

The Editorial Notebook

Structural Gridlock

There is a new kind of skyscraper going up in New York. The new model is not an isolated phenomenon, like a corporate headquarters reaching conspicuously for the sky, or a World Trade Center, setting a record in the tallest-building derby. The new kind, bigger and bulkier than anything the city has seen before, arises because of skyrocketing building costs, and there is nothing to stop it, certainly not New York's permissive zoning practices. Massed together in midtown, the resulting superbuildings will make the city's familiar concrete canyons seem intimate.

Sixteen of these huge buildings are already in construction or in advanced planning within a concentrated midtown area. They will all be highly profitable and generate business. But their collective scale raises serious concerns about density, pedestrian mobility and air, sun and shadow patterns, and eventual structural gridlock. Even their economic benefits will be overconcentrated, while other areas in need of development go begging.

None of these disturbing factors has been adequately addressed. And the blame can be placed squarely on the City Planning Commission.

The Commission's recent history has been one of drift and inaction. The new chairman, Herbert Sturz, has inherited an agency, and a process, that has almost ceased to function. The City Planning Department, which



serves the Commission, lost morale and personnel.

It is not as if signs of overbuilding and its dangers were not clear. The huge new I.B.M. and A.T. & T. buildings from 56th to 57th Streets on Madison Avenue were joined by plans for the immense Bonwit Teller replacement on Fifth. Apartment construction at a similar superscale has caused disruption of residential avenues. Nevertheless, the obvious questions of policy have never been dealt with. A zoning and development study promised for April has yet to appear.

These new buildings are the long-delayed fruit of the revised zoning of 1961, plus a labyrinth of amendments. Buildings that the framers of that

zoning considered hypothetical extremes or impractically large have now become reality. Today, developers wring every possible square foot out of the law. They expertly pit one planning agency arm against another to get ever-larger structures through confusion, indecision and complicated readings of the legislation. Heady with success, their demands for variances have become increasingly audacious.

The zoning bonuses given to encourage amenities like ground floor public space, meant to ameliorate the oppressive scale, make the buildings bigger still, and even those bonus provisions are often flouted or perverted.

The unmotivated and malfunctioning agency that Mr. Sturz has inherited will not find it easy to deal with these problems. He has started by filling commission seats left open far too long; strengthening borough offices, and eliminating the overlapping jurisdictional layers that builders have exploited. But restoring direct lines of responsibility is only part of the job. The Commission is hopelessly behind in its work. Worst of all, it lacks the will to deal with overzoning.

The zoning law needs a complete and radical overhaul. Construction is not only New York's most important product but also the key to the quality of its future. It is time for the city to regain control of its growth.

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