How the Far West Side Will be Won

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What will it take to develop Far West Midtown? All sides agree on the need for more residential and commercial development, as well as improved transportation and open space. But how the pieces come together is the stuff of political brinkmanship. Laura Wolf-Powers puzzles it all together.

Here are the indispensable pieces of the Far West Side development puzzle: an expanded Jacob K. Javits Convention Center; the westward extension of the midtown business district; the new residential development the market is craving; usable open spaces that connect the city with Hudson River Park; the vitality and scalar integrity of the South Hell's Kitchen neighborhood.

Here's the piece with the uncomfortable fit: a stadium facility that anchors the city's bid for the 2012 Olympics, linked to a major transit investment, the extension of the #7 subway line. The Bloomberg administration, digging in its heels, says plans to transform the Far West Side will go nowhere without it. Its opponents argue that a stadium-free solution, one that relies on zoning changes and the Javits expansion to spur phased growth in the area, will promote better development at lower cost to taxpayers and with far less disruption to the existing city fabric.
This is the backdrop for the jigsaw of design and politics that is Far West Midtown. Three solutions—some by Cooper-Robertson Architects on behalf of the Department of City Planning, one by Meta Brunzema Architects endorsed by Manhattan Community Board 4 and a neighborhood-based coalition, the Hell’s Kitchen/Hudson Yards Alliance (HKHYA), and a third by Robert Geddes, which is sponsored by the Newman Real Estate Institute at Baruch College—would produce different urban environments for those who live and work in the district. Because of the fiscal as well as the design ramifications of the city’s proposal, which may go forward as early as this month, the debate over Hudson Yards has mushroomed into a super-issuethat engages elected officials and citywide planning groups as well as local residents, developers, and property owners. A season of political brinksmanship awaits them all.

The city’s Hudson Yards Plan is ambitious and monumental, full of large buildings and sweeping gestures that embody City Planning Commissioner Amanda Burden’s vow to get ahead of the curve in anticipating and shaping new large-scale development. But this monumentality has also run the city’s plan into trouble. Though it makes sense to place a large-footprint structure in what is already a super-block corridor from 30th to 34th streets between 7th Avenue and the river, the proposed stadium is so overwhelming as to diminish the quality of the streets and spaces that surround it, according to Rob Lane, director of design programs at the Regional Plan Association (RPA). [Though the plan does] a really good job of animating the base of the stadium, he said, there is still a question of whether people can be comfortable in these spaces given their sheer walls. The RPA dealt the city a blow in a report last week opposing the stadium on both design and fiscal grounds.>
The city's proposal to expand the Javits Center northward, blocking view corridors and waterfront access at 39th, 40th and 41st streets, has also drawn fire. But neighborhood groups are most upset about a rezoning of 10th and 11th avenues in the 30s, a move that would pave the way for a north-south wall of office towers that, with FARs of 24 or more, could result in buildings with as much as 2 million square feet, as high as 90 stories. The proposed rezoning is already a compromise: Under pressure, the city agreed to increase density only moderately in Hell's Kitchen east of 10th Avenue and maintain residential zoning in that part of the neighborhood.

Still, for the grassroots community group Hell's Kitchen Neighborhood Association (HKNA), the Cooper Robertson plan amounts to a template for uniform building mass, type, and program that would leave the community without the waterfront connection it has sought for so long, and choke out the residential and industrial uses that give the neighborhood its mixed, gutsy character.

Community responses to these concerns are expressed in Brunzema's scheme, a collaboration with planner Daniel Gutman. Brunzema, who lives and works in a five-story townhouse on West 35th Street, asserted, We see the neighborhood as a place with its own rhythm of scales and building programs not a tabula rasa. The plan adds only moderate density above 34th Street, putting most new bulk on the 34th Street east-west...
superblock, including the rail yards. (Both HKHYA and the city allow for about 40 million square feet of new development, though the community would prefer less).

To accomplish this, the HKHYA alternative excises the stadium from the western rail yards and expands the Javits Center southward in its stead. The plan accommodates desired development by allowing for residential and commercial towers atop the convention center extension, perched on the periphery of the building. A public park, on the rooftop amid the towers, provides a connection from the blocks to the east (also fully built-out commercially) through to the Hudson River. Critics have praised the plan’s move to concentrate bulky new development on an east-west corridor that is already large in scale, and applauded its transformation of odd-shaped publicly owned sites into innovative, organic open spaces (including several abutting Lincoln Tunnel on-ramps). However, the idea of a 10-acre park on the roof of the south-expanding Javits has drawn skepticism. You would have these enormous towers meeting a vast open space without much relief in terms of massing,” said the RPA’s Lane, who also points out that park users would have to ascend 32 feet from 11th Avenue and 60 feet from Hudson River Park in order to access the space.

Brunzema’s plan has a much simpler flaw in the eyes of the city: It rejects the stadium and the #7 extension, the official sine qua non for a new Far West Side. The city also maintains that, under the HKHYA-endorsed design, the Javits would lack needed contiguous floor space. The design is nonetheless a powerful statement of how Far West Midtown development could be more flexible and sensitive to context if City Hall’s obsession with the stadium were removed from the mix.

A third alternative, a study sponsored by Newman Real Estate Institute at Baruch College, claims to let disputants have it all. This so-called dream scheme, spearheaded by Robert Geddes, dean emeritus of the Princeton University School of Architecture, would demolish the existing Javits Center, reconnect the street grid to the river from 34th Street northward, and build an entirely new convention center on the superblock corridor, where it would cover both the eastern and western rail yards. According to architect Chuck Lauster, the newly appointed director of the Pergolis Gallery at the Newman Institute, both a sports stadium and up to 10 million square feet of office space could be built on the roof of the convention center. Advocates say that if city and state officials would jettison the Javits’ long-standing vision, New York could have a waterfront greenway, high-density development potential, and a stadium all at once. Many view the Javits’ flipp as an outrageously expensive nonstarter, and the proposal does not prevent monolithic office development on 10th and 11th avenues. Nevertheless, stranger compromises have been struck in this town.
Far West Midtown's fate depends on the interface of design solutions with fiscal and political ones. RPA's opposition to the stadium has been damaging. Neighborhood activists now have powerful allies in West Side property owners, including Madison Square Garden owner James Dolan. But the city claims that if activists defeat the stadium by persuading the State Assembly to block it or through litigation there will be no redevelopment, not even a rezoning of the area. A political observer close to the issue predicts a complete reshuffling of the deck on the West Side if the city stops campaigning for a Manhattan stadium and sets its Olympic sights on Queens. In the aftermath of such a reshuffle, could former combatants sit across from one another and discuss the distribution of density, the role of east-west connectivity, the relationship of a city to a river? We may yet find out.

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