

Build the Convention Center

New York City needs no adversaries out there; it grows its own. Some of them sit with great power on the Board of Estimate and estimate our city ever deeper into trouble.

Why After undoing a year's work on a plausible plan to limit pornographic blight, the board now threatens to wreck the equally well-laid plans for a new convention center. It is a familiar routine: Sabotage the voter's interest in the voter's name; waste money in the name of saving it.

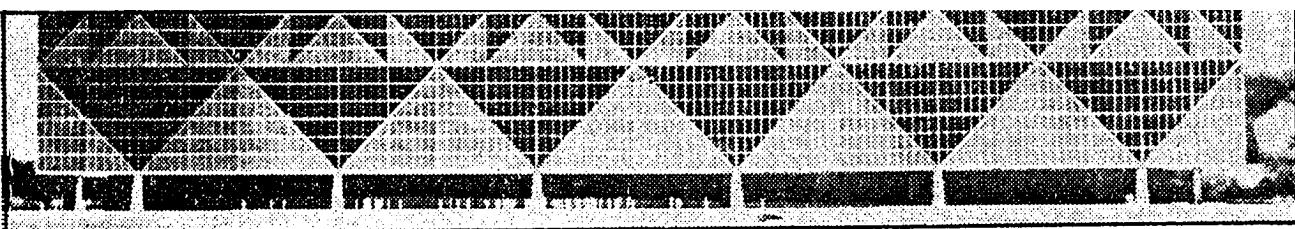
The wreckers are moving this time to withhold approval from a capital budget that includes \$6.5 million for the design and planning of the convention center. They propose instead to investigate the enlargement of the Coliseum at Columbus Circle, at roughly half the center's cost and with financing by bonds of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, which operates the Coliseum. Percy Sutton, Borough President of Manhattan and a candidate for Mayor, leads this charade, and he has been followed by the City Council.

The fact is enlargement of the Coliseum has been seriously examined, in a thorough and objective study by city and state, and judged inadequate—and city leaders know it. The Coliseum has failed to attract the

conventions and exhibits the city wants and needs not only because of its size but because its space is scattered over six floors that create massive labor and installation problems. Enlarging it would not only not alter that condition but would also pose new problems of residential and commercial relocation and traffic congestion.

Nonetheless, officeholders (and seekers) prefer to study the matter yet again and to leave the impression that the city can compete on the cheap with the best designed installations elsewhere. Spending \$90 million of the Triborough's money may seem more attractive than spending \$180 million of the city's in these hard times, but the arithmetic is deceptive.

New York needs a new convention and exposition facility as the cornerstone of its future economy and it needs it quickly. Economic development will henceforth depend not on manufacturing but on the exploitation of New York's cosmopolitan and cultural strengths. The city can profit from people, from services and tourism, entertainment and the arts, retailing and communications—all areas to which a flourishing convention center will contribute. To settle for less is to vote for becoming second-rate.



That much should be simple. What is not so simple is choosing a site for the new facility. The arguments about the three locations under serious consideration—Battery

Where Park City, the West 34th Street railyards and the Hudson River at West 44th Street—make a complex legal brief sound like a breezy synopsis. The arguments, moreover, do not stand still; they change as conditions change. Right now, after careful investigation, the city again favors the 44th Street site it had originally selected, for reasons that go beyond its primary concerns over cost and geography.

Last year, when the 34th Street yards became available after the Penn Central's bankruptcy proceedings, and after the construction cost estimates for 44th Street soared out of sight, both a new location and a new design seemed desirable. We preferred 34th Street at that time and under those conditions, but like the city administration, we are leaning back uptown again.

Roughly, the scoreboard now reads as follows:

Battery Park City offers the least expensive alternative, in terms of land and construction costs, and the most spectacular views. The facility there would give a badly needed boost to Lower Manhattan. The most obvious defect is the distance from midtown, where the city's hotels, shops and entertainment are concentrated. The subway is fast but repellent, taxis are increasingly expensive and traffic is atrocious—so that the trip cannot be compared to pleasanter, cheaper and quicker rides to outlying facilities in other cities. Building here would mean that part of Westway would have to be redesigned, which would require the reopening of public hearings. Transportation difficulties and lengthy delays seem conclusive barriers to this otherwise attractive location.

At 34th Street, construction costs would be higher than at Battery Park City, but still less than for the 44th Street over-the-river site. Although the railyards require preparation, they do not pose the difficulties of the river location. The land is immediately available, it is unoccupied, and there is room enough for future expansion, as there would be downtown. The site is much closer to existing tourist facilities, but still not close enough to benefit the restaurant and theater district dramatically.

Also, the city contends that there are massive traffic and pollution problems to be solved at 34th Street because the site is bounded north and south by Lincoln Tunnel entrances and exits and by the planned connections to Westway. As at Battery Park City, Westway changes would require new traffic and environmental

studies. With controversial hearings and court cases, the process could drag on indefinitely. In addition, the city would either have to buy the land from the railroad through a developer-broker, or entrust design and construction to the developer—a far less desirable process than working through a public development corporation.

At 44th Street, costs would be highest (\$20 to \$30 million more than elsewhere) but the site offers one overwhelming advantage: All the time-consuming preparatory work has been done—the necessary public hearings have been held, community endorsement is in hand. Indeed, the community could be counted on to fight hard and long to avoid losing the center now. Because the location is closest to midtown services and attractions, this site promises the most effective upgrading of the West Side. There would be no need for more studies and hearings, which can strangle a project in controversy and red tape and which can be expertly manipulated by opponents of both the convention center and Westway.

This factor is so critical to getting started before inflation pushes costs significantly higher—or to getting started at all—that it should outweigh almost every other consideration. Moreover, the non-profit Convention Center Development Corporation, once set up for this site, could be reconstituted without new legislation—another expediting move.

There is only one real point to be made against 44th Street. Any building there is going to be a wall on the water, cutting off river access and views for four blocks. The first proposed design was a massive concrete bunker which would have been an environmental disaster. The city now proposes to give us a stunning wall—a design by Mies van der Rohe that is an engineering and architectural spectacular. But it would still be a wall; and expansion, if necessary, would be limited or expensive—something to be considered as competitive European facilities grow in size. But this would be a structure of exceptional design quality and presence, and one that could be completed, if everything moved well, within three years. No timetable at all could be set for sites that still require changes and approvals; controversy and delay could drag on endlessly.

So what the discussion ultimately comes down to is getting the center built. The list of dramatic new facilities in other cities grows constantly, to their gain and our loss. Speed, feasibility, architectural excellence and pressing necessity all seem to point to the same spot on the map. At least they did until the Board of Estimate went off to hunt for bargains again.