

Plan for South Street Market Leaves a Wake of Dissension

By LAURIE JOHNSTON

The Square Rigger Bar goes to sleep early, down on Front Street near the East River, but it comes to sociable, individualistic life several times a day.

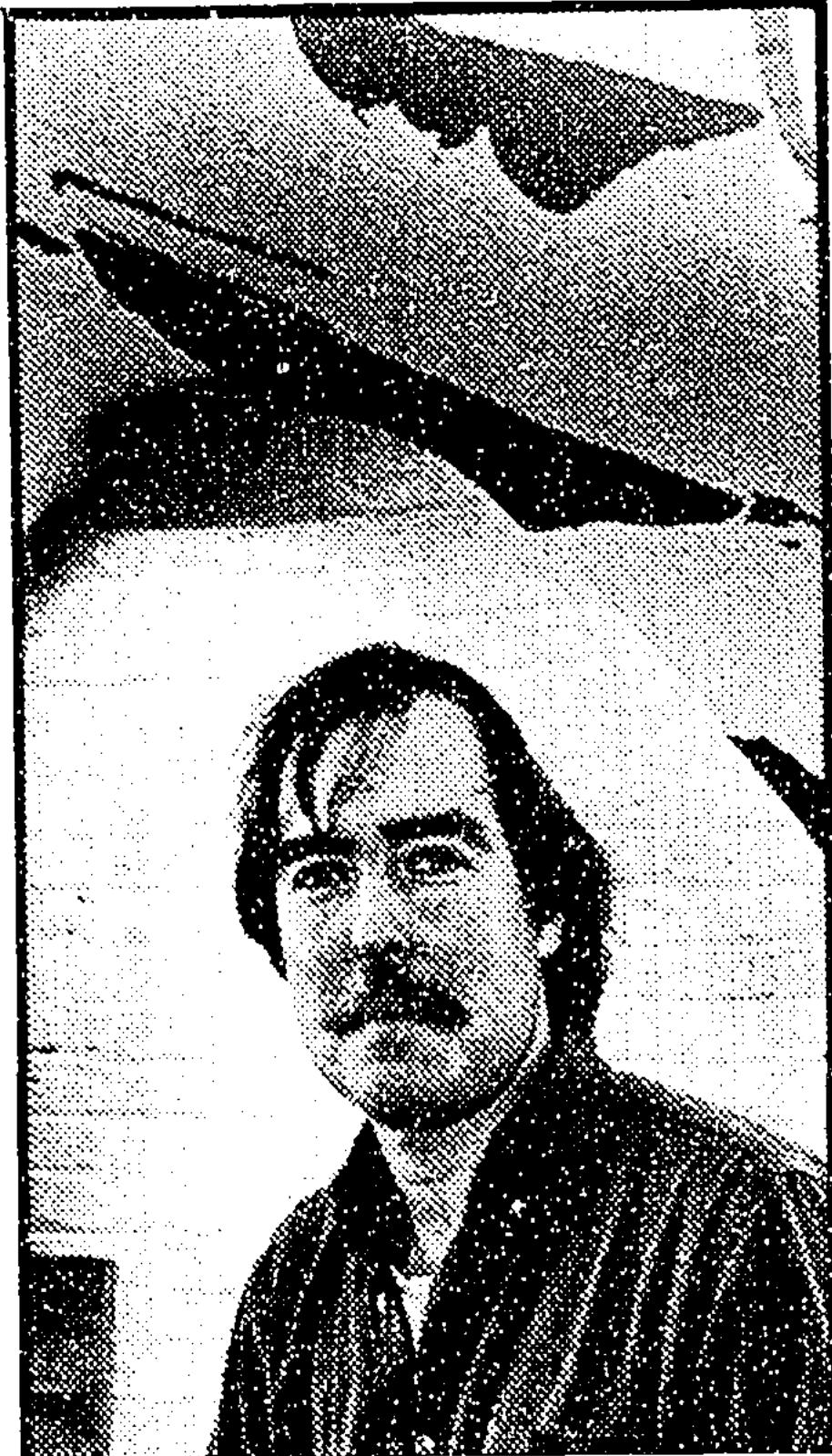
Nick Olatka, the proprietor, is ready for the 6 A.M. lunch break of wholesale fishmongers from the Fulton Fish Market. At noon, around the seven or eight tables or along the carved-wood bar, the galley serves its modest fare to a mainly male Wall Street and civic center crowd, mixed with crew members from the South Street Seaport Museum and perhaps some staff members from the Whitney Museum's downtown branch.

And at 5 P.M. the little bar turns back into the local pub for area residents — "mostly artists and ancient mariners," said Joellen Sheffield, a film maker who lives in an 1840's loft building across the street, behind the circa 1812 redbrick Schermerhorn Row.

"With no TV and no jukebox here," Mrs. Sheffield noted, "everybody talks to everybody about everything."

Lately, they have been talking about a \$210 million plan to build a marketplace of shops and restaurants in the South Street Seaport area, along with a new office and hotel complex. And that means talk about the residents' plans to fight the development, which many fear will tear at the heart of a rare neighborhood. "This is the last intact early 19th-century neighborhood in the entire city," asserts Kit White, an artist-architect and a member of Community Board 1, who is restoring his own building on Peck Slip. With a resident popu-

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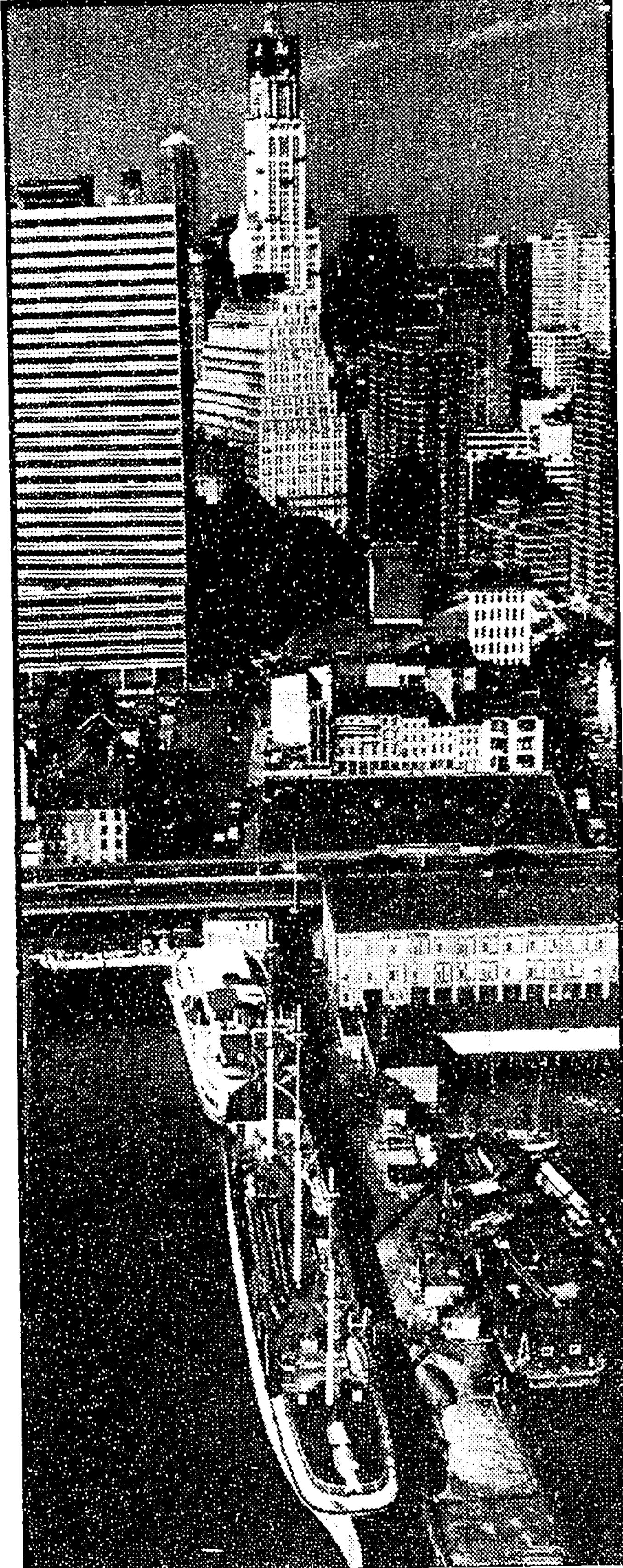


Brian O'Neill, an artist and member of Community Board 1, is skeptical about benefits of seaport plan.



The New York Times / D. Gorton

Among those who may be affected are Richard Fewtrell, with dog, director of restoration of square-rigged ship, Wavertree, a project that revenues from plan may aid; Joe Scheuerer, center photo, owner of Joe's Rope Shop, and Nick Olatka, right, of Square Rigger Bar.



The New York Times / Neal Boenzi

Aerial view of area planned for the \$210 million South Street Seaport redevelopment plan.

South St. Plan Leaves Dissension in Its Wake

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lation estimated at 250, the neighborhood turns its back on the city and its face toward the Brooklyn Bridge, the fish market and the topmasts that rise atavistically above the piers of the Seaport Museum. As far inland as Gold Street, the fishy-salty scents reach up Fulton, John and Beekman Streets or, at the outer reaches, Peck Slip and Burling Slip.

High-rising above the seaport enclave are the four Southbridge Towers, with 5,000 people in 1,650 apartments. The towers, middle-income Mitchell-Lama cooperatives, were built in the early 1960's after a vast area south of the bridge had been all but leveled in that period's brand of "urban renewal."

Ginger Ales and Strategies

Under the masonry cliffs of the financial district and the civic center, the one-story Square Rigger sits between the 10-story Green-Coffee Exchange Building and the community's vegetable-and-flower garden, a block from the seaport piers.

Joe's Rope Shop is across the street, its whitewashed-brick interior strung with rigging and cluttered with tackle. Joe Scheurer himself, a former seaman now married to a weaver, will likely be in the Square Rigger's sundown crowd.

Forty percent of the children in the immediate area may also be there — namely, Devon O'Neill, aged 7, and Jamie Sheffield, aged 3. They will be cadging straight ginger ales while their elders hatch strategies, struggling to head off the development.

Their local coalition, in fact, is circulating a counterproposal to make Schermerhorn Row the focus of an "urban artpark" and cultural center that, they contend, would be less of a "city giveaway."

History, Tourism and Retailing

The entrepreneur for the Seaport Development is the Rouse Corporation of Maryland. Assembling a history-oriented "package" of retail and tourist attractions, the company played a similar role in Boston's recently redeveloped Faneuil Hall Marketplace and Baltimore's Harborplace. The goal of the Seaport Development is higher tax collections as well as direct percentage-of-profit revenues for the city and the privately organized, non-profit Seaport Museum Corporation.

Two blocks of historic Fulton Street, from Water to South Streets, would be closed for a shopping mall. Boutiques and specialty shops would be located in Schermerhorn Row and in a three-story Rouse-built structure (part of the corporation's \$61 million mortgage-financed investment) to replace the bazaar-like New Fulton Market now run by the Seaport Museum.

No new housing is provided in the plan. But, using air rights held by the museum, a 45-story, block-square \$100 million office and hotel complex would be built in 1980 or 1981 facing the mall between Front and Water Streets — thus wiping out the Square Rigger, the Green-Coffee Building and the communal garden. ("We're appalled to have the tower there because it will dwarf our buildings and the seaport, but also because we just invested 200 tulip bulbs in our garden," said Mrs. Sheffield with a wry smile.)

At the waterfront end of the mall, adjoining the museum piers, the city would build a new \$10 million super-pier — under a three-story glass "slip-cover" — that would house up to 100 eating places, large and small.

"And every one of them serving spinach salad," a Square Rigger regular predicted gloomily.

A Studio and a Fish Market

For 20 years, Mark di Suvero, a sculptor and something of an old salt himself, has lived and worked in his high-ceilinged, slope-roofed studio above John DiMane's retail fish market and lunchtime seafood bar, on the Front Street corner of Schermerhorn Row. Other artists with local studios have included Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, Robert Rauschenberg and Jack Youngerman.

Mr. DiMane has already been told that he will be replaced by, as he understands it, a tenant of greater chic, although he said, "I'd think they wouldn't mind a fish store on the mall of something called the Seaport Development." The plan's announced goal of bringing 12 million visitors a year into the area — 30,000 daily average — has alarmed Mr. di Suvero, among others, about congestion and noise.

"What will become of my seagulls?" exclaimed Mr. di Suvero, a former boatbuilder and long-distance sailor.

At Sweet's, one flight up on Fulton Street, the staff likes to recount that the street, now planned as a mall, was once a slip, first used by sailing ships and then by the Brooklyn ferry. Around the corner, South Street was once lined with bowsprits as well as with ship chandlers and counting houses. The cocoa, coffee and spice traders survived into modern times.

A suspicion that the counting houses are now winning out, at the expense of the Seaport Museum's original intention of recreating a purely New York historic scene, is strong among Schermerhorn Row's artists and other tenants. And apprehension, laced with determination, is thick as chowder in

the hangouts amid the tumult and the shouting of the fish market itself: Carmine's, Dirty Ernie's and the cavernous, ornate Paris Bar of the century-old Meyers Hotel on Peck Slip.

The hotel's 35 or so residents, mostly retired seamen, have been given unofficial notice of eviction as plans evolve for conversion to apartments. With a half-dozen other nearby buildings already converted to residences, or on the verge, a major fish market building has just been bought for conversion to co-op apartments.

The specter haunting the area, logically or not, is of the Fulton Fish Market's dying like Les Halles in Paris or the French Market in New Orleans — "strictly tourist now, all the wholesalers forced out," said Bob Smith, a second-generation fish merchant.

'I Wouldn't Miss the Smell'

Not everybody deplores the ship-shapeness of things to come.

Two young New Jersey residents, David Donnelly of Short Hills and Joe Lally of Teaneck, were on their lunch hour from the nearby insurance district around William Street. They were in agreement that "a shopping mall might attract more people to see the other sights of lower Manhattan" provided that the shops "retain the uniqueness here."

"It would be nice to get rid of all these old buildings — they create a lot of derelicts and dogs," said a woman who lives at the Land's End housing project north of the Brooklyn Bridge but finds parking space near the fish market. "I wouldn't miss the smell if they tore it all down, but no doubt it would cost everybody more for fish."

The coalition headed by Brian O'Neill and Mr. White, both artists and members of Community Board 1, talks about the proposed Seaport Development as a "city giveaway" or a "real estate scam" that is "disguised" as a plan to bail out the foundering seaport museum. Coalition members wonder if the fate of seven square blocks — long designated as a landmark — will turn out to be what a local loft-dweller, Richard Hall of Pratt Institute, calls "giving up the dream of preservation for a little Disneyland with a plastic sailor."

Many of this group, including those who had been tenants in buildings, have put much of their own time and money into their lofts and studios. Now they favor competitive bidding for further renewal of the area by individuals, including themselves and other commercial and residential tenants. They say the announced developer will benefit overgenerously from \$25 million to \$30 million in public funds to be spent through commitments that the city, in particular, can ill afford.

The grandes dames of the community are 80-year-old Lea Lake, co-owner of the 137-year-old Sweet's Restaurant, and 74-year-old Lena Morino, co-owner of Sloppie Louie's, the other legendary seafood house, which is a mere 49 years old.

The two women, who still preside over most lunch sittings at their restaurants, share worries about what will happen to their rents and leases now that the state has removed Schermerhorn Row from its Department of Parks and Recreation, to be turned over to the South Street Seaport Museum — as the city's agent — for lease to the Rouse Corporation.

"It isn't nice," Miss Lake complained gently. "We want them to keep the old and the good and not put in a lot of expensive things that never were part of this place."

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