

# AIA New York Chapter

The Founding Chapter of The American Institute of Architects



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re: Lessons for rail yards decision, Crain's editorial of November 25, 2007

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The 11/25 editorial "Lessons for rail yards decision" is incorrect in several important ways. The "architectural community" – which came together with planners, urban designers, engineers and landscape architects to speak with one voice after September 11, 2001, never endorsed or lobbied for a particular scheme. In the *New York New Visions* document titled "Principles for the Rebuilding of Lower Manhattan," 20 design and planning groups suggested seven principles which eventually were used to evaluate the planning concepts solicited in the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation site competition. These included honoring the place (putting the memorial first), a flexible mixed-use future, more neighborhood connectivity, regional relationships, design excellence/sustainability, an effective and inclusive planning process, and quick action.

The report contained many specific ideas such as "Magnify public and economic benefits of investment by linking existing and new transportation centers and integrating them with pedestrian flows and public spaces." It did not push for a particular plan, though the proposals of both Studio Daniel Libeskind and the THINK Team (Viñoly and Schwartz) scored highly when measured against these principles. Subsequently the independent design jury of the American Institute of Architects New York gave an un-built project award to the proposal of the THINK Team.

The *New York New Visions* principles espoused shortly after 9/11 do apply uptown now at the West Side Rail Yards. Clear connections to the Penn Station/Moynihan Station corridor, the Javits Center, the Hudson River Park waterfront and the High Line are crucial. A mixed-use development that values the importance of welcoming and usable open space is critical, as is a significant percentage of affordable housing in the mix. Design excellence is not measured at this early stage uptown by sculptural forms and facades, but rather by a "green" approach to the site planning that relates to the admirable goals of the City's PlaNYC blueprint for 2030.

An inclusive planning process was initiated by the MTA by their placing the five proposals on public display at a storefront on 43<sup>rd</sup> Street and Vanderbilt Avenue.

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This process is reinforced by the community-led town hall on Monday, December 10<sup>th</sup>, and the presentation by the five design and planning teams at Cooper Union's Great Hall on Monday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>. Organized by ten different architectural and planning groups, including the Architectural League and the American Institute of Architects, the goals of this session are not to argue against constructibility, reasonable project phasing or economic return, but to point out that there are significant differences between the schemes.

What the MTA is doing by soliciting imaginative proposals from five superlative design teams is estimable – they are saying it is not only about the bottom line, but also about the quality of the spaces to be used by New Yorkers well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The architectural community has again come together to help the public and those responsible for the public good to differentiate between the qualities of the proposals on hand. If architects and other design professionals have any influence over the decision-making process, it is to loudly proclaim the need for a reconnected and activated Hudson Yards neighborhood.

Design does matter,

Fredric Bell  
Executive Director