

Architecture

Strictly From Hunger

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT is a well-worn New York cliché that there is no place to go but up. It follows inevitably that after you've built up on all the avenues, there is no place to go but the side streets. Now the peculiarity of New York is that while the avenues are its show, the side streets are its soul.

The boutiques, the specialty shops, the international haute couture and haute cuisine, the offbeat offices and stores, the treasures and services, entertainment and variety that New York spreads out at its accustomed residents' and visitors' feet, are concentrated in the East 50's and 60's, on Manhattan's small, chic side streets.

Hamburg Heaven rubs elbows with La Grenouille and Pop posters coexist with crown jewels in a democracy of sophistication. All of this, with almost uncountable "good little" restaurants, inhabits the converted crannies of four and five-story Georgian brick town houses, small stone ex-chateaux and remodeled brownstones, on streets of domestic scale with stretches of sky that have the touch of sunlight even on winter days.

Big banking and big business may make New York possible, but what makes New York, New York, are the intimate, multi-faceted urban functions and the conspicuous consumption of elegance on those small side streets.

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But whatever else this part of town may be, and whatever it may symbolize to New Yorkers and the world of the city's character and style, it is all prime office space. The East 50's and 60's are also the heart of commercial Manhattan.

The demand for business quarters in this area appears to be insatiable. The best corporate addresses, of course, are the avenues, and they have been virtually rebuilt since the war, from First to Broadway. When all the motley old has been replaced by the homogenized new on the avenues, there is, as we said, no place to go but the side streets. And that, now, is exactly where the real estate developers are going.

They are going there, but only strictly from hunger. An

avenue or corner property is worth more, and can be sold or rented for more than an "inside piece," as it is called in the trade. An inside piece has problems. The space is too confined for a building of conventionally profitable size and layout, and so a major holding must be acquired reaching through the block to both sides—not just a single street facade but back-to-back properties on two streets. There is what the trade calls the "danger and difficulty" of this kind of assembly: the risk of holdups and holdouts with multiple small plots.

But never underestimate the real estate business. It is in there breasting the dangers, assembling.

Right now, the Uris Buildings Corporation, experts at an art of assemblage that artists never dreamed of, is working on the north side of 52d Street and the south side of 53d Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues for a block-through office building site.

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To date, 17,000 square feet have been assembled. About 5,000 or 6,000 more are needed. Of that 17,000 square feet, there are presently 15,000 square feet of stores. A spokesman for Uris says, with regret ("It's a pity to see something like that disappear."), that there is no chance of creating that kind of store space in the new building.

Most of the ground floor space will probably be lost to—guess what—as large a plaza as possible surrounding a tower, because the open-space bonus of extra tower height for a plaza given to a builder by the zoning law makes this the most profitable way to build. Since a side street site accommodates a smaller building than a commercial developer considers desirable, he is obviously going to use the zoning law bonus to the maximum.

Adjacent to the Uris operation, a broker is putting together a parcel consisting of the north side of 53d Street and the south side of 54th Street, also from Fifth to Madison Avenues. One assumes that any new structure



Lawrence Fried
No place for the developer to go except the side streets — here East 54th
A sort of glassy death creeping around corners, sped by land values

would wrap itself around Paley Park on 53d.

These two contiguous projects would replace four prime East Side streets with a four-block desert of two more office buildings of completely predictable stamp.

Probably the last thing in the world that New York needs on its small side streets is plazas. An occasional vest pocket park, like Mr. Paley's golden gesture of sheer delight, cannot be faulted; it is a beautiful change of pace, not a disruption of the neighborhood. In urban and human, if not real estate terms, the return on the money is sensational.

New York's side streets are a human scale, pedestrian environment. Their measure is that of the foot and the eye. Their feature is their fascinating continuity. One is drawn along by the unflagging interest of their uninterrupted, highly personal pleasures and uses in an endlessly varied architectural context. To destroy this, you could bomb the streets, or build office tower plazas. The effect would be just about the same.

Wherever the lively side streets exist, there is vitality in a city. This is where the action is. Farther uptown, for example, where the developers' glazed brick, look-alike apartments stop on Second Avenue in the 80's, the fun begins. Here are the shops and restaurants and bars that make a kind of weekend Tivoli in the warm weather for in-towners, drawing neighborhood residents like a magnet. Here is life.

The buildings here are the old five-story tenement type that developers demolished so

easily along Third and Second Avenues for the characterless conformity of the new apartments. The rents are low; that makes life in that part of town a little younger and livelier.

Turn into the side streets in the East 70's and 80's and you will find some of those fine, rummager antique shops and bookstores and specialty enterprises that have been forced out of Third Avenue by the high rents of the bland glass boutiques and expensive dry cleaners in the new brick boxes. Not all have migrated; these are only survivors. The squeeze is on, the attrition continues, and after the side streets there is no place to go.

Midtown, however, is the heart of the matter, in every way. Unquestionably, these side streets are one of New York's great urban assets. They cannot disappear. New Yorkers simply assume that it can't happen here. These enterprises are prosperous and popular. But their prosperity is only a relative thing when pressured by spiraling land values.

A sort of glassy death is already creeping along Madison Avenue and around the corners, sped by those values; there is a foretaste of the future even in Union Carbide's handsome, moribund plaza and in the blank stare of banks that occupy increasingly boring amounts of ground floor space, killing the

streets. Architectural quality or distinguished building has nothing to do with this. It is a matter of urban function and character, and that is what a city is largely about, whatever the transactions in its board rooms.

The time may have come when certain functions that give New York its services and style may need to be protected, either by zoning amendment or some kind of administrative or planning action. The real estate community does not believe that the city should stop building new quarters for business and their contention is beyond argument. The new construction can be designed and located, however, in a more constructive context than the present planless pattern of destruction.

Zoning bonuses are allowed for arcades, for example, a far better answer to pedestrian shopping streets than plazas, as long as they shelter something more than banks. The City Planning Commission is working with the use of the bonus formula for amenities other than open space. High on the list would be those enterprises and neighborhoods that provide so much of New York's vitality, useful delight and characteristic sophistication.

At any rate, the handwriting is on the wall, or the street. One need not be clairvoyant to spot a trend or an alarmist to see the future.