

Architecture

Thinking Man's Zoning

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

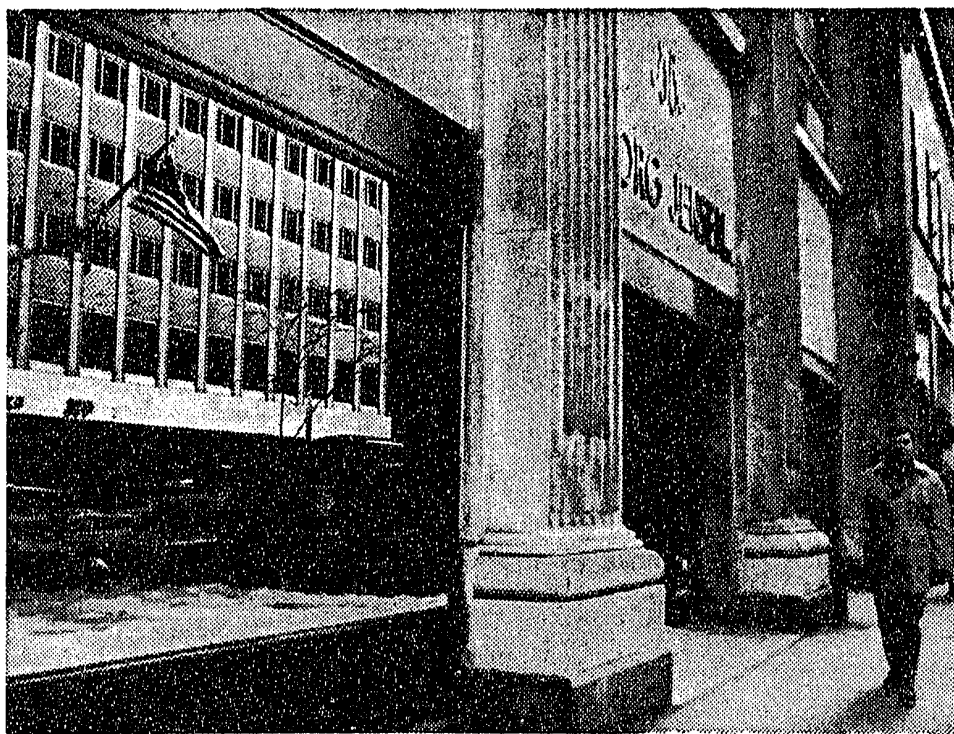
REVOLUTION is not always a call to the barricades. Some revolutions can even put you to sleep. Try reading zoning law, for example; it's as dry as dust and as dull as the law books and a numbers game to the uninitiated.

But there is a revolution going on in American cities in the conceptual, legal and administrative aspects of zoning that sets such innovative patterns of land use that it will change whole parts of cities as we know them now. Don't write off the revolution because it is being made by men in business suits at City Hall.

To grasp the importance of zoning, start with the premise that the city you see is to a great extent the city that zoning makes. Zoning does not solve social, racial and other urban ills; it tells builders how they can build—largely in terms of height and bulk. All new construction is shaped by the code.

In New York, while everyone watches politicians playing politics as usual, the planners and lawmakers are making a new kind of city possible through a new kind of zoning. There is a book, "The New Zoning," edited by Norman Marcus and Marilyn W. Groves, that grew out of a recent joint City Planning Commission-New School symposium with national participation. In the areas affected, all developers will have to play by the new rules.

Some of this has impinged on the public consciousness through the current alarm about Fifth Avenue. Fifth Avenue is New York in a very special way. Or was. Now new office construction is threatening to make it just another corporate address instead of a world-famous shopping boulevard. The tool that has been chosen by the City Planning Commission to save Fifth Avenue is the new zoning. The proposal is to create a special retail zoning district in which the shopping functions, instead of being



Window of building vacated by Jensen's reflects office building across the street
Mute symbol of the threat to Fifth Avenue

destroyed by the development juggernaut, would be protected and strengthened by new regulations.

People may not understand much about zoning, but they understand what's happening to Fifth Avenue. Best's, De Pinna's and Jensen's stand empty, waiting for demolition. Their blank faces are the mute signal of speculation, the tipoff that luxury retailing in older buildings is having economic hard going against rising land prices. Profitable new building has more glamour for developers than all the consumer treasures spread along the avenue that have created its international fame and appeal.

The street is now literally half given over to banks, airline ticket offices and corporate showrooms. They pay higher rents than specialty shops, and airlines and corporations often treat these costs out of advertising budgets—there's nothing like a billboard on Fifth Avenue. In spite of overwrought design, they're still not much fun. In real estate language, 50 per cent of the avenue is now "underdeveloped." There are at least 25 "soft" sites "ripe for redevelopment." What they are ripe for is more-of-the-same die-stamped commercial construction.

The best way to understand how this happens is to look at the Avenue of the

Americas. The new Sixth Avenue, as New Yorkers persist in calling it, was built largely under the present zoning code as it was "progressively" revised in 1961. It was hailed as a giant step forward. In practice, it is revealed as a giant failure. It is a failure in urbanistic terms—or how a city looks and works. The zoning, combined with the rising cost of land and building, has been the definitive factor in driving out the small enterprises, the shops, restaurants and services, that make New York a decent or pleasurable place in which to live and work. In their place is a cold parade of standard business structures set back aimlessly from the street on blank plazas that ignore each other.

The present code, and most zoning codes, give formulas for construction that deal primarily with the size and placement of the building. This goes for each individual and independent structure, as if streets weren't made up of buildings and cities weren't made up of streets. The intimate scale and varied delights of Manhattan side streets are being banished ruthlessly by the new blockbusters. The continuity of Madison Avenue is blasted wherever a new setback tower (and ground floor bank) goes up. This uniformity of treatment, considered

fair by realtors and their lawyers, is succeeding in destroying the multiplicity of uses and styles.

What has been realized, therefore, is that the present code is anti-environmental. We weren't much concerned about environment in 1961, and have been discovering it, like the umbrella, in the past ten years. One factor was added to the traditional concern for light and air: the architects' expressed wish to be able to design a straight-sided tower, free-standing in space, instead of the "wedding cakes" molded by the original code of 1916. They got it, and we're stuck with it. It ignores all urban relationships of any kind.

The new zoning starts by doing something the old zoning never did: it makes value judgments. Value judgments are necessary in a society with problems, or a society that plans. It says that certain parts of the city have special forms, features, functions and attractions of real worth. The theater district is an example. Such features are to be protected and encouraged by an over-all development plan.

To construct or keep these features, builders are given bonuses in the form of more rentable office space in their new buildings than the present zoning allows. The amenities may be circulation improvements, arcades, open space in the right places,

shopping or recreational facilities, or in the case of the theater district, new theaters to replace the ones doomed to destruction as commercial development moves westward. (There are five theaters going up now. The score would have been zero without the new zoning.)

The areas treated in this fashion are all called special zoning districts. New York has two in effect, the theater district and the Lincoln Square district, and two pending, a design district downtown devised by the Office of Lower Manhattan Development under Richard Weinstein, and the Fifth Avenue retail district.

The proposed Fifth Avenue district is the work of the Office of Midtown Planning and Development under Jaquelin Robertson. Its premise is that, like the theater district, this area is a good thing for New York, and that it should be safeguarded by building and planning controls. The Fifth Avenue district plan, from 38th to 59th Streets, specifies that new buildings must include two floors of retail space with unbroken shopping facades along the street. Building entrances must be on side streets and there are ground floor restrictions on banks, showrooms and ticket offices. The plan is a unified, competent exercise in sensitive urban design.

To carry it out, the builders will get their bonuses. But because more office space would add to already high commercial density, apartments are specified. How much better to put luxury apartments here than to "up-zone" uptown side streets for it, as recently proposed, worsening transportation and destroying neighborhood quality and scale.

Builders fear rigidity of requirements, limitations of small sites, and too much discretionary power. Balancing objectives and rewards, avoiding windfalls or hardships, matching fair compensation to the public good, are among the most sensitive aspects of framing the new laws. The point at which increased density tips the scales against planned improvements is a matter for the Delphic Oracle. But obviously this is the thinking, or planning man's zoning for cities which see themselves as more than real estate profit-and-loss statements.

Asleep out there? Next week, air rights.