

# Endangered Species

The Ninth Avenue Festival is over, but more than the memory lingers on. The weekend that offered a cornucopia of neighborhood delicacies and delights was only a well-publicized sampling of what is still there: a modest avenue lined with small stores providing a treasury of fresh meats, fish, produce, baked goods and ethnic food specialties of the highest quality and most tantalizing variety. This is the stuff, and staff, of life, not to be found in the standardized, prepackaged precincts of any supermarket.

The message, however, was more than eat well and enjoy it. It was also one of quiet urban desperation. These neighborhoods and their resources are irreplaceable; when they are lost, New York life is diminished. And they are always threatened: their essence is the small, specialized enterprise and their very existence depends on old buildings and relatively low rents.

In the familiar reckoning of real estate, they are essentially neighborhoods where land value outstrips building value and return on investment, making them, in the predictable speculative cliché, ripe for redevelopment. Put more bluntly, disposable communities.

The point of the Ninth Avenue Festival was not just gourmet treats and street music; it was to make it clear that this neighborhood is very ripe indeed. It is an endangered species. In spite of conscientious, temporary protective measures by the City Planning Commission, the impending construction of the Convention Center just west of the area is a clear threat to its continued life.

Much of the surrounding West Side is being assembled by investors for future development parcels, an inexorable process once the Convention Center has given impetus to large-scale building. Only the most vigilant watchfulness by the city, backed by strong and sensitive permanent controls, will keep Ninth Avenue alive. And if it dies, to be replaced by the usual profitable commercial desert, part of New York's meaning, richness and pleasure dies with it.