

Pressing the Panic Button on City Zoning

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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A set of cryptic, coded marks on a map are currently inflaming passions in New York to an extraordinary degree. The issue is zoning, which may not make the world go round, but it does determine where and how New Yorkers live and work. It even determines who can live and work here, and whether they do so under endurable conditions.

Changing R7 (low-density residential, as in tree-lined side streets of small houses and brownstone rows) or C1 (low-density commercial, as in row buildings of modest flats and stores) to R10 (highest density residential, for massive new luxury apartment construction) sounds like a reasonably harmless numbers game, once you crack the code. It is a game, however, that can condemn or give hope to the poor, banish or encourage the middle class, paralyze or increase construction, enrich or sap the tax base, make business boom or bust, create a viable or sterile environment. Zoning puts special-interest groups in confrontation.

The controversy right now is about the City Planning Commission's proposal to rezone parts of lower Second and Third Avenues for new R10 luxury apartments. But this debate is only the tip of the zoning iceberg. Under the muddy political waters lie three very important, intimately related

issues: the present insolubility of the city's housing needs by any currently available methods, techniques or devices; the political implications of the unsolved housing crisis for the Lindsay administration seeking re-election, and the question of whether the proposed zoning changes will ease the crisis.

Beyond these immediate issues is the awakening realization in the city that the 1961 zoning code requires major adjustments to meet needs that a number of years of use have made evident, revisions that its framers anticipated and desired. The Lindsay administration has come up, for example, with precedent-setting zoning changes of remarkable vision and sophistication for the theatre and Lincoln Center areas.

Rezoning Rationale

The rationale behind the present rezoning proposal is dual. Currently, R10 zoning is limited to avenues, creating north-south "spines" of tall and bulky buildings, a pattern of high-density "mountain ranges" along the avenues and low-density "valleys" on the side streets established deliberately and thoughtfully by the 1961 zoning to keep the city attractive and livable. This is a principle the planners want to preserve and extend. Paradoxically, without the proposed extension there are many R10 sites available right now on the

upper East and West Sides; but the builders do not consider these "ripe" for the luxury housing that is the only kind they can construct profitably.

Non-Solution for Non-Rich

The second and most publicized explanation is that the encouragement of new construction will ease the housing shortage generally, releasing lower-level rentals to the non-rich. Someone is selling, or buying, a bill of goods. No one releases anything at a rational rental in New York. Any appreciable softening of the market in the face of the fantastic extent of need among those who cannot pay the going luxury rate of \$125 a room would saturate the city with high-rent apartments. The result would be insuperable congestion.

For those who would be dispossessed by the new high-rent construction—whether on lower Second and Third Avenues or on the previously rezoned R10 uptown sites—there is no replacement housing at all. Adjacent areas—such as the moderate-income Cooper Square neighborhood, which has been struggling with its own bootstrap renewal for a decade—would be subject to land value increases that would lead to their speculative destruction. The limited scale and high cost of luxury housing on these sites will solve nothing.

The proposed avenue rezon-

ing is frankly a token gesture to the real estate community, which is making its desire for a great deal more rezoning felt politically. The city's planners are adamant about keeping inviolate the low-density side streets with the desirable addresses that the builders covet. Due to the grotesque costs of money and construction, only the highest-density zoning makes private residential building competitive today with the commercial building that is still providing bonanza profits.

Not altogether by coincidence, the timing of the rezoning proposal is a politically exploitable carrot to the realtors, who have been told to come up with a self-policing program to end the scandalous rent spiral in uncontrolled apartments.

The city's builders are complaining bitterly of lack of investment and construction opportunity under the present zoning, with the not-so-subtle suggestion that only changing the zoning will save the Lindsay administration from the accusation of hindering, rather than helping, the production of housing. That, of course, could be political death this year, and someone is pushing the panic button at City Hall. But non-solutions such as this one could prove lethal, too.

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