

# Bonanza for the Blockbusters

While New York breathes, New York builds. After a long period of overbuilding, and then of no building, more than 30 major commercial and residential projects are under way in the city, while the conversion of smaller, older buildings has reached epidemic proportions. Large-scale construction includes three corporate world headquarters, for A.T.&T., I.B.M. and Philip Morris, and a number of new hotels and office buildings. The American Stock Exchange, after flirting with other locations, plans a new home downtown. The Manhattan skyline is changing again.

But one thing that never changes is the developers' pursuit of ways to circumvent the city's protective zoning. Sometimes the city's own rules, which offer bonuses of added space in exchange for public amenities, are used against it. At the same time, there is a rush for variances from the Board of Standards and Appeals. As practiced by astute real estate lawyers and batteries of experts, zoning-busting has become a high art. And the discretionary powers of the city's zoners have been exploited by the builders.

Some of the special zoning amendments adopted in recent years allow so much leeway and have so many destructive side effects that they should be wiped off the books. The Special Park Improvement District, for example, is doing much more damage than good. Its wrongheaded encouragement of bigger buildings along Fifth Avenue, in exchange for their holding to a uniform street line and making some cash contributions for the upkeep of Central Park, has begun to erode the

avenue's scale and style. The cash donation brings a bonanza for the builder, since it is set far below the added development value of the land.

In midtown commercial zones, the permitted density is the same for smaller side streets as for avenues — much too high. And yet more huge buildings are about to invade those side streets now that avenue frontage is scarce. The loss of street sun and light in exchange for such features as pedestrian passages and “gallerias” becomes a questionable trade-off when, with few exceptions, a builder manages to get more than he gives. The quality of these “givebacks” often depends on the political strength of the city's planners.

The situation is still worse in the residentially zoned areas north of 60th Street, already breached by the oversized new apartment tower on the Dodge House site, at Fifth Avenue and 61st Street, which makes only hypocritical gestures to neighborhood scale. All of these gracious blocks, with handsome, historic town houses, are zoned for lower densities than the avenues, a restriction meant to protect them from exactly the kind of overbuilding that developers have been proposing.

Zoning exists for a reason — to preserve the quality of the city as a place to live and work. The assault on zoning accelerates as land values rise in locations made desirable by the very characteristics that the new blockbusters would destroy. New York City needs fewer clever compromises at its Planning Commission, and a much stiffer spine.