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City Should Make Trump Playground a Real One Crain's New York Business - September 3, 1990

By Mitchell Moss

Now that Donald Trump has been bailed out by his bankers, its time to consider the impact on New York City. The largest undeveloped parcel of land in Manhattan, the 76-acre Penn Central railroad yard site on Manhattan's West Side, is currently owned by Trump, but it's unlikely that banks will lend him the money required to develop the massive residential and commercial complex he has proposed for this site. What can New Yorkers do to assure that this underused but magnificent property - located between the Hudson River waterfront and the vibrant Upper West Side of Manhattan - is put to good use and not simply sold off in bits and pieces to raise money for Donald's follies?

First, it is essential to recognize the importance of keeping the property intact. Undeveloped land on this scale is easy to find in the hinterland, but a rare treasure in New York: how often can you build a new part of the city in a systematic way rather than in piecemeal fashion? The last such opportunity occurred when Battery Park City was created with the planning and development savvy of Olympia & York and the staying power of the state of New York. Seventy-six acre parcels don't come along very often: let's not chop it up to cover interest payments on casinos.

Second, the Trump property is too valuable to sit idle. Highly skilled and organized community groups do not want development that would disrupt

neighborhood life. Eventually, New York City officials will need to determine what should be done with the property so that it can best serve the overall interests of the city. Fortunately, the parcel is large enough to accommodate a mix of uses. The challenge is to develop the site so it can enhance urban life, contribute to - rather than draw upon - the city's revenue base, and is imaginative enough to get the nation's attention.

Third, we should resist the easy solutions of high-rise housing and office towers. The current glut of office space will take years to absorb, and there is absolutely no reason to create a new office hub, just when the monumental Times Square project is about to begin and when more than 15 percent of Manhattan office space is vacant. While the city certainly needs housing, West Side residents are not likely to welcome low-income housing for homeless families and will oppose luxury high-rise housing that blocks their view. So what's to be done? The most popular solution is to build a park. but public funds to acquire the site are not available: the current budget doesn't have money to maintain existing parks.

Let's consider an urban theme park that conveys the evolution of city life from the past to the future. Visitors could see the pre-Columbian Indian cities of Latin America while history buffs could experience Paris at the time of the French Revolution. A simulated ride through an urban sewer system - with narration by the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles - would demonstrate environmentally sound waste disposal. An "urban Olympics" - highlighting city rather than country club sports - would emphasize handball, stickball. and roller-blading. Food would only be available from streetcart vendors, thereby displaying the entrepreneurial and culinary skills of New Yorkers. Given the proximity of Lincoln Center, it would be appropriate to bring together sidewalk performing artists - musicians, mimes. and magicians - for a cultural festival modeled after the event in Edinburgh, Scotland. And for shoppers, there would be an urban Williamsburg with the "dinosaurs" of the 20th century: B. Altman, Crazy Eddie, Gimbel, S. Klein and Bonwit Teller.

The centerpiece of the project, of course, would feature a New York version of the Tower of Babel with George Steinbrenner, Al Sharpton, and Leona Helmsley.

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