

Good-by to Fifth Avenue?

There has long been a myth in New York, a kind of native folklore, that the city's manifest destiny belongs to real estate. The divine right of square-footage has been treated with almost religious respect by politicians and public alike—no questions asked.

Not any more. As a glassy death creeps along the avenues the result is clearly not destiny; it is destruction. A kind of urban rigor mortis envelops the city as humanity and variety are banished. The only thing that moves is money.

Now speculation threatens the end of Fifth Avenue. By definition, Fifth Avenue is that elegant, glittering, sophisticated artery that is the retail heart and shopping showcase of New York. News of the sale of Best & Co.'s building to developers for the construction of a new office tower opens the prospect for similar deals along the street. Like the other avenues, Fifth Avenue is to be turned into bland blocks of banks sleekly embalmed in a corporate pall.

The problem is that land prices have been bid up so high in the real estate game that retail rentals will no longer support them. Stores cannot compete with the return to be squeezed out of corporate tenants. *Sic transit* Best's after nearly a century of service to style-conscious New Yorkers. Its Lilliputian Bazaar had been transformed and many swinging new departments installed, but millions of dollars in capital investment could not bring its profit level up to a point that would stay the demolisher's ball. There will be no Santa Claus at Best's this Christmas, and its 1,200 employees will be scrambling for new jobs in a period of rising general unemployment.

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Something must be done to rescue Fifth Avenue and the city knows it. New York has had to save itself before. When builders succeeded in cutting out light and air with their new skyscrapers before World War I, the first zoning regulations became law. Recently, as the westward push of office construction doomed the theater district, special district zoning amendments were passed to guarantee the construction of theaters in the new buildings. Now the city negotiates with builders to keep or provide essential urban features there and elsewhere.

But even negotiation may not save Fifth Avenue's polished image. The Olympic Tower planned for the Best & Co. site by Aristotle Onassis and Arthur Cohen will be a product of the Miami Beach hotel architect, Morris Lapidus, known more for tinsel than for polish. As they said when the Summit opened in New York, Fifth Avenue is awfully far from the ocean.

That either Fifth Avenue or the theater district should be able to be wiped out by the speculator is appalling. It is absurd that the form and future of the city, for whom and how it functions, are determined by the insane spiral of escalating land prices. The city be damned, if the return is good.

Saving Fifth Avenue is a planning decision. A destructive trend can be redirected constructively by a city that knows what it is and what it wants to be. Trend, as Lewis Mumford has said, is not destiny.