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Bloomberg reshapes city, despite high profile setbacks



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His congestion pricing plan is in shambles. His Olympic dream of a West Side stadium long-ago evaporated. But six years after he was sworn in on the steps of City Hall near the smoldering hole in the heart of lower Manhattan, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has molded the way the city will look and feel for decades, observers say.

The mayor has transformed much of the city by pushing through 76 rezoning initiatives, turning abandoned waterfront areas into thousands of new homes, and luring financial firms back to lower Manhattan with enticing tax breaks.

"Businesses are investing in parts of the city that they weren't before," said Jonathan Bowles, president of the Center for an Urban Future, an economic think tank. "People are buying homes and building homes in record levels in neighborhoods that were down and out as recently as five years ago."

Indeed, with the dizzying pace of development it can be difficult to remember how bleak the landscape looked in early 2002. Then high-flying financial firms threatened to leave the city. Broadway nearly went dark. The squabbling over what would replace the fallen Twin Towers was just beginning.

But the transformation of the city that has followed has triggered a backlash, too, with many feeling that the city has become too expensive or too precious for its own good and no longer a place where cheap rents permit creative types and other strivers to eek out a living on the margins.

Well before that critique of Bloomberg gained currency, during the dark days of early 2002, the mayor pleaded with his friends in the business sector not to abandon New York in its hour of need, pledging to "renew, rebuild, and remain the capital of the free world."

They did not abandon New York, and, what's more, one out of every six square feet in the city has since been rezoned, the streets are a-clog with tourists, and newcomers are pouring into the city. High-concept street furniture and newsstands are replacing the untidy array of decrepit benches and bus shelters, and one of the city's last vestiges of grit -- the OTBs -- are about to go the way of subway tokens.

The city's very geography has shifted, with new neighborhoods springing in places people didn't know existed, and others carved out of existing communities as real estate agents search for new branding schemes.

"Places like Red Hook that were once a no-man's land are hipster havens, and Brooklyn is now a center for culture and art for the whole country," said Mitchell Moss, a professor of history at New York University and adviser to the mayor's first campaign. "Whoever thought people would want to live on the Gowanus."

"They always say the thing about real estate is that God isn't making any more, but actually, in a way, we are," said a Bloomberg adviser. "We are reclaiming unused land on the waterfront, building homes and stores and offices in places where there weren't any before."

But those transformations have exacted a heavy price, some observers say.

"There has been a pinching of people's sense of place, and a destruction of community identity," said Brad Lander, director of the Pratt Center for Community Development, which advocates for greater grassroots planning initiatives.

"They have accelerated the transformation of this place from a manufacturing city to a condo and office tower city, but a lot of people don't feel invested in that growth."

Fred Siegel, an expert on urban governance and reform and author of "The Prince of The City: Giuliani, New York, and the Genius of American Life," said the mayor's failure on congestion pricing revealed his great weakness as a mayor: his disdain for the middle class, underscored by the continued loss of Mitchell-Lama housing in Stuyvesant Town and elsewhere.

Siegel said, "You can sum up the Bloomberg legacy in two words: luxury city."

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