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The plan is not enough

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### Problems, policies, and research

Innovation and urban competitiveness in Ob. 2 regions of Italy

Competitiveness and urban policies

Towards a metropolitan agenda in the new programming

Urban policy: an only partial assent

Cities, districts and regional innovation systems: the intersection between innovation policies and territorial policies

The concentration of high-level jobs in the cities

Piedmont

Lazio

Tuscany

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### Projects and implementation

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*Laura Valeria Ferretti*

*Yannis Tsiomis*

*Bruno Gabrielli*

*Interview with Manuel Salgado*

*Federico Oliva*

An urban project for the Romanina

The centrality of the periphery

The preliminary studies

The history of a competition

Description of the preliminary layout

An approach to the urban project

The competition for the Romanina master plan. The challenge of the centrality

Creating a centre in the Romanina area

Strategies, rules and decision

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### Profiles and practices

*Francesco Rubeo*

*Yodan Rofè*

*Giovanna Fossa, Robert D. Yaro*

*Cristina Bianchetti*

*Patrizia Gabellini*

*Luca Gaeta*

Recovering historic centres: an urban project for Beijing, Baimixiejie, the White rice road

Making liveable and sustainable major urban streets: a renaissance for multiway boulevards

A comparative study of the New York and Milan convention-trade fair centers

The crisis of the relationship between power and authority in the changing city

Ludovico Quaroni: urban planning concepts before their time

Public land as leverage for urban projects

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*Anna Maria Colavitti, Giancarlo Deplano*

### Methods and tools

Museum-city and museum of the city: reflections on an utopia

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### Received books

## A comparative study of the New York and Milan convention-trade fair centers

*Giovanna Fossa, Robert D. Yaro*

A growing number of world cities, including Milan, Munich, Tokyo, London, Boston and other places, are building large new convention and trade fair facilities at the edge of urban areas accessible to airports and central business districts by both transit and highway. The new peripheral sites selected to relocate convention and trade fair centers are unconstrained by existing urban street grids and can be designed around the program needs of these facilities for maximum efficiency and utility. They can also accommodate extensive truck loading and car parking facilities, in addition to being accessible by regional transit systems. These cities are then redeveloping their in-town convention-trade fair sites into new urban communities. The sale and redevelopment of these in-town sites can finance most or all of the cost of building larger more modern facilities at peripheral sites. This phenomenon is occurring for several reasons: the international convention and trade fair industry is entering a period of rapid change, requiring larger and more flexible facilities that are not easily accommodated within the fabric of urban communities; a growing share of the visitors to events held in these facilities are 'day trippers' flying in for just a day or two, or driving from a suburban area of the metropolitan region; these facilities also generate enormous car and truck traffic that congests urban highways and city streets; large trade shows require the rapid installation and deconstruction and removal

of large prefabricated exhibits which require convenient truck access to exhibition halls; the current in-town locations for outmoded and landlocked facilities are often in highly desirable settings that have enormous value and redevelopment potential; the renewal of the in-town ex fair sites with a mixed use redevelopment could provide new open space, urban parks and greenways, and in some cases, compact, intensively used in-town congress centers, all of which are consistent with and can reinforce existing urban texture. In this framework Milan is the most recent transformation experience of a fair center, creating a global model both for the creation of new peripheral trade show facilities and for the reuse of in-town sites. New York is faced with the need to modernize and expand its convention-trade fair facility, the Jacob Javits Convention Center, and has several alternatives for achieving this transformation. The article presents a comparative study of the transformation on-going in the Milan fair system and of the proposals for the transformation of the Manhattan fair-convention center, which are now being examined. The comparison, beyond the research interest, will be useful both for the definition of the New York strategy (Javits Center expansion or relocation) and for the issues still open in Milan for the local development around its new peripheral site and for the implementation of the winning proposal in the design competition for redevelopment of the downtown former Fiera area.

### Milan

The Milan fair had just been reorganized with two venue centers, a new 'outer pole' which is the main trade fair facility, and an 'urban pole'

that is the most recent portion of the former in-town site, now used for smaller consumer shows and conferences.

The outer pole is located northwest of the city of Milan boundary, on the former oil refinery site, inside the boundaries of the cities of Rho and Pero. This is a totally new architectural complex, developed to host the most important exhibits and trading events. It is one of the largest fair center in the world. It consists in 6 one-floor pavilions, 2 two-floor pavilions and a service-congress center. The location is very accessible, on the main infrastructural axis of Milan (the historic Simplon axis), between the city center and the Malpensa airport: accessibility at international level (crossroad between the trans-European corridors Lisbon-Kiev and Genoa-Rotterdam), regional level (served by the regional rail system), urban level (subway connection to the urban pole and the city center). The outer pole has the potential to spread a new development in the surrounding region. Just completed, it is regularly operating since fall 2005; designed by M. Fuksas (winner of the 2001 international competition), its 'sail' roof is already a new symbol of Milan. The urban pole in downtown Milan is the most recent part of the existing Milan Fiera area, which has been kept in order to host small, custom oriented exhibit and trading events and a conference center. The urban pole is the result of an expansion built in 1993-95 on the former industrial area called Portello. The decision of that expansion was made together with the decision to find a new pole (in addition to the Portello expansion) in mid '80s. The cost of the land acquisition and the construction of the new complex (750 million euros) has been provided by the

Milan Fiera Foundation (a private entity) with funds (523 million euros) from the sale of the historic part of the existing Milan Fair area, bordering the urban pole. This area (an historic military facility which has hosted the Fiera since 1923) was sold subsequent to an innovative design-development competition in 2003-04. The winning mixed-use redevelopment master plan for the former fair site will provide a new urban park and a new urban landmark district, including 3 skyscrapers by architects Hadid, Libeskind, Isozaki.

### New York

New York now faces a similar challenge of maintaining the competitiveness of the Jacob Javits Convention Center, managed by a state agency (Javits Center Development Corporation). It was designed by I.M. Pei and constructed on a former rail yard site overlooking Midtown Manhattan's Hudson River waterfront in 1975. As the US convention-trade show industry contracts, a handful of large facilities are chasing a smaller number of large shows; convention-trade fair facilities have become an essential piece of post-industrial infrastructure serving the region's important tourism and advanced service and technology sectors; how can an expanded convention-trade fair facility be incorporated into New York's urban core? Given the need for Javits to reinvent itself, a series of proposals have been made for its transformation:

- 'North expansion' approved by the Department of City Planning in 2005 and supported by the State of New York. This proposal would expand Javits North to 42nd Street with a hotel at 42nd Street (designer, HOK, cost \$ 1.4 billion, SF 1.3 million);
- 'The Flip', promoted by the Newman Real Estate

Institute of Baruch College of the City University of New York (CUNY): this proposal would build a new Javits Center over the Hudson Rail Yards, and demolish old Javits and redevelop the former Javits waterfront site (designer: Geddes Demshak, cost \$ 7 billion, SF 1.3 million);

- 'South expansion' (community alternative promoted by the Hills Kitchen Neighborhood Association): this proposal would expand Javits south over the western Hudson Rail Yards; construct 4 towers (office, residential and hotel) on top of new Javits (designer: Meta Bruzema-FX Fowle, cost \$ 1,4 billion, SF 1.3 million).

All these proposals focus on expanding the facility in its current location; face immense land acquisition costs in the Manhattan core; underutilize a valuable urban parcel; cut of the Far West Side from its prime amenity, the Hudson River Waterfront, and conflict with larger development plans in the district; and fail to provide a sufficiently large facility to compete against other cities.

In January 2006, in response to rising land acquisition and construction costs, a new official plan was proposed by the State of New York for Javits expansion (designer: Richard Rogers Partnership and FX Fowle). This proposal would cost \$ 1.7 billion; reduce the proposed expansion by 20%; add new exhibition and meeting space on two new upper floors; require the sale of portion of the current marshalling yard to finance the updated facility; build a new marshalling garage at Javits' northern end, foreclosing future expansion.

A number of serious questions have been raised about the viability of the project, including:

- how will the facility interact with the waterfront, including the 39th Street

Ferry Terminal?

- will the proposed multilevel design compromise Javits' functionality?
- will a projected doubling of time and costs required for setting up and dismantling of shows further undercut the competitiveness and utility of the new facility?
- is this plan a long-term solution for NY's convention needs?
- will expansion plans damage nearby residential areas?

In 2005 Regional Plan Association began to explore an alternative 'Swap' proposal for Javits expansion, which would break the project into two phases:

- construction of a new southern expansion of Javits similar to that proposed by the Hills Kitchen Neighborhood Association (a community group) on the Western Hudson Yards site, including approximately 40,000 sq.m of exhibition and conference space and a new convention hotel and four additional residential or commercial towers. A new subsurface pedestrian link would be constructed to link this facility to the existing Javits Center, which would receive cosmetic improvements and repairs to its roof and HVAC systems needed to extend its use for several years;
- construction of a new Javits Center on air rights over the Sunnyside Rail Yards in Long Island City, Queens, and retention of the new in-town convention site built on the Western Yards in Manhattan as a free-standing 'urban pole' similar to Milan's in-town facility. When the new Sunnyside Facility was completed, the existing Javits Center would be demolished and its site reused for high density residential development. As in Milan, the proceeds of the sale of the valuable current Javits site would be used to finance construction of the new Javits facility in

Sunnyside.

The new Sunnyside pole would include 200.000 sq.m or more of trade fair facilities on a deck over the new Sunnyside Yards intermodal transportation center (to be completed in 2012 as part of the Long Island Rail Road East Side Access rail expansion project). It would form the centerpiece of a new Long Island City Regional Center that could also be built on and adjacent to the transportation center.

This 'Swap' alternative (like the 'Flip') would open up the Manhattan waterfront on the Hudson River to new residential-commercial development, making finance available, and would connect the Far West Side to the river. This alternative, however, would also make a long term competitive strategy possible for Javits and promote renewal and development of Long Island City. The large Sunnyside area would not be constrained by the urban road grid, which would allow the construction of a broader and more flexible structure, similar to Milan's new Fiera facility. The area would be able to take even heavy traffic and auto vehicles more easily than the West Side of Manhattan which suffers from a series of constrictions. With its new intermodal center, the Sunnyside facility would become one of the most accessible sites in the metropolitan area, easily reached by subway or commuter rail from Manhattan, the suburbs and the airports. A ramp off the Long Island Expressway near the Midtown Tunnel would provide easy automobile and taxi access from the metropolitan area. Taxi rides to and from Manhattan hotels, restaurants and other attractions would be 'reverse commuters' similar in time and distance to taxi rides today to Javits from the East Side of Manhattan. Trucks would have much

improved access to the Sunnyside facility than they do today to Javits, reducing the cost of putting on trade shows, a major disadvantage at both the existing and proposed West Side facility.

### Comparative issues

The concept being examined by RPA to relocate the trade show facility outside Manhattan has interesting similarities with the decision to relocate the new Milan Fiera: relocation as a regional strategy using a multicenter urban-regional development approach; mixed use as a trend of both urban renewal and local development; the contextualization of the out-of-town venue to translate focused investments into community advantages; the possibility of self financing for an expensive piece of economic infrastructure; the environmental sustainability of a transformation which reclaims abandoned areas, contributes to the urban ecological network and allows the waterfront to be returned to the public. The role of high quality design is underlined in both cases as important to the success of the transformation.

The definition of the guidelines for the redevelopment of the original in-town site constitutes a strategic part of the process in both cases. One fundamental decision in the case of Milan was to combine parks with skyscrapers, with a floor area ratio (FAR) double that is usually used for redevelopment of abandoned areas in Milan (1.15 compared to 0.65 sq.m/sq.m) together with the request for a large new urban park to fill at least half the redeveloped area. This decision was justified by both the demand of an emblematic design and the financial feasibility; it was performed by the owner (the Fiera) in partnership with the municipality, given the

clear convergence of public and private interests in the entire operation for the reorganization of the trade fair system.

The process is only just beginning in Manhattan, but the institutional decision process has until now been driven entirely by the demands of the convention center and its management, and only secondarily by broader concerns about urban design and economic development in the West Side district. The city's new zoning plan for the Far West Side presumes that Javits would not be relocated. Plans developed for the area by community, civic and academic groups have taken a different approach, assuming that Javits could be expanded elsewhere and the waterfront reclaimed for other higher value public and private uses.

In the mid-1990s, as part of its third regional plan, RPA convened an architects committee of prominent designers to suggest alternative schemes for redeveloping the Far West Side. Several of the urban design schemes emerging from this process concluded that Javits should be relocated and the waterfront returned to the public.

In both cities the demand for green and public spaces is expressed not in quantitative terms but in terms of connections, especially with the waterfront. The theme of water is present in both cases, in Manhattan with the priority of reestablishing public access to the River Hudson waterfront and as a driver of new property development. Milan has pursued similar goals, but as a reinterpretation, in the design of the park, of the traditional concept of Milan as a water city built on canals at the centre of a copiously irrigated countryside. In both cases, there are important urban views. In Milan there is that from the freeway access road (viale Scarampo in line

with Santa Maria delle Grazie) and in New York the alignment of 34th street with the Empire State Building and the views lengthwise and on the river.

In Manhattan, there has been an attempt to transform the existing Javits Center into more of an icon on the waterfront, but its sheer bulk and site and budget limitations have severely constrained the design creativity of the project's gifted team of designers. The Fuksas design in Milan, by comparison, places itself as a regional scale land art in the background of the Monte Rosa skyline. This issue has not yet been faced in New York with explicit reference to the relocation of the Javits Center, but it is not completely unconsidered, because the participatory process promoted by RPA in 1999 (RPA's Long Island City Urban Design Workshop) faced the issue of the transformation of the skyline of this emerging regional center, identifying Sunnyside Yards as a new focal point of function and landscape. Concern was expressed in this workshop over the drastic change made to the skyline by the recent Citicorp tower and the question of the future image of LIC was posed with the proposal to transform the district into a new center, and while conserving the varied traditional architecture of the postindustrial district. Milan, by comparison, wants to change its image with the Libeskind-Hadid-Isozaki design, breaking with tradition and putting its trust in 3 spectacular skyscrapers, while the peripheral centre expresses greater dialogue with both the local and the regional scale context.

The role of non government and non profit actors in the process is underlined in both cases with technical expertise in urban planning and complementary areas:

the ULI in the case of Milan and the RPA, the Newman Institute and the Hells Kitchen Neighborhood Association to a much greater extent in the case of NY. The Urban Land Institute made a determining contribution to defining the guidelines for Milan Fiera which were used to orient design in the negotiated tender procedure and included simulations of bids. The RPA is playing a similar role by suggesting an alternative development scenario for the Javits Center in the event that the current official plan fails due to lack of financial and practical feasibility, or successful litigation by community groups.

#### **Learning from Milan**

*Two venue system.* There is no doubt that the Milan Fiera is the most recent development of this internationally emerging paradigm that splits convention center functions into two discrete locations. The Milan case is interesting both in terms of the innovative method and because its state of implementation is starting to make initial assessment possible.

New York needs to learn from and emulate this experience, by considering redesign of Javits Center complex to include:

- a new convention-congress center on Hudson River waterfront, integrated into larger hotel, office, residential and public space concept with urban renewal of the site of the old Javits;
- new trade fair facility on Sunnyside Yards, built upon a new Sunnyside intermodal transportation center with subway, regional rail, Amtrak intercity rail, access to CBD and airports, and road access, good truck access, and structured parking for cars and trucks.

This system of venues (as for example in Milan and Birmingham) is a completely new concept for US because most American

convention centers are located in places where land values are minima and center cities lack vitality.

The two largest US venues, Las Vegas and Orlando, are not even located in center cities. The largest in-town facility, Chicago's McCormick Place, is located two miles south of the city's downtown loop business district, accessible solely by automobile. New York's structure and urban land values are more comparable to European and Asian world centers, with vibrant central business districts and high land values. New York (as Milan) has also developed into a multi-centered metropolitan region, with more than a dozen vital regional centers.

The new paradigm for siting convention and trade fair facilities into urban and satellite venues fits well into New York's regional geography; it is coherent with a multi-center development strategy both at urban and regional scale. It allows the possibility to work separately for different products, offering a wide site easily accessible for large scale products and a down town site very close to the showrooms and media centers (located in the city center).

*Subsidiarity and governance.* The Fiera is a private organization which has worked in synergy with local government authorities and various stakeholders right from the start of the process and it has been a protagonist of this redevelopment of undisputed interest to the community.

The synergies between public and private sector interests, which took on concrete form with 'AdP' (programme agreement) in 1994, have been essential for providing investors with certainty over the bureaucratic schedules for approval of the design and the implementation of infrastructural improvements (paid for by government

authorities at different levels). In the case of the Fiera, governance has been effective, while in the specific case of NY there is a clear divide between the role and needs of the Javits Center management, a state agency, and the needs of the municipality and industry stakeholders, as well as between the municipality and the local community.

*Method: integration of financial feasibility with design quality.* In the process of redeveloping the former Fiera of Milan, the need for the Fiera to raise finance and the municipality of Milan's urban redevelopment objectives were integrated in a competitive and transparent procedure: a negotiated tender procedure which required the bid for the purchase of the old Fiera area and the redevelopment project to be prepared and delivered at the same time. The groups that took part in the tender had to necessarily include developers, financial backers, architects and interdisciplinary consultants. The jury (composed of representatives of the Fiera assisted by interdisciplinary experts of international standing and by a representative of the municipality of Milan) first assessed the quality of the designs and the time schedules to select a short list of 3 groups and then the criteria of the highest bidder was applied to those on the short list. The selection of the design for the out-of-town venue was also made on a competition basis which integrated the quality of the design with the bid made by the general contractor (competitors: architects jointly with general contractors), in order to obtain certainty over construction times and quality with the shortest delivery times.

*Extremely short time scale.* The process for the

redevelopment of the Milan Fiera was extremely efficient: 10 years from the opening of the new venue, 3 years between the tender process and the construction of the out-of-town venue, 1 year for the design and sale of the redevelopment area.

#### **Learning from New York**

New York's planning process is more complex and generally includes much more intensive citizen input than comparable processes in other world cities.

Planning for the rebuilding of the WTC site, or Governors Island, for example, included an extensive public participation process. This process was neglected on the Javits Center site, however, with the result that there is little, if any, public support for the current plan. Alternative sites were never considered or debated, and alternative site plans for the site, including proposals by the community for a southern expansion and by Baruch College for the 'flip' to shift the Javits to an east-west orientation on Manhattan's West Side, have never been seriously considered or debated. The latest plan, which proposes expanding Javits north by 1 block, is now subject to strong community opposition, which will inevitably delay the project. It must also be noted that the neighborhood around the Javits Center has evolved in the quarter century since the facility was built from a warehouse district with virtually no residents to a mixed use urban community, with several thousand residents and office tenants with a strong interest in minimizing the impacts of the convention center on the community. Based on their concerns about the impacts that Javits expansion would have on the community, civic groups in neighborhood recently filed

a lawsuit against the Javits expansion plan.

The current project is also hundreds of millions of dollars over budget and has made a series of planning and design decisions that will compromise the utility of the facility if it is completed. Convention center managers and users are concerned that the day this facility opens it will be outmoded and sub-standard in the highly competitive US convention-trade fair industry, and even less competitive than the current facility due to the expected increase in cost and time required to set up and take down shows. To function at all the expanded facility will require tens of millions of dollars in annual operating subsidies from the State of New York.

The expected controversy and delay over the current northern expansion plan will also create the opportunity to reconsider the current plan. A new governor of the State of NY will be elected in November 2006. The next governor will have the opportunity to re-examine this plan and consider alternatives, including the in-town convention center-Sunnyside trade fair alternative. RPA's role is to propose alternatives that can inform public discussion and be considered and adopted by public and private sector decision makers.

In the case of the Milan Fiera, preliminary consultation with the city before the guidelines were drawn up was performed by means of surveys and interviews with selected personalities, but without the 'design' aspect which has characterized recent strategic redevelopment strategies in New York. This has been achieved, for example, on Governors Island, and in planning for the rebuilding of the World Trade Center, the Hudson River Park. This method places value on creative input and proposals from

community participation rather than from theoretical and ideological inputs. Specific aspects underlined in the use of this approach also come after the volume and surface areas of the redevelopment are defined and include for example spacetime designing of public spaces and parks for different uses and users (as occurred for the park on Governors Island). This approach could be adapted to the final design of Milan's large Citylife park, which is already being redefined by the municipality. Public engagement in the design process could increase public use and reduce the privatization of the park within residential areas. The 'industrial' role of tourism for competitiveness. New York's Javits Center is an important component of the city's postindustrial infrastructure for its culture, knowledge and tourism industries, and as an attraction for tourists, business visitors and human capital in general. The Milan Fiera is basically a 'manufacturers' trade fair which exhibits primarily machines and machinery in the mechanical engineering sector and furnishings and fashion goods. 30% of exhibitors are from Lombard manufacturing industries, 50% from the rest of Italy and 20% from abroad. The Fiera doesn't yet have a plan targeted on tourism in general (which could include students, leisure time and cultural visitors as well as visiting business people), but this direction is consistent with the objective of diversified local development. Furthermore, the RPA proposal for New York foresees synergies of the convention-trade fair facilities with provision of waterfront parks and other urban amenities and in general with environmental and landscape resources. Similar opportunities exist in Milan's Rho area, with particular reference to regional parks, ancient villas

and water courses. *Railway yards in operation as a resource of building land.* To interpret not only abandoned railway yards as a land resource for the redevelopment but also those in use could be an interesting long term approach even in the local context of Rho. This applies to the railway yard now used for rail carriage maintenance and the Certosa yard. The areas are located near the new Milano Fiera venue; building on air rights above these active rail yards would overcome the barriers that they represent and permit their reintegration into the urban fabric, and at the same time maintain or even strengthen their intermodal hub functions.

*The strong role of regional rail services.* In the RPA proposal for convention and trade fair facilities in the New York region, both urban and out-of-town venues are located adjacent to stations on the regional public rail transport network. The functioning of this network is not only seen as a commuter service, but also as a competitive factor on a par with international connections, an indispensable requirement for real multi-center development. For the Fiera both venues are served by the SFR (Regional Rail Service), but despite the leap ahead with the railway regional bypass, this SFR is still not adequate for the development strategies of the metropolis in terms of structure and also of the standard of service. New York's exceptional network of subways and regional public transport lines is now being expanded, with the extension of the 7 subway line to the Hudson River waterfront and the creation of a new intermodal station in the Sunnyside Yard (expansion of both facilities was recently approved by the New York State Legislature and the voters in the 2005 Transportation

Bond Act). The Sunnyside intermodal station makes this an excellent venue for the proposed out-of-town venue with access to two subway lines, all three regional rail networks, Amtrak's intercity and higher speed Acela service, and potential rail access to all three regional airports. The new Milano Fiera site has similar rail access, with metro, regional and intercity and high speed rail service in place or nearby, and planned access to Malpensa airport. For the former Milan fair area, although the connection with the subway line 1 and the North Milan railway is already operational, it must be underlined that the planned station for the future subway line 6 under the skyscrapers seems behind schedule as far as integrating it in the design and in the related finance is concerned. Construction of this station seems indispensable but improbable in time for the demands of such a volumes and functions concentration, quite exceptional for this regional urban context.

### Conclusions

The dual venue development of the convention-trade fair system that we have seen or outlined requires a new type of development, a transformation of the landscape on a new scale, a transformation of the economy and of society, a new way of generating and using resources and the environment. How the change is managed will shape the quality of life and economic success of world cities like New York and Milano. These decisions concretely express our ideas of cities and our development models. They can certainly be interpreted as strategic regional design and landscape projects for which the old bickering over planning versus design seems clearly obsolete. The quality of the design and the

vision of the transformed landscape have acquired a strategic role even in urban and regional marketing. Similarly architecture and open air public spaces, like the rediscovered waterfront and a new urban park, have also acquired a strategic role capable of generating new symbols and life styles. These are innovative projects from a cultural viewpoint above all because they overthrow old perspectives, create new rules of the game and also face the challenge of experimentation. They are the expression of a city that is exceeding its limits in government practices and in the community vision.

The out-of-town Milan Fiera is the first major Milan function to be relocated outside the City borders. It is an icon of governance, of a strategic vision at the metropolitan scale (a similar philosophy has been followed recently with the out-of-town sites of Milan universities).

The proposal to relocate the trade show functions of the Javits Center outside Manhattan to Sunnyside, even if it represents a continuation of a regional vision for the city promoted since years by RPA throughout metropolitan plans (with many examples already implemented), seems in any case particularly symbolic in the development of the post 11 September New York landscape with the new emergence of the NJ skyline over the Hudson River and the Citycorp skyscraper and proposed other high rise towers over the East River in Queens.