

A Planning Revolution

A quiet revolution has taken place in planning in New York. In many parts of this metropolis, the community and City Hall have been working together to preserve and improve neighborhoods according to deep-rooted local understanding of the area's character and needs—something the cynics said could never be done.

This is well illustrated by the passage of the Madison Avenue zoning district, which radically revises the standard zoning in order to retain Madison Avenue's characteristic and desirable small shops and relatively lower building size. Developers had already begun to destroy the special pleasures and conveniences of this street by simply following the zoning rules that encouraged breaking open the space and building the blockbusters. The pattern may be all right on some avenues, but it was all wrong here.

The people who were in a position to recognize the damage were the residents. The zoning changes were promoted by the Carnegie Hill Neighbors and Community Planning Board No. 8, working closely with the City Planning Department. This was a grassroots movement in the best sense of the word.

Let no one underestimate the expertise and determination of the local planning boards. Their role is advisory, but increasingly effective. What the local board process adds up to is an intelligent backlash against insensitive plans imposed from above, and the abstractions of the blanket zoning ordinance of 1961. That law, applied without discrimination or exception, would virtually bulldoze all neighborhood character for a homogenized uniformity of disastrous high-rise, open-space formulas. As is not uncommon—and it is a strong argument for much decentralization and community participation—the neighborhoods have caught up with the danger before the administration.

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Another illustration of the result of citizen planning action is the Second Avenue zoning also passed by the Board of Estimate. Called the Special Transit Land Use District, this is a one-year holding operation meant to encourage the relationship of subway construction to new development for a "more lively, efficient and humane environment," according to the Planning Commission.

This proposal was the joint work of the Municipal Art Society and the Planning Commission, with representatives of numerous other civic groups. The plan was arrived at through a special area study; it is important that these efforts are going beyond protest to the search for solutions through skillful urban design.

Still one more example is Community Board No. 8's continuing attempt to modify zoning to preserve what is left of the rapidly eroding Yorkville district and East 86th Street. These amended zoning district designations are probably the most rational way of meeting local requirements and preserving neighborhood values. They do so by recognizing specific needs, something that no general zoning reform could possibly achieve.

No one has a greater stake in New York than New Yorkers. Their concern is now showing sophisticated—and significant—results.