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A Move for the Essex Street Market

By GINIA BELLAFANTE

There's a point at which even the most emphatic preservationist must acknowledge the indulgence of nostalgia. Not every building is in every instance worth saving; not every vanished way of life is worth enshrining. If you believe that cities ought to maximize their options for affordable living space rather than accommodate the best-off, then arguments for keeping things as they are often remain incompatible with arguments for how things ought to be. And yet, mourning is so often the reflex that overcomes us, whenever we hear that a certain patch of land in New York will dramatically alter, a certain structure will go to dust.

What we would be lamenting if we were to bemoan the construction of Essex Street Crossing, the 1.65-million-square-foot mixed-use complex, renderings of which the city recently released, is essentially the loss of parking lots that the city has for decades tried to reimagine. The development, which will be erected over various sites near the intersection of Essex and Delancey Streets in Lower Manhattan, will include 1,000 units of housing (both rental apartments and condominiums), half of which will be made permanently affordable to those families with yearly household incomes ranging from $31,000 to $133,000. The project includes a site for Head Start programs, a community center run by the 100-year-old Grand Street Settlement, office space, retail space, a rooftop farm and a museum.

The prospect of glass towers inevitably (and too often rightly) breeds skepticism. In this case, the planned relocation of the 73-year-old, city-run Essex Street Market, from one side of Delancey Street to what will be a glitzier building on the other, has been the focus of a certain degree of emotion and worry. Last year, the community circulated a petition to keep the market in its current location. Ironically, it wasn't so much the utilitarian-looking 1940 building that seemed to move detractors as what the market had come to symbolize in an era of gentrification.

The Essex Street Market, along with other municipally run food halls, was established by Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia in 1940 to get rid of the pushcart culture he found so distasteful. For years preceding the current real estate boom, the market languished. In 2001, vendors occupied only 60 percent of the available space.

In the '80s and '90s, "it was very hard to get people inside," said Ron Budinas, husband and partner, Ira Stolzenberg, has operated Rainbo's Fish in the mark

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“Things were dark and dreary; there were prostitutes outside,” he added. “It was horrendous.”

“People were too busy playing numbers,” he told me, and certain stalls simply seemed like fronts for heroin dealing.

In recent years, as the fortunes of the Lower East Side have changed, $22-a-pound cheese and smoked Scandinavian fish have come, and surprisingly, this turn of events has not been odious. The market’s bodegas and their unusual root vegetables have remained. Limes are still sold at six for a dollar.

More than any other shopping venue in the city, the market stands as a place where disparate demographics consume things together — where old Hispanic women from the housing projects, owners of $2 million lofts and artists in rent-controlled Ridge Street apartments coexist in a Jane Jacobs vision.

Is this utopian alchemy now doomed? In its new building, years away from completion, the market will double in size to approximately 30,000 square feet. The city has promised existing vendors, from whom it has sought suggestions, that rents will not exceed what they would be paying in the current location; that they will remain in continuous operation until the new structure is ready; that moving expenses will be taken care of; and that infrastructure will be vastly improved.

At the same time, plans for Essex Crossing include a supermarket, which could steer customers away and, as Mr. Budinas put it, “no one really believes that rents won’t go up.”

But if the city can actually do what it claims it is so passionately committed to doing and build on the social dynamic that has evolved at the Essex Street Market for the whole project rather than displace it, then in this instance development will finally mean what its proponents always say it does: progress, and progress of the kind that uses private financing to serve a greater good.

“You come here and it’s like Coney Island, like you’re going to join the circus,” Rhonda Kave, a chocolatier in the market and a slow convert to the new venture, told me. Quirkiness breeds affection and frustration in equal measure. “I’ll mourn this building,” she said, “even as I curse that the air-conditioning doesn’t work.”

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