

BUILDING BLOCKS

Zoning Arrived 100 Years Ago. It Changed New York City Forever.

By David W. Dunlap

July 25, 2016

See how this article appeared when it was originally published on NYTimes.com.

Oh, stop blaming the Equitable Building.

Urban lore says that the massive Equitable Building at 120 Broadway in Lower Manhattan — a 40-story extrusion of a whole city block, unrelieved by setbacks and capable of housing 16,000 workers at once — was responsible for the enactment 100 years ago, on July 25, 1916, of New York City's first Zoning Resolution.

But while the completion of the building in 1915 added fuel, the fire was already burning. New York, it had been agreed for some time, was spinning out of control.

For one thing, the city's new privately built subway system was spurring a huge speculative development boom along its route. (It is no coincidence that some of the biggest apartment buildings on the Upper West Side — the Ansonia, the Aphthorp and the Belnord — are a block or less from a subway stop.)



The oversized maps in a portfolio titled, "Height / July 25, 1916." In the "2½" zone, in Lower Manhattan, buildings could rise without setback two and a half times the width of

the street that they fronted. Santiago Mejia/The New York Times

For another thing, the merchants of Fifth Avenue were losing their retail customers and watching the value of their properties drain away, as big loft buildings for garment manufacturers muscled in around them.

“The time has come when effort should be made to regulate the height, size and arrangement of buildings,” George McAneny, the borough president of Manhattan, declared in a 1913 measure establishing what amounted to a zoning committee.

Regulations, he wrote, were needed “to arrest the seriously increasing evil of the shutting off of light and air from other buildings and from the public streets, to prevent unwholesome and dangerous congestion both in living conditions and in street and transit traffic, and to reduce the hazards of fire and peril to life.”

It was New York’s good fortune that Mr. McAneny held political power when he did. Though he played many roles over a long civic career (including a few years as the executive manager of The New York Times), Mr. McAneny was at heart a city planner.



The sheer size of the Equitable Building, foreground — a space-hog of its time — was among several factors that drove the creation of the 1916 Zoning Resolution. Santiago Mejia/The New York Times

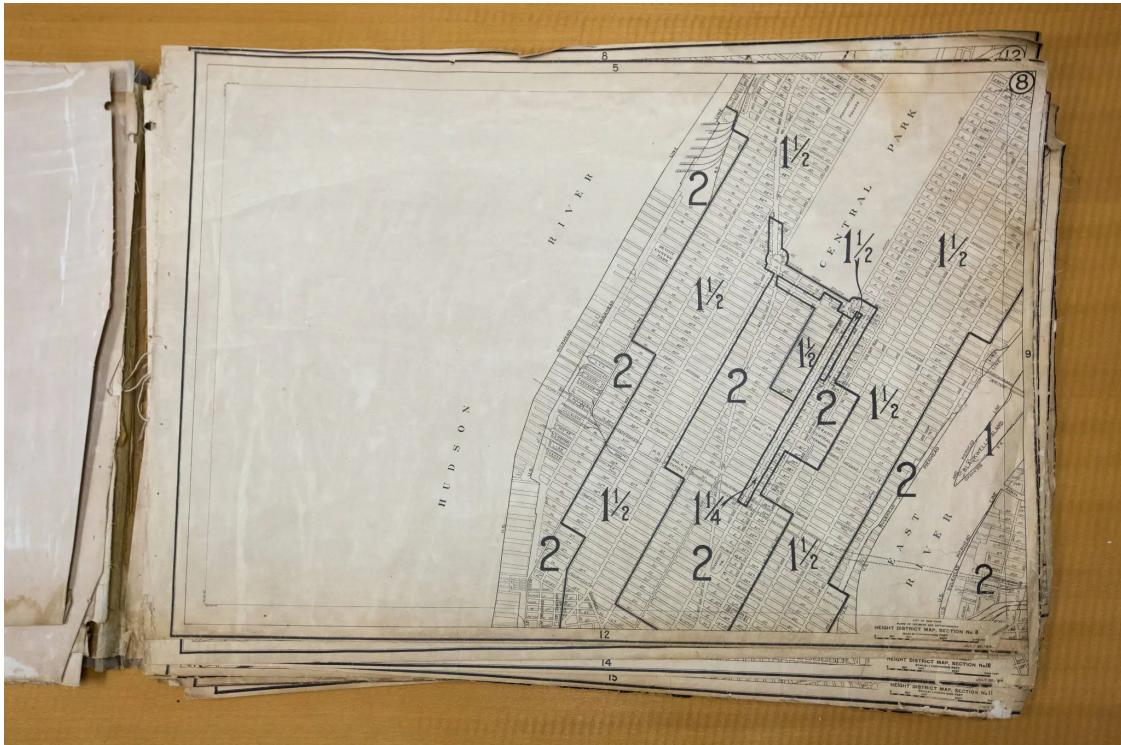
He and Edward M. Bassett were the chief architects of the 1916 Zoning Resolution.

Under its rules, buildings in strictly residential zones were permitted to rise only as high as the streets in front of them were wide; a ratio of one to one, put another way. (Side streets in Manhattan are typically 60 feet wide.)

These “1” zones cover most of the oversized maps in a portfolio titled, “Height / July 25, 1916,” that the City Planning Department still keeps. They are relics now, since the 1916 Zoning Resolution was superseded in 1961.

Also visible on the maps are “1¼” zones, “1½” zones, “2” zones and, in Lower Manhattan, a “2½” zone, where buildings could rise without setback for two and a half times the width of the street that they fronted. (That would have confined the Equitable Building to 18 stories, The New York Times calculated.)

Height restrictions were “only one of many important features of the law,” The Times said. “The law is designed to check the invasion of retail districts by factories and residence districts by factories and businesses. It is aimed to prevent an increase of the congestion of streets and of subway and streetcar traffic in sections where the business population is already too great for the sidewalks and transit facilities.”



These oversized maps are relics now, since the 1916 Zoning Resolution was superseded in 1961. One hundred years ago, buildings in strictly residential zones were permitted to rise only as high as the streets in front of them were wide, or at a ratio of one to one. Santiago Mejia/The New York Times

In other words, it was as much a planning document as a zoning document.

That was its genius, said Carl Weisbrod, who is the director of the City Planning Department and the chairman of the City Planning Commission.

He credited Mr. McAneny and Mr. Bassett with creating a revolutionary document couched in accepted common-law and constitutional doctrines: that landowners are not entirely free to create nuisances to those around them; and that local governments may police conduct in the name of public health, safety and welfare.

“So much of this was to get the courts to feel comfortable that this was a natural and obvious use of the police power,” Mr. Weisbrod said, “when what it really was a dramatic change.” (A key decision came 10 years later when the United States Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of a zoning law in Euclid, Ohio.)

“The reduction of density in Manhattan is directly a product of the 1916 Zoning Resolution,” Mr. Weisbrod said. The 1910 population of Manhattan was 2,331,542, or 164 people per acre. In 2010, the population was 1,585,873, or 109 people per acre.

As for the reviled Equitable Building, it is now an official New York landmark.

And the headquarters of the City Planning Department.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 21 of the New York edition with the headline: Zoning Arrived 100 Years Ago, Changing New York Forever