

The Brownstone

New York has been known for its incubator industries—the small businesses that generate ideas, enterprises and success—and it also has had its incubator housing. By custom this has been the brownstone, the recycled New York row house that has become the affordable shelter of the young, the ambitious and the talented on their way up; the newly married and the small family; the old and the indigent. It has been housing for the artist, the writer, the scholar and the creative community that contributes to the singular vitality of the city's culture.

Unfortunately, the brownstones' operational economics has been marginal. Their numbers are constantly diminished. When the marginal operation breaks down in marginal neighborhoods, the result is wholesale abandonment. In luxury neighborhoods, ironically, brownstones become high-rent rarities sought after for their stately rooms and vanishing architectural amenities. They seldom stand against the large-scale developer. Where brownstone revivals take place, the price for neighborhood improvement is high: those streets tend to turn into upper-middle-class enclaves displacing the less privileged residents whom they have so humanely served.

Rising operating costs and the high price of heating fuel doom most of these buildings that have traditionally given stability to a cross-section of the city's population. The problem is the same as that endangering much existing, older, precariously functioning housing stock, for which City Hall is producing little but vague promises of even vaguer remedies.

The loss of the brownstone goes beyond housing hardship. As part of New York's history and humanity, its disappearance hastens the homogenization and impoverishment of the city's streets and social fabric. More than sentiment is involved; the brownstone is a New York way of life.