

ARCHITECTURE VIEW: THE N.Y. CONVENTION CENTER--TOO BIG TO BE BAD ...

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The N.Y. Convention Center—Too Big to Be Bad

The word has finally come: After three city administrations considered five different locations over a 10-year period, New York has decided to build its new convention center on the site of the Pennsylvania railyards at 34th Street and the Hudson River. A few clear facts have emerged from the confusion and delay.

The first is that there is no longer any question about the need for the convention center. If New York is to be competitive with other cities, it must build one now. The direct and indirect economic benefits of conventions and trade shows range from increased hotel and restaurant business to the spinoffs of entertainment and tourism and the service industries that are so essential to this

city's vitality and financial well-being. At least half a dozen other cities have large, new and sometimes dramatically handsome convention facilities that put New York out of the running.

The one thing that has become strikingly evident through all the debate is that a convention center in New York cannot be like a convention center in any other place. Because of the decision that

the building must be in midtown Manhattan, the impact of such a huge structure—four unbroken blocks long and avenue-to-avenue in width—on the city's fabric and scale can be shattering. The effects of its presence will reverberate from the Hudson River waterfront into the neighborhoods to the east, and uptown and downtown for dozens of blocks.

The design can therefore work with

the city or against it. In any case, it must be unique to this city and its special urban character, while satisfying the routine requirements of such a facility in space, size, servicing, parking and access. One stop-and-go design effort was made for the original 44th Street site that has been discarded. In a sense, the delay may have been a blessing. Maybe now we can design it right.

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It must be made clear that a convention center is not in itself a vitalizing thing, whatever economic vitality it may generate. It is, essentially, an enormous box, often of heavy concrete, stretching for hundreds of feet and many blocks, offering blank vistas of endless solid walls. It lays a dead hand on everything around it. It breeds empty streets, except at show or meeting time.

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New York's Convention Center

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when it brings streams of traffic. Even skillful and elegant structural systems do not ameliorate this undesirable result.

Such a blockbuster creates not life but parking garages. It may encourage construction of a hotel or two, usually big, standardized and dull. It may start speculative assemblages, but not for the kind of development that makes street life. Convention center territory, whether it is in the central business district (where it is always advertised as a "regenerative" element of some paper redevelopment plan), or an amorphous, outlying district (for which it is supposed to become a "focus"), turns into a featureless no-man's-land. Contrary to those redevelopment promises, its warehouse character does not bring attractive construction at human scale or revitalization in an appropriate urban context.

That may be all right for places where no one ever goes anyway, or ventures only encapsulated in a car, but it will be a disaster for Manhattan. To date, we have not been thinking about this aspect of the convention center at all. We have been concerned, quite rightly, with the relative merits of uptown and downtown locations in terms of accessibility, transportation, construction and cost.

What has already been proposed is discouraging. The Skidmore, Owings and Merrill project, which was carried well along before the original 44th Street site was abandoned, is notably deficient in environmental assets. The latest marketing study has also enlarged the recommended size of the exhibition space from 560,000 to 750,000 square feet. If there is any thought of transferring and adapting the old design to the 34th Street site and new size in the mistaken idea that it would result in either economy or speed, the city had better think again. Not only would the economy be false and the efficiency spurious, but the design would be hopelessly wrong. The need now is to start from scratch. And to start with an understanding of the environmental necessities that has been so conspicuously lacking.

The SOM design was actually handicapped by its offshore site, which turned out to be more of a straitjacket than a riverfront asset. The idea of setting the building on a platform in the Hudson River not only created severe limitations on size and shape, compounded by inflexibility, but also made immediate problems in getting to the center across the West Side Highway or Westway.

Either it was impossible to relate to the adjacent land and streets or the architect made no attempt to do so. His answer was a massive concrete box surrounded on the three river sides by a service road and parking; for all of its relation to the water it might as well have been dropped onto a desert from the moon. This box was to be connected to the main entrance on Eleventh Avenue by a pedestrian bridge across the highway. The entrance unit, raised above ground to connect with the bridge to the offshore structure, featured banks of escalators. Even this was a considerably more humane version

than the original design fronted by a huge, coiled automobile ramp. That other and better answers were possible was demonstrated by a handsome adaptation of an early Mies van der Rohe convention center design, developed as a conjectural solution by his successor firm in Chicago—Fujikawa, Conterato, Lohan and Associates. On another site, however, different solutions are possible.

What makes putting a convention center into the fabric of midtown Manhattan so different, or so much more difficult, than building one in any other city? The problem is New York's unique urban character, the tight-island, compact configuration that establishes its particular assets of lively use and human scale. The city's intense land use, its close grid and street system, its dense building patterns, the dominant pedestrian connections, the inescapable "togetherness" of its streets and neighborhoods, its uniform and intimate scale, its very style, come from these facts of its urban design.

At best, that small-scale closeness works superbly, making a large and populous city attractively human and very much alive; it fails only when it is ruptured by a structure of aggressively wrong street scale or blatant insensitivity. In New York, no building, and particularly a big one, is an island.

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The convention center must therefore be designed, from the very beginning, with an awareness of its context and with a conscious attempt to make the building both serve and enhance its environment, rather than turning its back on its setting. It must not be a blind box that walls off the waterfront and reduces the site and surroundings to sterility. If ground-floor commercial space is not immediately practical, provisions should still be made to include it for essential street scale and activity when more development has taken place. Those street frontages should be attractive enough to invite, not repel, future residential construction. There must be transparency instead of solidity, breaks in wall scale and surface, open space and views of the river, well-designed public features.

The building should concern itself on one side with the waterfront and on the other with physical and esthetic relationships to neighboring communities. Since the site that has been chosen extends from 34th to 38th streets, it is actually close enough to plug into 42d Street development plans, possibly through a light rail system. It can utilize both 34th and 42d streets as crosstown transportation arteries. Pedestrian attractions on these routes must be strengthened, as well as connections to the features and functions of the midtown West Side in the 30's and 40's. Used properly, the center can be an instrument of reinforcement of existing advantages as well as of desirable change. Not least, it must be a building of great good looks—an architectural event for New York. It is just too big to be bad.

Obviously, since the impact of the convention center will be inescapable, that impact must be controlled. It can kill or cure, blight or beautify a large section of the city. It is all a matter of design. That is the challenge now. ■

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Hedrich-Blessing

Chicago's McCormick Place— "strong pedestrian attraction"

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