

The Essex Street Market, on the Move

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from one side of Delancey Street to what will be a glitzier building on the other, has been the focus of a certain degree of emotion and worry. Last year, the community circulated a petition to keep the market in its current location. Ironically, it wasn't so much the utilitarian-looking 1940 building that seemed to move detractors as what the market had come to symbolize in an era of gentrification.

The Essex Street Market, along with other municipally run food halls, was established by Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia in 1940 to get rid of the pushcart culture he found so distasteful. For years preceding the current real estate boom, the market languished. In 2001, vendors occupied only 60 percent of the available space.

In the '80s and '90s, "it was very hard to get people inside," said Ron Budinas, who with his husband and partner, Ira Stolzenberg, has operated Rainbo's Fish in the

On the Lower East Side, a symbol of coexistence in a period of gentrification.

market since the '70s. "Things were dark and dreary; there were prostitutes outside," he added. "It was horrendous."

"People were too busy playing numbers," he told me, and certain stalls simply seemed like fronts for heroin dealing.

In recent years, as the fortunes of the Lower East Side have changed, \$22-a-pound cheese and smoked Scandinavian fish have come, and surprisingly, this turn of events has not been odious. The market's bodegas and their unusual root vegetables have remained. Limes are still sold at six for a dollar.

More than any other shopping venue in the city, the market stands as a place where disparate demographics consume things together — where old Hispanic women from the housing projects, owners of \$2 million lofts and artists in rent-controlled Ridge Street apartments coexist in a Jane Jacobs vision.

Is this utopian alchemy now doomed? In its new building, years away from completion, the market will double in size to approximately 30,000 square feet. The city has promised existing vendors, from whom it has sought suggestions, that rents will not exceed what they would be paying in the current location; that they will remain in continuous operation until the new structure is ready; that moving expenses will be taken care of; and that infrastructure will be vastly improved.

At the same time, plans for Essex Cross-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KIRSTEN LUCE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ing include a supermarket, which could steer customers away and, as Mr. Budinas put it, "no one really believes that rents won't go up."

But if the city can actually do what it claims it is so passionately committed to doing and build on the social dynamic that has evolved at the Essex Street Market for the whole project rather than displace it, then in this instance development will finally mean what its proponents always say it does: progress, and progress of the

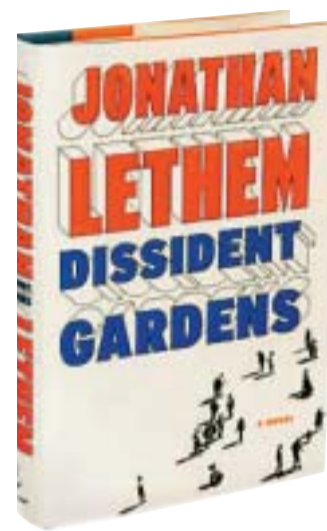
Luis Meat Market, top, in the Essex Street Market. Other vendors sell root vegetables and other produce, gourmet cheeses and grocery items. Ron Budinas, far right, operates Rainbo's Fish with his husband and partner, Ira Stolzenberg.

kind that uses private financing to serve a greater good.

"You come here and it's like Coney Island, like you're going to join the circus," Rhonda Kave, a chocolatier in the market and a slow convert to the new venture, told me. Quirkiness breeds affection and frustration in equal measure. "I'll mourn this building," she said, "even as I curse that the air-conditioning doesn't work."

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