

## Living the Loft Life

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In Manhattan, living in a loft can be a pleasure and a smart investment. Conversions of these big manufacturing spaces into luxurious apartments are featured in fashionable magazines and loft cooperatives are considered a hedge against inflation. These conversions have become an important part of the city's housing market.

But loft living can also be risky, illegal, expensive — and controversial. As the conversions have outstripped the city's control, violations of safety codes and complaints of tenants being abused have multiplied. Some commercial tenants say they are being evicted prematurely. Rents have risen rapidly as landlords realize that lofts can make money — especially given the tax incentives that encourage conversion. Some long-time residents, meanwhile, with no clear definition of who owns what in illegal loft apartments, have been priced out of their homes and forced to leave behind walls, floors and plumbing that they installed. City action is plainly overdue.

Now the City Planning Commission has come to grips with the issues in a proposal that could reconcile the interests of housing and manufacturing, tenants and landlords, and the city as a whole.

The commission proposes, soundly, that manufacturing districts be established to protect the space requirements of Manhattan-based industries. Those industries — including garments, printing, meat — are still housed in many lofts in lower Manhattan. Their equipment would be difficult and costly to move, and their traditional concentration and proximity to users is worth preserving. So residential conversions would be illegal in these areas, and tax incentives for conversion would be withdrawn.

Some mixed-use districts are proposed; lofts there could be legally converted, and existing apartments could be legalized by bringing them up to code. A healthy part of the plan is that it would enlarge the supply of housing by about 10,000 apartments.

The commission's plan will have to be astutely managed to succeed. It requires many sorts of approval: community boards, the Board of Estimate, state and local legislation. And as the planners examine which old areas of the city should be left to factories and which not, they will need to be careful that new regulations do not freeze any area into some spurious industrial immortality. New York's people and buildings just aren't that predictable.

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