

The West Side Stadium: No Arena for Good Planning

by {ga=tangotti}

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The fixation with putting a football stadium on the west side of Manhattan is blocking good planning — for the Olympics and for the neighborhood.

After eight years of trying, Rudy Giuliani hung up his mayor's cap without getting a stadium for the Yankees on the West Side of Manhattan. Michael Bloomberg came in to office and had the good sense to see that the numbers just didn't add up. But then Bloomberg turned the Yankee dream into a Jets nightmare. And now, unless he has the good sense to can this latest stadium idea Bloomberg may well kill the city's chances of getting the 2012 Olympics, undermine his own grand plans for office development on Manhattan's west side, and end up a one-term mayor.

The Jets would like to transplant their turf from the Meadowlands to Manhattan mainly so they can have an arena with many more expensive box seats that they can market to corporate clients. This is no doubt a good business move for the Jets. But independent economists unanimously agree about two things. First, downtown stadiums don't get built without huge public subsidies. Secondly, they don't bring a lot of other business into cities. The Jets would foot only a fraction of the construction costs and the gains from their corporate subscribers won't spill over into the neighborhood. After all, the Jets play only eight home games a year.

Since most New Yorkers who have looked at the stadium plans understood these painful truths, the city has now exorcised the term "stadium" from their vocabulary. They now call it a "multi-use facility" that would also serve the Jacob Javits Convention Center. The problem is it is not clear the Javits either needs or really wants a piece of a stadium whose goal posts have to be taken down, at considerable expense, after the last touchdown. A stadium is still a stadium.

The Plans for Olympics 2012

What is deceptive is that the brutish-looking west side stadium plan is wrapped up a much more attractive package -- the city's plan for the [2012 Olympics bid](#) . If you take the stadium out of the west side of Manhattan and put it across the river in Queens, the Olympics plan is a masterful and compelling piece of urban and environmental planning. It concentrates almost all its venues within a six mile radius and uses the city's mass transit system to move spectators and athletes, thus avoiding the use of inefficient gas-guzzling vehicles. The plan would apply

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much-needed capital money to the building and restoration of parks on the Brooklyn and Queens waterfronts and leave an open space legacy that will last far beyond 2012. Perhaps its greatest merit is that, unlike so many other Olympics plans (Atlanta was one of the worst), it does not displace residents and businesses. While its authors may have emulated Robert Moses by cooking up their scheme without public input, the plan reflects a sensitivity to the critique of the Moses legacy of planning by bulldozer.

The Olympics plan would string all the Olympic facilities along two axes, one going north and south from the Bronx to Staten Island and the other going east and west from the Meadowlands to the Nassau Coliseum. The axes converge in Long Island City. By placing the geographic center of the New York City Olympics in Queens, the plan will give a boost to the majority of New Yorkers who constantly live under the pale of the media mythology that New York City begins and ends in Manhattan. Unfortunately, by putting the stadium, as well as the broadcasting and media centers, on the west side of Manhattan, the center of the Olympic "X" gets shifted from Queens to Manhattan.

A "secret" memo by staffer Christopher Glaisek at Olympics 2012 that was recently leaked to the press presents a compelling argument that the center of the Olympics "X" should be in Queens and not Manhattan. A temporary retrofit of Shea Stadium would be infinitely cheaper, and would require no major public approvals or gigantic infrastructure investments. Already three major Olympics venues are planned for Flushing Meadows/Corona Park, right next to Shea. The International Broadcasting Center and Media Village, now planned for Manhattan's west side, could easily be located in close proximity to Shea.

Of course, the Olympics planners should still look at the potential impact of the Olympics on the surrounding Queens neighborhoods. For example, Shea Stadium and the U.S. Tennis Center right next to it now operate like little enclaves that bring crowds in and out with little interaction with the neighborhoods of Corona and Flushing. The Olympics could just as easily turn its back on these neighborhoods and leave them nothing of value after the last athletes go home.

If the city decides to keep the stadium in Manhattan, they could very well undermine whatever chances are left for winning the 2012 Olympic bid. They face the formidable opposition of most local civic groups and elected officials, and likelihood of a devastating lawsuit. On the other hand, if the city decided now to put the stadium in Queens (and George Bush gets defeated in the next election) other countries represented on the International Olympics Committee may well vote for New York City.

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The West Midtown Plan: Robert Moses at His Worst

The proposed stadium is a central part of the city's monumental plan for office expansion on the west side of Manhattan. It's so central the city named its plan [the Hudson Yards Plan](#) "referring to the rail yards over which the stadium would be built. This is what happens when a bad idea based on the fanciful dreams of a greedy corporation is the foundation for a plan that would redevelop an entire neighborhood. This is truly Robert Moses at his worst, without the parks and low-income housing that Moses left behind, only a few shrubs and lots of office towers and luxury high-rises.

The city and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority are now doing an environmental impact study to look at two things: first, the potential effects of zoning changes they hope to introduce next year; and secondly, extension of the #7 subway line, proposed to begin construction no later than 2005, when the final decision on the site of the 2012 Olympics will be made.

Here's what's wrong with this mega-plan:

~ It would create a huge north-south wall of office and residential buildings, and a northward expansion of the Javits Center, cutting off the rest of the neighborhood from the waterfront.

~ It requires building the most expensive mile of subway in the world " possibly \$3 billion. This will divert funds from the Second Avenue subway and prove a net loser if the projected office development lags.

~ It undermines the protections of two special zoning districts, the Special Garment Center District and Clinton Special District, zoning havens for small-scale manufacturers and affordable housing.

~ It is based on overly optimistic projections of the amount of future office space that would be attracted to midtown.

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â€~ There's no financial plan that shows how all of this makes economic sense or that it won't contribute to a future fiscal crisis.

â€~ It has virtually no community support. Local civic groups, elected officials and the community board are all against it.

The Community Plan

There is a sensible alternative. The Hells Kitchen Neighborhood Association ([HKNA](#)) has an alternative plan that deals with most of these problems. It is the result of many consultations involving residents, property owners, and the community board. It also has a bit of grandeur and plenty of development opportunities. But it is tempered by a more reasoned expectation of future development.

The plan has in mind a real full-time community, not another downtown office district that turns into a cemetery after the three-piece suits get back on the buses. It's curious that the Bloomberg plan is such a throwback to the dull old downtown development model while at the same time he's had the good sense to acknowledge the declining prospects for an office-only downtown in lower Manhattan.

The neighborhood plan would put a mixture of uses on the platform to be built on the Hudson Rail Yards. It allows space for the expansion south of the Javits Center and would put commercial and residential uses on the site. Most importantly it makes a big dent in the monstrous wall that a northward Javits expansion would create. Community residents all over the city want improved public access to the waterfront. A giant stadium will give that access only to the box-holders.

For background and major articles on the stadium and west side, see the Web site, [HellsKitchen.net](#)

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