Five Visions for Man
LOCATED ON THE FAR WEST SIDE of Midtown Manhattan, surrounded by tall concrete walls and chain-link fences, the two gigantic superblocks that comprise Hudson River Rail Yards constitute one of the most unwelcoming pedestrian zones in the city. A walk at any time of day past the long empty expanse of the looming walls that stretch for three blocks along 11th Avenue is disconcerting in a city known for its vibrant street life. Nor is there any nature here—even the hilly topography is man-made, and the streets and avenues are built up and over the rail yards, which occupy enormous sooty open pits jammed with tracks and trains.

However, dramatic changes are coming to this bleak area in the form of one of the largest redevelopment projects in the city’s history. Last October, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which controls rail yards, issued a request for proposals (RFP) that in addition to allowing for a whopping 12 million square feet of residential and commercial development contains strict open-space guidelines and requires that approximately 12 acres of the 26-acre site be developed as open space and public parks.

Even by New York City standards, this project is enormous. First, at 26 acres, Hudson Yards is the largest undeveloped tract of land in Manhattan—significantly larger than the 16-acre World Trade Center site in lower Manhattan. Second, the scale of the buildings will be immense—the 12 million square feet of new buildings is roughly 12 times the size of the Time Warner Center at Columbus Circle, the largest building project completed in recent city history.

Five different developers are bidding for the opportunity to redevelop Hudson Yards into a new mixed-use neighborhood. The design teams for the development proposals are some of the biggest names in landscape architecture: the Olin Partnership, Field Operations, Peter Walker and Partners, Landscape Architecture, WRT Planning and Design, and West 8.

The MTA is expected to select a developer sometime later this month or next. In the meantime, the agency has launched an outreach effort, which has included a display of the models and plans of the competing proposals at a storefront near the city’s Grand Central Station. Civic groups and community organizations have been reviewing plans at packed public meetings.

The parks proposed for Hudson Yards have the potential to be among the most significant in the city. With a million new residents expected by the year 2030, New York City planners are under pressure to find places for the city to expand, and they have identified the far west side of Midtown Manhattan as the city’s final frontier. Plans call for a new 360-acre mixed-use district with 20 acres of new parks and tree-lined boulevards to replace the underused industrial area bounded roughly by 42nd Street and West 30th Street and by Eighth Avenue and the Hudson River.

In addition to being located at the hub of an entire new district, the new parks at Hudson Yards would also be at the nexus of three new major linear parks that, when finished, will create a greenbelt running along much of the west side of Manhattan: Hudson River Park, the High Line (an elevated rail trestle that is being converted into a public park), and the proposed eight-block-long Hudson Boulevard (a tree-lined thoroughfare that will travel from West 42nd Street through the heart of the new commercial district.)

Hudson Yards is an especially challenging project for designers. In the development scenario contained in the MTA’s RFP the project would be built primarily atop two massive platforms spanning two functioning train yards: the Eastern Rail Yard, a 13-acre superblock site situated between West 30th and West 33rd streets and 10th and 11th avenues, and the Western Rail Yard, a 13-acre superblock bounded by 11th and 12th avenues and West 30th and West 33rd streets. One challenge involves figuring out how to provide adequate connectivity between a site resting on platforms that could rise up to 30 feet above grade in places and the streets of Manhattan below.
Another is arranging 12 million square feet of new buildings so that adequate light and air reach the new parks. In addition, although not a requirement, another consideration is the preservation of the stretch of the popular High Line that runs along the southern and western borders of the Western Rail Yard and has a spur extending over 10th Avenue to the Eastern Rail Yard.

A distinguishing aspect of this competition is that the MTA is holding a public review process in advance of its selection of a developer. Ordinarily, there is little opportunity for the public and the design community to weigh in this early on large redevelopment projects involving state-owned land in New York City. State officials generally first choose a particular developer and a plan, and only later is there a public dialogue about the project’s urban design qualities and its civic aspects. However, a failed attempt by the city several years ago to build a football stadium for the New York Jets on the Western Rail Yard helped set the stage for a new approach. This time around, MTA officials are engaging the public sooner. And the developers who generally are more focused on the views from their skyscrapers are making a conspicuous attempt to curry public support for their respective proposals—with extraordinary attention to the landscape architecture features of their plans.

Although the MTA has stated that it will make its award primarily based on economic considerations, many see the public showcasing of the proposals as an opportunity for the planning professions and community groups to build a consensus around critical urban design objectives. "I don’t think that any of us is under the illusion that the plans that we are seeing now are cast in stone," says Anna Levin, cochair of the Hudson Yards Community Advisory Committee, "but they do represent some planning attitudes, and we are going to work with whoever gets chosen to ensure that their plan is adapted to a whole host of considerations."

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**MASTER PLAN AND OPEN SPACE DESIGN: SKIDMORE, OWINGS & MERRILL/FIELD OPERATIONS**

This plan ignores stipulations in the RFP and extends Manhattan’s street grid onto the site along 31st and 32nd streets. In public presentations, James Corner, ASLA, of Field Operations has stressed that his guiding inspiration for the landscape architecture component of the Brookfield proposal is to connect the rail yards to the rest of the city. He also maintains the design guidelines contained in the RFP for the project would result in a large elevated open space 30 feet above street level in places that, in addition to having poor connectivity with the surrounding city, would suffer from wind tunnels and shadows created by the surrounding towers. So instead of constructing one large park at one main elevation on two major platforms, Corner reconfigures the site into four distinctive public open spaces that are located at different elevations. In addition to breaking up the superblocks, Corner says that his team’s plan will provide the overall site with more light and better views of the city around it than it would have had if it simply followed the RFP’s requirement for a large elevated contiguous open space on an east–west axis.
The parks proposed for Hudson Yards have the potential to be among the most significant in the city.
Each of the parks in the Brookfield proposal has a specific orientation. For example, the West Chelsea Promenade, above, which is located at grade level along West 30th Street, would create a wide buffer along the High Line, for which Field Operations also did the design (in conjunction with Diller Scofidio + Renfro) (see "Taking the High Road," Landscape Architecture, December 2004), and provide a streetscape animated by cafés and shops along two blocks of West 30th Street.

At the other end of the spectrum is Hudson Green, located atop the platform on the Western Rail Yard, where this proposal has ignored the MTA’s guideline to site a building at the southwestern edge and instead opened up the site with a rolling meadow that offers wide-angle views over the Hudson River.
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LEAD ARCHITECT: Kohn Pedersen Fox
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: WEST 8/WY

This proposal is defined by three major open spaces: a waterfront lawn on the western edge of the site, a central open space called the promenade, and a cultural plaza situated over the Eastern Rail Yard. In addition, large public plazas located at the corners of the eastern boundary of the site open up to Midtown Manhattan. Orientation to the rest of the city is established by pedestrian walkways, which connect to adjacent city streets and extend through the site. The landscape architecture in this proposal is designed in layers with gardens, trees, and hedges. In addition to providing distinctive spaces for large and small events, Claire Weisz of West 8 says the layered landscape will help mitigate the effects of the harsh weather coming off the Hudson.

A key aspect of this plan is that it engages the High Line in ways that run counter to the objectives of the advocacy group the Friends of the High Line, which has issued its own set of design guidelines, one of which calls for the celebrated rail trestle to remain distinct from adjacent structures planned for the rail yards. Instead of following that suggested design guideline, this plan connects the development’s elevated platform to the adjacent High Line and incorporates the structure into the Hudson Yards development with cafés and a school on top and shops and restaurants underneath.
This proposal emphasizes clear, easy-to-navigate connections to the rest of the city with an elevated pedestrian thoroughfare called the "Skyline" that traverses the entire site, connects with the elevated High Line and Hudson Boulevard, and also crosses 12th Avenue to connect to Hudson River Park. In addition to linking city parks that abut the
site, the Skyline connects raised lobbies of the surrounding buildings and provides a unique way to experience the green space below. Another distinguishing aspect of this proposal is that it does away with a substantial section of the High Line along the western edge of the site as well as the eastern spur crossing 10th Avenue, an aspect of the plan that is not likely to win support from the influential Friends of the High Line, the advocacy group behind one of the city's most popular park projects.

WRT has designed the open space for Hudson Yards as one 12-acre contiguous park that transitions from a highly urban space on the eastern end to a more pastoral, greener landscape on the western end overlooking the Hudson River. This plan animates and programs the park with retail and concession structures located throughout the park and underneath the Skyline. This plan also features some of the densest plantings arranged in microenvironments, which Margie Ruddick of WRT says are intended to buffer the park space from the larger scale of the surrounding buildings and the harsh winter winds coming off the Hudson River.

One 12-acre contiguous park transitions from a highly urban space to a more pastoral landscape overlooking the Hudson River.
THIS PROPOSAL is oriented around two main transportation spines: the High Line and the city streets surrounding the rail yards. All of the elevated open spaces connect to the High Line, which borders the western and southern edges of the site. At street level is another open-space network with a promenade running along West 30th Street with large plazas at the eastern and western ends.

The plan also enlivens 11th Avenue with a large terraced seating area at the intersection with Hudson Boulevard dubbed the New York Steps, which is meant to be a contemporary reinterpretation of the Spanish Steps in Rome. The New York Steps lead up to a platform atop the Eastern Rail Yard, where there is a large round civic area for events with an elevated seating area called the Forum that is capable of holding 1,500 spectators.
A key aspect of this plan is ensuring views of the Hudson River across the east–west axis of the site. To that end, the pastoral green open space over the Western Rail Yard interlaced with winding Olmstedian pathways is built at different levels with a graded topography that descends toward the Hudson River to afford better views along the east–west axis.

The plan enlivens 11th Avenue with a large terraced seating area dubbed the New York Steps.
In contrast to the four other plans, which all employ some type of platform technology built over the rail yards, this futuristic plan is defined by a landscape designed by Olin Partnership that is constructed on top of a sloping deck supported by suspension bridge technology. The sloping suspension cables supporting the 12-foot-thick deck give the park its valley shape. In keeping with the objective of building a green development, a stream running through the center of the park on the Western Rail Yard would contain recycled graywater from the buildings that would be used for irrigating the park’s plantings.

Instead of placing buildings in the midst of the deck, this plan calls for them to be built on solid ground surrounding the perimeter of the parks. The tops of the towers on the Western Rail Yard are slanted to allow more sunlight to reach the park below. Of all the plans, this one has the most open space: 19.5 acres, or approximately 75 percent of the site. The large open space would have unobstructed views of the Empire State Building to the east and the Hudson River to the west. And instead of a park raised atop a platform that would have to be accessed by stairs and ramps, the novel suspension deck would make the complex largely accessible at grade.
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