

THE VOICE

Skyline's Forecast: Only Partly Cloudy

By CAROLINE H. DWORIN  
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*PRECISELY how the economic crisis will leave its imprint on the architectural development of New York has yet to be determined. It's not clear how plummeting stocks, rising unemployment and a stunted mortgage industry will mark the city's skyline.*

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Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times  
Andrew Scott Dolkart

*But one person who can offer some educated guesses is Andrew Scott Dolkart, an associate professor of historic preservation at the [Columbia University](#) Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation.*

*Mr. Dolkart, who lives in Upper Manhattan and who late last month was named director of the school's historic preservation program, is only 56. Yet he seems to know, with intimacy and affection, what happened on the city's streets centuries before his birth. His careful attention to*

*how the trends, politics and finances of the times shaped urban infrastructure informs his thoughts about what the current economic troubles might mean for the years ahead.*

*Professor Dolkart, a slightly built man with glasses, curly red hair and a neat mustache, is currently teaching a class on housing in New York during the Depression. One recent afternoon, he sat among his books in his office in Morningside Heights and talked about how the mess on Wall Street might affect construction on other streets around town.*

**CAROLINE H. DWORIN**

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The myth is that the stock market crashed in the '20s, and new construction stopped. And that's pretty much true for commercial buildings — office buildings — with the exception of Rockefeller Center, which is a unique story.

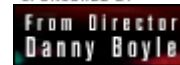
Major commercial skyscraper construction did pretty much stop. But residential development did not stop. There was a lot of privately funded residential construction during the 1930s, although there was certainly a major slowdown. The Depression had a huge impact on architects and construction workers; there was a huge amount of unemployment.

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I have found in more recent downturns in the economy, in the '80s, for example, that a lot of very prominent architects who mostly designed new buildings, like James Polshek or [Hugh Hardy](#), started doing a lot more preservation work because that was what there was to do.

You can't blame them. When new construction declines, preservation becomes a really important aspect of what architectural offices do.

When I was a student here, James Marston Fitch, who founded the preservation program here — my chair is named for him — he said, only half joking, that depressions were very good for preservation because there wasn't the money to demolish buildings.

It's a little premature to know exactly what the impact will be of what's happening now. But if history is a guide, preservation does relatively well.

I think new construction is going to take a nose dive — especially residential, because we've been so overbuilt in fringe areas of the city, and I think a lot of new residential buildings are going to have a lot of trouble.

I was doing a project recently in Clinton Hill, in Brooklyn, and I wandered east into what was always a fringe area, an industrial area between Clinton Hill and Bedford-Stuyvesant. People were building luxury apartment houses! And I was thinking, even then, a couple of years ago, why would I spend a million dollars to live on the corner of Quincy and Franklin Streets, which is basically in the middle of nowhere? It's not really in a neighborhood at all.

I think buildings like that are going to suffer. Their developers invested in areas where people are not going to be so likely to spend that much money.

It's hard to see signs of prior economic slumps now because we've gone through such a boom period. I remember the last economic downturn, in the '80s. I remember that, at the time, high-end investment (or what some people would call gentrification, which is a word I don't really like) was occurring in the East Village, and it was just beginning to move towards Tompkins Square, and it was occurring in Manhattan Valley, the area east of Broadway and south of 110th Street.

Then the economy went down, and, as those were the fringe areas, they really lost the most. When prices go down, people go to more stable neighborhoods, neighborhoods with more amenities, assuming they can afford it.

I think the same thing is probably going to happen again, although there aren't so many fringe areas anymore. These last few years of economic boom have really changed the face of the city. There are still going to be a lot of people in New York with good jobs and good salaries. If they want to buy a row house, prices may come down a bit. So I think the demand for those kinds of houses — old buildings in stable areas, or beautiful quality housing — will continue.

I was on a tour in the Detroit area once, and we went to this house, this huge estate that

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had been built in the 1920s. And somebody said something to me, that when they said it was so obvious: one of those things you needed somebody else to say to you, and you think: "Oh, yeah! Why didn't I think of that?" They said, "If you had money during the Depression, you could buy more for less." And I think that that's really true. Not everybody's going to be laid off by Lehman Brothers.

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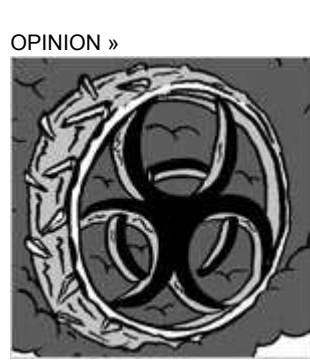
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