Criminal Construction

Now that Manhattan's chief construction inspector has been found guilty of taking unlawful gratuities, and 131 other cases of bribers and bribees are moving toward trial as a result of last year's highly publicized scandals, the question is how to change a city building process that virtually guarantees corrupt construction practices. The clear need is not only for punitive action but also for basic reform.

The fault lies in a system so archaic and obstructionist that it invites criminal practice as the simple price of getting things done. Payoffs buy time, an expensive commodity in construction. A new law due to come before the City Council in the next few weeks—if it is not sandbagged along the way—could make a radical difference.

It would set up totally new inspection procedures meant both to expedite and improve the building process. Code revisions would mandate the owners of all major projects to hire an architect or engineer registered with the city to inspect their buildings and file certificates of code compliance.

False certification would be prosecuted as perjury and the offending professional removed from city registration, or effectively, from city work. Pressures for false certification would be a misdemeanor. The process would become much more professional, builders would control their own timetables, and the adversary relationship with city inspectors would be removed.

Administratively, waiting time for permits is being reduced where possible—one step toward turning the Kafkaesque glue of Building Department operations into a way of helping, not hindering, construction. Until now, patience or payoffs have been the only alternatives. But there is a long way to go.

It has taken a full year to get this excellent legislative package ready—New York moves in its own time zone. Slow motion in getting it to the City Council, and passed, will only do further harm. The penalty of high costs and slow production built into a corruption-prone system has been paid for too long.