

Architecture

# How to Keep The Status Quo

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE New York talent for turning farce into tragedy is now being demonstrated in the Lincoln Square area around Lincoln Center.

The farce is the absurd misunderstanding with which the City Planning Commission's efforts to create a Lincoln Square special zoning district have been met, from city officials to the public.

The tragedy is the willful way that misunderstanding is being used by private interests to promote their own objectives, which, it can be said with reasonable accuracy, are not always in the public interest.

What is at stake through this comprehension gap is an enlightened, flexible, handsome and practical scheme that would shape the growth, functions, character and appearance of the Lincoln Square area through sensitive use of the city's zoning controls. The alternative is the chaos of conventional development and conventional disaster.

Once again, in the over-familiar New York pattern of free-wheeling speculation, the profits to private builders will be beatific and the cost to the public horrendous. Once again, New Yorkers will wail "Why?" after the damage is done.

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The ultimate cost of defeat of the Lincoln Square proposal will be the city's right to plan, to control its own destiny, to project public objectives, and to use its laws constructively to achieve them. The decision will be made by the Board of Estimate on April 24.

This is the issue, pure and simple. But nothing is simple beyond that. The news is full of appalling statements by people who should know better; the city is already embroiled in a lawsuit against one of its own agencies that has effectively pre-sabotaged the special zoning proposal; and a developer in the area

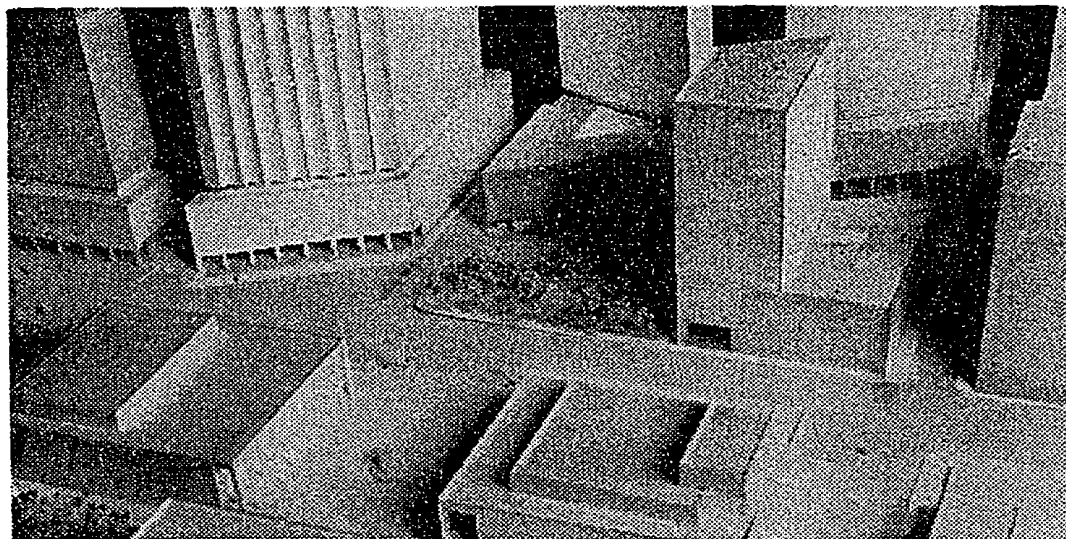
is spearheading an effort not only to defeat the proposal but to declare all planning for the city legally null and void. The real estate profession will undoubtedly raise a monument to him. It would be appropriate in Lincoln Square.

The Lincoln Square district as designated for the purpose of the special zoning, is a 15-block area bounded by 60th and 68th Streets, Amsterdam Avenue and Central Park West. After the construction of Lincoln Center, the area was faced with the effects of rising land values, and sudden growth. Large-scale building and commercial encroachment surged in from the central business district just to the south, schools and a university were added, already atrocious circulation worsened, and the neighborhood was faced with the violent dislocations of changing scale and function.

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A local community organization was formed — the Lincoln Square Community Council — which entered into an agreement with the city to evolve a neighborhood plan, sharing the costs of a study that covered a considerably larger area. The Council is a broadly based group of local institutions and individuals, including the Ethical Culture School, McBurney School, YMCA and Lincoln Center.

As a result of the study, the city developed the concept of a special zoning district, similar in its objectives to the special zoning already instituted for the theater district. Special zoning districts are meant to meet the specific and differing needs of particular neighborhoods, protecting the assets that conventional construction wipes out. The generalized zoning law cannot do this. It simply imposes an identical mold on all buildings and all neighborhoods, regardless of character or purpose. What happens routinely is that a specialized neighbor-



Lincoln Square zoning plan with Broadway arcade opposite Lincoln Center  
At stake, the city's right to control its destiny

hood is gouged, flattened and standardized by new construction. There is no misconception about this; New Yorkers understand thoroughly, through experience, how the process works, or doesn't.

What most New Yorkers do not understand is what the special zoning district does. First, it recognizes the particular nature of certain neighborhoods. If the loss of its features would be serious for the city — as of the theaters in the theater district — the special district keeps or provides them through incentives to builders under the zoning law. At the same time, those features are accommodated realistically to the inexorable development trends on the way.

In the case of Lincoln Square, the special zoning district is a way of guiding the growth of such an area in which development forces are strong rather than letting it proceed in the customary anarchic fashion for the usual sterilities and malfunctions. A schematic plan is worked out for optimum development in terms of the area's evolving uses within the framework of adjacent neighborhoods and of the larger city. This is master planning at its most progressive.

After the establishment of objectives, a more specific plan is drawn up, dealing with land use, densities, street and building patterns and something new called amenity design — the provision of those features that the conventional building process does not include that

make New York livable and pleasurable.

This is not "esthetic" zoning — the most common misconception. You cannot execute a plan without giving it a form. The form of the Lincoln Square scheme is important and intrinsic, not some kind of frosting on a cake. It would consist of a covered arcade along Broadway opposite Lincoln Center with building facades not higher than the Center's to complement it and make Broadway a strong and handsome urban axis. Public-walkways would lead to gallerias, sitting areas, covered plazas and open courts with restaurants and shops. There would be improved pedestrian patterns and services and controlled densities.

In a laudable first for New York, the city's planners are equally concerned with standards of form and function. One way to divide the sheep from the experts in this matter is through their statements on the subject. Beware of anyone who considers appearance and use separate goals; it is a giveaway of incompetence.

The investor must be compensated for following the blueprint. This is done by offering "incentives," or a precisely specified amount of extra floor space as a "bonus" for constructing equally precisely defined amenities and features. Each building is a part of a total concept.

In Lincoln Square, builders are being asked to conform to the city's plan. It is both ludicrous and mischievous to say that this means that the City Planning Com-

mission is "designing buildings for private developers," with the peculiar off-color connotations the statement contains. This cockeyed canard is getting some surprising currency, with excellent publicity from Mario Procaccino, who is a master of the absurd, and from former Building Commissioner Charles Moerdler, now representing the builder in conflict with the city, who must know better. Whether it is a willful or innocent misstatement, it is an inconceivable distortion of the planning function.

What the Lincoln Center proposal offers is some rational control of intensive development so that private investors may build at a profit within a more desirable public pattern at the city's discretion.

"Control" is a dirty word. So is "discretion." One suggests abuses by bullies and the other suggests abuses by knaves. But the zoning law is control; it is a police power for the protection of the public health, welfare and safety. The nature of planning is discretionary; the nature of discretion is judgment. You can't operate without it in a city of varied character and needs.

The alternative is the universal application of uniform zoning, as we have it now, to be worn like a standard-size shoe, whether it fits or not. Cut off the toes, if necessary, but do not risk discretion. Or excellence. Or judgment. In New York we have all kinds of arguments in favor of keeping things as bad as they are.