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Renovations, With Reservations; Vendors at Essex Street Market Debate Going Upscale

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The waves of immigrants who swept into the Lower East Side in the first years of the 1900's found almost everything they needed sold right under their tenement windows. Pushcart peddlers crowding the streets hawked fish and fruit, bread and boots, pots and pickles. And with minimum start-up costs, new entrepreneurs could scrape out a living provided they were willing to bear the long hours and exposure to the elements.

But the pushcart-packed streets made it hard for the Police and Fire Departments to get through, drew the trash of trade and aroused increasing ire from storekeepers resentful of the competition. So in 1939, Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia offered the peddlers an alternative: the Essex Street Market, four cavernous brick sheds that stretched from Broome to Stanton Streets. It soon filled with vendors whose roof was no longer the sky.

For years, the string of single-story structures was a vibrant venue for scores of fishmongers, butchers, greengrocers and purveyors of low-priced garb. The mostly poor bargain hunters squeezed the fruit, smiled or scowled over their fingers' findings and parted with their pennies and dollars.

But by the 1970's, as shoppers increasingly preferred supermarkets and street-front stores to indoor stalls, the market began shrinking. Today, only two dozen merchants remain in just one of the four city-owned buildings.

Yet as old markets across the country have been revived in recent years and new ones, like the three-year-old Chelsea Market in Manhattan, have opened, the city has sought to sustain the surviving slice of the Essex Street Market; even, most recently, to introduce a stylish touch.

It has refurbished the interior of the blocklong, skylighted building between Delancey and Rivington Streets, reconstructed some of the stalls and improved the heating and cooling systems. And it has leased one end of the hall for a restaurant that will be the market's first upscale operation when it opens this fall.

The restaurant's owner, Felice Banker, says she hopes to draw the hip young residents who have been moving into the area, as well as veteran Lower East Siders, with what she describes as a "new American menu with a bent toward traditional cuisines of the Lower East Side: Eastern European Jewish, and Latino." The Essex Restaurant's recessed floor lighting on newly built mezzanines will share a building with $5 skirts and $10 dresses hanging over stalls.

But one neighborhood business leader said that the city still needed to work on the building's exterior. "It's like a fortress," Howard R. Slonim, president of the Lower East Side Business Improvement District, said of the long brick expanses. He suggested stretches of glass to make the interior "visible to passers-by."

Of the three other buildings that were part of the original market, one, at Stanton Street, has already been transformed into a satellite outpatient center run by NYU Downtown Hospital, which signed a 10-year lease for the building in 1995, after it had stood empty for many years.

The two remaining market sites, one vacated more than a decade ago while the other is nearly empty, are also the focus of recycling efforts. But the attempt to revive one of them shows that redevelopment in the city is rarely a cakewalk.

One of these buildings, at Rivington Street, was leased to Henry Rainge-Megill for 20 years. Mr. Rainge-Megill, who has owned and operated food shops and bars, was given the lease by the city two years ago to transform the building, then vacant, into food kiosks, a banquet hall, a cocktail

lounge and a bakery and cafe. Now, however, the city is seeking to evict him, citing rent arrears.

Mr. Rainge-Megill said he had already put more than $1 million into the building, "including my life savings." He said he had overcome the financial problems that led to the arrears (including unanticipated major structural expenses and a partner who ran out of money) and could finance the remaining $500,000 worth of work.

But the city, he said, has refused to accept the late rent payments and has moved to evict him. And, he said, a city official had told him she believed he did "not have the financial wherewithal to do this project."

But Mr. Rainge-Megill is determined to keep his lease. "I'll go to the Supreme Court!" he said. Guiding a visitor through the building, he pointed to improvements like the newly reinforced foundation and new utility lines, windows and brickwork. "All my money is in here," Mr. Rainge-Megill, 63, said. "My ex-wife's annuity money is in here."

Bruce Brodoff, a spokesman for the city's Economic Development Corporation, which administers the market sites, declined to respond because the "matter is in litigation." He would say only that the rent arrears were the reason for the eviction and that if the agency won Mr. Rainge-Megill's ouster, it would seek new proposals for redeveloping the site.

The fourth building that was once part of the market stretches the full block from Broome to Delancey Streets and stands vacant except for a street-front liquor store and small diner. It has been included in a group of five sites in the area for which the city has invited developers to submit urban renewal proposals.

Although some of the remaining merchants in the Essex Street Market favor having upscale fellow vendors, others fear that this would cause their rents to soar. But Mr. Brodoff said, "Any upscale shops that might take space at the market will have no impact on the rents paid by the other tenants."

He said annual rents for the market's stalls now range from $22 to $25 a square foot. Faith Hope Consolo, vice chairman of the retail leasing firm of Garrick-Aug Associates, said that these compared with a going rate of $60 a square foot for stores on the broad thoroughfares of Essex and Delancey Streets, but were on par with store rents on Rivington, a side street.

Even at the cheaper rents, most of the Essex Street Market vendors have disappeared. But the memory has outlasted their booths. "The pickle section, pickles in a barrel," and their crunchy taste still remain sharp for Jeanne Oberhofer, 60, who as a child frequently accompanied her mother to the market. She now munches on her market memories in Kent, Wash., a Seattle suburb.

In the market's early years, "the shopkeepers were all Jewish and Italian and the customers were mostly Jewish and Italian," recalled Allen Ruhalter, a butcher whose business, begun by his father, is the market's only survivor from its opening day. Most of the market's patrons today are Hispanic and Asian.

Mr. Ruhalter, 68, who began working at the family's meat counter while in junior high school in the mid-1940's, recalled that his schoolboy start as a market meat merchant required a contribution from the dairy stalls. "I was so small, I had to stand on a milk crate to look over the counter," he said.

He also recalled that the carcasses of the chickens sold in the market then "were still warm when they were brought in" by the supplier, and still had their heads, feet and feathers. Plucker was a job category in the market then.

Mr. Ruhalter's son, Jeffrey, 44, who also works in the operation, looked to the market's future. While his father said that their business "goes up and down, but over all it's profitable," Jeffrey Ruhalter said that business was less than in the past, and he put himself with those market merchants and other local business people who favor an upscale turn.

"I'd like it upscale to attract the people moving into the neighborhood," he said of the affluent young arrivals who in the last few years have moved into expensive apartments in renovated tenements. Their presence is signaled by the clubs, restaurants and boutiques that have sprung up on nearby Orchard and Ludlow Streets.

It is also reflected in the $1 million renovation that is transforming Ratner's, the nearly century-old landmark on Delancey Street, from a kosher dairy restaurant to a place where the dinner menu will be bereft of blintzes and barley soup. Instead, diners will feast on steaks and chops in a sophisticated setting when it reopens in two to three months.

Andrew Flamm, executive director of the Lower East Side Business Improvement District, said that the Essex Street Market already offered "fine meats, produce and fish" and that his group wanted to see "more quality food and food-related products," but only to fill vacancies and not at the expense of the current merchants.

But some of those merchants are still worried that an upgraded market could lead to higher rents that would drive them out the stalls.

Low-priced shirts and jeans hang over the entrance to the cramped nook of Juan Vargas and his wife, Carmen Salvador. "If they raise the rent, we have to raise the prices," Mr. Vargas said. "The people who shop here are medium and low income and don't want to pay too much, so there will be no business."

Jose Rivera, who has sold milk, eggs and other dairy items in the market for 15 years, said that "everyone's concerned" about rent rises.

"If it goes up, I leave," he said.

But Mr. Brodoff, the spokesman for the Economic Development Corporation, emphasized that the agency was trying to keep the current merchants viable, even as it was "continually working on improving the market."

"It's not a Tiffany's," he said. "But it's not a street cart."

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