

...Eroding the Life of the City

The realities of real estate and the qualities that make a city worth living in are on a collision course in New York. The latest casualties are small shopkeepers, services and industries.

In the past, demolition sent the independent businessman searching desperately for rents that he could pay, if it did not put him out of business completely. But now demolition is no longer necessary. The shoemaker, the antiques dealer, the local bakery, the specialty food shop simply disappear overnight. Small industries "fold or flee." The big chains appear like sudden, sinister magic. For the small businessman, when his lease is up, the jig is up, too.

It is all done with rent raises. Quoting rising costs, taxes and land values, many commercial landlords have been demanding huge increases, some of them undoubted gouging. In Yorkville, new developments come, boosting adjacent commercial values, and the small shops that have offered an irreplaceable richness of foods, goods, services and shopping styles go. Greenwich Village, with an identity that rests on a variety of individual enterprises, is being subjected to the same profitable, and fatal, homogenization.

The city is callous, and the treatment of its small businesses and industries has become a noticeable cruelty. The city is rich, but the poverty of its look-alike streets and neighborhoods becomes increasingly oppressive. Beyond the shop front, or the loft space, is the larger matter of the relationship of the city's social and economic stability to its urban quality—and even to its life. Commercial rent control could carry the danger of stopping commercial construction; still, the lethal side effects of doing nothing at all cannot continue to be ignored. The price is destructively high.

Rent abuses are obscuring the real issues and hard decisions that New York must make. What kind of loft industry can, and should, Manhattan support? Where, and how, can such businesses be accommodated in a proper economic development pattern and how can they be helped? How can the attrition of neighborhood services, resources and pleasures be stopped? Must the city succumb to the speculator and yield all human values to the immutable laws of economics?

It is already too late for too many. Action in the form of controls, selective zoning, use specifications for commercial space, or a combination of devices, must be taken now. The alternative, already visible, is a kind of galloping uricide.