ARCHITECTURE VIEW: A RECESSION-PROOF PLAN TO RESCUE LITTLE ITALY

Huxtable, Ada Louise
New York Times (1923-Current file); May 4, 1975; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 163

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Recession-Proof Plan To Rescue Little Italy

It has been a stubbornly late spring, but suddenly the season of *alfresco* pleasure is upon us. And so is the urge to stroll, to find outdoor cafes, to reacquaint oneself with the street life of New York. It is time for the *passaggiata*, the *cappuccino* and a bit of *dolce far niente*. And the vernal expedition to Little Italy.

If you can get there. But don't try by car. You will be condemned to cruising the narrow streets looking for nonexistent parking places. Traffic is reduced to a polluting trickle between permanent, curb-lining walls of automobiles. You can make it by subway if you can stand it. But it is a long way from the jasmine-scented gardens of the Umbrian hill towns, the fountain-cooled courtyards of Rome, the moonlit street drama of Trastevere.

And yet, for over a century, Italian-Americans have managed to transport their traditional social and urban amenities to this congested section of lower Manhattan, trading gardens for fire escapes, baroque buildings for old law tenements. And for almost as long, other New Yorkers have come in search of that particular life style—and *granita* and *pizza rustica* and sausage and cheese—with an instinctive understanding (arrived at very late by city planners) that this celebration of people and their pleasures is what makes places work. It loses something in the translation, but the fact that is survives at all is a powerful lesson in the sociology and behavioral psychology of urban design.

• • •

Like so much else in New York, Little Italy has suffered from poor maintenance and services and lack of infusions of cash and concern. Twenty years ago, when I went there frequently in response to post-Fulbright nostalgia and in search of Roberto Murolo records of restyled Neapolitan love songs, it was a more leisured and less impacted area, although problems of housing, schools and open spaces existed then. The neighborhood has been preserved as much by local pride as by anything else.

It is therefore good to report that something is being done about its decline. Within the next two months, there will be a mini-event of major importance on Mulberry Street. As the result of a year of planning preparation by the Urban Design Group of the Department of City Planning and the local community, represented by LIRA (Little Italy Restoration Association), Mulberry Street will be "pedestrianized," or closed to traffic except for service and emergency vehicles. This will be part of a grass roots sprucing up, from cleaning and painting buildings (four are being done now) and dealing with storefronts and empty lots, to dressing up the whole with planting, lights and art.

But as nice as a car-free street of cafes, banners and flowers sounds, this is intended to be more than seasonal window dressing. If it were not, it would be of little significance beyond the temporary warm-weather pleasure that it will provide. The Mulberry Street closing is meant to be a symbol, or a send-off, for something the planners and local leaders are calling a hoped for *"risorgimento"* or more specifically, a larger, more technical and more permanent scheme to encourage upgrading through zoning and special district designation. It is a plan for overdue physical and social improvements.

There is significance, also, in the fact that it is a reversal of more accepted planning procedures. This project starts deliberately small, in contrast to the approved practice of working with comprehensive geographical areas and proposing vast, long-term solutions. (Comprehensive planning, a favorite intellectual rallying cry, is basic to the setting of coordinated goals and procedures. But it also has the too-seductive allure of appearing to set large parts of the environment straight—on paper, anyway.) Because of the size of these often admirable schemes and the complex factors and fluid conditions involved, they tend to become rapidly impractical or obsolete. The urgent neighborhood needs that can be seen clearly by the man in the street may be a casualty of the Olympian big think.

The Little Italy plan is a two-part effort. It begins with neighborhood restoration in intimate detail, and at the same time, it ties this rehabilitation to a special district proposal based on neighborhood needs and values. The 125-acre area, bounded by Bleecker Street, the Bowery, Canal Street and Broadway, has a population of about 14,500. Recommendations are for rehabilitated and new housing, with air rights transfer to create small parks, a pedestrian street network made feasible by the building of a municipal parking garage, historic storefront restoration and other emphasis on street activities, and increased community social services. What this approach does is to recognize neighborhood conservation as basic to any larger view of the city's health and functions.

The philosophical debate, within the profession, is whether you take the worm's eye or the bird's eye view. The danger, of course, is getting lost in minutiae, instead of keeping a sharp planning eye on the bigger ball. Here it is not just Little Italy that is affected, but also the adjacent communities of Chinatown, Orchard Street, SoHo and Greenwich Village. The belief is that this kind of planning can succeed where other planning fails because of the realistic scale of its local approach, dealing with immediately identifiable problems, with each succeeding step leading to the fulfillment of a larger concept.

But perhaps the most important point to be made about this proposal is that it is a prime example of how New York's planners can continue to work on improvement and development schemes at a time when recession has brought private construction to a virtual halt, and the city has no money to spend. Earlier strategy tied improvements into the development process through zoning specifications that the builder was required to follow. This strategy was meant to have automatic, built-in execution, without cost to the city for special features, and it worked until construction stopped.

• • •

The Little Italy approach incorporates the same intention, through more recession-proof means. The local community, collaborating with the city's staff, is to carry out the specifications that they have arrived at together and that have been detailed by the planning professionals. This is to be done through grants, assessments, self-help, the pursuit of special purpose funds, business loans, even do-it-yourself techniques. These are plausible and possible financing devices.

Because the initial project is modest, it does not present immediate, insurmountable obstacles. There is some opposition to the plan, but the organized groups seem to be carrying it. The Mulberry Street closing and refurbishing is a $50,000 job—not a huge sum by any accounting. And every small-scale demonstration of potential results can be catching; it often leads to more extensive rehabilitation, as has happened in similar Main Street and central business district revivals of numerous small towns. It is a logical, incremental investment.

But New York cannot fumble its larger needs. John Zuccotti, chairman of the City Planning Commission, and Raquel Ramati, head of the Urban Design Group, which is carrying out the Little Italy project, believe that it is larger than it looks. They call it a prototypical scheme, with standards and procedures adaptable to the stabilization and revitalization of other neighborhoods. It could even produce local strengths to build on comprehensively.

What it does promise is recognition and celebration of the virtues of diversity and humanity, of the pleasures of place. That is the basis of the plan's appeal, and hope. And it is the basis of *civiltà*.