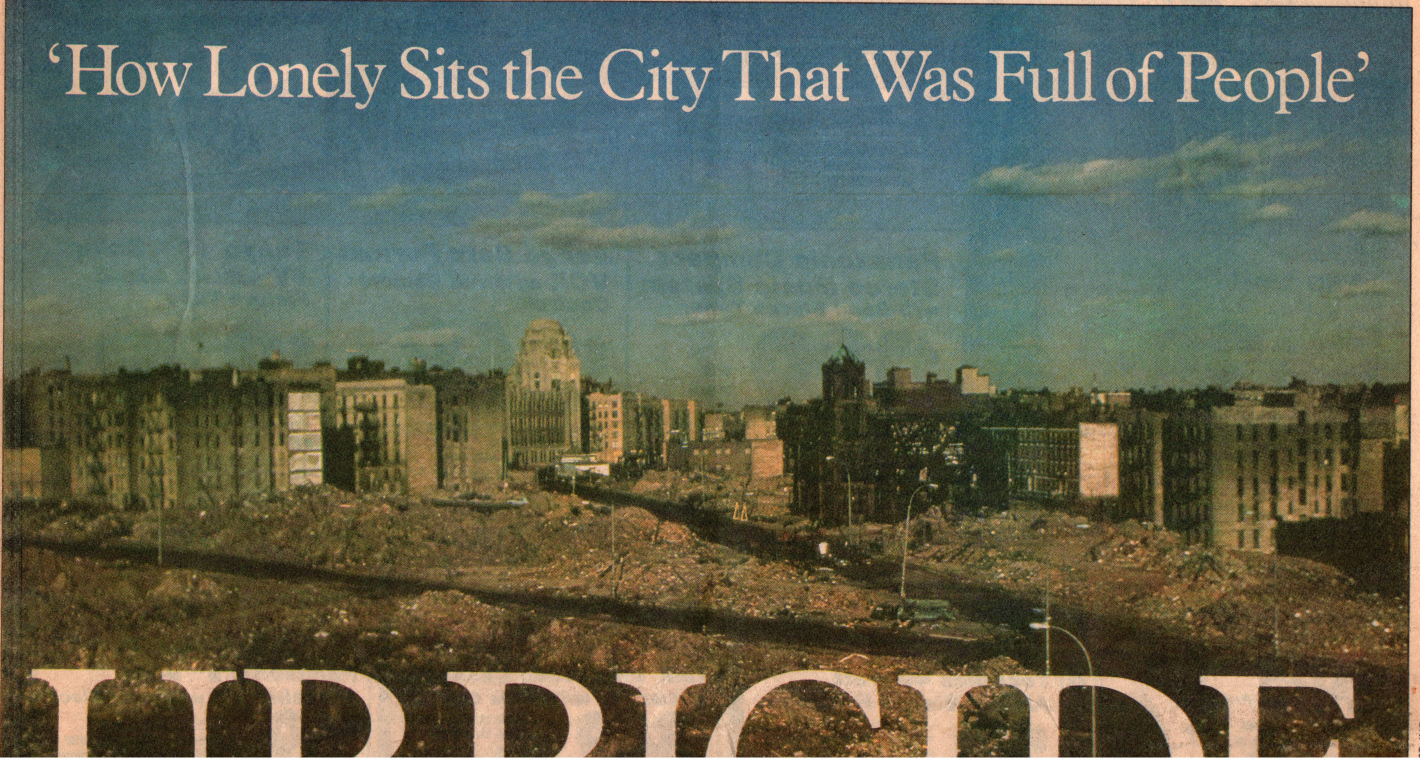


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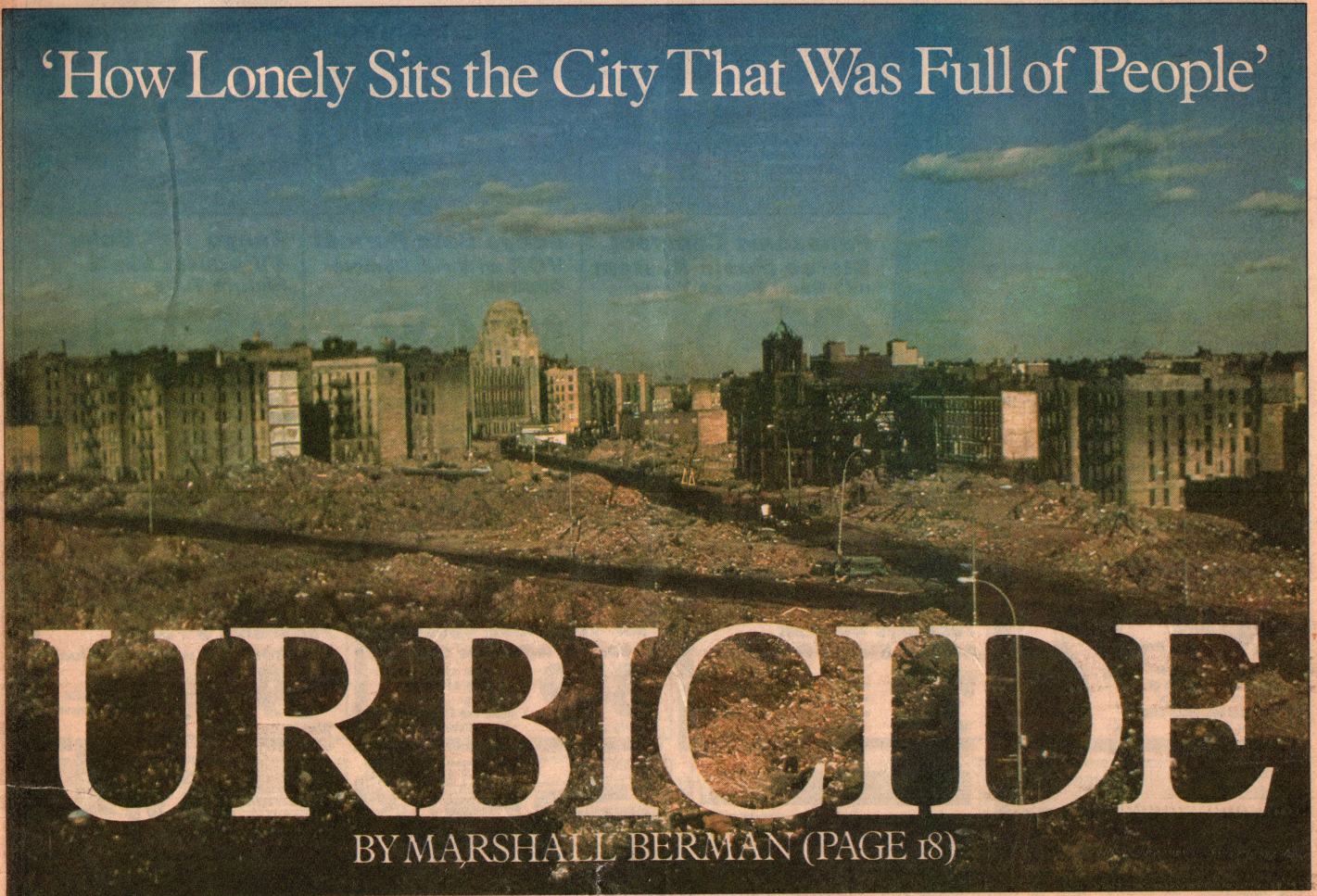
'How Lonely Sits the City That Was Full of People'



INDICENT

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'How Lonely Sits the City That Was Full of People'



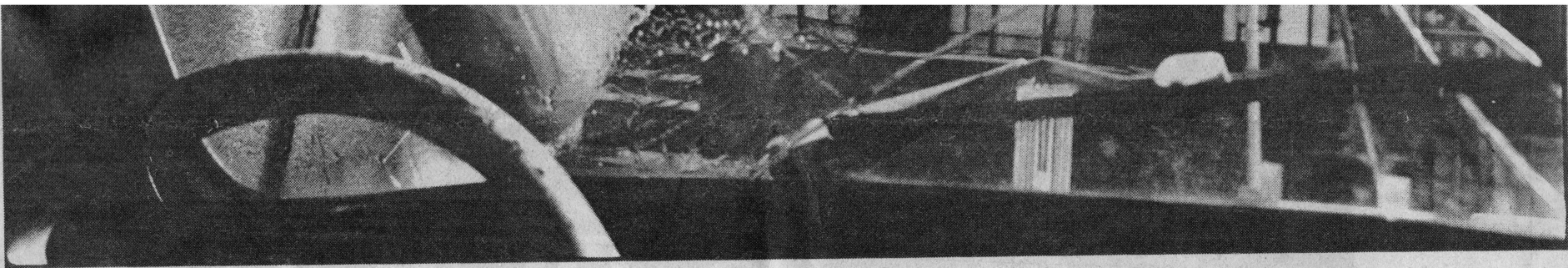
URBICIDE

BY MARSHALL BERMAN (PAGE 18)

ETHAN HOFFMAN/ARCHIVE PICTURES INC.

The literature of uricide is painful, of course, but also luminous and profound. The ordeal of having to learn to see and to speak all over again—look at the world from inside the ruins, to communicate by signaling through the flames—has enlarged the people who could survive it.





ARLENE GOTTFRIED

Roots, Ruins, Renewals: City Life After Urbicide

*For David Roskes,
Shalom!
Marshall Berman*

By Marshall Berman

*What are the roots that clutch, what
branches grow out of this stoney rubbish?*
—T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

1 / Bonded in Ruins

When I talk about ruins, I'm an interested party. The South Bronx, where I spent my childhood and youth, is the site of one of the greatest aggregations of recent ruins in the world today outside Beirut. The South Bronx's physical and social destruction began with the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway in the late 1950s and early 1960s spreading gradually southward from the highway, and northward from the emerging Bruckner Expressway, in the late '60s. Then, in the early 1970s, the disintegration began to spread at a spectacular pace, devouring house after house and block after block, displacing hundreds of

thousands of people from their homes like some inexorable plague. Those were the years when the Bronx finally made it into all the mass media, as a symbol of every disaster that could happen to a city: "The Bronx Is Burning!" resonated all over the world. My family had left the South Bronx several years before; but all we had to do was turn on the news and we could see our old neighborhood in close-up, in real living color (urban fires make great visuals), as it went down in flames. Or we could simply consult the little boxes in each morning's *Times* that itemized buildings destroyed the day or night before. Every time I saw or heard about the destruction of another landmark of my life—streets I'd played in, houses where friends and relatives had lived, schools, shops, synagogues—I felt like a piece of my flesh was being ripped away.

Whenever our family got together in

the middle and late 1970s, we would talk about "our house," 1460 College Avenue, the apartment building where we had lived for 20 years. Was it still standing? Were people living in it? No one had heard anything about the building since the fires, collapses, and abandonments had begun. Maybe no news was good news, but during the plague years none of us could bear to go back and take a look.

Finally, one fine day in 1980, I took the D train, got off at East 170th Street, and hoped for the best. As I came up from the subway, onto the Grand Concourse, I saw a dreadful sight: a row of splendid red-brick apartment houses, with richly sculpted and beautifully detailed facades—houses that had meant "class" far beyond our means not so long ago—turned into an enormous mass of ruins. The facades were charred black, some of the upper walls had collapsed, the windows all were smashed (probably by fire-

men—this must have been one hell of a fire), and the sidewalks were still strewn with debris. As I turned onto 170th Street, and walked downhill for about half a mile, going east, I saw a great panorama of recent ruins unfold before me. Some, like the group on the Concourse, had been sealed off with cement blocks. This might mean that their owner, most likely the city, was planning to leave them standing, in the hope that they could be made livable again someday. Alternately, it might mean that the city simply hadn't yet found the time to tear them down. Others, in various stages of demolition or decomposition, presented jagged expressionist forms, far more arresting than the ordinary squares and cubes of people's homes. Such consisted of two wings, one burned and sealed off, another where life seemed to be going on. But going on precariously: the "Apart-

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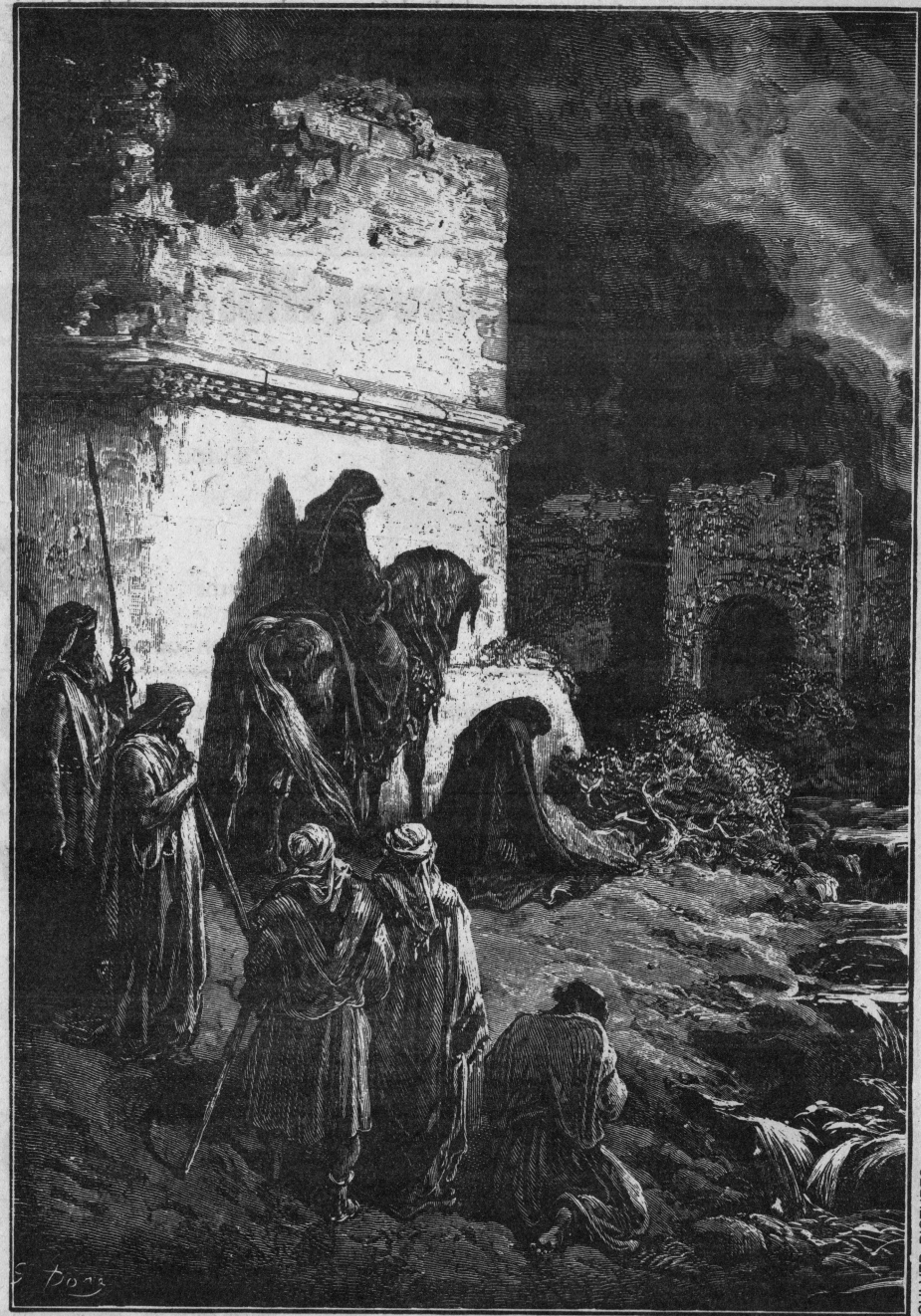


CULVER PICTURES

In Euripides, Troy has meaning for its citizens even as it burns down.

Continued from page 18
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CULVER PICTURES

Gustave Doré envisions Nehemiah surveying the ruins of Jerusalem.

in Berlin, Belfast, Beirut, masses of people have watched the buildings burn and crumble around them day by day and wondered when their turn would come; have taken elaborate precautions and seen all their care come to nothing; have lost much of what they possessed (which

of pride,
your very name of glory shall be stripped away.
They are burning you, and they drag us forth from our land, enslaved. . . .
O city, long ago a happy place, goodbye!



In Euripides, Troy has meaning for its citizens even as it burns down.

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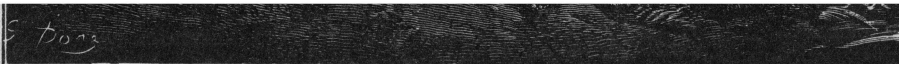
ments for Rent" signs hanging from the fire escapes suggested that services and maintenance had been cut to the bone, that tenants were scared and moving out as fast as they could find places to go before winter began. There were a couple of blocks, once especially close and dense and noisy, with sidewalks too narrow for their crowds, that now contained nothing at all: most of the rubble from their buildings had long since been carted away, and they were as open and empty as the desert.

As I got closer to our old home, I began to sweat. A few smaller houses, probably occupied by their owners, were, as ever, shabby but intact. On the other hand, the synagogue where I was bar mitzvahed was a ruin, burned and ready to collapse. On the block before the house I was eerily alone: the buildings were still standing, but sealed. Everything looked dead as a ghost town: not a good sign. What if, when I got to the spot, there was nothing there? At last I turned the last corner, and—there it was! Thank God! And there were people living in it, names on the buzzers, drapes, and plants in the windows, kids jumping rope in the courtyard. I relaxed with a sort of metaphysical relief: my roots were still alive. Now I could climb the hill, take the train, get back to my home and my life again.

In my family we take things very personally, as if the ruins were meant for us and us alone. In fact, in our sense of loss and violation, we have plenty of company. In the South Bronx alone, more than 300,000 people fled in the 1970s as their homes were being destroyed. Many of these people were forced to run more than once, trying desperately to stay ahead of the blight that kept catching up with them. Thousands more in Manhattan (on the Lower East Side and in Harlem) and in Brooklyn (Brownsville, East New York, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Bushwick) went through the same ordeal. In fact something similar was happening in working-class neighborhoods in older cit-

ies all over the U.S.A. In New York, though, it happened, like everything here, on a far greater scale; moreover, because this city is an international communications center, its devastation and anguish were transmitted instantly and vividly to the whole world. No one has seriously tried to add up the victims of this latest wave of urban destruction. It wouldn't be easy. First, we would have to count all the people who were forced to flee instantly, when their homes burned down or collapsed. Next, there would be a larger group, harder to pin down, who have fled the fire zones out of fear—quite a reasonable fear—that they, their homes, their children would be next. Finally, there would be all those who no longer live in the fire zones, but who still feel a whole range of social and emotional bonds with them, and who are emotionally devastated to see their roots destroyed. An accurate national total could run well into the millions.

It is important not to get carried away: on the scale of 20th century violence and destruction, these ruins don't loom very large. True, the South Bronx and Brownsville look a lot like Rotterdam and Warsaw and Berlin and Tokyo in 1945. But there are important differences. For one thing, there are a lot fewer dead. If we added up all the people of the South Bronx who were killed in fires and building collapses, all those killed by drugs or by fighting over drugs, all those caught in crossfires, all the children who died of neglect, malnutrition, or violent abuse, all the victims of the many diseases that infect a decomposing city, we would probably get, for the 1970s, a figure of several thousand. This is deplorable; but it's small potatoes in an era whose bombs have killed 100,000 people in a single day. Still, if our nation stays lucky, the assault on the South Bronx may be the closest we will ever come to the full-scale disasters of war. Moreover, there may well be a kinship among the survivors of these various assaults, the people under fire. In the Bronx as well as



Gustave Doré envisions Nehemiah surveying the ruins of Jerusalem.

in Berlin, Belfast, Beirut, masses of people have watched the buildings burn and crumble around them day by day and wondered when their turn would come; have taken elaborate precautions and seen all their care come to nothing; have lost much of what they possessed (which in the South Bronx wasn't much in the first place); have lost neighbors and loved ones; and finally, as they fled, have looked back dazed and uncomprehending on the ruins of their lives. These stricken people belong to one of the largest shadow communities in the world today, victims of a great crime without a name. Let us give it a name now: *urbicide*, the murder of a city.

2 / Urbicide Past

If there is a shadow community of people whose physical and emotional communities have been destroyed, this fellowship extends not only outward in space—from Brooklyn and the Bronx to Belfast, Beirut, Bangladesh, and on and on—but also far backward in time. As long as people have lived in cities, they have been haunted by fears of urban ruin. It isn't hard to see why. Any city is a work of human construction and cooperation; but anything that is constructed can be destroyed, and any human beings who can work together can also turn against each other and destroy all they have made. A city is one of the earliest and most enduring expressions of collective pride; but we have all been through enough to know what goes before a fall. A city is an attempt at a kind of collective immortality—we may die, but the forms and structures of our city will live on. Ironically, however, our attachment to these forms makes us more mortal, in the sense of more vulnerable: there are more ways for our lives to be destroyed. Thus myths of urban ruin grow at our culture's roots.

*O Troy, once
so huge over all Asia in the drawn wind*

*of pride,
your very name of glory shall be stripped
away.
They are burning you, and they drag us
forth from our land,
enslaved. . . .
O city, long ago a happy place, goodbye!
— Euripides, *The Trojan Women*,
5th century B.C.*

And, from the same period, a Jew laments the destruction of Jerusalem:

*How lonely sits the city that was full of
people!
How like a widow she has become,
She that was a princess among the
cities. . . .
She weeps bitterly in the night, tears on
her cheeks;
Among all her lovers,
She has none to comfort her. . . .*

*The roads to Zion mourn,
for none come to the appointed feasts;
All her gates are desolate. . . .
Her foes have become the head, her ene-
mies prosper;
All her people groan as they stretch for
bread;
They trade their treasures for food to
revive their strength.*

*Is it nothing to you, all who pass by?
— Lamentations 1.1-12, 6th century B.C.*

From ancient times to our own times, the experience of seeing one's city in ruins has been one of the traumatic primal scenes. And *urbicide* has been one of the primal crimes.

Lately I've been reading in the literature of *urbicide*. It is painful, of course, but also luminous and profound. The ordeal of having to learn to see and to speak all over again—look at the world from inside the ruins, to communicate by signaling through the flames—has enlarged the people who could survive it. They have been forced to concentrate and reorganize their minds, just to get the picture straight: the destruction of all the places, all the things, all the sights and sounds, all the activities and institu-

tions through which they built up and defined their lives; their inability to take care of themselves in the most basic ways—to get food, clothing, and shelter; the suffering of their children (a source of the most intense anguish in the literature of uricide), whose dependence on their parents becomes radically acute just when their parents are least able to help them; the total inability of their accustomed leaders, and the inadequacy of their traditional norms, to deal with life in the ruins. Then they have had to stretch all their faculties to find new ways to define themselves, to connect with each other, and to relate to the world, simply in order to survive each day. Finally, they have had to reach into the depths of their inner lives, and to blast new depths, to deal with overwhelming questions. What is the meaning of these ruins? How can this have happened to me, to us? What kind of world is this where things like this happen? Some of their answers over the ages can show us what our lives are made of, and how in death's midst we can make life anew. Again and again, through human history, our most dreadful experiences have inspired our capacity for renewal: one of those ironies through which our species has managed to keep itself alive.

Some of the earliest writing in the literature of uricide is still just about the best: for instance, the Old Testament books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, along with assorted Psalms and prophetic fragments, written at the time of the first destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 583 B.C.; and Euripides' tragedy, *The Trojan Women*, written and presented at Athens in 415 B.C., near the climax of the 30-year Peloponnesian Wars, which destroyed dozens of cities and left large parts of the Greek world in ruins. (Virgil's *Aeneid* tells the Trojan story in much more detail but Euripides is closer to the bone.) These ancient works gave us most of the images and structures of feeling that we still use in our attempts to come to terms with the ruins in our cities and our lives today.

What is the meaning of the destruction of our city? One conclusion, which some people drew in the ruins of ancient cities, and other people are still drawing up in

died for a good purpose, to defend their city—unlike the Greek heroes who, when they died, died for conquest, for plunder, for booty, for nothing at all. Hecuba, when she is about to be taken into captivity, tries to commit one last act that will mean something: she tries to throw herself into the city's flames, and die with it. She doesn't get her chance; the Greeks stop her and take her away. Still, this would be a worthy way to go. In a universe that seems to mean nothing, the bond between citizens and their city means something—especially where that bond is fragile, precarious, where cities and citizens alike are endangered species.

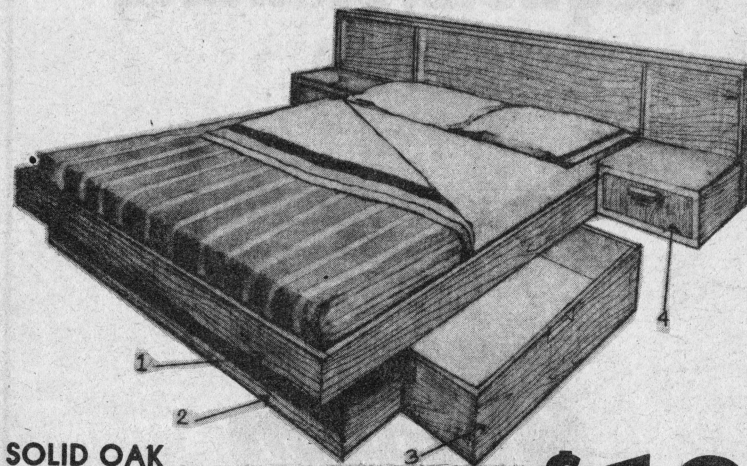
The Jewish responses to uricide are more complex—at once more twisted and neurotic, and yet more potentially creative—than the Greek. The prophets, like Hecuba, trace uricide to the gods; only they believe that their God was right to hate and destroy them, that they were profoundly guilty and deserved to be punished for their sins. The prophets present searing indictments of life in Jerusalem before its fall. They say that the ruling castes, the generals, the rich merchants, the moneylenders, the priests, the official prophets, all ran after riches, honors, pleasure, success, and stained their hands with the people's blood; that the rich laid house to house and field to field, so that there was no place for the poor in their own land; that all the poor desired was to emulate the ways of the rich and great, to change places with their oppressors; that people of every rank and order oppressed each other, devoured each other's flesh and blood; that the covenant between God and Israel, and the vocation of a holy people, was forgotten by all. In other words: as we see Jerusalem in ruins, we must understand that we ourselves are ultimately to blame. God sent the Babylonian army to light the fires, but only after we rotted the foundations and destroyed our city from within.

What are we to make of this? If we remember that these are victims speaking to victims here—survivors grubbing for food and shelter in the ruins, captives weeping for their lost homes—there appears to be something morbid and perverse in this victim's passion for collective blame. Aren't the citizens of lost Jerusalem suffering enough already? Do

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is closer to the bone.) These ancient works gave us most of the images and structures of feeling that we still use in our attempts to come to terms with the ruins in our cities and our lives today.

What is the meaning of the destruction of our city? One conclusion, which some people drew in the ruins of ancient cities, and other people are still drawing up in the ruins of the Bronx, is that it has no meaning, and that, moreover, there is no meaning to be had. Euripides puts such a cry of cosmic despair into the mouth of Hecuba, who used to be queen of what used to be Troy. The chorus of Trojan women has just a protest to the god of gods, Zeus: "Can it be, my lord, that you've forgotten, from your throne in heaven's bright air, my city, which is ruined?" Hecuba's response is caustic: "O gods! what wretched things to call on—gods!—for help." In fact, the gods are to blame for this catastrophe: "The gods meant nothing except to make life hard for me, and of all cities they picked Troy to hate." But why? There is no reason, says Hecuba, and it is folly to expect the gods to be reasonable:

That mortal is a fool who, prospering, thinks his life has any strong foundation; for our fortune's course of action is the reeling way a madman takes

With lines like these, we are pretty close to the existential abysses of Shakespeare's tragic heroes: like flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport; life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. In the 20th century, of course, this abyss, like everywhere else, is more densely populated than it used to be. But it is worth remembering that as long as cities have been destroyed, existential despair has been close to home.

And yet, for Euripides, even if there is no meaning in the universe, one's city itself turns out to be a source of meaning. Even if it is burning down—maybe especially if it is burning down—the bonds between us and our city can give our lives some value. Thus the Women of Troy console themselves that their loved ones

What are we to make of this? If we remember that these are victims speaking to victims here—survivors grubbing for food and shelter in the ruins, captives weeping for their lost homes—there appears to be something morbid and perverse in this victim's passion for collective blame. Aren't the citizens of lost Jerusalem suffering enough already? Do they need to be made to suffer more from guilt? Moreover, some of this self-torment is delusory: to believe that little Israel could have stopped Babylon's imperial juggernaut if only the people had been righteous and good is a dangerous flight from reality. But in other ways, the prophets penetrate deeper than ever into reality, forcing their people to take some responsibility for their fate. Like Socrates later, they entice and intimidate the people to know themselves, to make a great leap into collective self-awareness. In years to come, when Jews learn to take the vow, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand wither," one of the things they will have to remember is that cities are very precarious and vulnerable, especially when their citizens forget to take care of them.

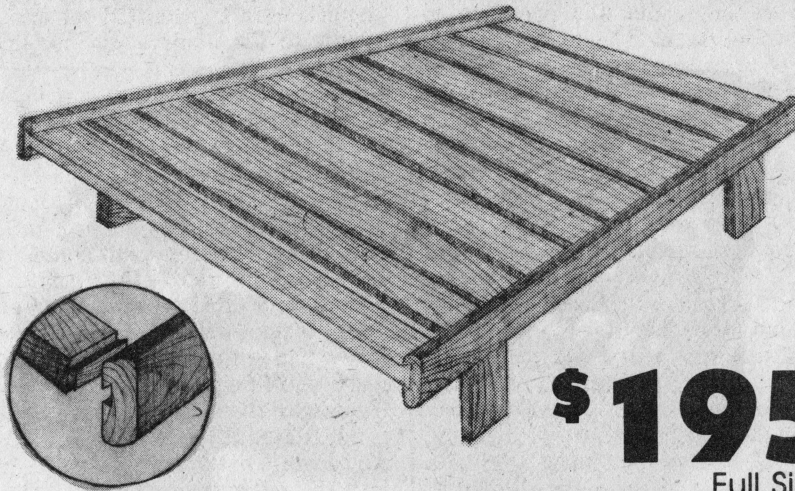
This knowledge is cruel and painful; what makes the prophets so determined to inflict it on the people is their belief that the people are going to get a second chance. Their perspective on the ruin of Jerusalem is historical rather than cosmic: they see uricide not as the end of an eternal cycle, something that inevitably befalls all cities (as it is for Euripides and all other Greek thinkers), but rather as an intermediate stage in a spiral, part of an historic process that will eventually lead to renewal and progress. For Jeremiah, the bitterness of exile can be transformed into an educational experience, abasement can become a basis for growth. "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile; and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." The Jews may be able to learn in their enemy's city what they never thought to learn in their own: how to be citizens. If they can learn to live for the city, rather than for themselves alone, then they may be ready to

Continued on next page

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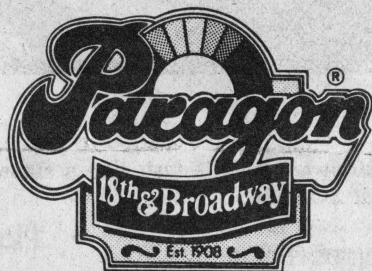
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Continued from preceding page

build Jerusalem anew. For the end of the prophetic dialectic, which coexists with their traumatic visions of urban ruin, is a triumphant vision of *rebuilding*. "I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel," God promises the prophet Amos, "And they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall build vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their land, and they shall never be plucked up." In this dialectical vision, the destruction of Jerusalem emerges as a sort of Fortunate Fall: it is only through losing our city that we can find the right way to build a city and only through this knowledge that we will attain the power to build (or rebuild) a city that can last. Thus the prophets' critique of their people's past is meant to empower them to transform their future. If the people understand why they are overcome today, they shall overcome tomorrow.

Tomorrow, too, the victims of uricide will get revenge. Both Jeremiah and Euripides predict that the conquerors will be conquered before long. Euripides draws on an ancient myth in which the triumphant Greek armada is utterly destroyed directly after its uricide at Troy to warn his fellow Athenians—who have just obliterated the little island city-state of Melos, killing all its men, enslaving the women and children—that their brutal supremacy cannot last: "That mortal who sacks fallen cities is a fool... His own turn must come." This is more than wishful thinking. Both the tragedian and the prophet understand that uricide is not merely bad morality, but bad politics as well. A winner that seeks not merely to rule the losers but to annihilate them will gradually align the whole world against it, and turn into a loser itself. Thus the arrogance of power turns out to undermine power, and uricide is revealed as a prelude to suicide. Both Euripides' and Jeremiah's prophecies would soon be fulfilled: within a generation the Babylonian empire would be utterly destroyed, and its captive peoples would be free to go home; within a decade of *The Trojan Women*, Athens's insatiable lust for power would lead it into a series of disastrous defeats, and although the city would hold onto nominal sovereignty for half a cen-

captivity and see what an uricidal war plus three decades of abandonment have done to their city, they go into a state of shock. At first they are so stunned that they can do nothing at all. (This syndrome has been described exhaustively in many contemporary studies of the survivors of disasters.) But Nehemiah emerges as a brilliant leader and organizer. He agitates among the people, appeals to their pride in themselves. "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer disgrace." The people respond to this call: "they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' So they strengthened their hands for the good work." Nehemiah organizes them into work detachments (based partly on clan affiliations, partly on neighborhoods, and partly on occupation), and establishes a public subscription by which everyone will contribute to the work according to their means. All sorts of troubles unfold. There is hostility from some of the peoples who had dug themselves in here when the Jews were driven out; in some phases of the work, "each of the builders had his sword girded at his side while he built." Then the poor Jews protest that the rich are getting richer on this project, while they are forced to sell their land, their houses, and even their children to obtain the bare necessities of life. Nehemiah, who has by now been appointed governor of the city, prevents a civil war by abolishing the practice of debt slavery (as Solon was doing in Athens just around this time), prohibiting usury, and forcing the rich to return to the poor most of what they had seized. Many other things go wrong, but vision and organization gradually overcome them. "So we built the wall, for the people had a mind to work." The city wall is dedicated, to great rejoicing. Of course, this is only a beginning: when the Jews returned, not only the temple, but just about everything else, has been reduced to wasteland; at the point the narrative leaves off, there is a wall, but not much within it. Still, the people have staked out an urban frontier for themselves, and transformed a wasteland into a living city. The first rebuilding of Jerusalem is a paradigm of urban renewal, of a city coming back from the dead.

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Jeremiah's prophecies would soon be fulfilled: within a generation the Babylonian empire would be utterly destroyed, and its captive peoples would be free to go home; within a decade of *The Trojan Women*, Athens's insatiable lust for power would lead it into a series of disastrous defeats, and although the city would hold onto nominal sovereignty for half a century more, it would never recover from this crash. The literature of urbicide reveals the classic form of political overreaching: for all the agony urbicide inflicts on its victims, what it does to the conquerors may in the end be even worse.

One of the fascinating ironies of this literature is that, if the conqueror is really heading for the fate of his victims, then he, too, will soon be eligible for the compassion that all victims of urbicide deserve. Whether his victims, seething with hate, will be able to grant him that compassion will be a measure of their spiritual growth. Toward the end of the book of Jeremiah, we see the Babylonian empire suddenly collapse under a Persian attack. Now, at last, all the dire prophecies will be fulfilled: Jerusalem yesterday will be a model for Babylon today. Now it is the 'captive peoples' turn to gloat, and to escape. But Jeremiah does not want the Jews to gloat: to seek the welfare of the city, after all, was one of the main things that the Jews in exile were supposed to learn.

Suddenly Babylon has fallen and been broken:

Wail for her!

Take balm for her pain; perhaps she may be healed.

*We would have healed Babylon,
But she was not healed.*

It is only when the Jews have learned to feel compassion even for their captors that they will be ready to go home and rebuild their own city. Then they may be ready to transcend the zero-sum politics of their age, and to build a world in which nobody's city will get burned down.

The book of Nehemiah describes the work of rebuilding. It is a task that poses enormous difficulties, both material and spiritual. When the Jews return from

just about everything else, has been reduced to wasteland; at the point the narrative leaves off, there is a wall, but not much within it. Still, the people have staked out an urban frontier for themselves, and transformed a wasteland into a living city. The first rebuilding of Jerusalem is a paradigm of urban renewal, of a city coming back from the dead.

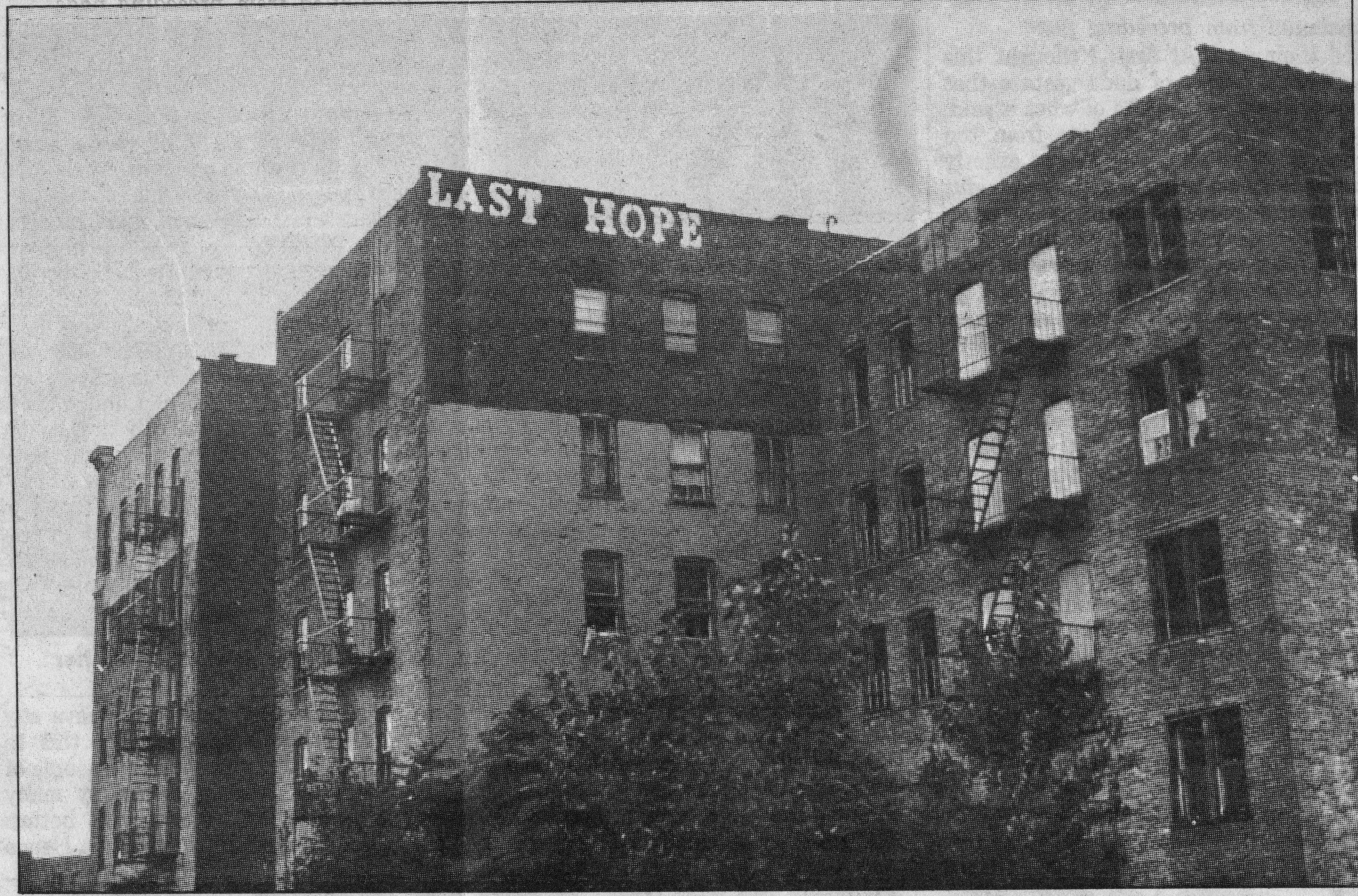
3 / The City Coat of Arms

We are badly in need of such paradigms today. The 20th century has probably created more ruins than all earlier centuries put together. Our wars have reverted to the urbicidal and often genocidal ferocity that the ancients knew so well; the old lessons of *The Trojan Women* and the Book of Lamentations, as much as the surreal cityscape of *The Waste Land* and *Guernica*, have become part of the realism of our time. At the same time, our progress in technology and social organization has exposed us to fiercer fires than anything the ancients could imagine. Freud put it succinctly at the very end of *Civilization and its Discontents*, written in 1930 between two world wars: "Men have gained control of the forces of nature to such an extent that... they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety." In the years since Hiroshima, this nightmare has come a lot closer to home, and children of the nuclear age have no way to awake from it. Every city on earth is Ground Zero in somebody's doomsday book. This brings a new specific gravity to city life.

New Yorkers can easily feel at home in the landscape of Kafka's parable, "The City Coat of Arms." This city came into being, so the parable says, for the purpose of building the Tower of Babel. But the city was so torn by class, national, and ideological struggles that its reason for being was forgotten; however, "by that time everybody was too deeply involved to leave the city." This impasse, Kafka says, gave rise to obsessive visions

of, and even nostalgic longing for, "a prophesied day when the city would be destroyed by five successive blows from a gigantic fist. It is for this reason, too, that the city has a closed fist on its coat of arms." In our cities, as in Kafka's, the specter of uricide is central to the experience of city life.

For many of the people who grew up in World War II, the vision of the ruins of that war, which reduced so many cities to ruins, became an ineradicable obsession long after the last of the rubble had been carted away. This obsession pervades many of the most arresting novels and films that emerged from that war: Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero*, and *Paisan*; Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*; Akira Kurosawa's *The Bad Sleep Well*; Thomas Berger's *Crazy in Berlin*; Alain Resnais' and Jorge Semprun's *Hiroshima Mon Amour*; Elsa Morante's *History: A Novel*; Doris Lessing's *The Four-Gated City*; Czeslaw Milosz's *Native Realms*; Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*; Eva Mattes's *Germany, Pale Mother*; Walter Abish's *How German Is It*; and more. (The presence of ruins as a theme in postwar art and architecture is a fascinating story in its own right.) In Berger's *Crazy in Berlin*, which begins just as the war ends, a young American G.I. of German descent is stationed in Berlin, where he hopes to trace and understand his German roots amid German ruins. His quest soon leads him to the rubble of Hitler's chancellery; there he asks a question which, although awkwardly phrased (one of Berger's themes is the difficulty of finding a language and a voice for all this), echoes and resonates through the whole literature of uricide: "Why when things are broken do they seem like more than when they're together?" Berger's implicit answer is that the uricide we have survived has reduced everything to its essentials, and so, ironically, made all that is left somehow larger than life. Forced to live among these gigantic broken forms, we can learn what is worth putting together, what is worth living for. Czeslaw Milosz, who lived through the destruction of Warsaw, says something similar in his recent lecture, "Ruins and Poetry." "In our century," he says, "the background of poetry is the fragility of



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South Bronx

noise of new construction.

About a year ago, a young German art critic, who has been working in New York for several years, told me a story about something that seemed to happen whenever her friends from home came to visit. She could never interest them in the sights and scenes that moved her most: the harbor, Brooklyn Bridge, the skyscrapers, Fifth Avenue, Central Park, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and so on. After awhile she would lose patience with them, would demand to know whether anything anywhere could move them, and why if they were so blasé had they bothered coming here at all. Some of her friends would be shy and embarrassed at first, others would blurt it right out, but always it came to the same damned thing: "Where is the South Bronx? Take me to

Germans who were asking to take the D train were far too young to have experienced Hitler or the war, and that they had grown up in a culture that wanted only to forget. Maybe they felt that our ruins could help them to remember something, or figure something out, that was important to know. I came to think that, if these ruins really had something to teach—and I believed they did—I could only wish the best of luck to anyone who wanted to learn.

4 / Notes for a New Nehemiah

So what can Americans learn from the recent ruins around us?
1. *These ruins may be painful to*

could be assembled and disassembled fast, like a stage set. He then stationed them along the Volga, just ahead of the Empress's barge as she sailed down the river, inspecting her domains. Each night the village would be taken apart and moved a few miles downstream to await her on the following day. She is said to have been pleased with what she saw, relieved that rumors of starvation and misery were clearly false; she rewarded Potemkin well. New York's Department of Housing Preservation and Development may have been competing for a Potemkin Prize last summer, when it announced a plan to mount decals in the broken windows and empty frames of all the hundreds of burnt-out and sealed-up buildings that line the Cross-Bronx Expressway. The decals would portray neat

that is left somehow larger than life. Forced to live among these gigantic broken forms, we can learn what is worth putting together, what is worth living for. Czeslaw Milosz, who lived through the destruction of Warsaw, says something similar in his recent lecture, "Ruins and Poetry." "In our century," he says, "the background of poetry is the fragility of those things we call civilization and culture. What surrounds us, here and now, is not guaranteed. It could just as well not exist—and so man constructs poetry out of the remnants found in ruins."

One of the ironies implicit in all this poetry is that, as harrowing as it is to live in the midst of ruins, to live in a world with no ruins at all would be even worse. Ruins teach us things that we urgently need to know about who we are; a world in which all ruins have been cleared away is a world that wants to forget. This irony exfoliated surprisingly soon after the end of the war, when, aided by enormous infusions of American capital, West Germany reconstructed its ruined cities and its wrecked industries in a matter of years. By the late 1950s, the German recovery was the most spectacular success story in Europe. The English, whose economy was doing far less well, were beginning to mutter, somewhat darkly: if only *our* country had been conquered and destroyed, we could have got aid and credit to rebuild in the most advanced forms; as it is, we have to make do with antiquated industrial plants and equipment which we cannot afford to modernize. The rhythm of cataclysmic ruin and spectacular recovery was preferable to pyrrhic victory leading to a slow, entropic running down. (Americans in the 1970s would mutter similarly about Japan.) But if the English remembered Germany's recent ruins, the Germans themselves seemed to be straining all their powers to forget. It was easy to see why: these ruins embodied memories that were not only painful but guilty—memories of the far greater, irreparable ruins that Nazi Germany had inflicted on much of the world. A few distinguished German writers, artists, and social critics argued that, in refusing to face its past, Germany was poisoning its present and future; but their voices were drowned out by the

After awhile she would lose patience with them, would demand to know whether anything anywhere could move them, and why if they were so blasé had they bothered coming here at all. Some of her friends would be shy and embarrassed at first, others would blurt it right out, but always it came to the same damned thing: "Where is the South Bronx? Take me to the burning buildings! I want to see the ruins." At first I laughed, a little uneasily. Then I got angry, at the thought that Germans should be getting cheap thrills from my city's devastation: after all, didn't they cause—and eventually suffer—more than enough devastation on their own? Then I remembered that the

one who wanted to learn.

4 / Notes for a New Nehemiah

So what can Americans learn from the recent ruins around us?

1. *These ruins may be painful to look at, but it will hurt more in the long run if we try not to see.* It is said that Potemkin, noble lover of the Empress Catherine the Great, built "Potemkin villages" to please her: he paid a group of peasants well enough to look industrious and content, and ordered them to build a simulated village that

Potemkin well. New York's Department of Housing Preservation and Development may have been competing for a Potemkin Prize last summer, when it announced a plan to mount decals in the broken windows and empty frames of all the hundreds of burnt-out and sealed-up buildings that line the Cross-Bronx Expressway. The decals would portray neat drapery, flowerpots, and window boxes, intimations of comfortable and happy domestic scenes. That way, commuters who passed through the Bronx en route to Westchester, Long Island, or the Connecticut executive belt wouldn't have to be upset by the sight of the misery that

Continued on next page



Coney Island

GEORGE COHEN

Continued from preceding page
lined their way. At first, I thought this was a joke, a sort of dada gesture that meant the exact opposite of what it said. My City University students from the Bronx were sure the city meant exactly what it said. The message, they thought, was that City Hall didn't give a damn how life actually *was* up in the Bronx, but only how it *appeared*, and that it was their social duty to lay low so as not to embarrass their betters. When an uproar developed, and official clarifications were issued, it appeared that they were more nearly right than I. If this is so, it bodes ill for our political future. One thing we can learn from history is that just about all the worst things that are done to people are done at a distance. A first step in excluding people from the human family is excluding them from the family of eyes. It's far easier to neglect, to oppress, to destroy people whom we don't have to see. The Germans who come to see our ruins should be able to help us see the long-range costs for a political culture that shields its eyes.

2. Don't blame the victims. During the 1976 World Series, the helicopter TV cameras would pull back from the disaster the Yankees were going through on the field to the disasters that some of



ETHAN HOFFMAN/ARCHIVE PICTURES INC.

German tourist surveys the South Bronx, perhaps in search of a history her own culture hopes to forget.

their neighbors were suffering just next door. Once, as the screen showed the blazing lights of Yankee Stadium on the lower left counterpointed with a burning building on the upper right, Howard Co-sell intoned, indignantly, "What's wrong

with those people? Don't they have any self-respect? How can they do this to themselves?" This image of the people of the Bronx was widely shared by many people who should have known better: *they were doing it to themselves.* Hence

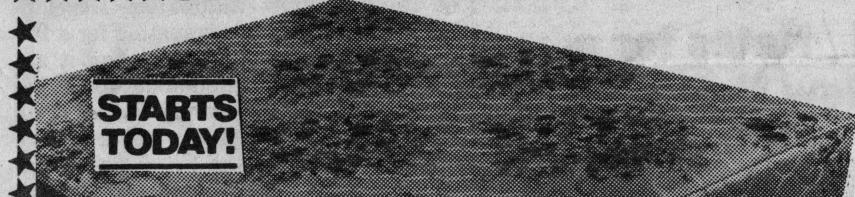
the people whose homes were burning down were, in effect, burning themselves; the people who were being robbed blind were, somehow, robbing themselves; the children who were caught in the crossfire of gang warfare were, presumably, shooting themselves. So it went. Since *they* were doing it to themselves, out of some incomprehensible perversity, it was beyond the pale of our legitimate sympathy, it need not overly concern *us*. Bring on the decals!

One of the most distressing things about this belief is that it was even shared by some of the victims: they believed that they must be doing this to themselves, even though they hadn't the slightest idea how. Anyone who spoke with people in the fire zones during the heaviest years—or saw them interviewed on the local news as flames rose in the background—heard this time and again. "When we moved here four years ago, this building was nice. Then they started renting to thieves. Then they stopped fixing the front door, so everybody could come in. Then junkies took over the top floor. Then they stopped fixing the elevator. Then there was no heat all last winter. Then they took over the building across the street for a dope factory. Then a little girl got killed. Then strippers began taking the pipes. Now this. [Cut to flames.] *What did we do?*" One reason people were so traumatized is that they simply couldn't grasp what was happening to them; they had no alphabet to "read" it, to make it intelligible. They were prepared for grinding poverty, but not for the rupture and collapse of their rough world. And, in fact, while it was at its height, "we," the educated public outside the fire zones, didn't understand it any better than the victims did. It was only at the very end of the 1970s that analysts began to sort out the hopelessly tangled webs that connected landlords, bankers, insurance underwriters, the FHA, welfare departments, junkies, thieves, real estate speculators, crooked politicians, "finishers" (who picked up old buildings for a song, collected rents, and stripped the buildings clean of all they could carry away), professional arsonists, and the dazed, weeping people out on the street. *Business Week* as-

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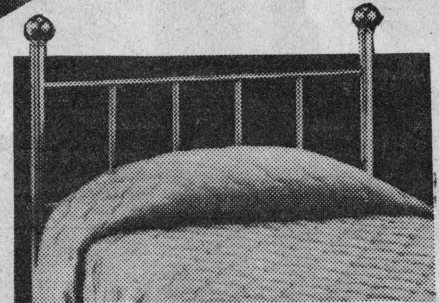
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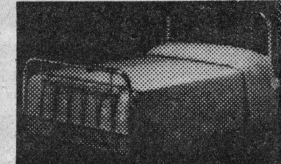
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tangled webs that connected landlords, bankers, insurance underwriters, the FHA, welfare departments, junkies, thieves, real estate speculators, crooked politicians, "finishers" (who picked up old buildings for a song, collected rents, and stripped the buildings clean of all they could carry away), professional arsonists, and the dazed, weeping people out on the street. *Business Week* assigned an ace investigative reporter to find out how a particular building on the Grand Concourse, splendid in 1958, had become a burnt-out ruin by 1975. Weeks of digging elicited an enormously complicated answer, full of labyrinthine paths and wheels within wheels. It was a brilliant story; but if it took all this full-time digging to penetrate the depths of urbi-cide, how were people on Charlotte Street or Avenue C supposed to grasp what had hit them? They couldn't grasp it, and neither could we, and they blamed themselves, and we let them, and we should be ashamed.

3. *There are plenty of people in the fire zones who have the will and energy to rebuild.* If you look at these neighborhoods from a distance—say, from any of the old elevated lines that run through them or from the not-yet-decaded Cross Bronx Expressway—the people you see appear puny, widely scattered, passive, and utterly overwhelmed by the enormities of ruin. On the other hand, if you get off the el or the highway, and walk around at street level for a couple of hours, you will be amazed at how many people you see, mostly in small groups, working on houses, on gardens, on parks, on murals, trying to put life together again. One of the most striking things about these neighborhoods is the richness and intensity of small-group life that has not only survived the ruins, but often been born from them. (See the proliferation of names on the projects under way on the street: Bronx Frontier, Bronx 2000; Mid-Bronx Desperadoes, Banana Kelly, and more, on just a few blocks.) Many of these grassroots groups have organized themselves around a series of urban homesteading and alternate management programs that developed under the Carter administration. The philosophy behind these programs was admirable: people would work to rebuild the houses

that they would eventually live in; a person's right to property would spring from what John Locke called "the labor of his body and work of his hands." By donating their labor power, participants would build up sweat equity that would eventually enable them to buy the buildings from the city or federal government for a bare minimum of cash.

The urban homesteading movement began heroically in the midst of the firestorms, and heroic dedication has kept it going. But a number of chronic problems soon emerged. The city and federal governments didn't invest enough money or provide enough support services; participants had to provide big extra shots of both. But this was impossible: in order to put in money, you needed to be working—no mean accomplishment in a time of constantly rising unemployment—but if you held a regular job, you had little or no time left for rebuilding. Even if work on an individual building went well, it might all go for nothing if the houses and blocks around it were shooting up or burning down. In other words, homesteading could work only if the city provided support services on a neighborhood-wide basis, which the city was only sporadically willing or able to do. Moreover, there was little or no coordination between groups that were very like each other and projects that were quite close by. Often, groups that should have been sharing resources and working together were simply oblivious to each other's existence or, even worse, locked horns in sectarian warfare. Although all these groups were helped immeasurably by anonymous lower-and middle-level bureaucrats, who worked heroically to expedite their plans, secure permits, get funds through the pipelines, etc., the higher authorities almost totally failed to do a few things that might have made a difference—and indeed, that still might make a difference. (Jimmy Carter was stirred for a moment, but lacked the guts, or the attention span, to follow through.) They failed to *coordinate* the complementary (and often identical) initiatives of a multitude of small groups; to *integrate* them into a broad front that could develop some political momentum of its own; or to *legitimize* them and their enterprise in the eyes of the public. Nehemiah, where are you now that New York needs you?

Bronx's cultural creativity can be understood only as a response to its physical and economic destruction. It is a pleasure to see so many of its talented young people finding a public that reaches beyond the shadow of the ruins. I only hope that they can sustain the solid sense of place that helped them get where they are. It would also be nice if they could find ways to keep some of the money that they are making now within the neighborhood. And if they can't—if, like so many working class heroes through the ages, they feel that they must get out to keep from going under—I can only hope that, even when they are out, they will remember where they came from.

There isn't a hell of a lot that government can do about this, but at least it can integrate and legitimize. For instance, instead of spending millions of dollars each year in vain attempts to eradicate subway graffiti—or, failing that, to kill the graffitiists, as transit cops killed young Michael Stewart last year—the city might try to accept their existence and, with whatever qualifications, incorporate their work. New York, a city that prides itself on its openness, might at last open itself to some of its children who are doing constructive work, not only within its borders, but in its name and for its sake. Their wild colors and extravagant forms might even serve as a symbol for our city

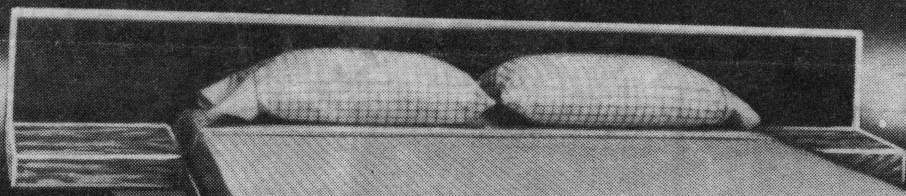
in one of its most deeply troubled times. They are saying: we come from ruins, but we're not ruined.

5 / Can These Ruins Live?

Slowly, New York's ruins are changing, and it isn't always real estate developers who reap the benefits. Many neighborhood groups have gone under, but others have hung on, and they are learning slowly, guardedly, how to work together. The changes may be imperceptible from day to day, but they are unmistakable from year to year. Half a city block, nothing but rubble not long ago, emerges as a garden. An apartment house, half destroyed in the mid-1970s, covered by scaffolding for the last few years, is finally "done," and the building shines forth, its moldings—unobtainable at any price today—glimmering brilliantly in the sun. The building is not only good as new, but in some senses better than new, not only in contrast with the wreckage that still haunts the neighborhood, but also because, surrounded by open space, with greenness all around—most of it weeds, but green is green—it can really be *seen*. Much of the South Bronx today has returned to the texture it had in the 1920s (see the affectionate memoirs of Cynthia

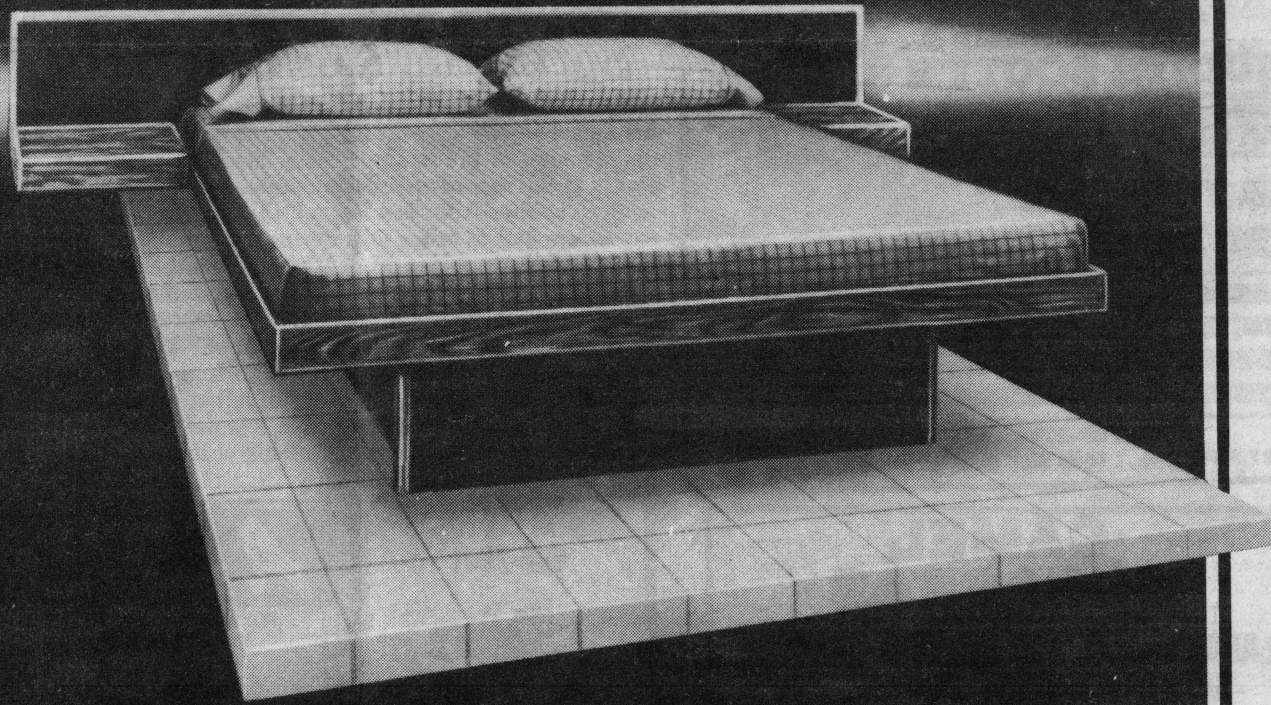
Ozick and Kate Simon), urban densities interwoven with country openness and fresh air. On the Lower East Side, the eccentric visionary, Adam Purple, has converted rubble from the burning and crumbling buildings around him into a very efficient fertilizer, and created an extraordinary circular garden. Lately the police have been arresting some of the pushers and heroin manufacturers who had taken over the street, and ordinary people are coming out of doors to enjoy the garden's nature and art. And out in the ruins of Brownsville, the East Brooklyn Churches and the late Saul Alinsky's Industrial Area Foundation have raised millions of dollars to build 1000 single-family houses, to be sold at low prices to a new breed of pioneers. This project is called the Nehemiah Plan. The houses are going up fast, and people will be moving in soon. It is all painstakingly, infuriatingly slow, but it does seem to be happening. New Yorkers are organizing themselves to transform their ruins into pieces of a city again, and to make these fragments their own. Maybe those of us outside the fire zones can find ways to work with them, to connect their work with ours. It would be nice to think that, working together, we can make these ruins live, and build a city that will hold together as a community this time around. ■

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ence—and indeed, that still might make a difference. (Jimmy Carter was stirred for a moment, but lacked the guts, or the attention span, to follow through.) They failed to *coordinate* the complementary (and often identical) initiatives of a multitude of small groups; to *integrate* them into a broad front that could develop some political momentum of its own; or to *legitimize* them and their enterprise in the eyes of the public. Nehemiah, where are you now that New York needs you? In his absence, much of the energy flowing through our ruins has consumed itself or run itself down; it's as if the phoenix had risen from the ashes, but failed to get the boost it needed to take off, and was forced to skitter and stagger impressively but desperately along the ground.

4. There's cultural creativity in these ruins. Grandmaster Flash's "The Message," and the recent release of *Wild Style* and *Beat Street* have made it clear to a large public what adventurous artists, writers, and musicians from Manhattan have been saying to each other for some time: that the South Bronx subculture of rappers, break dancers, subway graffitists, poets, and assorted workers in a multitude of media is one of the most vibrant and creative cultural scenes anywhere today. Until fairly recently, not much of its art was produced in commodity form for sale. (Indeed, among graffitists, private sales were considered dishonorable, a betrayal of their sacred obligation to the public.) As a result, most of it disappeared pretty fast, before audiences could get it into clear focus—or else, as in the graffiti case, it was intentionally destroyed by the authorities. It may not be clear for some time which individuals are going to develop and which works are going to last. Regardless of this, the scene is remarkable and influential in its collective vibrancy and power. No one has yet written its history, or explained how so much creative vitality could emerge, and could keep emerging, from the South Bronx's ashes and dust. Whatever the explanation, it is clear that, even as the Bronx's young musicians and artists (mostly, but not entirely, black and Latin) were distancing themselves from its flames, its drugs, its ruins, still they were inspired by the crises that were ripping their world to shreds. The



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