

# Sporting With SoHo

The proposal to put up a sports center in lower Manhattan's SoHo district, like the London plan to put a convention center in the Covent Garden district, has engendered unusually vehement opposition. In each case, an area of small-scale structures of healthy mixed uses, in which historic buildings have become a center of light industry and the arts, is threatened by incompatible commercial construction.

The key word here is incompatible, not commercial; and this incompatibility goes right to the heart of a set of urban values that is only beginning to be understood. The city may be tough, but its fabric is fragile, and that fabric is composed of such things as use, style, scale, history, art and character as well as economics, in a balance that is tenuous at best, and tenable only through constant care.

SoHo, which lacked a name until recently, has been watched with anxiety by historians and urbanists for years. An almost intact enclave of a disappearing genre,



the intricate, rhythmic, post-Civil War cast iron-fronted structures for which New York once led architectural taste, it gradually slipped into grimy, unfashionable uses. It became, in the ominous words of real estate, "ripe for redevelopment." Those who read the reality of art and history through soot and disrepair and the debris of marginal manufacturing feared for its future. It was saved from the exploitation of "improvement" by a city report, which pointed out that low rents and spacious lofts served incu-

bator industries and employed low-income workers, both essential to the city's well being. Shortly after, it was "discovered" by artists, always hard pressed for space at reasonable rents. They have coexisted with industry, their occupancy legalized by the City Planning Commission. The Landmarks Preservation Commission, recognizing the Cast Iron Age and the richness of the architecture, has been considering the area for designation as a historic district.

In the inevitable sequence, attracted by the artistic community which made the desirability of the district clear, the commercial galleries came, pushing up rents and land values; and the real estate operators came, buying for investment. And now come the ruinous proposals.

This is no place for a sports complex, in terms of scale, function and the inevitable impact on density, circulation and character. It would be fatally inappropriate land use, and a decision by the Board of Standards and Appeals that would permit the bulky structure would be a disservice to New York. It would destroy the balance—already precarious—of this older, intimate, successful mixed use district of recorded historic value, starting an inevitable chain of events of "upgrading" and demolition. It would be an egregious example of that sad, speculative spiral of the city destroying itself.