

# New York City's Growing Architectural Poverty

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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They are terse notices—"Three Town Houses Bought by High-Rise Builder," "Midtown Expansion Forcing Music Street to Sing Swan Song," "Real Estate Deal in Village." On the surface, a factual, newsprint chronicle of urban change; underneath, the death of a city by "development."

There was a time when, Can-dide-like, New Yorkers bought the arguments of progress that this was all for the best in the best of all possible worlds. As their favorite neighborhoods were pulled out from under their feet to be replaced by the profitable sterility of the standard real estate model, wisdom came, slowly and painfully. It was the grass-roots, or rather cement-roots wisdom of bitter experience; but it paralleled the more cerebral lessons being taught in planning schools and environmental studies and redundant urban symposia: without variety of function and humanity of scale, the city becomes monstrous and insupportable.

Take "Three Town Houses Bought by High-Rise Builder." The three houses are in the center of the 79th to 80th Street block on Fifth Avenue, flanked by apartment buildings at either corner. The 79th Street tower is a brand-new skyscraper that makes a pathetic gesture toward the elegance of its older neighbors with dark brown

brick and elementary stone trim. The three doomed town houses are of richly detailed masonry in variations of turn-of-the-century French taste: Gothic, classical and Beaux Arts. The story will end, perfectly predictably, when another new apartment house replaces them.

### Poor House for the Rich

It started when the 79th Street skyscraper replaced a landmark building, the Brokaw mansion. The little Gothic town house that still stands next to it like some piece of bungled surgery had been built to match the mansion. The Brokaw house went down over the howls of preservationists who were unable to find a way to make that magnificent white elephant useful in today's cut-rate, computer society after the institutional owners had exchanged it for a pocketful of cash. The new apartment house quickly became known as New York's most expensive cooperative. Next to the Gilded Age mansions, it represents a kind of architectural poverty for the affluent.

In addition, it represents irreversible environmental damage. A brutal breaking of the streetscape, both historically and esthetically, is the developer's most notable achievement. That block was part of one of the city's finest, continuous landmark group of mansions, an irreplaceable row that stretched

from the Duke House at 78th Street to the Stuyvesant House at 79th Street, crossing to the Brokaw House and ending at the 80th Street corner. Until the 79th Street tower was built, this magnificent urban complex was tied together by a unified street line and the facing park and an incredible period richness of material and detail. All that beauty has been violated. Nor is there any guarantee that some of the succulent real estate of the remaining 78th Street block is not vulnerable, in spite of current institutional uses.

A second environmental tragedy illustrated here is the destructive force of the new zoning when it is applied literally and without adjustment to specific urban conditions. A feature of the 79th Street apartment house is a wraparound corner plaza. Open plazas opposite the open space of Central Park are an absurdity. But this awkward, meaningless, windswept setback from the street gives the builder a bonus of extra rentable floors in a taller tower. Builders, notoriously, are not urbanists. This trend can destroy the little that New York has of genuine urban elegance or greatness, its few handsome avenues and sophisticated plazas.

Still another world is being lost on 48th Street, where "Midtown Expansion Forces Music Street to Sing Swan Song." In New York, neighbor-

hoods fall like dominoes. Everyone knows about the small electrical supply stores uprooted by the World Trade Center; the thrift and antique shops chased by the apartment builders from Third Avenue; the small business, bars and coffee dealers uprooted from the lower Manhattan waterfront by office construction; the artists' lofts eliminated in the Village for more luxury apartments.

### Divine Right of Development

What follows demolition is preordained by the divine right of development. There will be the same new buildings out of the same old mold, sleekly commercial or shoddily residential; and in the ground floor store space of all, as if by some holy decree, there will be banks.

The 48th Street development, under the aegis of Rockefeller Center, repudiates the superior planning principles that marked the original undertaking and added a superb urban heart to midtown. Gone are its coordinated construction and open spaces and the functional, multi-level circulation. The preoccupation now is just to make the facades blend. Somehow, Rockefeller Center fell over Sixth Avenue on the way to 48th Street. New York, anyone? Come and get it before it is too late.

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