ARCHITECTURE VIEW: URBAN PROGRESS DOESN'T ALWAYS MAKE THINGS BETTER

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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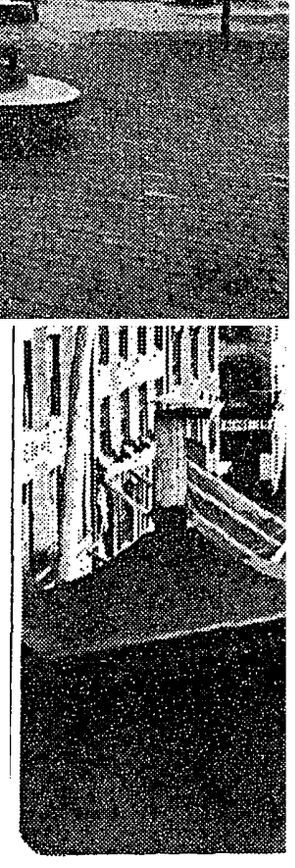
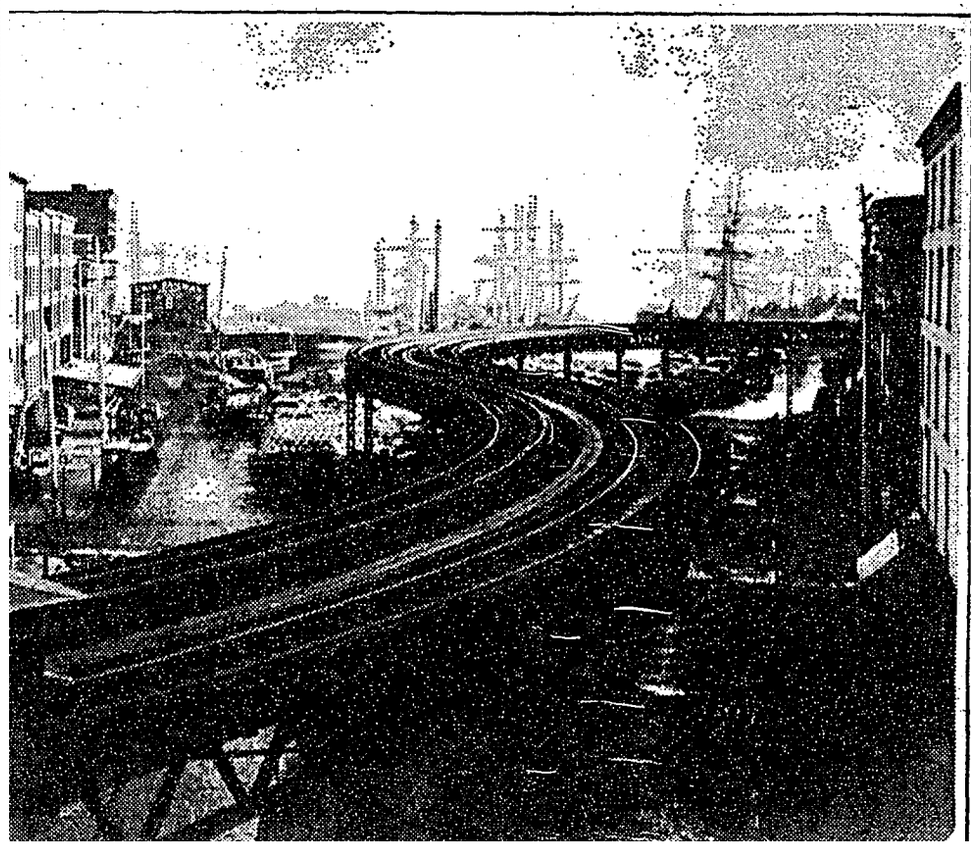
Urban Progress Doesn't Always Make Things Better





The new Jeanette Park, on the site of the old Coenties Slip, has "no sense of history or humanity."

For those who see New York City in extremis, the Museum of the City of New York offers hope. It has just opened an exhibition called "How Grim Was My City" that definitely does not celebrate the good old days.

Using photographs of the same areas in the 19th century and today, supplemented with descriptive and factual data and some evocative artifacts, it not only suggests that things may have been much worse in the past, but frequently were. Its message is meant to cheer the doomsayers, and in the words of the exhibition's director, Albert K. Baragwanath, "restore perspective" about the past and the present and the urban apocalypse.

The show presents a series of illuminating "then and now" scenic contrasts. But these views are just as illuminating for the sense of underlying history and sociology that shaped the changes as for the mere fact of the dramatically transformed vistas. The implicit attitude of the museum is that the new represents a distinct advance over the old. In many cases this is so. Parks replaced slums, mansions replaced shanties, urban renewal removed the "el," playgrounds and open space remade a sordidly picturesque waterfront. Concurrent with physical rebuilding, conditions of health and sanitation were markedly improved.

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But the mythology of physical upgrading as a panacea for the city's ills is easily shattered. Some of these views raise more questions than they answer. In fact, some are a blow to the simple conventional wisdom that cleaning things up makes problems go away, the comfortable assumption that motivated planners for so long. The before and after views of Morningside Park, for example, show a rocky wasteland of desolate shacks replaced by Olmsted's superb, formal work of public landscape art. Morningside Park may now be the city's single most crime-ridden, underutilized and dangerous spot. Physical design has been powerless against deepseated urban pathologies. There is a bitter and difficult lesson here for architects, urbanists and planners.

The lesson that the show is obviously intended to teach is that the urban tragedy is scarcely new and that New York has not yet gone down the drain. If you think things are bad now . . . "late 19th-century New York had grinding poverty, decimating disease, intolerable housing, filth, congestion and crime," the introductory label tells us. There were the remarkable documentary photographs of Jacob Riis, of the wrenching conditions of the poor. There was the stunning contrast between wealth and want. What the pictures do not tell us, contemporary accounts provide. They fill in the details of what it was like behind those slum windows that the "el" screeched by, in quarters without light or air, in crowded blocks of tenements on impassable streets that knew no sun.

In 1865, a Sanitary and Social Chart of the Fourth Ward, 30 blocks bounded on the north by Chatham Square, described appalling conditions of overcrowding, inadequate sanitation and disease. Smallpox and typhus were listed, and one privy was shared by 78 people. In 1880, about half of the city's population was packed into the tenements of the lower East Side, an area that accounted for about 70 per cent of the city's deaths. Jacob Riis wrote, "When the houses were filled, the crowds overflowed into the yards. In winter, (there were) tenants living in sheds built of old boards and roof tin, paying a dollar a week for herding with the rats." In 1902, he could still call New York's housing "the worst in the world."

The draft riots of 1863 killed 1,200 people in four days; buildings were burned and the affluent fled. Public transportation was totally tied up in 1886 by a streetcar strike. The satisfactory settlement was for two dollars a day for a 12-hour day, and a half hour for lunch. An 1868 quote scores the streetcars as "crowded, dirty, insufficient in number, the conductors and drivers rude and brutal in their treatment of passengers."

All this may provide a negative kind of comfort. But it becomes quite clear why the reformers of the late 19th and early 20th century could consider a patch of park thinning out a crush of tenements a giant step forward. Light, air and sanitation were the basic requirements.

It is small wonder that planners believed that "safe and sanitary" housing would solve all problems. A good number of the pictures in the show demonstrate that point. On Mulberry Street a park relieved wall-to-wall congestion. Allen Street lost one whole insalubrious block at Broome, for a treelined center mall. These things must have been a genuine godsend. And although much of the lookalike parks and housing that replaced substandard quarters is from the same monotonous cookie cutter, it delivered what it promised: open space, ventilation and recreation.

On the other hand, where did those pathetic squatters in their miserable hovels go when Andrew Carnegie built his Fifth Avenue mansion? They had fled once, across the street, when they were evicted from the land chosen for Central Park. And while there may have been too many saloons, the variety of neighborhood stores sheltered by the "el" are still missed today.

The United Nations replaced slaughterhouses. Chatham Square exchanged squalor for new housing and the civic center. There is no doubt that the human condition has been upgraded—with a formidable amount still to be done. But we have also downgraded certain desirable components of the urban equation: the waterfront has been lost as a unique resource, neighborhoods have been homogenized and human scale destroyed by the new construction. It might be called the tragic paradox.

The pictures on this page, from the show, illustrate the complexities involved. There is, first, the old Coenties Slip on the East River, about 1879, with sailing ships at the end, the characteristic waterfront street slashed brutally by the "el," but offering provocative glimpses of riverfront and maritime life. When the "el" came down a few years later, Jeanette Park replaced it, a shabby handkerchief of grass and benches tenanted by old sailors warmed by wine, who surveyed a familiar scene.

The picture of the same place today looks toward the East River, but you can't see it. Coenties Slip was filled in some time ago. This is a brand-new plaza by landscape architect Paul Friedberg and Associates, elevated above ground level. The space is now part of a monster office building at 55 Water Street, and it is the result of enlightened negotiation between the city and the builder. It is a skillful job of urban design.

This is also called Jeanette Park; the grass and winos are gone and you can look at the water if you peer over the edge. It is a nice place to take the sun—a successful, sophisticated plaza formula that could be anywhere at all. It has everything except a sense of history or humanity, a feeling of local place, or the recognizable richness of a specific urban inheritance. The past is gone and the present is sanitized. We still have a lot to learn.

"How Grim Was My City" at the Museum of the City of New York, through Sept. 7. Open 10 A.M. to 5 P.M; Tuesdays through Saturdays; 1 P.M. to 5 P.M. Sundays and holidays.