

## Architecture

# Fun City, No; Slob City, Yes

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ONE of the more astute U.S.-watchers, London's Economist, remarks that Americans have discovered that air comes two ways—clean and dirty. Pollution has finally been made a priority concern at the national level.

It would be proper to note that cities also come two ways—clean and dirty. Mostly dirty, and appallingly, horrifyingly so in New York. Some New Yorkers are not only afraid to breathe; they are afraid to look, or walk. This is not the fear of the effete snob or the merely fastidious. There is more than one way to pollute an environment.

But there is only one word for it in New York—filth. Contrary to popular belief, this sordid frosting is not confined to the slums or those notorious neglected middle-class communities in Queens. It is apolitical and nondiscriminatory. Try the economically privileged, socially desirable areas of midtown Manhattan, the Upper East Side or charming Greenwich Village. The enveloping effluence sweeps over all neighborhoods, good and bad. Filth is the urban oil slick.

In a curious way, it contributes to a kind of urban ecology. It is a serious factor in the deterioration of the environment through a domino-linkage of human, hygienic, functional, psychological and aesthetic factors.

The dirty city, like dirty air, has become a subject for environment-watchers. They also come two ways now—rural and urban. The rural conservationist concerns himself with the polluted river and the silent spring. The urban environmentalist has been fighting the processes of destruction and alienation: bulldozer renewal, the fractured neighborhood, the relentless attack on the urban fabric by the expediency of economics and the greed of man.

There are a few million of these environmentalists in

New York now, give or take degree or kind of concern, from community planning groups to observers of the littered avenues. They range from urbanologists steeped in graduate studies to ordinary people—the kind who write letters to the papers protesting the state of the streets. The letters are not always about things fit to print.

An increasing number are going quietly about the business of documenting the sordid evidence of the urban condition. At the most awful end of the spectrum, Roger Starr and others have collected pictures of the no-man's land of abandoned, derelict housing, a subject of tragic complexity that embodies many of the country's ills and mocks simplistic analysis or prescription. But even the minutiae of environmental deterioration are finding their Boswells, often in areas considered immune to decay.

A gentleman named William Ayers has been documenting the downside into littered honkytonk of the glamorous East 50's and 60's around Lexington Avenue, where quick-eatery garbage now vies with high style. (Times Square, of legendary squalidness, is cleaner than 59th Street opposite Bloomingdale's, which may have the highest pedestrian-garbage flow in the city.)

Another observer, Paul Gardiner, has been photographing the city's street furniture—the elegant new anti-litter signs in chic black and white graphics, light standards, mail and fire boxes—defaced by campaign posters slapped on at election time. These posters use a sticking system called pressure sensitive, which makes anything virtually unremovable. Nor does removing them seem to be part of crusading political activism.

There are many games in urban ecology, and any number can play. One is called Sunday in the Park. On Monday it looks like a hurricane casualty. Getting the city's



New York street scene, 1970  
Are we getting the city we deserve?

deterioration down in black and white or full living color seems to be replacing a lot of "human interest" photography at the amateur level. I expect, daily, to receive a set of pictures of the atrocious maintenance of New York buildings, even in the newest, high-cost construction.

There is no lack of material. Take the condition of food concessions in the dirt-encrusted subways, which the city has officially labeled its most wretched environment. Vacant lots that act as a vacuum for debris. Unswept sidewalks. Uncurbed dogs. Uncollected garbage. Uncleaned buildings. And al-

ways, everywhere, litter, the detritus of life. Filth has become the urban life-style.

Why? For the same reasons that we have an urban crisis. Population explosion, migration and dislocation and mismatching of people, abilities and jobs, breakdown of the antiquated urban plant, insufficient funds for upkeep, facilities or services, inadequate personnel, all of the forces of growth, change and decay including loss of place, pride and identity, drugs and crime—the whole process speeded and aggravated by social, technological and environmental revolution.

Causes become indistinguishable from effects. You can put it all through a com-

puter for answers, but that won't slow down the filth fallout, which accompanies every upheaval from central business district "progress" to ghetto riots. Mayor Lindsay has been able to cool it, but not clean it.

There are futile numbers games with sanitation workers and collections and the frustration of unenforceable laws. In the losing war with resources, abuses and a bureaucracy dedicated to the proposition that nothing need work if enough time-consuming obstacles can be put in the way, conditions will continue to get worse. One small, absurd example: litter baskets are taken off streets as fire hazards in marginal neighborhoods, which leaves the streets for litter. Block-improvement associations beg to get them back.

But for every block association that cares, there are countless people who don't. Nor can the mess be passed off as the social dislocations of the disadvantaged. The crux of the matter is a breakdown of public decency among the advantaged. Is there a legal or moral obligation for property owners or renters to clean in front of their buildings? Interest never reaches the curb, and some big-name business are guiltiest of all.

Our Lexington Avenue correspondent showed his appalling pictures to a member of the Dry Dock public relations staff. "He was surprised," says Mr. Ayers, "that some of the worst offenses were diagonally across the street from the bank whose whole advertising approach is to promote the elegance and superiority of 'Dry Dock country.'" He was surprised, but was not interested.

True, manners and morals are changing. I, for one, am philosophical about being beaten by men in the daily pursuit of cabs, if that is the new morality, but I do object to slipping on a banana peel, or worse. Slob City. From street blight to spiritual blight. From apathy to vandalism. Are we getting the city we deserve?