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New York’s waterfront building boom has been a bonanza for developers, but the resulting public space has often been a letdown: monotonous promenades, rigid bulkheads, ever-present guardrails, and nary a spot to quaff a beer.

And so after getting

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21 Murray St., 5th Floor
New York, NY 10007

AUTHENTICITY OF EMPIRE STATE MODEL IN DOUBT

EMPIRE FAKE?

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General gladness and near unanimous support greeted Mayor Bloomberg's February 27 announcement that he was malling Times and Herald squares by closing off portions of Broadway in the interest of easing traffic, widening sidewalks, and reclaiming some three acres for pedestrian use. The Regional Planning Association has been pitching the idea since 1974, and so the group's president, Robert Yaro, was triumphant: "This plan is a win-win-win strategy for New York's motorists, its residents, workers, visitors and property owners. All will benefit as the City's Broadway plan is brought quickly to reality." Streetsblog called it "a bold transformative new vision." And what's not to like? The $1.5 million plan is supposed to reduce southbound motor vehicle travel times by 17 percent on 6th Avenue, and northbound travel times by 37 percent on 6th Avenue. And the Naked Cowboy will have somewhere to sit down.

The notion of banning cars on Broadway has reared up every decade or so since the 1960s, when a malling craze seized the entire country from Kalamaazoo (where the first downtown pedestrian zone opened in 1999) to Atlanta. Only 15 percent of 200 pedestrian malls survived, according to Sam Staley, director of urban and land use policy at the Reason Foundation; the ones that did not were absent two essential ingredients: plenty of pedestrians and a unique sense of place, with viable retail. Those two are resoundingly on hand in Times Square, and always have been, along with effective traffic management. In 1977, a $500,000 federal grant was paid to the city to create an "experimental pedestrian mall" with trees and potted plants that—just like the one announced by Bloomberg—would become permanent if it worked. And that was the last we heard of a plan that made local businesses fear they'd lose curbside traffic; annoyed taxi drivers for the inconvenience; and flew against the city's thinking that the time only that more time and wider roads could make traffic flow faster.

This time around, things are different, not least because the plan seems motivated in part by the mayor's determination to have something highly visible go his way after congestion pricing went so wrong. The attitude of other stakeholders has also changed—except perhaps the taxi drivers—reflecting more enlightened thinking about public amenities and transportation. They get it now: Cars in the city are headed for extinction.

And yet as radical as the plan is, it was disappointing to see it quite so completely devoid of design. Deborah Marton, executive director of the Design Trust for Public Space, pointed out, "No one thinks these plazas should look this way. Just claiming the ground was kind of heroic; they can always go back and rethink the detailing." That's true, but why doesn't the Department of Transportation, which is spearheading the plan, have a landscape design consultant on call to sketch up a vision first? After all, that's a little less ad hoc, more layered, and not so isolated from side streets? The agency's so-called pizza islands—like the new pedestrian spaces at Madison Square and 14th Street—are risible for their mattenings of cafe tables and glued-in-place gravel. Transportation Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan deserves enormous credit for shouting the lead off this decade-old plan and making something happen that this time might stick. It's still a shame, however, that landscapers design seem to belong to the second wave of the solution, not the first. JULIE V. IOVINE
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THE POWER & THE APPETIZERS

Tone deafness has trickled down to those who create the illusion of taste. Gawker recently let Los Angeles interior designer Michael Smith have it between the armoires for throwing a lavish Fashion Week luncheon at the Four Seasons for magazine editors and Barbara Walters. Isn’t lavishness the soul of Fashion Week? Yes, but by some (anyone breathing?) it is also considered bad taste to flaunt wealth during an historic economic meltdown. In politics, as in fashion, perception is reality, and Smith would be wise to manage the public’s view of him. After all, he’s the decorator who realized Merrill Lynch CEO John Thain’s dream of running his company into the ground from a $1.22 million office, while hydrating from a $960 Michael Graves cobalt-blue glass. The media would not have bothered to put Smith as the designer if it weren’t for the fact that he’s been retained by the Obamas to refreshen up the White House living quarters. The irony is that President Obama referred to Thain as a symbol of wretched excess in a speech last month, saying, “Taxpayer money should not go toward renovating offices.” Of course, Smith’s budget for the White House is a measly $100,000 of taxpayer money, which we calculated to be less than the fee he collected for the Thain job. Remember, perception is reality. The lunch, by the way, was given in honor of Desiree Rogers, the new White House social secretary. Awkward.

EDITRIXES

...Speaking of magazine editors, we doubt that Paige Rense was among the guests at Smith’s get-together. Architectural Digest’s octogenarian editor was overheard at a Los Angeles party last month enthusiastically dising Smith’s decorating skills. Of course, the disrespect got back to him before you could say commode-on-legs.

SING TO ME, O MUSE, OR NOT

If a tree falls in the woods, and nobody’s there to hear it, does it make a noise? If a cable show has no viewers, does it exist? No and no. Muse, the virtually unknown show on the hardly watched Bloomberg Network is about to go from unknown to nonexistent, which we acknowledge is just a technicality. Muse was the network’s gratuitous nod to arts and culture and aired at dawn on the weekends. Architectural luminaries such as Thom Mayne, Frank Gehry, Steven Holl, Ben van Berkel, Zaha Hadid, and Richard Meier were among those given air time. Now Bloomberg has decided that business news is more better. We say more is less.
OUTRAGE OVER DEVELOPER’S STAB AT GETTING STIMULUS

SMELLING A RATNER

Rumors spread furiously in weak economies, and the rumor that New York State’s federal stimulus funding might find its way to Bruce Ratner’s long-stalled Atlantic Yards project reached saturation a day after Congress passed the stimulus bill. That doesn’t make the rumor worth believing, though.

“I don’t think Atlantic Yards is getting stimulus money,” said someone who talks daily with Mayor Michael Bloomberg about policy, who spoke with AN on condition of anonymity since the mayor has taken no official position on the subject. The city still wants to see the project succeed, this person adds, but Ratner’s needs match the stimulus priorities too weakly to sell it to an exasperated public. Marty Markowitz, the volatile Brooklyn borough president, has surfaced in press reports as a proponent of the idea. His alleged rationale is that Atlantic Yards can start work soon and trigger construction spending. That Markowitz declined to announce his thinking indicates how politically dubious this may be.

In fact, the state’s stimulus priorities will focus on other priorities relative to big real estate projects. The package for New York City, for example, Governor David Paterson, will have allocated for education, Medicare, and transportation funding. Most of this will keep programs running, or help the Metropolitan Transportation Authority sustain projects like the Second Avenue Subway that are in the service of its capital-spend plan. The 17-building Atlantic Yards proposal, despite sitting over an MTA railyard and ostensibly advancing mass transit, is much farther from fruition than other projects. It also would have less potential impact on the flow of commerce and on the state deficit.

Many other stalled projects, like the on-going, offagain effort to create a grand rail station in lieu of Penn Station, arouse more fatigue than opposition, but are likelier recipients of funds. On March 2, Senator Charles Schumer told a Crain’s New York business breakfast that a chunk of stimulus money could revive efforts to bring Amtrak and commuter rail through a new Moynihan Station that could be done without siphoning money from the city or the MTA. In light of Atlantic Yards’ chances, the speed and depth of the stimulus-to-Ratner rumor indicates just how influential the developer remains, despite the idle pit near the Atlantic Avenue LIRR. Daniel Goldstein, spokesman for the coalition suing Forest City Ratner over his use of eminent domain, worries that the developer will prevail on the MTA or other state officials to help him cover his debts. “The MTA has said this project is not on their list (for federal relief), but that doesn’t mean it can’t be put on their list,” Goldstein told AN. “Any money to bail out Ratner enables him to move forward on his task list.”

Goldstein speaks for Develop Don’t Destroy Brooklyn, which has fought Atlantic Yards in state and federal court through many judicial setbacks. The suits have muddied public opinion about the project, making the idea of funding it with federal relief attractive only to politicians in the developer’s circle. “Marty Markowitz is calling both New York senators,” Goldstein told AN. Whether Markowitz is continuing to plump for Atlantic Yards, though, is dwarfed by the question of how the governor or mayor could justify plugging stimulus money into an unbuildable project.

The Carlton Avenue Bridge at Vanderbilt Raidyard.

Left to right: Gensler, Foster + Partners, SOM, Office for Metropolitan Architecture.

not worried about is financing. Raymond has partnered with the Lewis Trust Group, a British real estate investment firm, and the National Electrical Benefit Fund, the pension fund of the New York Local of Electrical Workers, both of which have been thus far spared by the recession. “It’s sheer dumb luck we picked them as partners, but thank God,” Mattson said.

Despite such public and financial support, some politicians have objected, most notably Michael Flaherty, the city councilor running against four-term incumbent Mayor Thomas Menino. He has seized upon Raymond’s proposal to include two adjacent parcels in the development, one occupied by a police station, which was recently refurbished for $2 million, and an NStar substation. Raymond’s proposal is bad for both the city and NStar about its intentions, though no formal deals have been struck. Still, Flaherty has called it a sweetheart deal for the developer.

Politics aside, Peter Smith, a co-chair of the Boston Society of Architects’ Urban Planning Committee, said that while much work remains to be done, he believes Raymond is headed in the right direction. “They’ve got to work through it with all the stakeholders, dot all their ‘i’s’ and cross all their ‘t’s,’ Smith said. “But in that respect, they’re on the right track.”

Failure to sell Atlantic Yards, Brood’s chairman, has said, will help the Metropolitan Transportation Authority sustain projects like the Second Avenue Subway that are in the service of its capital-spend plan. The 17-building Atlantic Yards proposal, despite sitting over an MTA railyard and ostensibly advancing mass transit, is much farther from fruition than other projects. It also would have less potential impact on the flow of commerce and on the state deficit.

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TIME TO SHARE

In this second in a series of conversations with architects about their experiences during recessions past, AN sat down with Rob Rogers, principal of Rogers Marvel Architects, to talk about entering architecture as a professional in the early ’80s, just as the economy went into one of its periodic nosedives, then starting his own practice right as the next one hit.

The Architect’s Newspaper: You took your degree from Rice School of Architecture in 1981, which included a year in Pei Cobb Freed’s office. What was it like when you were back on the job market in 1983?

Rob Rogers: Prospects were grim. I traveled around the country for four months, interviewing and just seeing the country. I had already had a year’s experience at Pei’s office, so they invited me back. I was lucky, because the early ’80s were a very tough time for a lot of people. Houston was really down, and everyone was trying to go somewhere else to find jobs. It was a small class at Rice and everyone had to leave whether they wanted to or not. A lot of us went to New York, and some to California; the rest were kind of scattered.

You were at Pei’s office for about six years and then went out on your own during another downturn. What was that like?

They were definitely weird times. I was at a desk at John Carl Warnecke’s office in ’83. That office had essentially dissolved. And as it had downsized, they sublet space and I sublet a desk from someone who was subletting two desks. He was only using one and I took over the other one.

It got you one source to answer the phone; it got you access to some copiers, a coffee machine, and a conference room so you could function and not be operating out of your house.

The space was a classic, huge loft on Broadway. There must have been 40 to 50 desks and there were probably 15 to 20 entities, everything from people alone like me to people with four or five desks in a group. Bob Heintges was there, starting his curtain wall consulting business. There were some others: Michael Zenreich, David Mullman, and Patty Seidman.

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It was a super-rich place and a great way to start up on your own. When you come out of a big office, you don’t know anything about running a small practice. You’ve maybe done big, amazing things, but expeditors? How to fill out landmark forms? You need help.

Here, you could share people—’Hey, help me on these drawings,’ or, ’How do I put this bridge wall together’—and somebody would know the answer. There was a really great collegial attitude about the sharing of knowledge and resources. And it was cheap: about $180 a month. Also, it wasn’t some squirrel hole somewhere, it was a beautiful space, loaded with daylight.

Things were still tight when you started up a partnership with Jonathan Marvel. Did it feel risky?

I met Jonathan, who was renting a desk from a guy whose office he was designing, and we had a beer Christmas of ’91 to talk about practicing together. Then I took over the second desk and we got started.

Everything was dead, and that forced us to do lots of everything: competitions, apartment renovations, small institutional jobs, office renos for the friends of friends who knew people with a company that needed work. But we started to grow. Jonathan had won a competition for El Museo del Barrio for a little renovation, and that was publicly funded, so that gave us our first access to the public agency world and we began to pursue that, too.

Then Bob Heintges grew to four people and he took a master lease in the Bendheim Building on Hudson. Mullman & Seidman were expanding, too. So we sort of refueled the system into a three-firm deal and moved all together. We were there for almost three years and we all kept growing until we didn’t fit, and then Rogers Marvel Architects moved across the street to our present location.

Sometimes I don’t know how aware we were of the recession at all, because we were starting out and everything was fighting and scrambling to get work anywhere, any way. If you were completely paying attention to the economic situation, you probably wouldn’t risk it. But we didn’t have time to pay that kind of attention.

Would you ever consider renting desks now?

We’ve had a lot of staff leave to start their own practices. If someone needed a desk or two, we’d entertain the idea, sure. It was an inspiring way to work.
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CORNELL SPLIT IN BITTER BATTLE OVER OMA ARCH SCHOOL

Milstein in the Balance

Having just won final approval from Ithaca’s Planning and Development Board, OMA-designed Milstein Hall, the planned expansion of Cornell’s College of Art, Architecture, and Planning (AAP), has hit another roadblock, along with most other construction projects on campus. Due to university-wide financial constraints, President David Skorton has put all university building projects under review. In this context, a group of professors and alumni have called for Milstein to be shelved, while AAP faculty, students, and alumni are lobbying for its survival. Meanwhile, the school is facing a deadline from the National Architectural Accreditation Board (NAAB) to upgrade its facilities.

“We’re not calling it a freeze. Most projects on campus are being evaluated, including Milstein,” said Tommy Bruce, vice-president for university communications. “Projects must meet two criteria. They must be essential to the mission of the university, and they must have all funds aligned.”

In a January 30 letter to The Cornell Daily Sun, 25 faculty members and alumni questioned the project, given the estimated 27 percent decline in the university’s endowment. “The financial crisis faced by our university renders the extraordinary expense of the chosen design (circa $60 million, before it has even gone to bid) very difficult to justify,” they wrote. “The extravagant expense of Milstein threatens more pressing financial needs for core functions of research and teaching, contributes to a greater financial burden on students and their families from projected tuition increases, and threatens more employee layoffs.”

In addition to the cost of the project, the letter questioned its aesthetics and sustainability, as well as its high-profile design team. On February 11, one of the signatories of the letter introduced a resolution to include Milstein in the university-wide “construction pause.” The resolution was struck down, as the administration already considered the project on hold.

AAP students and faculty, however, defended the necessity for the project’s going forward. Dean Kent Kleinman argued that the project is essential for the school to maintain its accreditation. A spokesperson for NAAB confirmed the dean’s claim. “We have not gotten a satisfactory response from them in regards to their facilities, to date,” said Cassandra Pair, an accreditation manager at NAAB. “This is something we can no longer ignore.”

Though the project appears to meet Bruce’s criteria of being “essential to the mission” of the school, the second measure, having “all funds aligned,” is more complicated. Dean Kleinman, who declined to be interviewed for this article due to the pending decision, estimated the project will cost $52 million, and told The Cornell Chronicle that AAP has raised nearly $30 million for the project and plans to borrow $12 million more, leaving the university to pick up the remaining $10 million (or $18 million, depending on which total cost estimate is used).

OMA is reticent about the situation. “All we can do is explain our intentions,” said Shohei Shigematsu, director of OMA’s New York office. Still, they acknowledge the present climate is difficult for their design. “Every project begins in a particular moment. If we started the project today, the design would turn out differently,” he said. “It’s an issue of bad timing, but the issue is not as black-and-white as some people seem to think.”

ALAN G. BRAKE
Quelling some fears that an unfriendly forest of towers may rise on Fordham University’s Manhattan campus, late last month, university officials struck a compromise with community groups, setting the stage for a major facelift for the school’s eight-acre Lincoln Center quad.

The controversial expansion has been mired in debate since 2005, when Fordham first unveiled plans to add seven new buildings to the campus, located on the superblock that stretches from 60th to 62nd streets and from Amsterdam to Columbus avenues. The university maintains that new classrooms, libraries, and housing are needed for the campus’ growing population of some 7,800 students, including more than 900 who live in university-operated housing. But opponents have protested that tall buildings ranked along Fordham’s periphery would tower over the area and wall the university off from its neighbors. Those concerns led Community Board 7 to cast a 31-0 vote against what many called the “Fordham fortress” in late January.

Since then, Fordham has relented somewhat on the scale of its proposal. The latest incarnation, announced by Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer on February 24, shaves 206,000 square feet off the original 3-million-square-foot plan. It reduces certain building heights, buries bulk underground, and scraps one proposed parking garage (cutting the plan’s allotted parking by over 50 percent).

So far, the scheme has been met with a qualified thumbs-up. The community board was “very pleased” with the project’s downscaled size and density, according to board chair Helen Rosenthal. But Sidney Goldfischer of Fordham Neighbors United, an organization formed to fight the expansion, still questioned the need for residential space. “Instead of putting up 2.8 million square feet, they could just put up the 800,000 square feet of academic space,” he argued.

Though public debate has focused on total square footage and height, size is only part of the equation, according to Brian Cook, a senior planner at the Manhattan borough president’s office who was instrumental in the negotiations. He emphasized that other factors also determine whether the new campus feels fortress-like or welcoming.

The proposed law school as seen from Lincoln Center. Below, the campus looking north on Amsterdam Avenue.

One of those is building shape, he said. Negotiators settled on two possible fixes for what Cook called the “slab-like” appearance of buildings on Columbus Avenue: The first option would offset half of each building, creating the illusion of four buildings rather than two, and visually break up the street wall. The second option would narrow the upper stories, letting in more light and air. Fordham also agreed to lower street walls to make the structures feel human-scaled despite their overall height.

The university’s options for building placement were more limited, since the open space at the interior of the campus is a two-story-high podium that does not allow building above it. Negotiations focused instead on making the campus more permeable. “There will be a lot more street-level transparency all the way around,” said Fordham’s communications director Rob Howe. “A lot more openings, glass, and street-level uses, like a bookstore and coffee shop.”

To that end, the staircase leading down from the north side of the podium was widened to 77 feet, connecting Fordham to the heart of Lincoln Center. Plantings on the stairways will draw visitors up to the podium’s gardens, which are currently hidden from view and little used by the public.

Rosenthal praised the hard work that had gone into the agreement, but said the board still had two concerns as the university moves to win formal approval from the city. The first is the height of the residential towers on Amsterdam Avenue, both over 50 stories. The board also wants to be consulted again once the buildings have actually been designed—and not just in an advisory capacity. “We’re looking for something that will have teeth in it,” she said. 

JULIA GALEF
On February 13, the civic group Chicago 2016 submitted its Olympic Bid candidate file, or bid book, without a Bird’s Nest or Water Cube. There is no Calatrava stadium to scramble to finish before the opening ceremonies. The marquee names associated with the bid, Burnham and Olmsted, might seem a little dated, but Chicago’s boosters believe that classics endure. “We’re focused on the games, the athletes, and the spectators, less on iconic architecture,” said Tom Kerwin, partner at SOM Chicago and coordinator of the firm’s Olympic 2016 master planning services. SOM has done most of the bid’s planning pro bono, though they are slated to design the Olympic Village should Chicago be named the host city.

In competition with finalist cities Madrid, Tokyo, and Rio de Janeiro, Chicago is emphasizing its existing facilities and its string of beautiful lakefront parks, first developed for the 1893 World’s Fair and codified in the Plan for Chicago (the city is celebrating the plan’s centennial this year). “Chicago is ideally suited to events like this,” Kerwin said. Soldier Field, the McCormick Place convention center, the United Center, and the University of Illinois Chicago Pavilion will all be pressed into service. “Many of the recent Olympic venues, such as in Beijing, were located on the periphery,” he said. “Our program is woven throughout the city for a much more urban experience.”

Benjamin Wood, formerly of Wood + Zapata (the firm that modernized Soldier Field in 2006), now of Ben Wood Studio Shanghai, will design the 100,000-seat Olympic Stadium to be located in historic Washington Park. Following the games, most of the stadium seating will be disassembled, leaving behind a small bowl and the track. The former Meigs Field, an island airfield controversially seized by the city in 2003 and shut down, will become a major venue, including facilities for beach volleyball, BMX biking, and track cycling.

The SOM-designed Olympic Village will be the most visible and lasting element of the Games. Sited on the grounds of a midcentury hospital, the Olympic Village will house 17,000 athletes and officials, and will later be converted into a mixed-use neighborhood. Planners claim more than 90 percent of the athletes will be within 15 minutes of their venues. After the games, the village will help to link the burgeoning South Loop, on the edge of downtown, with the sprawling Southside.

While the planners are taking a deliberately low-key approach to the bid, Kerwin emphasizes that the architecture will continue to evolve. “The designs are not very far along. It’s really more of a technically-based bid,” he said. The International Olympic Committee will make its decision on October 2.
Robert W. Ferris, AIA, REFP, LEED AP
CEO and Co-Founder of SFL+a Architects, Co-Founder Firstfloor, Inc., providing turnkey development solutions to educational institutions.

Sculpture: Gyre, Thomas H. Sayre, N.C. Museum of Art

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**RECYCLED CONTENT**

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Innotech recently released a new line of European-designed window and door profiles made with up to 70 percent recycled unplasticized PVC. Available in Natural White and Café Latte, these windows and doors are an innovative and sustainable option for architects, building professionals, and homeowners. Innotech recycles all manufacturing waste, while the windows and doors themselves are recyclable at the end of their life.

www.innotech-windows.com

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**ARTISAN SERIES**

*AMSCO WINDOWS*

Salt Lake City–based AMSCO Windows recently introduced The Artisan Series—a new line of well-designed, energy-efficient vinyl windows. Featuring a beveled-in frame, interlocking panels, high-performance weather stripping, CozE performance glass and SuperCapSR color technology by Mikron, these windows are available in a variety of options, styles, and colors including: white, almond, taupe, autumn red, evergreen, and bronze.

www.amscowindows.com

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**VERONA BY SIMONTON**

*SIMONTON WINDOWS*

Another new, green-friendly vinyl window on the market comes from West Virginia window and door company Simonton Windows. Verona by Simonton features a 3/4-inch insulating glass unit, a warm-edge spacer system, and double-strength glass for maximum thermal efficiency to help lower energy costs. For greater performance, an argon-filled and low-e glass is available. The Verona comes in four frame options, with a side-loading sash and a pocket sill.

www.simonton.com

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**BI-FOLDING DOOR**

*HERITAGE WINDOWS AND DOORS*

Made from an anodized aluminum perimeter frame and individual swing-out panels, the Bi-Folding Door is among the latest products to come out of Heritage’s Arizona headquarters. Available in a range of colors and glass options, the frame is composed of 40 to 50 percent recycled aluminum, making the product cost-effective, sustainable, recyclable, and maintenance-free. The panels contain high-performance glass, while the spacers in between are double-sealed to provide a better bulwark against the outdoor environment.

www.heritagewindows.com

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**ULTIMATE PUSH OUT CASEMENT**

*MARVIN WINDOWS AND DOORS*

Marvin has expanded its Ultimate Casement and Awning Collection to include the Ultimate Push Out Casement (pictured) and Awning. Designed to offer a more traditional alternative to crank-out casements, the new Ultimate Push Out opens with the turn of a handle. The window comes in all wood or wood-clad finishes, with a choice of 19 clad colors and nine casings, and is available with low-e II insulating glass with argon gas between panes or tri-pane insulating glass for even more energy-efficient windows.

www.marvin.com

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The main thrust of the 117-page amendment is to break down the uniform quality of many new waterfronts and allow for more creative uses of the edge. "In standard New York City zoning, there is one water's edge, and it has to have a 42-inch-high railing," said Donna Walcavage, principal at EDAW and landscape architect for Williamsburg's Northside Piers complex, designed by FXFowle. By contrast, the new code permits a variety of edge options such as boat launches, get-downs, and tidal areas. Other improvements include more meandering pathway configurations, moveable seating, and fewer visual barriers. The plan also dispenses with an unimaginitive list of plants that had been deemed prescriptive," said Elena Brescia, partner in the landscape architecture firm Scapes, whose waterfront design for Williamsburg's 184 Kent Avenue, next door to Northside Piers, is now under construction. "It's design by calculation. A certain number of benches are required per square foot, a certain number of trees are required per square foot," she said, concerned that the result may not add up to the intended effect. "Even though there may be a boat launch thrown in, much of what is prescribed here is about having the same experience everywhere.

On the bright side, the new rules do encourage the holy grail for many waterfront boosters: more cafes. "They're allowing for more flexibiility, and more commercial viability on the waterfront," Lewis said. "It's remarkable how few waterfront eateries there are in New York City. It's almost shocking."

Under the new code, developers would have the option to transfer public waterfront land to the Parks Department, and make annual payments to the city for site maintenance. The North 5th Street pier and esplanade at Northside Piers is the first transfer of this kind, which would seem appealing to developers, who also get to transfer the public space liability. In return, the Parks team is brought into the design process at an early stage. "To get our plan approval, we had to come to an agreement with the city about the transfer of the whole waterfront," said David Lee, project architect at FXFowle. The result is theoretically a public space more tightly woven into the open-space fabric of the city.

While many designers support the plan's goals, some wonder whether the amendment's fine-grained design standards are the best way to achieve them. "I think the biggest concern about these regulations is that they're incredibly prescriptive," said Elena Brescia, partner in the landscape architecture firm Scapes, whose waterfront design for Williamsburg's 184 Kent Avenue, next door to Northside Piers, is now under construction. "It's design by calculation. A certain number of benches are required per square foot, a certain number of trees are required per square foot," she said, concerned that the result may not add up to the intended effect. "Even though there may be a boat launch thrown in, much of what is prescribed here is about having the same experience everywhere.

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THE ART OF THE BATHROOM

Named for the Japanese phrase “carving by hand”, the hand-engraved Tebori basin is a tour de force of opaque laminated black glass. The basin is available in two finishes, thirteen colors and sixteen engravings with bespoke designs available. Experience Tebori at your local Davis & Warshow showroom.
Architects participating in New York City’s Design and Construction Excellence Initiative become the go-to firms for a wide range of municipal jobs, from storage sheds and office renovations to libraries and museums. As the downturn renews interest in public works and the program proves its own merits, getting on the list has never been more competitive.

By Aaron Seward
Once a peer-review architect for the General Services Administration’s Design Excellence Program in Washington, D.C., Karen Bausman of Karen Bausman + Associates is enthusiastic about public work. “From my perspective, the barrier between public architecture and all other architecture is closing,” she said. “Public architecture is now at the forefront of developing the design ideas that will fulfill our 21st-century needs.”

Bausman recently returned to New York City and plunged right into the public realm, designing two projects at Ferry Point Park in the South Bronx for the Department of Parks and Recreation. Her views may sound a little too optimistic to some. Over the past several decades, the legacy of public architecture has been such that municipally released Requests for Proposals have more likely caused design firms to hide their heads in despair than jump at the chance. Known primarily for modest budgets, Byzantine bureaucratic proceedings, and poor construction quality, the public realm has remained the domain of the ideologically dedicated—or of large firms looking to polish their public image after profiting handsomely from private developer jobs.

But that trend, in New York City at least, is changing fast. The number of architects of all stripes competing for public contracts (involving nearly 100 projects per year) has more than doubled in the last five years. With private developer work about as plentiful as the saber tooth tiger, billions of dollars are set to flow into the public realm. Part of this tectonic shift can also be attributed to Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg’s Design and Construction Excellence Initiative (DCE), which has turned what was once the ugly stepchild of the profession into a hot date. Bloomberg first announced DCE in 2004, along with the 22nd annual Art Commission Awards for Excellence in Design, which recognized eight city projects that exemplified the highest design standards, including Polshek Partnership’s entrance pavilion at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The purpose of DCE, the mayor stated, was “to expand our city’s pre-eminence as the design capital of the world,” by encouraging city agencies “to strive for the same level of excellence in design for all public works—large and small—that is recognized annually by the Art Commission’s Awards.” While DCE is a citywide initiative, the Department of Design and Construction (DDC), headed by Commissioner David J. Burney, was placed in charge of spearheading it. The Parks Department, which manages its own design and construction projects, also took an active role. The first step was...
to revamp the city’s method of procuring design services. Since time out of mind, public architecture projects have been awarded based on one driving factor: the lowest bid. This has proven an effective method for politicians wishing to exhibit their thrifty application of taxpayer dollars, but for obvious reasons, hasn’t always attracted the best architects or resulted in the finest work. DDC turned the tables on this method by removing price competition as the prime motivator in procurement, instituting a quality-based selection process. “I think that the perception, for better or worse, was that the city had a tendency to focus on schedule and budget. One measures those and defends the taxpayer’s dollar, and quality takes a back seat,” Burney told AN. “The idea was to reinstate quality in the minds of every project manager. We now have a series of initiatives to make that happen.”

DDC developed two new methods of procurement, streamlining the RFP process to attract the right architect to the right project and to allow a greater range of firms the opportunity of winning public commissions. (Not all designers have marketing departments at the ready to fill out 90-page competition forms.) The first method is for large projects of $25 million or more, such as the Brooklyn House of Detention or the new Police Academy to be built in Queens. In this method, two-stage RFPs are issued for each project. During the first stage, a committee that includes at least one outside professional peer evaluates respondents and ranks them based on their sub-consultants, the education and experience of their project team, and their design record. The top firms are then invited to submit detailed proposals during stage two. At the conclusion of the second stage, the city begins fee negotiations with the highest technically ranked firm. “The DDC’s new selection process guarantees a level of attention to architecture,” explained Todd Schliemann, a partner at Polshek Partnership Architects, which has completed countless projects for New York City. “It wasn’t so long ago that they insisted on practicality over design.”

The second method, for projects of less than $25 million, involves the selection of a panel of consultants who become the city’s go-to architects for projects in this budget range. As with the first stage of the RFP process in method one, architects are invited to apply to be on the panel and are evaluated based on their relevant experience and the quality of their portfolio. Firms that are selected are awarded 24-month on-call contracts with the city and are given the option of submitting proposals to projects as they become available. To keep the submission process fair and distribute the work evenly to large and small firms, this category is further subdivided into projects of less than $10 million and projects of $10 to $25 million. In the less than $10 million range, which thus far has accounted for approximately 50 projects every year, the city selects a panel of 24 small firms (defined as having ten or fewer employees) for each contract period. These have included firms like Andrew Berman Architect, Lyn Rice Architects, and Toshiko Mori. The remainder of the work, in the $10 to $25 million range, is offered to a panel of eight larger firms, such as Polshek Partnership, Smith-Miller + Hawkinson Architects, and Grimshaw. “For each project that becomes available, the DDC issues an RFP to the 24 firms,” said Adam Marcus of Marble Fairbanks, which has been included in the DDC’s $10 million-and-under on-call list since 2005. “We usually submit proposals for each one, but it’s not required.” The firm’s diligence has paid off, and it currently has four projects under DCE: a cultural center and a fire station on Staten Island, an arts center in the Bronx, and a library in Queens. “DDC is very involved throughout the process. Their input is usually helpful and they’re right about a lot of things. There’s definitely additional work dealing with the bureaucracy, but in general it’s been pretty good and we’ve found their reviewers easy to work with.”

This method of

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**THE LISTS**

Here are the names of architects participating in programs within the Design and Construction Excellence Initiative. Their two-year contracts were awarded in 2007 by the Department of Design and Construction (DDC) and by the Parks Department. The latest round of contracts for work with Parks was due in February, while the next round of RFIs for DDC goes out in August.

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS**

Abel Bainnson Butz EDAW
Mark K. Morrison Associates
Miceli Kull Williams & Associates
Nancy Owens Studio
Quinnell Rothschild & Partners
Stantec
Thomas Balley Associates

**ON-CALL FOR DDC PROJECTS: SMALL FIRMS**

Andrewerman Architect
Atelier Pagnamenta Torriani
Caples Jefferson Architects
Charles Rose Architects
ChristoffLinke Architecture
CR Studio Architects
Garrison Architects
LARC Studio
Locascio Architect
Lyn Rice Architects
Marie Fairbanks
MarilliPolland Architects
Michielli + Wyetzner Architects

**Firms Scale**

Sage and Coome Architects
Siela Architecture
Stephen Yablon Architect
Steven Harris Architects
Toshiko Mori Architect
W Architecture and Landscape
Architecture
WORK Architecture Company
WXY Architecture

**LARGER FIRMS**

1000: Architect
Deborah Berke & Partners Architects
Grimshaw
Polak Partnership Architects
Smith-Miller + Hawkinson Architects
Snøhetta
Steven Holl Architects
TEN Arquitectos

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The news is not all bleak, and there is still ample hope for high-design architects to find satisfying work in a city that values design. The Parks Department, the only other city agency that issues its own series of on-call contracts using the same methods as the DDC, has a $3 billion budget to spend on capital improvements over the next ten years. The first generation of Parks DCE projects is now going into construction, including the Bushwick Inlet Community Center by Kiss + Cathcart Architects, the McCarren Park Pool renovation by Rogers Marvel, and the Union Square Comfort Station by ARO. The agency is actually increasing the number of architects it will hire from six firms to eight. In addition, Parks also issues eight contracts to landscape architecture firms. RFPs for Parks’ latest round of contracts were due at the end of February, and while official numbers were not released as of press time, the number of applications has nearly doubled from the last count of 115 submissions. The fact that New York City values design and has implemented strategies to increase its weight as a factor in public works is heartening, but the question that must be on the minds of many architects right now is whether pursuing these jobs can keep them afloat. While the city’s process of finding architects has changed, its fee structure has not. The city has a sliding fee curve—based on percentage of overall construction cost—that is derived from a combination of previous contracts for the same services, adjusted for inflation, and information from a New York State analysis of contract fees. The lower the construction cost, the higher the percentage the fee accounts for. For example, a $100,000 project offers a 16.13 percent design fee, or $16,129. A $25 million project, on the other hand, offers a 6.08 percent design fee, or $1,520,375.

Without doing a detailed economic analysis of architecture firms, their fees, and their profit margins, it seems that this pay structure is more beneficial to the smaller fish in the architecture pool. Speaking about his firm’s extensive public work for New York, Schliemann said, “I’m not going to tell you that we make a great deal of money, but it’s a great contribution to the city.” On the other hand, city commissions account for approximately one third of Marble Fairbanks’ work. DCE is an admirable addition to the administration of New York City, but it is just one part of a greater initiative to make this town a better designed, more egalitarian, and more sustainable place. The city’s overall 2030 strategy also includes requirements for green design and a degree of diversity among those hired to complete public work. “What has been very satisfying to me,” said Bauman, “is that my voice is listened to and I have an opportunity to help re-imagine the city. The city is celebrating its 400th anniversary this year. It’s great to finally have a seat at the table.”

AARON SEWARD

Designed by Arquitectonica, the Bronx Museum of the Arts won an Art Commission award in 2003 and became the model for the city’s DCE program.
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The fact that New York City values design and has implemented strategies to increase its weight as a factor in public works is heartening, but the question that must be on the minds of many architects right now is whether pursuing these jobs can keep them afloat.

While the city’s process of finding architects has changed, its fee structure has not. The city has a sliding fee curve—based on percentage of overall construction cost—that is derived from a combination of previous contracts for the same services, adjusted for inflation, and information from a New York State analysis of contract fees. The lower the construction cost, the higher the percentage the fee accounts for. For example, a $100,000 project offers a 15.13 percent design fee, or $15,129. A $25 million project, on the other hand, offers a 6.08 percent design fee, or $1,520,375.

Without doing a detailed economic analysis of architecture firms, their fees, and their profit margins, it seems that this pay structure is more beneficial to the smaller fish in the architecture pool. Speaking about his firm’s extensive public work for New York, Schliemann said, “I’m not going to tell you that we make a great deal of money, but it’s a great contribution to the city.” On the other hand, city commissions account for approximately one third of Marble Fairbanks’ work.

DCE is an admirable addition to the administration of New York City, but it is just one part of a greater initiative to make this town a better designed, more egalitarian, and more sustainable place. The city’s overall 2030 strategy also includes requirements for green design and a degree of diversity among those hired to complete public work. “What has been very satisfying to me,” said Bausman, “is that my voice is listened to and I have an opportunity to help reimagine the city. The city is celebrating its 400th anniversary this year. It’s great to finally have a seat at the table.”

AARON SEWARD IS ASSOCIATE EDITOR AT AN.
spaces (POPS), products of incentive zoning. districts (BIDs) arising from public/private public realm, such as business improvement ings that belie the distinction between the ries especially strong, if complicated, mean-
um context, which remains largely As Robert Smithson discerned very use, and the built environment. Morris, Michael Heizer, and Agnes canvas to the potentialities of what autonomous space of the painted focus of their practice from style hanging of 20 or so drawings "site" in contemporary art. Epitomizing the misguided methodology of Sites is the salon-style hanging of 20 or so drawings and prints by preeminent Land, Process, Conceptual, and Site- Specific artists such as Smithson, Robert Iwuo, Richard Serra, and Vito Acconci. The majority of these sheets appear to be working draw- ings for sculptural, architectural, and environmental projects. Yet except in the case of a Barry Le Va sketch paired with its realization as a small geometric sculpture, there is no indication of whether these par- ticular projects were ever attempted or completed. In the absence of further documentation, the viewer might easily assume that these drawings are self-contained works of speculative or visionary art rather than fragments of a radically expanded practice that extends far beyond the confines of the exhi- bition space. Such an assumption would push the achievements of these artists back into the very frame work that they sought to destroy: that of the autonomous, museum-friendly artwork. Meanwhile, the crowded, homogeneous presentation of framed drawings by artists as diverse as Claes Oldenburg, Bruce Nauman, and Sol Le Witt tends to elide their very different, often incommensurable practices and perspectives into a unified field. A smaller group of drawings, presented with adequate documen- tation of the projects to which they belonged, might have allowed for a more substantive engagement with the theme of the show. The selection of larger works on display only serves to heighten the idea of a museum-friendly, housebroken version of expanded art. Matta-Clark, best known for his aggressive engagements with architectural space, such as sawing buildings in half and shooting out the windows of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (to the extreme chagrin of Peter Eisenman), is inexplicably pre- sented here with a small stack of gessoed paper, sawed through and mounted on cardboard (and, yes, framed). Meanwhile, Alice Aycock's small, wooden shanty construction of 1978 gives the impression, in this context, of architecture shunk down to the point where it can safe- ly function as indoor sculpture. Even a photographic or video presenta- tion of Matta-Clark and Aycock's outdoor architectural interventions would have spoken more directly and powerfully to the problem of site. The documentary approach is applied instead to postwar sculptor David Smith, an important forebear of site-specific art. Three photo- graphs depict twisted metal sculp- tures positioned in the landscape around Smith's upstate New York studio; the sculptures appear to frame particular views of the natural environment. However, the actual presence in the exhibition of one of these works totally overwhelms the idea of environmental context, and focuses attention on the raw materiality of the object itself. In a number of more recent works, the concept of sites take a metaphorical turn. David Simmons' Ghoster (1997), a monumental painting in chalk of a spectral rollercoaster, seems to vaguely posit memory or fantasy as a place. Sharon Lockhart's untitled photo- graph of pines swallowed up in a snowstorm evokes total disorien- tation—a sublime erasure of site. Finally, Huma Bhabha's worm's- eye-view drawing of feet moving into an apocalyptic landscape updates the popular modernist theme of wasteland. The inclusion of these rather romantic works stretches the supposedly contem- porary concept of "site" to the point where it might embrace, say, Caspar David Friedrich. In contrast, a 1996 sculpture by Rachel Harrison appears to pick up where Smithson and his experi- mentalist compatriots left off in the 1960s: a double-layered structure in wood paneling with a photograph on each surface that depicts a woman with a shopping cart on London's Wordsworth Road. The strange conflation of sculpture and photography in this work, as well as the opacity of the images, points up the epistemological diffi- culties of making an exterior site present in the exhibition context. Also complicating the problem of site is a recent multi-screened video piece by Doug Aitken, which layers together fragmented sounds and images of a solitary figure walking, and sometimes dancing, through deserted, phantasmagorical urban spaces. By turning the exhibition space into a series of screens, Aitken is able to recast the cinema itself as a physical site in which notions of place, time, and narra- tive are unraveled, scrambled, and uncanonically reassessed. These two pieces suggest that the idea of site in contemporary art has not hard- ened into an art-historical cliché or an abstract concept, but rather continues to provide an impetus for philosophical questioning and formal innovation.

PARSING PLAZAS

Designs on the Public: The Private Lives of New York's Public Spaces shows, in New York City, the term public space car- ries especially strong, if complicated, mean- ings that belie the distinction between the phrase and its apparent opposite. One thinks of streets, plazas, parks, and other publicly owned places, but in the city, many legal mechanisms blur traditional notions of the public realm, such as business improvement districts (BIDs) arising from public/private partnerships, and privately owned public spaces (POPS), products of incentive zoning. Miller, associate professor of landscape architecture at the University of Minnesota, analyzes six such spaces in Manhattan: the steps of City Hall, Jacob Javits Plaza, Times Square, and three Midtown skyscrapers (the IBM Atrium, Sony Plaza, and Trump Tower), a few of the city's $50-plus POPS. At City Hall, the public's right to assemble is presented as a reflection of the city's political interests: The government decides which public may gather and how that may be done. At Jacob Javits Plaza just north of City Hall, the redesign of an open space formerly occupied by Richard Serra's arc of rusty steel is viewed as a continuation of those restrictions, this time via design rather than regulation. In Times Square, graphic design is a means of manipulation, of skewing the demographic of the place from actual to desired, as a component of the transforma- tion from its seedy past. In the three Midtown office buildings, a well-designed public space (IBM) is ruined when private interests take precedence and ignore the provisions of POPS; another (Sony, formerly AT&T) is transformed by design and legal gray areas into a semi-private commercial zone; and bad planning and design at Trump Tower demon- strate a POPS system that values quantity over quality.

Miller's well-researched and disheartening analyses illustrate how public space is hijacked from the urban design to the public body by enforcing use of space beyond its physical boundaries. At Times Square, the public realm is transformed by BIDs, to the delight of tourists but the dismay of many locals. But the last three places that Miller examines are most telling. They illustrate the roles of corporations in the shaping of urban spaces: how corporate interests are elevated above those of the general public through positions of ownership, power, and finance. If design, as Miller contends, is complicit in excluding, restricting, and privileging certain groups in public spaces, how can one even reverse this trend? One might argue that this problem should not be addressed by design or other means, given that public spaces in the post-9/11 urban condition are increasing- ly utilized as security buffers to the arguably more valuable building, sites of governments and corporations. A more hopeful and egal- itarian response is that design can be an antidote to this exclusion, restriction, and privilege through The case in three sites—parks, plazas, and streets. Miller does not give the reader prescriptions. Instead, she presents arguments for public space in a shifting city. Today, inciting those who care to demand higher, more inclusive standards.

John Hill writes the blog A DAILY DOSE OF ARCHITECTURE.

The Great Exchange

This mind-expanding book, like a demanding college course or an exotic voyage, will substantially broaden your perspective. Its scope, far wider than the title implies, ranges from the American Revolution to the present, encompassing the histories of technology, politics, economics, art, city planning, philosophy, education, engineering, and architectural theory. Fraser is particularly adept at summing up theory.

Despite its sweep, this is not an impersonal, broad-brush study. People who made history are made to come alive in vivid detail. Briton Henry Bessemer patented a means for mass-producing steel in 1856, but it wasn’t widely used until the exigencies of the American Civil War. Soon afterward, the Scottish-born Andrew Carnegie “spotted the potential of Bessemer’s invention on a visit to England, then exploited the method on an industrial scale” in the U.S.A., where it could be produced much more cheaply. Later, he restored an historic castle in Scotland, cladding steel-framed additions in stone, and spent summers hunting and fishing like a lord. Steel would, of course, make possible the skyscrapers that rose in Chicago and New York.

The give-and-take between the two countries was advanced by trade and by outposts of American companies in the U.K., which introduced new ways of building and working. The first, Samuel Colt’s gun factory in Pimlico of 1853, closed within a few years because “Britain’s population wasn’t in the habit of shooting each other.” But in 1883, Singer Sewing Machine opened an assembly plant in Glasgow, and 20 years later, using an early type of reinforced concrete, built the largest sewing-machine factory in the world in Clydebank. In 1911, the Ford Motor Company opened its first overseas factory in an existing building in Manchester, then built multi-story, steel-framed additions. Ford then became the biggest car company in Britain and introduced similar multi-story, concrete-framed plants with gravity-fed assembly lines. The Heinz Headquarters of 1865 by Gordon Bunshaft was the first suburban office park in the U.K.; Roche Dinkeloo’s 1981 Cummins Engine combined offices and manufacturing in a campus setting, innovations possible then because the British were adopting American patterns of automobile ownership. The authors argue that ties between the two countries “were never so much political as economic and cultural.” Britain was “the single largest recipient of loans and grants under the Marshall Plan” after World War II, and later, of private American investment abroad.

Even more important, perhaps, were the cultural ties reinforced by a shared language and foreign study programs. They note that the American Ezra Ehrenkrantz studied at the University of Liverpool, which had longstanding ties with the U.S., and then stayed on to study modular prefabricated systems. Back in the States at Stanford University, he developed the School Construction System Development (SCSD) in 1962, a long-span steel structure with light demountable interior partitions, integrated lighting systems, and roof-mounted heating and air conditioning (innovations similar to those Eero Saarinen had developed a decade earlier at the General Motors Technical Center outside Detroit). The SCSD structure influenced a whole series of British and American architects, including Richard Rogers and Norman Foster, who had studied at Yale and traveled through the U.S. (and later set up a practice together in London with their first wives)—adventures recounted with just enough personal detail to make history fun.

The book highlights the impact that Buckminster Fuller, Cedric Price, Archigram, and James Stirling had on the “Special Relationship,” as well as the less desirable mutual influence of the New Urbanism and of Prince Charles on design and planning policy on both sides of the Atlantic. (It even cites the founding of The Architect’s Newspaper, which was modeled after the British publication BD, as a product of cultural exchange.)

Toward the end, the authors take real pleasure in the fact that despite a parade of big American corporate firms setting up shop in London and showing the Brits how to be efficient, Foster, Rogers, Grimshaw, and Hopkins are now getting significant amounts of work in the States. They attribute this in part to the U.S. backslide during postmodernism and to the creative work of British engineers, especially Tony Hunt and Arup, over the years. “Whereas for most of the 20th century… the main British influence on the U.S.A. lay in the sphere of town planning, and in return, Britain looked to American for technological advances. Now,” they argue, “the exact reverse is the case.”

The book, which came out before the recent financial crisis, ends by posing two potential scenarios for U.S.-U.K. relations: The two long-aligned countries will work together on the global stage, or the U.S. will align with China where cheap goods are made and new technologies will be invented—the way they were in the U.S. when it connected with the U.K. Both scenarios could come into play, creating even more complex special relationships.
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Infrastructure: A Hacker’s Manifesto

In December, when President Elect Barack Obama called his economic stimulus plan “the single largest new investment in our national infrastructure since President Eisenhower established the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s,” the media was abuzz with hopes that cities strained by decades of underinvestment would become better places to live. There were even suggestions that building high-design infrastructure would serve as an inspiration to a gloomy nation. Calatrava everywhere! OMA-designed windmills! The possibilities were delicious.

So there has been much hand-wringing about our failing infrastructure, we don’t. Incredibly, forms of data as basic as subway schedules can still be hard to obtain, often requiring either Google’s muscle or a canny lawyer and a Freedom of Information Act request. Incredibly, forms of data as basic as subway schedules can still be hard to obtain, often requiring either Google’s muscle or a canny lawyer and a Freedom of Information Act request.

As society has become more complex, the computer display of experience is the computer display. Commuter train ridership, which infrastructure might be.

Take Google Maps on the iPhone. This service delivers up-to-date information about traffic speeds. Granted, it’s not perfect. Not all routes are covered, the data is too coarse, and sometimes it is unavailable, making real-time routing tricky. Still, I have a good sense of whether I should take the George Washington Bridge or the Holland Tunnel on the odd occasion when I have to drive into the city. With technology like this, there’s no reason why New York’s subway riders can’t be equally enlightened. If the MTA knows where its trains are, we should know too. It’s preposterous to wait forever to get on a local train only to find out—once the doors have closed—that the train is inexplicably going express, right past your stop.

Congress and the White House as can be imagined: hacking. In the post-9/11 culture of government paranoia, hacking is tantamount to terrorism, but in the best sense of the word, hacking sets out not to harm other people but to expand our horizons. Congress and the White House as can be imagined: hacking. In the post-9/11 culture of government paranoia, hacking is tantamount to terrorism, but in the best sense of the word, hacking sets out not to harm other people but to expand our horizons. Architects should not feel left out. Their imaginations are sec-ond to none. It’s time to use them again, and to truly rethink what architecture and infrastructure might be.

In December, when President Elect Barack Obama called his economic stimulus plan “the single largest new investment in our national infrastructure since President Eisenhower established the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s,” the media was abuzz with hopes that cities strained by decades of underinvestment would become better places to live. There were even suggestions that building high-design infrastructure would serve as an inspiration to a gloomy nation. Calatrava everywhere! OMA-designed windmills! The possibilities were delicious.

We should view this not as another professional snub, but as a major opportunity to get our priorities straight. We all know that infrastructural investment is necessary. But the way architects were talking about their hopes for a bailout made them sound as bad as the banks. So let me make a modest proposal. To paraphrase another president, think not what infrastructure spending can do for you; think what you can do to reinvent infrastructure. Here’s the real problem: Our models for supporting cities have grown as deceptively as the bridges and highways around us.

This I learned between 2004 and 2008, when I led a team of researchers investigating the changing conditions of infrastructure in Los Angeles, and producing the book The Infrastructure City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles. For us, Los Angeles was a case study: A particularly interesting city, but one that proved the rule regarding infrastructure, rather than the exception. Our conclusions were, first and foremost, that a WPA-style infrastructural push is impossible today. In part, this is because infrastructure tends to conform to an S-curve during its growth. As money is invested in infrastructure, its efficiency leaps ahead, but due to rising complexity, the S-curve eventually flattens and returns-per-dollar invested diminish greatly. Most of our systems are now at this stage: highly complex and very expensive to invest in. Moreover, costs for infrastructural improvements are vastly greater today than in the past. Thus, even if economist Paul Krugman observes that infrastructure funding generates vast growth, which stems from its status intended as a means to free information. This is amply shown by the internet’s rapid growth, which stems from its status as an ideal environment for hackers. Anyone with a small investment in access can build new applications and interfaces. Why not do the same for your city? Let us imagine: hacking. In the post-9/11 culture of government paranoia, hacking is tantamount to terrorism, but in the best sense of the word, hacking sets out not to harm other people but to expand our horizons. Architects should not feel left out. Their imaginations are second to none. It’s time to use them again, and to truly rethink what architecture and infrastructure might be.

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