Ship chandlers and spice merchants and roasting coffee
By Ada Louise Huxtable
New York Times (1923-Current file); Nov 18, 1973; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 368

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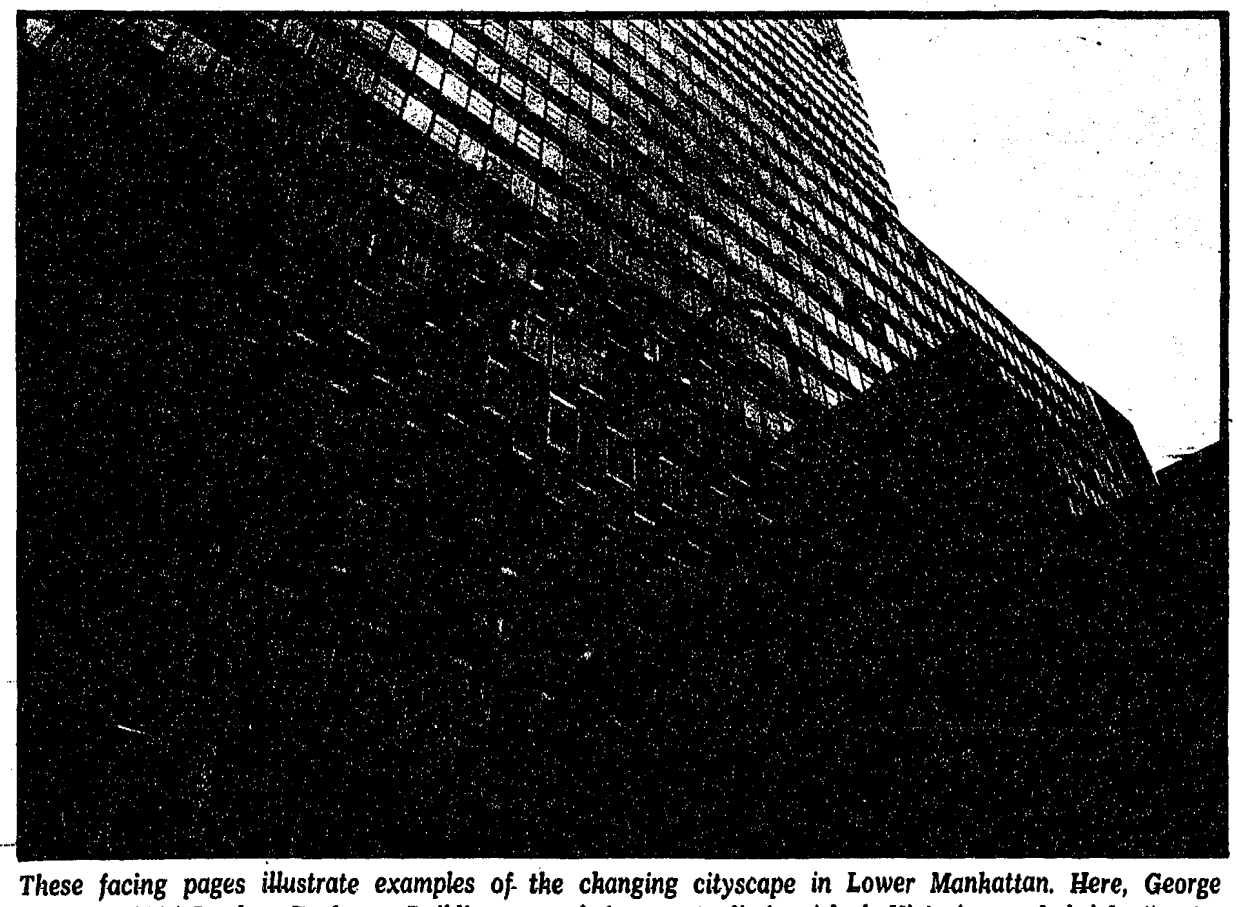
Farewell, Old New York



These facing pages illustrate examples of the changing cityscape in Lower Manhattan. Here, George B. Post's 1884 Produce Exchange Building, one of the most distinguished Victorian red brick "proto-skyscrapers." Bottom, its replacement, the hardly distinguished facade of Emory Roth & Sons' 2 Broadway.

New York is immortal. It is eternal regeneration, a love affair with the new. No more so than in Lower Manhattan, where it all began. Dutch New York isn't even a memory. Georgian New York is suggested by a few crumbling houses and stubborn ghosts. Greek Revival New York struggles for survival. Victorian New York is fair game for the bulldozer.

Occasionally still, the past and the present can be seen side by side. But this is a moment when the past is disappearing with particular rapidity. Lower Manhattan is in the throes of a "renaissance" marked by the eruption of huge new skyscrapers on small-scaled old streets, and even by the disappearance of those streets for modern superblocks. The 19th century is being obliterated by the 20th century at a startling rate.

The old seaport city is gone. The home of chandlers and dockers is now a place of clerks and office workers. Its symbol is the bank, not the ship. Its connections are with the computer, rather than with the sea. Only photographic records and personal nostalgia remain.

A few historian-observers have recorded the process of destruction with cameras, those instruments of helpless protest. They meet each other in rubble-strewn lots heaped with solid granite lintels wrenched from 19th-century doorways, climbing hills of rose-colored shards of handmade brick. They have been moving from one doomed block to another for the past 10 years, fixing images on film like witch doctors fixing the city's soul.

But the new cannot be denied its drama. The true New Yorker is torn between regret and excitement; he is in love with the superscaled volatility of his city. If he is a real architecture buff, he knows that while the old is beautiful and irreplaceable, there are areas downtown where the new is setting standards of urban design—an unaccustomed role for New York builders. And so he mourns the past, and responds to the present. The conflict, for him and the city, is irreconcilable.

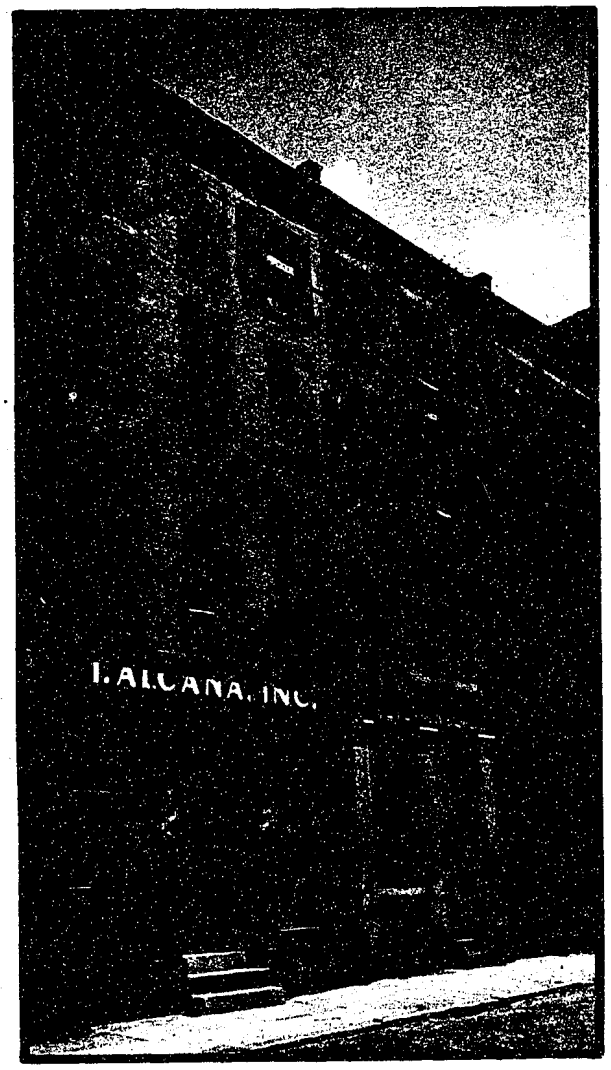
Today, lower Front Street, along the East River, has been literally wiped out. It is covered by a parade of glass and aluminum structures reaching from Front to Water Streets, including 55 Water Street, currently the largest privately constructed office building in the world.

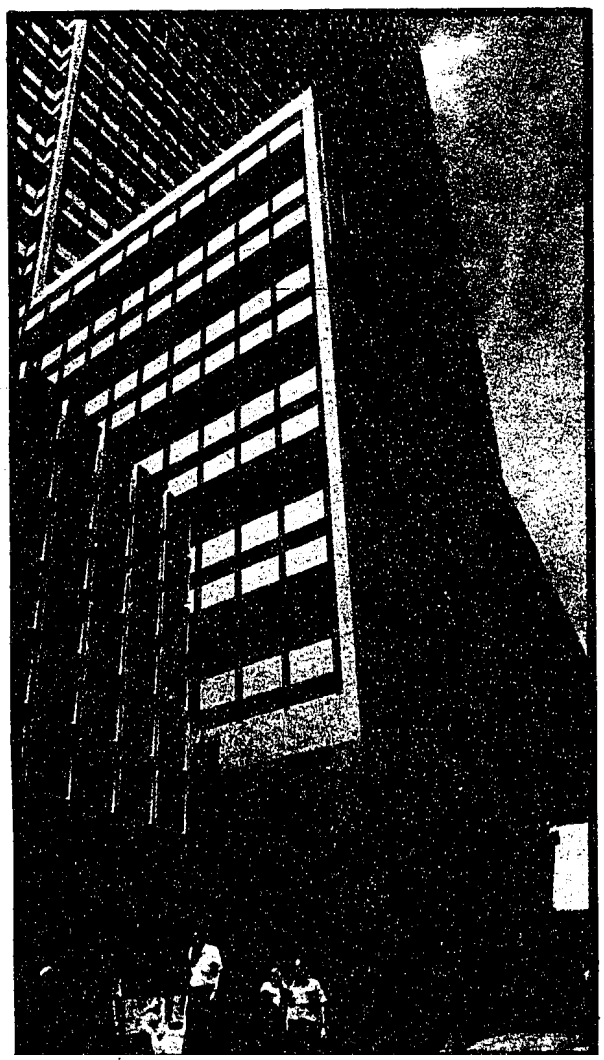
Both Front and Water Streets, where New York's early shipping and commercial fortunes were made, are almost totally transformed. They resisted physical change for nearly a century and a half. Now little is left of what may have been some of the finest "street architecture" of any city, the eighteen-thirties red brick "classic commercial" row that ran from Old Slip to the Brooklyn Bridge.

The smell of fresh roasting coffee is gone, too, and the ship chandlers selling "Everything for Anything Afloat." The dormered and pitch-roofed houses against the Gothic stone and spiderweb steel of Brooklyn Bridge, the four-story, granite-faced blocks that housed casual bars and beaneries, the 19th-century breaks in the 20th-century canyons that let in the sleety New York winter sky and the sense of New York history—all are largely photographers' elegies.

A row of spice merchants' buildings, in Georgian and Greek Revival style, continuous on Fletcher Street, was still redolent of the Indies a few years ago. It has been replaced by a gas station. Feck's Slip, a miraculous Georgian survival until recently, is a mutilated remnant. The handsome Greek Revival warehouses of Water Street that held more than a century of ships' cargoes and

Ada Louise Huxtable is a member of The Times editorial board, and the Sunday architecture critic.





Old 165 Water Street, part of a row of shuttered, red brick Greek Revival warehouses, notable for their repeated granite piers and lintels, built in New York's heyday as a 19th-century seaport. They have been replaced by 127 John Street, a full-block, aluminum and glass curtain-wall office building.

imports went for street widening in the nineteen-sixties. Front Street was subject to gap-toothed spot demolition for parking even before it was bulldozed for office buildings.

Through private initiative and city help, Fulton Street from South to Front is being preserved for the South Street Seaport Museum. It is not the choicest example, but in the early sixties, when action elsewhere could have been taken, a newly established Landmarks Preservation Commission, moving with extreme caution, failed to designate any part at all of the city's prime historic commercial district.

The buildings of many of these streets, and most notably of Front and Water, were continuous and homogeneous. They were built in 1836 and 1837, after the disastrous fire of 1835 and before the 1837 financial panic. It was a particularly felicitous moment of a particularly handsome and tasteful style of simple classical persuasion.

These structures, basically in the vernacular Georgian tradition, were dressed up with newly popular "Greek" details. They have been recorded in Talbot Hamlin's scholarly and definitive work, "Greek Revival Architecture in America." He noted the style's essentials: "a ground floor supported on monolithic granite piers, often with Greek anta capitals, carrying a simple molded granite architrave; above this, three or four stories of brick wall pierced with well-proportioned windows; a restrained, simple cornice of moderate projection, with moldings of Greek profile."

"The uniformity of their cornice lines," he wrote, "the monumental repetition of their granite piers, and the rhythmical regularity of their openings give a pleasant harmony and unity to the streets they border. The best of these buildings are simple, useful, unostentatious, human in scale, and restrained and delicate in detail."

The best are gone. These commercial buildings were some of the most intact vernacular street architecture in American history. In addition to Front and Water Streets, Beekman and Ferry and parts of Cliff and Pearl were wiped out for Brooklyn Bridge South renewal, an abortive project which was conceived in the days of total bulldozer clearance.

What was cleared in this area alone was Greek Revival rows that could, and should, have been rehabilitated for adaptive use, including a rare, curved-corner example with stepped window lintels at Beekman and Ferry.

Also destroyed: a later 19th-century cast-iron facade of airy Venetian grace; some Second Empire and other solid Victorian fancies, such as the Chatillon Scale building with its classically robed lady balancing weights; the incomparable, tight-coursed, rounded-window brickwork of the Healy Building, and the leering masks of the pedimented, 1837 Lorillard Building. Southbridge Towers and Pace College have taken their place. Pace College is the more architecturally ambitious of these two pedestrian efforts.

On the West Side of Lower Manhattan, except for the recently demolished Washington Market, the 18th and early 19th centuries enjoyed a spottier survival. Around the Battery, and up Broadway, the early nineteen-hundreds erected their own landmarks of proto-skyscrapers, sandwiching a few remaining Georgian houses between them, often in bar-and-grill mufti.

On Whitehall Street, Nos. 47 and 49 had keystone arches, oval windows and Adam fireplaces behind their raffish disguises. New York Plaza, one of the city's more overwhelming and underplanned superblock developments, starts there now.

But you don't have to be small to be demolished. The New York Produce Exchange, an imposing "Renaissance" red brick building designed by the noted architect George B. Post in 1884, was de-

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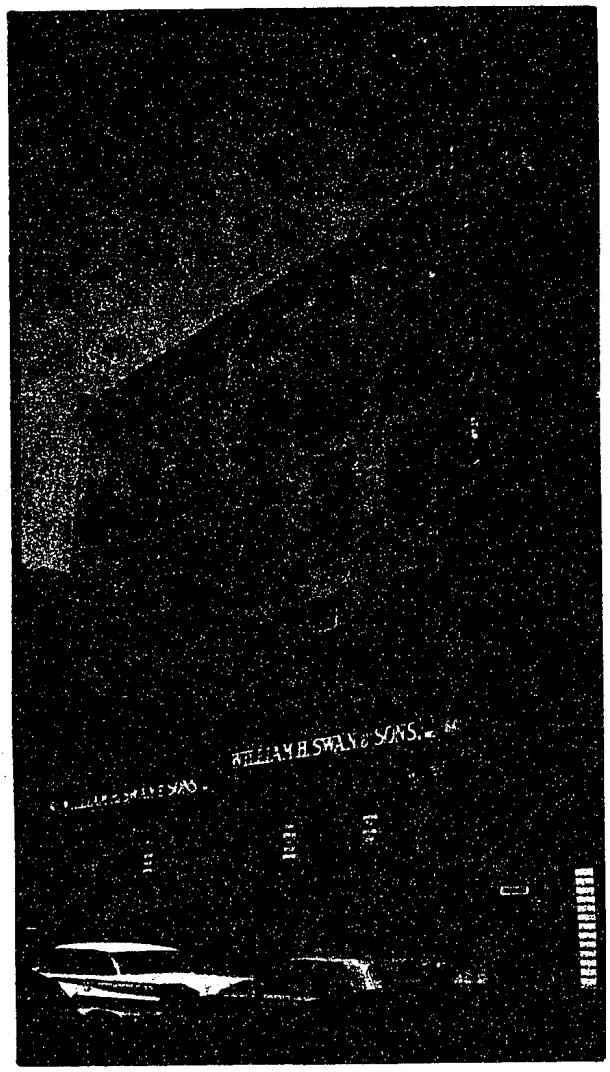

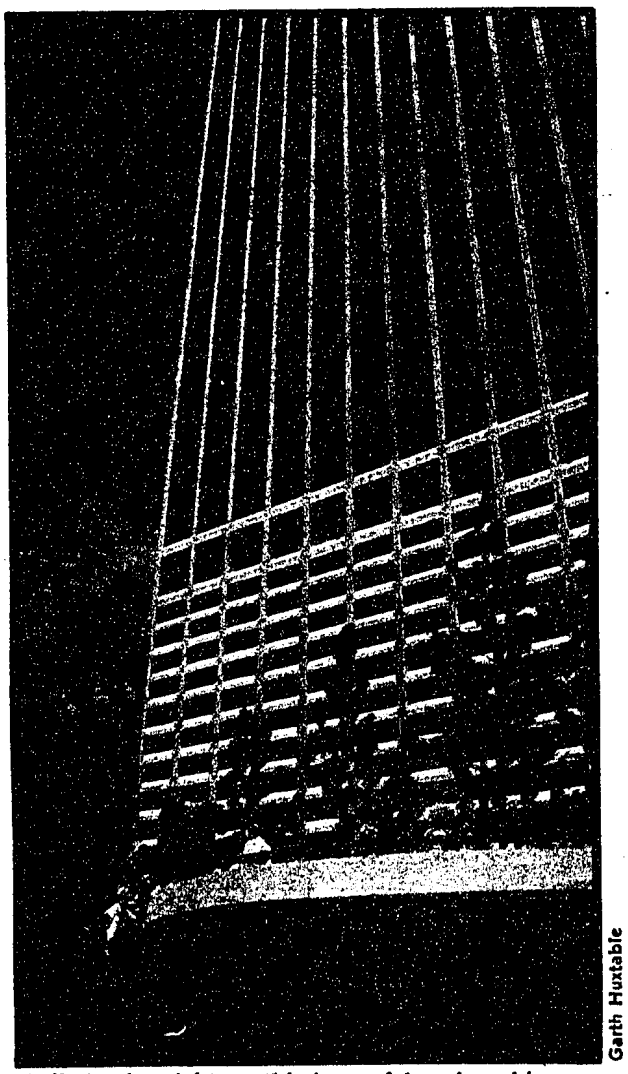

Garth Huxtable

Built in the eighteen-thirties and housing ship suppliers, 62-64 Front Street was typical of the area from the Battery to Brooklyn Bridge. The site today is occupied by 55 Water Street, the largest privately built office building in the world. In the foreground is the reconstructed Jeannette Park.

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stroyed before the Landmark Law was passed, to be replaced by 2 Broadway. Where the massive, arcaded distinction of the older structure made a civilized architectural statement there is now a flat, checkerboard curtain wall of no distinction at all.

Ernest Flagg's ornately elegant 1908 Singer Building on Lower Broadway between Liberty and Cortlandt Streets was the city's tallest for 18 months. It came down recently for the U.S. Steel Building, an impressive truss structure by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill for those who admire handsome engineering design. Unfortunately, the replacement is aggressively impersonal at street level. The Singer Building's marble lobby slabs were carried off for coffee tables by lucky scavengers.

The World Trade Center's new, twin 110-story towers were just about as briefly the tallest buildings in the world. Designed by Minoru Yamasaki & Associates with Emery Roth & Sons, these scaleless monoliths are on the site of mixed West Side construction, including early 20th-century office buildings and smaller 19th-century structures.

Four typical dormered Georgian houses, including John McComb's, one of the architects of City Hall, were saved from the Washington Market debacle after a struggle led by a more self-confident Landmarks Commission. The buildings have been moved and reerected in the Washington Market urban renewal area as a kind of preservation tokenism in a sea of new high-rise housing. James Bogardus's cast-iron fronts from the same market, piously demounted, are in storage while planners and architects argue about their future.

WHAT is being built on the ruins of Lower Manhattan is a new city of immense sophistication and overwhelming scale. Wall Street brought the area's first skyscraper age after 1900, ending in the twenties. Then Lower Manhattan languished, its romantic skyline world-famous and its historic pockets safe, until the new Chase Manhattan tower sparked the second skyscraper age in the early nineteen-sixties.

Architecturally, this "renaissance" is not always—in fact it could be said that it is infrequently—outstanding. The new buildings are massive. They are flat-topped and

flat-chested and with a few notable exceptions, without fantasy or art. There are some good recent buildings, among them Davis, Brody's slate-clad tower at 100 William Street, with exploded, multi-level pedestrian ground floor; I. M. Pei's taut refinement at 80 Pine Street; and Emery Roth & Sons' sleek aluminum skin patterns at 77 Water Street. The majority is run-of-the mill speculative production.

But thanks to the pioneering work of a city agency, the Office of Lower Manhattan Development, cooperating with the private Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association, there are unaccustomed sensitivities to innovative principles of urban design, in spite of the impoverished quality of so many single buildings, and it is this fact that makes the Lower Manhattan "renaissance," at least in part, different from ordinary rebuilding.

Unhappy about the change in scale, the planners are reintroducing a human dimension wherever possible, particularly at street level, where people move and congregate. Awareness of high densities has made for insistence on amenities, circulatory improvements and pedestrian pleasures. For providing special features such as parks, passageways or shops, the builder gets more floor space, according to a specific set of requirements and restrictions known as "incentive" zoning. The city's planners have mapped out the features they want the builders to include, and offer space "bonuses" in exchange for them. It is a novel arrangement, and it is working.

As a result, there is an unusual attention to relationships and connections between structures and streets, to stores and open spaces, to water views and walks. The planners promise waterfront esplanades and outdoor cafes to replace Pop-Georgian bars with aluminum awnings over genuine keystone arches on cobbled streets to the river. They know what has been sacrificed to the inevitable, relentless wave of redevelopment, and they have tried to control and stress the quality of life where they can, through sophisticated, legal manipulation of the new construction.

But the human results are as mixed as the architectural results. The removal of the Washington Street produce market to the Bronx from its 19th-century setting, with the Fulton Fish Market to follow, also removed flavor and color. It made the area safe and sanitized for I.B.M. The computers and their minions are buried underground and sealed in glass towers.

When the workers come out for air, it is no longer to slips and cobbled streets. They get planters on paved plazas, like The Avenue of the Americas, or a rebuilt Jeannette Park. Once a shabby trapezoid of bums on benches in unkempt grass littered with bottles, the new Jeannette Park — designed by M. Paul Friedberg & Associates — is superstylish stepped levels of brick, water from pipes, and trees in tidy rows. The old had a sense of nearness to the river and the sea; the new could be anywhere.

The old streets offered an urban esthetic of an intimate, handsome Georgian tradition. The new are impersonal and superhuman, except for a few essays of outdoor gimmickry and pseudo art. This ameliorates brutality, but it is no substitute for the real environmental thing.

The generations-old restaurants featured fresh fish and scrubbed wooden floors. The new ones are formula fake-beam "pubs" with formula menus and décor. Depressingly predictable, they, too, could be anywhere. A renovated Sweets and Sloppy Louie's will be kept in the South Street Seaport restoration, but the fish, which always went from across the street to the pan, will be trucked down from the Bronx. The two chief ingredients of renewal are destruction and irony.

The gains downtown are clear, in regeneration and economic strength, and they are essential to the health of the Lower Manhattan community. But the losses, less apparent to the untutored eye, are tragic. They are in history, architecture and environment, and it is doubtful if even David Rockefeller can name the price. A city is not civilized without its past.

In Lower Manhattan now, the past has no future. Today, there are few places left where classical red brick stands against a theatrical backdrop of towering steel and glass. This has been New York's great environmental throwaway, its nonpareil drama of contrasts, its superb architectural accident. It is, or was, an extraordinary indication of its special strength and style. As the contrasts and continuity are lost, the magic disappears forever. Some of us remember and mourn the most breathtaking cityscape in history. To others, it is a world that never was. ■