazas chases out most of the things a city needs for service and pleasure. The living—or dead—example of the trend, Sixth Avenue, properly known as the Avenue of the Americas, is the definitive demonstration of the failure of New York's revised zoning code a decade after it was passed.

This failure now threatens Fifth Avenue. The street is in the throes of speculation. Alarm has risen with the price of land and the trend from luxury retailing to banks, airline offices, business showrooms and office construction. Unless something is done about the proved deficiencies of the zoning rules under which the inevitable redevelopment will take place, Fifth Avenue will be indistinguishable from Sixth Avenue in another ten years.

Fortunately something is being done, to the city's credit. The special retail zoning district just proposed for Fifth Avenue by the city's planners through the Office of Midtown Planning and Development is a breakthrough being pioneered by New York and watched by the rest of the country. It would save Fifth Avenue as a great shopping street. New York has already enacted special district zoning to save the theater district from speculative destruction and to control the Lincoln Center area, and a design district is pending in Lower Manhattan.

The purpose of the "new zoning," as it is now widely known among lawyers and professionals, is to treat an area as a whole, dealing with its particular nature and needs. It specifies appropriate goals through an over-all plan and tailors new construction to them. This comes to grips with the most glaring fault of conventional zoning—its inability to consider or coordinate the features of a neighborhood in terms of its character, style, functions and desirable development objectives.

The present lot-by-lot formula controls height and bulk only, treating each site in total isolation at the same time that it stamps out carbon-copy construction. Although it safeguards light and air, as intended, it has turned out in application to be thoroughly and tragically destructive of a varied and vital city.

The new zoning is full of promise and problems. It includes features such as pedestrian circulation, transportation connections and public amenities that go far beyond the traditional limitations of building size. These features are defined and specified according to a district's particular needs, with bonuses to builders for providing them. New uses of air rights protect landmarks and neighborhood character.

The problems, as with all progressive human endeavors, are great; but in no case do they overshadow the promise of a better city, based on the most sophisticated standards of urban design. For Fifth Avenue, the objectives are a street lined solidly with quality shops, topped by new offices and apartments—a brilliant planning triple play.

New York is in the vanguard of a handful of cities recognizing the critical need for a more constructive land-use policy that starts with a clear concept of a city's form and functions. In today's pressured urban world, zoning shapes survival. It is an essential technical and legal tool of awesome complexity. It can, and must, be an instrument of vision as well.