

## MUST URBAN RENEWAL BE URBAN DEVASTATION?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

**I**F urban renewal is not to turn into urban devastation, which it shows signs of doing, the officials of New York would be well advised to take a course in the history of the city's architecture.

The recent ill-considered action of Manhattan Borough President Edward R. Dudley, who presented a proposal for a private housing and commercial project in one of the older sections of the city to the Board of Estimate, runs counter to the proper procedures recommended by the Mayor and set up by the City Planning Commission and the Housing and Redevelopment Board and spotlights an increasingly serious problem in New York's redevelopment program.

**How Suitable?**

The area so blithely designated by Mr. Dudley and MiCove (the middle-income cooperative group sponsoring the project) is bounded by Broome and Houston Streets, Broadway and West Broadway. It was characterized by Mr. Dudley as an eminently suitable site, involving virtually no problems because it consists of nothing but "rundown, bad buildings."

Now, what are rundown, bad buildings to the naked eye, may be something else to the edu-

cated eye. In this case, a considerable part of the area is a rich, significant pocket of New York's architectural past. These are not gracious streets of proper Colonial homes of the kind unanimously endorsed by antiquarian societies because we just don't have such streets. The most important landmarks in New York are, and have been, business buildings. Our most important heritage is in the field of commercial architecture, and until this fact is more generally recognized there will be little but muddle-headed thinking about our preservation problems. The section around Greene, Mercer, Prince and Spring Streets consists of many intact rows of five-story cast-iron-fronted structures of the Eighteen Sixties and Seventies, their colonnaded and pilastered "Metallic Renaissance" facades now mute and shabby testimony to New York's earlier technological and aesthetic achievements. (The area and the buildings have been featured in the *English Architectural Review*.)

**Important Architecture**

These rhythmically patterned, sharply detailed iron fronts, with huge areas of glass made possible by their revolutionary, factory-made metal walls (even more glass, frequently, than our modern glass-walled offices) are the forerunners of prefabrication, of curtain wall construction and of that later American architectural triumph—the skyscraper. They possess the further, and almost extinct, virtue of existing still as uninterrupted, homogenous street architecture of a specific period—strongly evocative of a particular style of New York art and life.

To see how handsome these buildings once were, we need to go only as far as Worth and Thomas Streets, between Church and Broadway, where private owners have painted and preserved a row of similar iron fronts designed by Griffith Thomas in 1869. A visiting Italian architect, taken to Worth Street to see an example of New York's unique commercial heritage, was as impressed with this nineteenth-century iron architecture as we are with Roman antiquities and remarked with assurance, "Of course, the government protects this." He was assured that the government does not.

Admittedly, the once-proud business headquarters in the Greene and Mercer Street area are now reduced to small commercial operations; the buildings are often filled with waste and bad housekeeping makes them a continuous fire hazard. It is hard for the nonprofessional eye to pierce the gloom and grime.

The point here, as well as in other areas proposed for redevelopment, is that no professional eye is looking. There is a tremendous and terrifying gap in all of the city's renewal plans, a total lack of study of proposed areas for historic architecture that may exist within them and the designation of such architecture, in part or in whole, for appropriate uses in the new plans. Not until the city sets up a permanent landmarks preservation commission, a proposal now awaiting the Mayor's action, will the situation be rectified.

It should be made quite clear that with the exception of this unpardonable oversight, the City Planning Commission and the Housing and Redevelopment Board are doing some highly commendable work. We are not anti-plan. The commission's three-year Community Renewal Study program, which is giving careful, over-all consideration to many of New York's individual neighborhoods with the ultimate objective of relating their specific needs to a thoughtful master plan, is most admirable. The Housing and Redevelopment Board has inaugurated a positive, unprecedented policy of encouraging good architects and architecture in the projects it handles. But it is a paradox—and a tragedy—that with this kind of conscientious work going on, authorization is also proceeding, with the approval of both agencies, for the almost complete demolition of the oldest part of the city.

**Heritage**

In lower Manhattan, from the Battery to Brooklyn Bridge, entire streets of four-story and five-story brick buildings of the Eighteen Thirties and Forties—all that remains now of early New York—are to be bulldozed shortly. One side of Water Street has already been ripped out for widening, and all the rest will go for the World Trade Center and the Brooklyn Bridge

South redevelopment. Much of this building is mentioned in Talbot Hamlin's authoritative volume, *Greek Revival Architecture in America*. Those remaining red brick rows, with their intimate, Georgian simplicity, will be a serious loss to the city in terms of history, human scale and architectural style.

It is of some interest, and perhaps throws some light on the matter, that an able, civic-minded architect charged with replacing a considerable part of this area with new building, when questioned about the possibility of retaining and including some of these historical structures for shops and services, replied with honest surprise, "I didn't know there was anything good down there!" The disguises of age, dirt and deterioration work all too well.

**Basic Attitude**

But perhaps the real fault lies in certain basic attitudes that one finds in even some of the best-intentioned members of the Planning Commission and the Housing and Redevelopment Board. J. Clarence Davies Jr., head of the board, stated the thesis at a downtown redevelopment meeting last year that a piece of property should be put to its highest use, and that this highest use was economic; the development of a given site should be determined by whatever will yield the best financial return.

This, of course, is rule No. 1 of the real estate ten commandments, and Mr. Davies is a former real estate man. But it is to be hoped that in his position of public trust, and with his obvious civic dedication, he has enlarged his definition by now. A building is a complex thing; there are historic, artistic and human values as well as economic ones involved. And these are the values that are often most in the public interest. It is time for the gentlemen who control so much of New York's destiny and who are proceeding on a scale and with a speed of almost superhuman dimensions (they rest not even on the seventh day) to realize this. Only then will redevelopment be more than an opportunistic operation with real meaning for the city's future.