

The New York Post, May 22, 2008

DEATH BY 'PRESERVATION'

By MITCHELL L. MOSS

DECADES ago, my grandfather would take me to Fel ty's on Orchard Street whenever he wanted to buy a hand-sewn hat. I loved the energy, activity, crowded sidewalks and street-cart vendors that made Sunday morning on the Lower East Side a booming marketplace.

Long before America discovered the Tangier Mall and Woodbury Common, we New Yorkers had our own world of discount shopping. I still cherish that special day when we shopped for *tallis* and *tefillin* before my bar mitzvah.

But that world has evaporated. Synagogues have been converted into theaters, performance spaces and churches. Lingerie and corset shops have given way to tapas bars and pan-Asian cuisine. Gertel's Kosher Bakery has been superceded by "Babycakes," the new mecca for sugar-free, gluten-free and vegan goodies - which has been so successful that it will soon open a branch in Los Angeles.

Admittedly, Russ & Daughters on Houston Street still slices the world's best lox, but much of the neighborhood declined when the population and retail stores moved out. Drug dealers, prostitutes and abandoned storefronts lined many streets in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

As with so much of our city, when crime was brought down, new residents and shopkeepers moved in. Today, the Lower East Side has a remarkable blend of public housing, middle-income housing, old-law tenements and new condos and hotels. The south side of Houston Street between Allen and Chrystie streets alone holds three new hotels. And the Department of City Planning has proposed an intelligent rezoning to guide future growth to those corridors where it is most appropriate.

But now the National Trust for Historic Preservation is calling for the establishment of a new historic district in the area - which would seriously hamper the construction of the new housing that the city so desperately needs.

In 1990, according to NYU's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, just 206 certificates of occupancy were granted in the Lower East Side/Chinatown area. In 2006, that number had more than doubled to 466.

And in 1990, only 40 new units of housing were authorized in the area. In 2006, new building permits authorized 971 housing units, an increase of 2,375 percent.

New York City's Landmark Preservation Commission is focusing on the need to save important buildings in the area rather than to create a massive historic district that would limit new housing and development. Just because a building is old does not mean that it is historically significant. Landmark designation shouldn't be abused to achieve other political and social goals.

The Lower East Side is flourishing; the New Museum just opened on the Bowery and is the catalyst for the transformation of what was once the city's Skid Row. The Yiddish that once was spoken on Grand Street has been replaced by Cantonese and Mandarin.

If New York City is to accommodate the population growth projected over the next quarter century, neighborhood change is inevitable. This is not a city that stands still. It is always evolving.

We should be wary of strangers from Washington bringing their recipes for preservation; let New York be New York.

Mitchell L. Moss is professor of urban policy and planning at NYU's Wagner School of Public Service.