

# ARCHITECTURE VIEW: REDEVELOPING NEW YORK ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# Redeveloping New York

**W**ith the unveiling of the Convention Center design last week, the revitalization of Manhattan's Midtown West Side seemed to be moving a step closer to reality. The five-block trade show and exposition center that will reach from 34th to 39th Streets and span 11th to 12th Avenues is a blockbuster in the literal meaning of the word; it will be the largest facility of this type in the country. But the word takes on new meaning and more felicitous aspects in the thoughtful and dramatic design prepared by I.M. Pei and Partners, with James I. Freed in charge, in association with the Lewis, Turner Partnership. Since there is no way to dematerialize or humanize the scale of such a structure, the only solution is to make it as handsome as possible and provide some direct relevance to the city.

The architects have done just that; they have devised a

lightweight, space-frame structure wrapped in reflective glass, for tricks with mirrors and transparency, and some stunning interior spaces. And they have combined the structure's obvious economic functions with an attempt to create a significant public building.

Using a 10-foot module for the structural frame, the less monumental spaces can be treated in something resembling human terms, while the units can be joined for huge spans. Faceted details based on the 10-foot module develop naturally, varying the mass and adding interest to flat surfaces. The building steps up to a handsome public room inside the main entrance, where a light-filled, 180-foot high area in the "grand palais" tradition leads to a 60-foot high glass gallery that runs to the river side of the building. These public areas will contain restaurants, shops, displays and services for the city as a whole. "It is a celestial space," says Mr. Freed of

the great hall, "and within the budget."

After innumerable false starts with site and design, New York seems finally to have gotten the Convention Center right. The next step is for the City Planning Commission to declare a Special Convention Center District, if it is to guard the potential for appropriate and desirable development around the new building. Because these huge structures do not, per se, revitalize their neighborhoods. Their natural affinity seems to be for parking garages, and they are usually hostile and unusable for the resident populations. But set within the right planning framework — such as the one that the Pei firm insisted on and provided so successfully for the Dallas City Hall — the Convention Center can open, rather than foreclose opportunities.

At the present time, plans and projects are simmering all over the Midtown West Side. A surprising number of these are aimed at the Times Square area, in spite of its unsavory state and reputation. There are tax-abated conversions already in work on Eighth Avenue, including the reconstruction of the moribund Royal Manhattan Hotel from 44th to 45th Street, for 1,300 badly needed, medium-priced tourist hotel rooms.

On West 42d Street, the building at the southeast corner of Broadway is in the process of residential rehabilitation. Two of the 42d-43d Street Brandt-owned theaters have been reclaimed, and the Brandts plan to restore more of them.

The projects of the 42d Street Redevelopment Corporation, while small, have been an important holding operation.

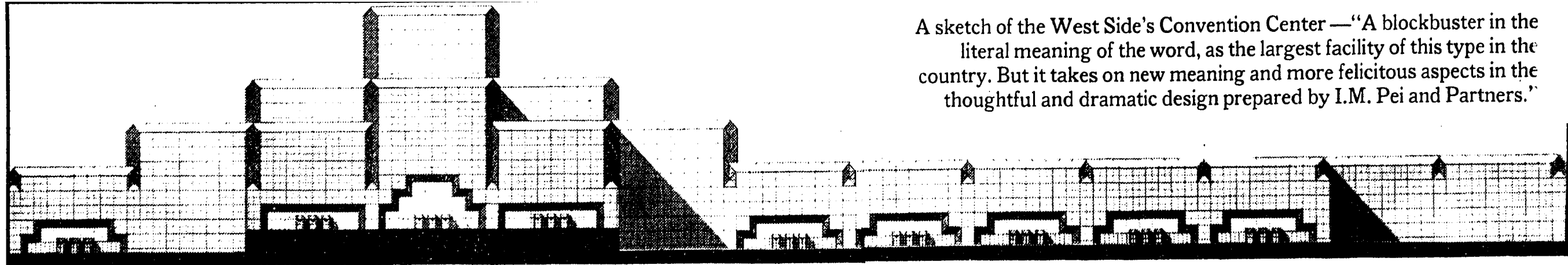
Although the funding of the Portman Hotel is still hanging in the balance, neither Portman nor the city has given up. The Midtown Planning Office lists 38 actual and possible projects from street paving to major construction. Enough has begun to happen in the area, in investment terms, to have sparked major redevelopment proposals. And these schemes don't appear, with builders expressing interest in them, unless there is a reasonable expectation of success and profit.

Unlike the Convention Center, which is to be built by the New York State Urban Development Corporation with Triboro Bridge and Tunnel Authority bonds, these are private projects. But all require some form of public participation or subsidy. Two of them are asking for urban renewal designations from the city. These two represent big gambles for big stakes in the ongoing poker game that is the real estate business in New York.

One of them, called The City at 42d Street, has been created by a consortium of concerned and talented New York architects and designers under the design direction of Richard Weinstein, and is being promoted by a corporation headed by lawyer and former City Planning Commission chairman Donald H. Elliott. The plan has attracted the interest of one, or possibly two, Canadian builders. The other, which is equally ambitious and seems to have only the work-

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A sketch of the West Side's Convention Center — "A blockbuster in the literal meaning of the word, as the largest facility of this type in the country. But it takes on new meaning and more felicitous aspects in the thoughtful and dramatic design prepared by I.M. Pei and Partners."



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ing name of Proposed Midtown Renewal, is the design of the architectural firm of Pomerance and Breines under the sponsorship of the De Matteis organization.

Both start with the objective of removing specific streets of pornographic blight, and then continue into substantial redevelopment schemes. The City at 42d Street would replace the most wretched block, between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, with a World's Fair kind of display on New York City themes, mixed with some cinematic and theatrical features, aimed at tourism and visitors.

For this purpose, a number of the theaters on the block would be saved and others sacrificed, and the displays would be combined with shopping and eating facilities. To fund the displays, which, to some minds, are not all that wonderful an idea, would require the construction of three very large office towers that would be partly located on non-blighted land. Since the condition of blight is a prerequisite for urban renewal designation, that would be stretching the definition, which is not all that wonderful an idea, either. Construction would include Times Square subway improvements.

The potential investors are setting the rules for those blockbusters, which include the demolition of the much-remodeled, little old Times Tower between them. This is unnecessary nonsense. The proposed construction is an overly brutal scheme tacked onto a questionable land use for Midtown, as well as more theater destruction on the 42d Street block than some of the city's planners think necessary. The project is far more intriguing as a legal and financial exercise than it is admirable

as design. With all of its expertise, the scheme has an unhappy resemblance to a discredited tradition of urban renewal.

The second plan involves the blocks from 42d to 47th Streets, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. The blighted 42d Street block would be cleared, as well as much of the blocks beyond. Major buildings and theaters would be kept, but the small hotels that the city's planners are currently studying for rehabilitation as a tourist resource would be demolished, with other, older structures. The proposal's real interest lies in the idea of midblock development — a hotel and two condominium towers are proposed — that would open up some of the interior space and create block-through connections and public amenities à la Rockefeller Center. Its faults are overdemolition and ambivalence about the replacements, which are likely to be aimed at the largest return on the investment dollar rather than at some of the area's more urgent needs.

The city is being pressed for urban renewal designations by both plans' sponsors. The Planning Commission, for economic and other considerations, is understandably, and wisely, reluctant to hand them out. It is not enthusiastic about the responsibility and financial risks of acquiring land for uncertain private development.

This is the time to go full speed ahead on the Convention Center project and to proceed with caution on the rest. Right now, it makes no sense to jump on anyone's bandwagon. It is in the city's best interests to look at the prospects for the entire area, to nurture the good and discourage the bad, to add up assets and set priorities and guidelines, and to trade horses well. This is not the time to give anything away. ■