

# Self-Destructing City

In city development, nothing fails like success. There is no question now about the successful regeneration of Lower Manhattan. The new downtown construction is strong on civic responsibility and superior urban design. With last week's action by the Board of Estimate furthering creation of two complete new communities, Battery Park City and Manhattan Landing, Lower Manhattan is about to become not only the world's most dramatic urban experience, but a place to live as well as work.

A place to live implies more than a profitable physical plan. It means satisfactions beyond physical needs. In Lower Manhattan, there was much to supply the senses. There were cobbled slips and riverfront streets with rows of red brick Georgian and Greek Revival buildings—a cultural heritage of intimate human scale. A sense of the sea and the city's history intensified the drama of the skyscraper present and of the spirit past.

But the more promising the future becomes, the more difficult it is to protect the past. New building drives out old. Art and history become uneconomic. The city self-destructs. And not all the pains of the planners can restore the qualities and experiences that are lost.

Token preservation is being pursued with skill and dedication in the excellent South Street Seaport project. But it is almost certain that those downtown streets that still enrich through contrast, that keep the nineteenth century as a superb and necessary foil for the twentieth, are doomed. For example, the Fraunces Tavern block is—in the real estate phrase—now ripe for redevelopment and it is the block as a whole rather than the reconstructed tavern that has irreplaceable urban value.

It is going to take the same kind of determination and drive that has carried Lower Manhattan from decay to renaissance to devise ways to retain what is left of the area's history and heritage. The answer lies not in investment formulas. It is in the conscience of New Yorkers, and in the power of the downtown community.