Where It Goes Nobody Knows
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Architecture

Where It Goes Nobody Knows

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THE latest word on the Lower Manhattan expressway is that it is going to be poisonous. Well, that is no surprise to a lot of us who have considered the whole idea of a Lower Manhattan expressway poisonous for some time. The warning now is that its covered stretches—which represent the result of a long and bitter battle to depress the road rather than rend Manhattan asunder with an elevated Chinese wall—will produce air polluting fumes of more than acceptable noxiousness. One could probably do a dandy dissertation on levels of acceptable noxiousness in overpolluted New York.

The battle of the Lower Manhattan expressway, which has raged for 28 years, was "settled" by the incoming Lindsay administration's "acceptance" of the road on the condition that it be built as a depressed highway, recasting it in the role of urban benefactor instead of urban assassin. (The cases of inner-city destruction by expressway are too numerous and well-known to recount. Almost every one is a demonstrated environmental catastrophe.)

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The in-and-out, over-and-under proposal that has come out of this attempt to defang the monster makes no one very happy. Ducking subways, utilities and the water table, it struggles above and below ground in a series of curious compromises of tortuous complexity, complete with enough entrances, exits and connections to turn Lower Manhattan into a concrete no man's land. Displaced people will now number in the low thousands rather than the high thousands. It is a question of degree; do you kill a city or maim it?

At present, the mess—and all except die-hard road lovers admit it is one—is undergoing a year's special planning study. The administration has given the problem to a highly creative architect, Shadrach Woods, hoping that the application of genius may turn up a miracle of some sort. Anyone who thinks New Yorkers lack faith has no idea of how many miracles are prayed for every day.

Meanwhile, the traffic studies pile high. One thing is quite clear, with or without them; you can go uptown, and downtown some of the time, with luck, but you can rarely go across town. That is a truth of New York life, but it is particularly true of Lower Manhattan. Cars and trucks pour off the bridges and struggle gelatinously to the tunnels and vice versa.

The traffic studies prove that most of Lower Manhattan crosstown traffic is "interstate," which means that 90 per cent Federal funds are available for the expressway's construction. Then they prove that most of the traffic is local after all, and that the expressway is needed primarily just to get to the other side. They prove that traffic will be routed around, rather than through Manhattan, as a result of building the expressway, and they also prove that traffic will go directly to Manhattan destinations because of it. Slice it any way you want.

Only one thing is really proved—that there is a monumental and complex traffic problem for which Nostradamus might reliably predict a future pattern. And one thing is not proved at all—that the expressway, at the expense of city-maiming, is going to solve it.

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There is a Parkinson-type law that once you provide a super-route you do not just speed the already stuck cars and trucks on their way; you acquire a lot of new traffic. How much more non-Manhattan traffic will be attracted that would, or should, use Lower Manhattan as an interstate shortcut is a question that just won't go away. Or why that traffic should be dumped in Brooklyn. What will happen to the capacity of the Lincoln and Holland tunnels is another. How much more traffic can be shunted to still other congested Manhattan streets is one more.

A Port Authority statement made in favor of construction of the expressway some years ago claimed that the tunnels could, at that time, handle all traffic "which *must* travel between New Jersey and Manhattan." (Port Authority italics. Motorist vows on the necessity of their trips would ostensibly be handled by Port Authority toll collectors.) It was explained that nothing would be helped by enlarging the tunnels "and so dumping more traffic on the already overburdened streets of Manhattan."

The Port Authority's reasoning is incontrovertible. It applies equally well to the Lower Manhattan expressway.

What concerns this department most of all is some thing that has been least discussed: the destruction of the fabric of the city along the expressway route. There is a prevalent thought that depressing the road eliminates blight. This is not so, or only relatively so, to the degree that getting rid of a city-dividing superstructure is an improvement. But the social and physical fabric of the city along the proposed route has been deteriorating for the past 28 years. This is the blight that comes from being fingered for an expressway route, with the uncertain future of the area its only certainty.

Properties are not kept up; improvements are not made. Residential and business tenants share the insecurity that sends everything downhill. Twenty eight years of this can do a lot of damage. Along the Lower Manhattan expressway route there once was a healthy community an its remains are still there—blighted by the expressway before it ever got built.

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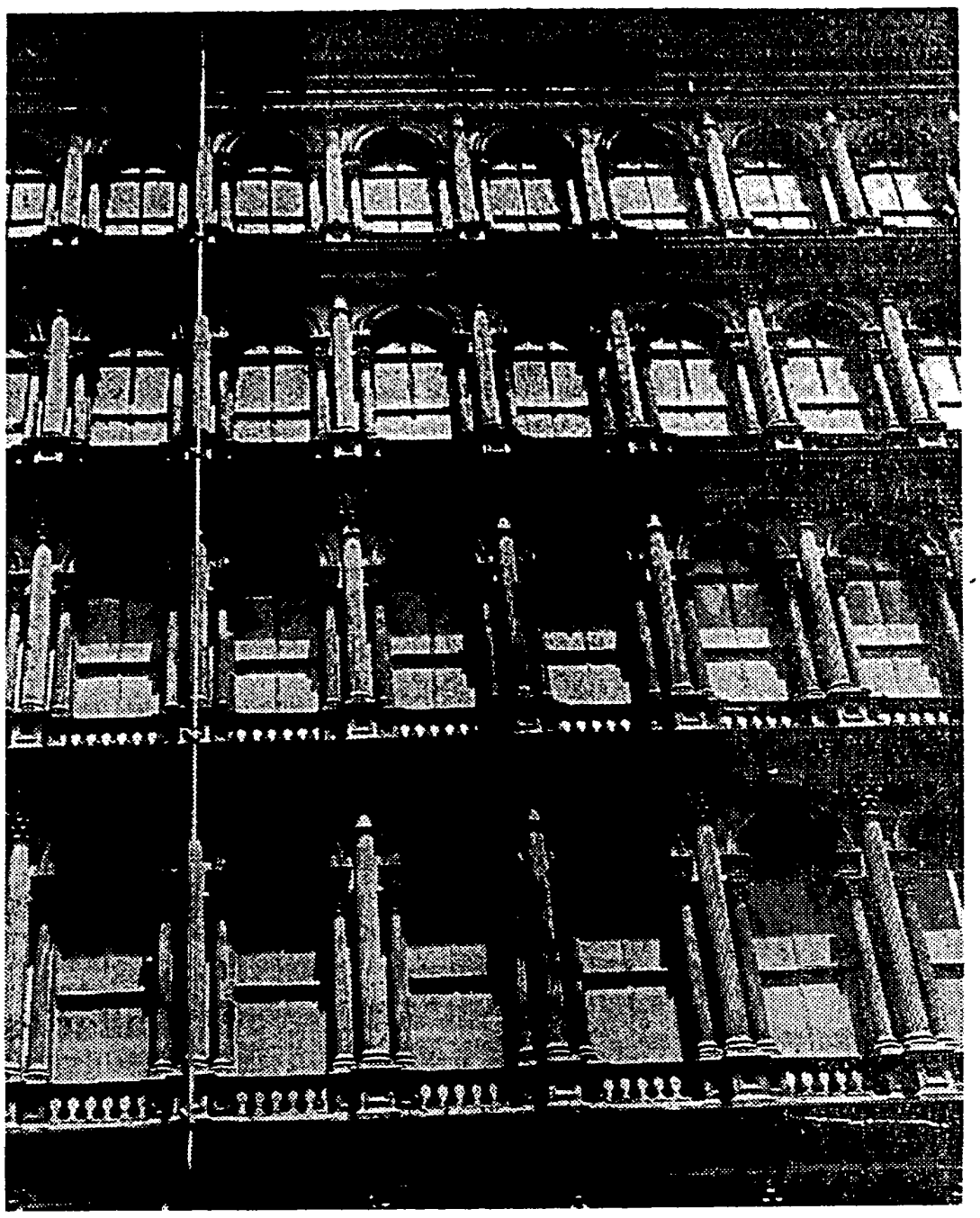
The route is fixed where it will do the most possible historical and architectural damage. A line on a map does not begin to indicate the amount of destruction that will take place. To get the cars on and off that "line," supporting and servicing construction must extend far beyond it. Not only will the entire north side of Broome Street go for the expressway's cross island path but sections of many streets beyond.



Freidman-Abeles

Cast-iron facade of Haughwout Store doomed by lower Manhattan expressway
A route that will do the most possible historical and architectural damage

The area is known to historians as the Cast-Iron District, a mid-to-late-19th-century structural and architectural development of particular importance to American building. Part will be destroyed and the rest irreparably damaged. The Haughwout Store on the northeast corner of Broome Street and Broadway, noted in many histories of architecture, is doomed. Greene Street, a uniquely intact enclave of iron architecture, will be hopelessly mutilated. One of the most respected critics and historians, Nikolaus Pevsner, informed a group of Americans visiting England that "there is a veritable museum of cast iron architecture in downtown New York, a greater concentration than anywhere else in the world."

"Are you aware of this?" he asked. "Do you recognize its unique quality? Are you letting the public know about it?"

The answers to Dr. Pevsner's qestions are no, no and no. The Landmarks Commission has designated the Haughwout Store and held other hearings. The highway people did go so far, a few years ago, as to commission a survey of the buildings. The city knows that some of them contain flammable materials of industries of less than good housekeeping habits, which has led to some particularly tragic fires. Hell's Hundred Acres is the catchy popular name given to the district as a result, ignoring its history, culture, and some important economics.

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For still another city survey came up with the information that this near miraculous 19th-century survival forms a valuable economic neighborhood. Small businesses of above average stability occupy irreplaceable low-rent loft space behind those handsome, rhythmic, cast-iron colonnades of shabby Victorian elegance. These necessay businesses, of the kind that the city has been losing, also give essential, hard-to-find employment to marginally skilled minority workers.

So—stack up economics, environment, sociology, art, history and people against that line across the map. If there is no guarantee, there must at least be a reasonable certainty that some problems are really going to be solved by the huge expenditure of funds and urban assets. We wouldn't bet our money on it, and what is being gambled with is the city itself.