

# Convention Center

The arguments about the Convention Center site—and it is an encouraging sign for the city that the project is alive enough to be argued about—now focus on location: whether it should be built at Battery Park City or over the Penn Central 34th Street yards. It boils down to money versus merits.

In terms of cost, convenience, speed of completion, existing features and accessibility to the city's hotels, stores, restaurants and theaters, as well as the potential for the biggest boost to the largest section of a consumer-oriented economy, the 34th Street site wins hands down. It is better than the original river site at 44th Street, which entailed more expensive and elaborate over-water and access construction, and heavier impact on a neighboring residential community.

The new site, which offers vacant land, freight rail connections, an abutting pier, existing roads and ramps and crosstown transit, was simply not available for consideration while it was embroiled in the Penn Central bankruptcy proceedings. A preliminary design suggests a kind of park-fronted crystal palace rather than a concrete blockbuster. It has everything going for it—except the money to build it.

In comparison, money is the chief thing going for the downtown proposal; and today that is no small consideration. The Port Authority is evidently considering investing in a convention center on Battery Park City land next to the World Trade Center; the project would clearly function to strengthen the Trade Center since it would make possible a now-stalled hotel that was part of the original plan.

It is unarguable that a downtown center would shore up a foundering Battery Park City and give desperately needed help to Lower Manhattan. A building at the Battery could be dramatic, and it could be easily reached by rapid transit. These could be persuasive considerations for a downtown location if the case for the 34th Street yards were not so much stronger. It is hard to beat the existing midtown advantages and amenities for which a convention center is a rational and necessary reinforcement.

But the city seems to be leaning toward the Battery, or in the direction of the money, on the theory that a convention center in the hand is worth a possibility somewhere else. It will take some remarkable ingenuity for the Port Authority feasibility study, now under way for the Battery Park City site, to match the assets of midtown and their massive and immediate potential for improving the city's economic health.

In fact, it would make excellent sense for the Port Authority to study the 34th Street site at the same time; construction at that location would directly benefit its own mass-transit facilities. This important decision should not be an exercise in economic desperation or perverse planning logic.