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Author

Baldwin, Ian

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A Tale of Two Points

Ian Baldwin



In 2004, New York's bid for the 2012 Olympics put an unlikely spotlight on two coarse-grained patches of Queens. Hunters Point, facing midtown Manhattan across the East River, was to be the Olympic Village. The Olympic Stadium, hastily relocated from Manhattan's West Side, found a proposed new site next to Shea Stadium in Willets Point.

Both Hunters and Willets Points are low-slung industrial landscapes marked by cycles of use and abandonment, bordered by rails, asphalt, and ragged shorelines. Both host New York's back-of-house economy: auto repair, light industry, warehousing,

parking for fleets of trucks and buses. Both are a quick trip from Manhattan via the main highways to Long Island or the number seven subway line. And both typify the urban potential lying fallow in the outer boroughs.

These two massive redevelopments, Mayor Michael Bloomberg declared in 2004, would come to Queens whether or not the Olympics did. Five years later, in the wake of the unsuccessful Olympic bid, in greatly reconfigured form they have reemerged.

“The Valley of Ashes”

Willets Point lies at the northern end of Flushing Meadows-Corona Park. It is the site of the legendary ash dumps described in *The Great Gatsby*. It was also home to World's Fairs in 1939 and 1964. A memory of those events is still present in the elevated subway station at Willets Point Boulevard that was expanded to serve them, and in the vast parking lots and wide boardwalk ramps that still handle crowds destined for baseball games or the U.S. Open tennis championships. Just to the west is LaGuardia Airport. Every few minutes a jet passes overhead, low enough for spectators at the



baseball and tennis stadia to count the tires on its landing gear. Just to the northeast is the bustling Asian-dominated center of Flushing.

In the early 1960s, the Whitestone Expressway absorbed the bridge carrying Willets Point Boulevard over the Flushing River, truncating the boulevard after seven blocks and creating a cul-de-sac neighborhood. Subway maps began to show the name of the elevated stop only as Willets Point. But a more evocative name for the area is the Iron Triangle, a reference to the neighborhood's businesses—block after block of auto body and repair shops, junkyards and parts suppliers. On the eastern

half of the point, just beyond the tall reeds that grow on the banks of the river, are an iron works, a gravel yard, and a few large wholesalers.

The 225 to 260 businesses here employ at least 1,300 people. Willets Point Boulevard teems with cars, moving slowly to navigate the scrum of pedestrians, vehicles parked every which way, and enormous potholes full of dark oily water. Shop signs are everywhere, a riot of fonts and colors above gaping dark interiors. On a typical day, men in caps, hooded sweatshirts, and work boots sit, stand, talk, and work in the open. The smell of paint thinner and oil is everywhere,

and particularly dirty jobs such as spray-painting may take place in the middle of the street.

When I visited the area last winter, Shea stadium, for 44 seasons the home of the Mets, was being dismantled. A modified excavator jabbed at it with a giant yellow arm, coaxing off chunks of concrete, which fell with a slow rumble and a roll of dust. Next to this, workers put finishing touches

Above: On Willets Point Boulevard, an auto shop is fashioned from shipping containers.

Opposite: Map of Queens, showing the locations of Hunters Point South and Willets Point.



on a the new Mets stadium (currently called CitiField). It is a touchstone for the city's development plans, but even the most optimistic schedule will see at least a year of coexistence with the old Willets Point. On opening day in April, Mets fans shuffled up 126th Street from the elevated station. On their left was the grand staircase

Above right: The Long Island Rail Road's Long Island City Yards. Once the LIRR's main terminus, it now holds a few diesel trains during the day and provides limited passenger service.

Above left: CitiField, the new home of the Mets, rises above the Willets Point streetscape.

entry to the neotraditional, brick-clad stadium; on their right was a continuous line of low garages behind broken-down cars and steel shutters.

To the River's Edge

On its way from Willets Point to Manhattan, the number seven subway skims over the dense, multiethnic neighborhoods of Queens—Corona, Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, Sunnyside, Woodside—before reaching Long Island City. Here, the elevated line slips underground, stopping at Vernon Boulevard before continuing through the Steinway Tunnels to Grand Central Station and Times Square.

Emerging at Vernon and walking due west, brand new luxury condos peek out above older row houses, apartments, and workshops. At the water's edge, a lush park built around the gantries that once put railcars onto barges offers piers to stroll on and a stunning view of the United Nations, Chrysler, and Empire State Buildings. The *raison d'être* of this spectacular public space are six apartment towers built here from 1997 to the present. Five more are on the way as part of the state-sponsored Queens West development.

Current plans for Hunters Point South would extend this pattern of



development south a few blocks to Newtown Creek, a wide industrial inlet that forms the border between Queens and Brooklyn. Just inland sits the entry plaza for the Queens-Midtown Tunnel. The area is also bordered by a train yard for the Long Island Rail Road. This was once the main terminus of the railroad, where passengers would transfer to waiting ferries, and the yard occupies an area larger than two square blocks. With the creek and the river, it hems Hunters Point South into an isolated triangle of anonymous warehouses and parking lots that unceremoniously mark the end of Long Island.

“New York’s Next Great Neighborhood”

In November, the New York City Council voted to approve zoning changes allowing redevelopment of Willets Point and Hunters Point South. Both plans call for about 5,000 apartments, 35 and 60 percent of them, respectively, classified as “affordable.”¹ Most press accounts configured the debate leading up to the vote as proxy fights over the amount of middle- and lower-income housing and the use of eminent domain.² Persistent battlegrounds between the forces of “development” and “community.” This not only oversimplified the issues

at stake, but it obscured the fact that the nature and condition of the sites themselves present major obstacles.

As currently planned, at Hunters Point South it will cost the city \$222 million to buy land from the Port Authority and upgrade infrastructure. This is in addition to \$128 million in housing subsidies.

The corresponding costs for Willets Point are unknown, mainly because the city does not know how

Above: A future site of the Hunter’s Point South development sits directly across the East River from the Empire State Building.



badly contaminated the area is. Given the intense quasi-industrial use over the past several decades, the cost of cleaning it up will be significant. Furthermore, Willets Point's streets and sidewalks will have to be rebuilt six feet above current levels to prevent flooding, and a new network of sewers will need to be installed (waste currently goes into cesspools).

If the city does end up using eminent domain against holdout landowners, there will be an additional irony in condemning as blighted an area that was never given basic infrastructural support in the first place. Both Willets Point and Hunters Point South are also overly reliant on the number seven subway line. Always crowded already, it is frequently shut on weekends for maintenance.

New York's explosive growth over the past decade favors the assumption that any area within a reasonable commute of Manhattan will provide fertile ground for profitable development. The assumption is acceptable at Hunters Point South, which despite all its challenges, boasts unmatched views and connects to an existing, successful development. But it seems premature at Willets Point. Bounded by busy highways, vast parking lots, and a polluted river, directly beneath the LaGuardia flight path, with decades of toxic and sewage waste in the ground, it is not well positioned to become a high-value residential neighborhood—even before factoring in a daily influx of tens of thousands of cars and subway riders two weeks out of every month during baseball season. It is much easier to imagine the new stadium coexisting with the convention center, open space, and retail and entertainment uses called for in the city's development proposal.

The Safe Strategy

Underdevelopment is a legitimate urban technique, and the back rooms of a city have the same right to ownership of place as do showpiece residential and business neighborhoods. It would, of course, be disingenuous to suggest that Hunters Point South and Willets Point should not evolve. However, this does not mean that the developer-driven, unapologetically generic strategies of apartment towers-cum-park and mixed-use "town center" are the only way to accomplish that evolution. In a city that has always grown according to an emergent, at times chaotic, spatial logic, there is less need for such top-down all-at-once placemaking; far less disruptive and artificial strategies could be allowed to emerge from a less rigid framework.

The world cities New York competes with—London, Los Angeles, and Tokyo, most prominently—are polycentric. By contrast, the unipolarity of Manhattan is undisputed. This burdens New York with massive physical challenges. But it also offers an opportunity in a relatively open field like Queens, where highly specialized urban programs (such as ethnic enclaves, large parks, stadia, and airports) can easily disperse along common lines of movement.

The entire city, outside the core, can thus be seen as a template of mixed use, with the boroughs offering urban experiences compelling enough to compete with the increasingly staid and commercial orientation of Manhattan. This process is already under way, if the knots of European tourists on the streets of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, are any indication.

Both Willets Point and Hunters Point South will eventually grow, organically or otherwise, into something quite different from what they

are today. But they will still, by dint of location and history, function as pivot points between adjoining areas, between movement systems, between spaces of leisure and infrastructure.

This idea was brilliantly articulated by the architectural firm Morphosis in its winning 2004 proposal for the 2012 Olympic Village, at Hunters Point South. Turning and warping the traditional skyscraper, Morphosis envisioned horizontal ribbons of structure curving sinuously in three dimensions, touching down and lifting up to allow walk-through access to the waterfront. Holding the neighborhood edge with buildings and leaving much of the site open, the design relished its location at the junction of two waterways recovering from decades of pollution.

The current proposal foresees a narrow strip of park and eight standard-issue towers, standing across the river from the world's most iconic island of towers. The city's pack-em-in development brief leaves little design leeway to do otherwise. Where there might have been an image, vital and fresh, of a newly confident outer-borough urbanism, there will only be the mediocre reflection of a city we know too well.

Notes

1. Within this designation are set-asides for several income tiers between \$23,000 and \$158,000.
2. These were brought to the fore by the Atlantic Yards project in Brooklyn. See, for example, Norman Oder, "Atlantic Yards: Penn Station for a New Generation?" *Places*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 79–83.

All images are by the author.

Opposite: A sailboat anchors on the Queens shore of Newtown Creek. The Pulaski Bridge connects Long Island City, Queens, to Greenpoint, Brooklyn.