

Curtain Going Up

There are two ways for a city to die. It can fail to provide shelter and the dignity of a livelihood, and it can lose the creative force that makes it central to men's existence. Without the first, no city can survive. Without the second, no city is great.

Essential to a city's greatness are its arts. Three years ago New York was on the way to losing one of its chief creative assets—the theater—as midtown land values rose and development pressed westward. Economics and zoning spelled doom for the old houses, with no hope of replacement. Today, about \$20 million of new theater construction is nearing completion, and the first of four new houses, The American Place Theater, is open and operating.

The city saw the disaster coming and did something about it. By devising a special theater zoning district, it acknowledged that there are other urban values as important as real estate values, and that familiar tools, such as zoning, can be used to direct development to more desirable ends. Called incentive zoning, this pioneering, goal-oriented planning legislation now gives developers profitable space bonuses for including theaters in their new buildings in the theater district. It also compensates for the increased density that results by requiring better circulation, services and amenities. New York has thus sparked a renaissance of theater building and provided an almost miraculous and desperately needed subsidy for the performing arts.

The inescapable truth about the theater today is that it needs subsidy to survive. Even without the threat of rising real estate—which also makes the New York theater the most costly in the world to run—all serious theater is a deficit operation. What the new zoning does is to supply the basic subsidy—construction.

If the theater is to remain a vital creative force in New York, it must have new kinds of houses; nostalgia and past glamour are not enough. New environments are required for new kinds of plays, large houses for opera and dance are still in short supply, and there is no suitable place for a national theater, if it ever comes to pass.

The special zoning can help make these things possible where little chance existed before. The city's action is not only responsible planning of the highest order, it also recognizes the nature and needs of one of our primary arts. It is not time to write off New York yet.