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## POSTOPINION

# Our Suffocated City

## Time for NY to shed the sheds

**T**HE beautiful city of New York is covered in about 200 miles of sidewalk shed — that shabby, drippy, dark and often smelly scaffolding that makes you feel like you're worming your way through the Big Apple instead of drinking in its sights and skyline.

This month, architect Zaha Hadid made news by creating a beautified, gossamer improvement upon this ubiquitous structure in Manhattan's High Line neighborhood. The

**MARY KATHARINE HAM**

Iraqi-born artist's sidewalk shed of transcendence, constructed of taut white fabric between 27th and 28th Streets, is also ephemeral. It'll remain only until the work on the building it surrounds is completed in a couple of months.

Not so with the city's other 199.8 miles of sidewalk shed, which range from architectural afterthought at best to semi-permanent blight and physical danger at worst. A design contest of the New York Building Congress is also attempting to improve on this plywood canopy of the concrete jungle. These are fun, creative, en-

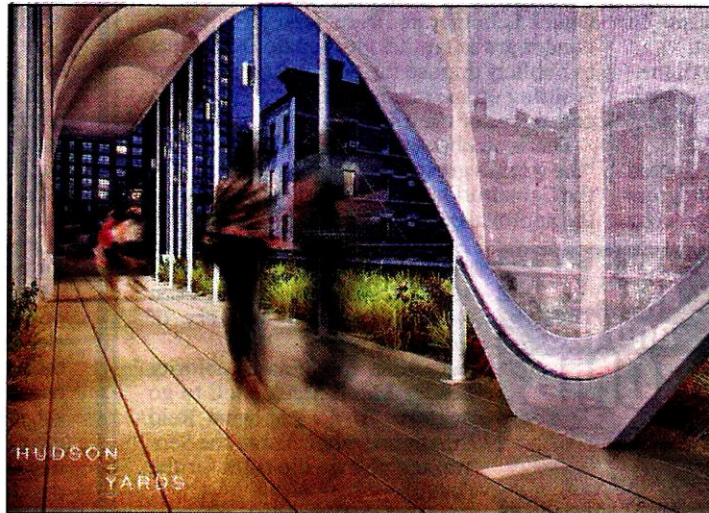
trepreneurial efforts to harness the spirit of the city to unleash it from this unsightly mess.

Let me offer another modest proposal. What if the city literally unleashed itself by removing some of the sidewalk shed?

But wait! Don't we need those sidewalk sheds for safety? Yes, some will always be necessary to protect pedestrians and property, but an examination of the regulatory road to 200 miles of shed reveals easing up might benefit the city.

Scaffolding has long been part of the city's landscape; the Gray Lady notes its first mention in 1899. But regulation changes in the 1990s sent the price of building in New York, owning property, repairing property and the number of sidewalk sheds soaring sky-high.

It's a classic case of regulation written for a worst-case scenario without regard to everyday consequences. There was a good reason for the original modern shed law — a Barnard student was killed by falling debris from a Columbia building in 1980. In 1997, another accident, resulting in very minor injuries to two, inspired a regulatory revamping under Mayor Rudy Giuliani the following year. No longer were sidewalk sheds only for construction



**Artful solution:** This graceful shed along the High Line is far better than the city's 200 miles of drab and potentially dangerous scaffolding.

sites, as many assume, but for any building face awaiting hands-on inspection and repair under newly stringent standards.

More rigorous safety standards for the facades of some 12,000 buildings (all on the exact same inspections and repairs schedule) meant a rush on contractors who can repair those buildings. As demand and prices went up, it became cheaper and easier to maintain sidewalk sheds instead of meeting the city's standards.

The unintended consequence is

these sheds often shelter more danger than they shelter citizens from. The Bloomberg era brought the Scaffold Safety Team, necessitated by "at least 39 pedestrians and construction workers ... injured since January 2011 in accidents involving sidewalk sheds," according to a New York World investigation in 2014.

Thus can a solution become a problem. A 2014 New York Times article detailed another downside.

"With its murky corners and tiers of blue piping," the Times wrote of

a Harlem shed ringing in its second decade, "the shed has become a jungle gym for strapping men and a hideaway for drug deals. Evenings feature camaraderie among street friends, occasional outdoor sex, and the usual neighborhood drama ... A few steps away from the curb that the group uses as a bathroom, young families try to dash into their brownstones without catching a whiff — an impossible task on stifling summer days."

Harlem residents have been trying to get rid of the shed for years. But it remains, protecting them from the vanishingly small chance they might be hurt by falling debris while harboring very real dangers they'd rather banish.

Some will predictably argue the answer is more shed beautification, more mandates, more inspectors, more enforcement and more taxpayer cash for all of the above, to rescue the city from scofflaw property owners. Those measures would come from the city government of New York, which is pretty busy right now, having promised to remove some eight miles of long-languishing sidewalk shed in the city's public-housing projects. Scofflaws indeed.

Sometimes less is more. Less regulation doesn't necessarily mean more danger and more regulation doesn't guarantee more safety. But less sidewalk shed would mean more New York City for all to enjoy.

*Mary Katharine Ham is a writer and TV and radio commentator in Washington, DC, and author of "End of Discussion."*

Twitter: @mkhammer