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Opening day for South Street Seaport in 1983. // Ted Thai/The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images

Changing Tides Engulf the South Street

Seaport

ALLISON C. MEIER   FEBRUARY 25, 2020

Mayor Ed Koch wanted a family-friendly attraction for Lower Manhattan. But this 1983 icon of yuppie-era NYC was swept off course by changing tastes.

New York was born a maritime city. In *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville described the pull of the sea on his fellow New Yorkers: “[p]osted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries.” Walk towards the East River in Lower Manhattan and the street names anticipate the water: Pearl Street, Water Street, Front Street, and finally South Street. There at the eastern edge of the island, the ghosts of the 19th century can still be made out in the tall masts of ships bobbing at the South Street Seaport piers. Hidden beneath the ground, hulls of other ships are buried, used to stabilize the landfill that extended the island far beyond its original borders.

But a century later, the daily life of Manhattan had turned inland. Much of the network of warehouses and boarding houses that served the nautical trades was demolished and replaced with new construction. In 1961, the building of the Chase Manhattan Bank skyscraper spurred a wave of corporate towers in Lower Manhattan.

There was a holdout against this development: the 11-block district of the South Street Seaport, huddled against the East River in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge and the FDR Drive. By the middle of the 20th century, most maritime traffic had shifted to the roomier Hudson River, where deeper waters accommodated larger ships, and the exodus of sailors and fishermen had left many of the low brick buildings clustered around the Belgian block streets vacant. Still, much of the neighborhood's 18th century architecture survived. So, too, did the smell of fish, even if by the 1970s, many of the fresh catches at the Fulton Fish Market were being delivered by truck rather than boat.

The city named the neighborhood a historic district in 1977, and the South Street Seaport Museum boasted a small fleet of historic vessels. But crowds were thin, and funding was sparse. To bring this timeworn waterfront neighborhood back to life, the city turned to a very 1980s kind of urban renewal tool—the festival marketplace. But in New York City, the era's go-to move to boost downtown development didn't quite do the job.

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Shortly after taking office in 1978, New York City Mayor Edward Koch went to Boston to see that city's new star attraction: Faneuil Hall Marketplace. Centered on a 150-year-old Greek Revival structure that had been considered for demolition, the complex had transformed a once-moribund historic area into thriving shopping-and-eating destination. "I want one of those for New York," the mayor said, according historian Jon C. Teaford in his 2006 book *The Metropolitan Revolution: The Rise of Post-Urban America*.

Faneuil Hall reflected the vision of developer James W. Rouse, the famed builder of shopping centers and planned communities who saw the urban mall he called a festival marketplace as a way to bring people back to America's struggling downtowns. In Boston and in Baltimore, where the twin-pavilion Harborplace project opened in the city's Inner Harbor in 1980, the Rouse Company's formula promised to both respect the historical fabric of old urban districts and restore their economic vitality.

Critic Michael Sorkin summed up the Rouse approach in his book *Variations on a Theme Park*:

> Preferring the density of historic areas to wide-open shopping malls, the Rouse Company rejected large-scaled, single-use structures like department stores in favor of small retail shops lining pedestrian passageways and open-air shopping promenades in a carefully regulated yet varied visual environment.

For South Street Seaport, New York carefully followed Rouse's already-successful playbook. Architect Benjamin C. Thompson, who had designed Faneuil Hall and Harborplace, came aboard, and the development would be conducted with public development authorities, just as it had in Boston and Baltimore. A public-private partnership was created between the Rouse Company and the City of New York. The goal was to draw tourists for sightseeing, Lower Manhattan office workers for lunch and dinner, and everyone for shopping.

"I don't think I'm welcome," said a septuagenarian seaman, "and I can't believe people would pay $20 to eat a fish."

The redevelopment started in 1979, and boutiques and restaurants moved into buildings that formerly housed coopers and tanners. For a city bruised by the exodus of middle-class residents during the 1960s and '70s, the new Seaport offered a ray of hope that at least some of those New Yorkers would come back to Lower Manhattan, to shop and eat in an environment that seemed safely suburban. "The purpose of these and other orchestrated, enclosed, mixed-use projects," wrote William Severini Kowinski in the *New York Times* as plans for the project proceeded in 1981, "is to enable the city to recover from injuries inflicted and self-inflicted in the postwar period. Whether the city as a whole will become healthy is still in doubt, and everyone knows it."

The Seaport's first phase opened in 1983, with red-steel-and-glass Pier 17 mall following in 1985. As in Boston and Baltimore, big crowds greeted this new kind of urban attraction. Paul Goldberger, then the *New York Times*' architecture critic, wrote that "instead of breaking an illusion of 19th-century perfection, the new parts of this place make it all the richer and deeper an urban experience."

Before recent renovations, Pier 17 was showing its age. (Jin Lee/Bloomberg)

But Goldberger also wondered if "this kind of neatly packaged urbanism would really make any sense" in a city where "the streets are already crawling with life and vitality."

Indeed, in the early years, some felt that the raffish character of the historic Seaport was eroded by the glitzy new retail. In 1986, after the second phase of the project opened, the *Times* followed an "ancient mariner"—a septuagenarian former seaman named Edmund Francis Moran—as he roamed the new, yuppified district. Wearing his old fishing cap, he surveyed the Abercrombie & Fitch and Laura Ashley skeptically, and was tentative about entering any of the shops or restaurants: "I don't think I'm welcome," he said, "and I can't believe people would pay $20 to eat a fish."

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After the initial boom of interest faded, the redeveloped South Street Seaport struggled to find an audience. The recession of 1990 and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing dampened foot traffic. When visitor numbers refused to climb, writes the historian James M. Lindgren, “Rouse increasingly marketed [the Seaport’s] image as a suburban-like refuge, especially after *Time* pictured a ‘rotting big apple’ in a cover story.” A 1991 television spot included the tagline “The South Street Seaport, where New Yorkers go to get away from New York.”

But that approach made less sense as New York City’s economic fortunes revived. Once-seedy Times Square became a magnet for tourists, and there was no shortage of rival Manhattan destinations; the Seaport was off-the-beaten path for many. Meanwhile, the neighborhood’s nautical vibe continued to wane. Closures in the 1990s ranged from novelties like Captain Hook’s, an eclectic shop selling ships in bottles and coral fragments, to historic holdouts like Sweet’s Restaurant, which had operated on Fulton Street since the 19th century. When Rouse died in 1996 at the age of 81; *Newsweek* cited the South Street Seaport as “one of the Rouse Co.’s biggest successes, but it lacks the authentic grittiness of a real place. It’s like a mall with tall ships.”

In the wake of September 11, crowds disappeared from the South Street Seaport area. (Daniel Acker/Bloomberg News)

The early aughts continued to be hard on the South Street Seaport. The September 11, 2001 attacks reduced Lower Manhattan crowds. In 2005, the Fulton Fish Market, which had survived decades of downturns and developments, relocated to Hunts Point in the Bronx, taking the smell of fish with it. In 2004, the Rouse Company was purchased by the shopping mall giant General Growth Properties, which entered into bankruptcy in 2009, further clouding the site's future. Then came Hurricane Sandy in 2012; severe flooding damaged several buildings and shuttered shops, restaurants, and other local mainstays, including the South Street Seaport Museum and the Bridge Cafe, which dated back to 1794. In 2015, the National Trust for Historic Preservation put South Street Seaport on its list of 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.

Among the threats that the Trust identified was "overwhelming impact" of proposed developments by the Howard Hughes Corporation, the company spun off from GGP in 2010. The difficult balance between creating a destination that can thrive in the 21st century and one that celebrates its heritage remains. Hughes has since rebuilt Pier 17 (it is still a mall, but a sleeker, glassier one), while plans for a 494-foot condo tower adjacent to Pier 17 were nixed after opponents criticized its height. The building the tower would have replaced—the New Market Building, once home to the Fulton Fish Market—is still slated for demolition.

Hughes is continuing with other projects, like the Tin Building, damaged in a 1995 fire, dismantled in 2016, and now being reassembled west of Pier 17. In June, the company announced that Skidmore, Owings & Merrill would oversee a master plan process for "the continuing evolution of Seaport District properties."

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But interest from the Hughes Corporation in transferring air rights to a parking lot at Water Street has sparked fresh objections from the grassroots group Save Our Seaport, which stands against further changes to the area's historical character.

That opposition isn't the only hurdle the redevelopment faces. Last year, the *New York Times* reported that elemental mercury may be below the Water Street parking lot—the toxic legacy of the thermometer factory that stood there the 19th century.

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In retrospect, the Rouse Company's festival marketplace was an imperfect revival; it overlooked the neighborhood's human history. When it tried to shape a haven for the middle class in what had been a working-class neighborhood, the Seaport lost some of its historic connection to the waterways.

"Like a mall with tall ships." South Street Seaport today. (Allison Meier/CityLab)

It is in many ways the last neighborhood of its kind in New York, a link to a bygone era when water was the gateway to the city and its streets were raucous with the flow of seafarers, traders, and immigrants. Glimpses to a past obliterated elsewhere in the city survive here, in the terra-cotta fish and shells that adorn a façade on Beekman Street, or along the 1811 counting houses of Schermerhorn Row on Fulton Street, once home to merchant warehouses and later a hotel with boarders who, in an 1880 census, included a tug captain and fish dealer.

Today, as the neighborhood braces for the next wave of redevelopment, its blocks of low brick buildings are pocked with reminders of many previous attempts at transformation. The city has changed and its needs are different. But even with chain stores and sleek 21st-century architecture, something of Seaport's salty spirit endures, and its streets still lead visitors down to the water where New York City began.

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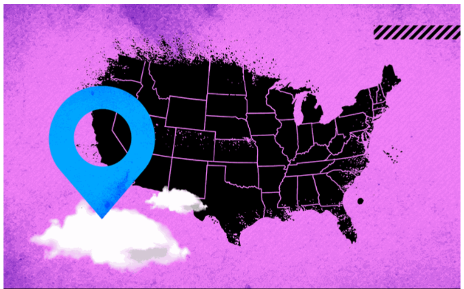

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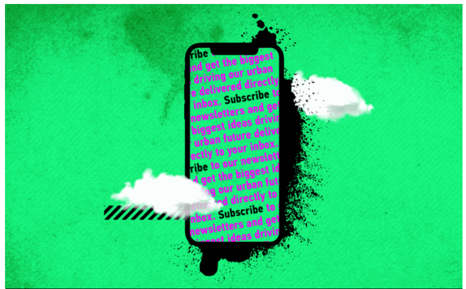

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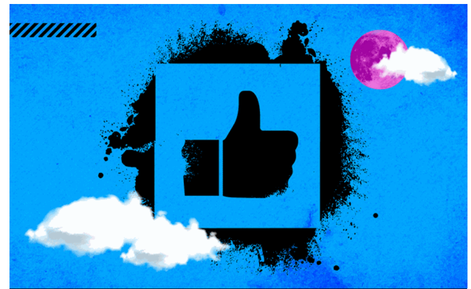

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