

# INSTITUTE FOR URBAN DESIGN

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## GRAND CENTRAL PARTNERSHIP CREATES A NEW MIDTOWN DISTRICT





# GRAND CENTRAL PARTNERSHIP

*Private owners tax themselves to transform public space*

by Barbara M. Walker

Mercury, Hercules and Minerva have become the new stars on 42nd Street. This year the monumental trio guarding Grand Central Terminal's main entrance entered the spotlight projecting from huge new lamps atop the Bowery Savings Bank Building, 19 stories above the street. Along with a rich facade and a famous thoroughfare, an inviting new approach to urban revitalization in the U.S. has been illumined.

Lamps mounted on the Bowery Savings, Lincoln, Ship Central and Bank of America buildings to flood the Terminal's face are the first concrete (in fact, steel) evidence of an unusual \$28 million capital program now in progress in midtown New York City. At a time when few cities can afford the means to check decay, public space in this high-density downtown is actually being redesigned, rebuilt and upgraded.

The key is a private non-profit property-owners' group called Grand Central Partnership. Incorporated in 1987 under state and local laws as a business improvement district, the Partnership uses a self-imposed special tax assessment of 11.4 cents per square foot to finance a broad spectrum improvement program. There is nothing unique about this approach; the U.S. has at least 1,000 "B.I.D."s, or special assessment districts, 21 of them in New York City alone.

What sets GCP apart is the scale of the district, its budget, and its ambition. The largest in the U.S., this B.I.D. has a total of 53 million square feet of commercial floor space, more than in the entire downtowns of all but three other U.S. cities. Its programs for public space management include not only special sanitation, security, and visitor services, but an innovative social-services effort to help the district's homeless population. And its involvement with public spaces goes well beyond familiar "management" practices to substantial capital improvements—\$28 million worth. Of a 1990-1991 budget of \$7.4 million, \$2.5 million is earmarked for debt service on borrowing for capital expenditures.

A premise of a business improvement district is that public space is important enough to private owners of adjoining property to warrant their paying for its care. A premise of this B.I.D. and its founders is that maintaining attractive public space requires, in addition to private financial support, both aggressive management and

imaginative urban design.

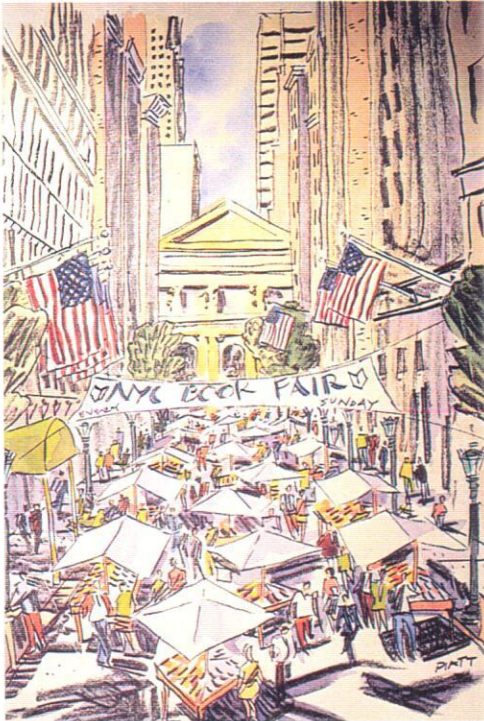
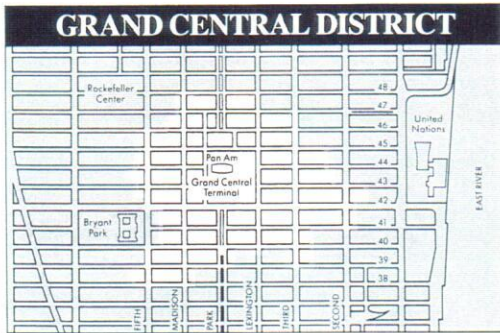
The first organizing steps were taken in 1985 by Peter Malkin, general partner with Harry B. Helmsley in the ownership of the Lincoln and Graybar buildings, and Daniel A. Biederman, then executive director of the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation. Early on they consulted with urban gurus William H. Whyte and Edmund Bacon about physical goals. Malkin and Biederman, now chairman and president respectively of GCP, gave high priority to finding an architect skilled in adaptive reuse and urban design. From some 30 names suggested by Whyte, Bacon and other professionals they selected seven and invited design proposals from them.

The response by Benjamin Thompson and Associates, architects for Fulton Market and Pier 17 in lower Manhattan, "stood well apart," according to Biederman. Using snapshots of the district's elegant shops, handsome buildings, cluttered sidewalks, scarred surfaces, and hapless loiterers, the Thompson proposal identified strengths and weaknesses and outlined practical and inventive ways to make the great gateway a neighborhood for lingering in as well as leaving.

Awarded the commission, BTA elaborated its proposal into a five-year Master Plan, published in September 1987 as both a credo of aspirations for urban regeneration and a handbook of design details that would make the difference environmentally. Bold broad concepts—treating 42nd Street as a boulevard of light, for example—were complemented with ideas for paving and curbs, trees and lampposts, street signs and store signs.

Less than a year after the Master Plan was published the city gave the district the necessary approval, levied the first special assessment, and returned the resulting funds to GCP. To oversee capital projects Biederman chose Arthur Rosenblatt, former vice president for architecture and planning of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Not only had Rosenblatt guided the Met through its most expansive decades; he had also served the New York Public Library as its director of capital projects and started a successful renovation there.

Less than two years after his appointment, Vice President Rosenblatt could point to results. After months spent seeking



Cover: Mercury, Hercules and Minerva glow in floodlight from lamps mounted on nearby rooftops. The sculpture by Jules-Alexis Coutan crowns the facade of Grand Central Terminal, designed by Reed and Stem and successors Warren and Wetmore. Photo by F. N. Kinney II

Above, top: The district's irregular boundary embraces 53 city blocks.

Above: 41st Street east of the New York Public Library would become "Library Way" under BTA's Master Plan for the Grand Central Partnership district. Rendering by Jim Piatt.



owner permissions and engineering tests, overseeing design and construction of lamp installations, and running the regulatory gauntlet, Rosenblatt had the satisfaction of turning on the first rooftop light aimed at Grand Central Terminal. The boulevard of light was taking shape.

Other new lights on 42nd Street shine from restored historic cast-iron lampposts that are now replacing temporary "trombone" fixtures on the landmark Pershing Square viaduct. The posts are the first steps in restoring the original 1919 viaduct as part of a new Pershing Square, one that extends the full width of Park Avenue from 42nd to 40th Streets. The Partnership will replace the present under-arch store with a glass-enclosed cafe or similar establishment designed to serve the park and open a vista eastward from the Philip Morris Building and Whitney Museum.

Not far from Pershing Square, major changes for sidewalks are in the works. Having studied conditions here and solutions in other world capitals, BTA partner Jane Thompson and her project team developed a design vocabulary to give new character and identity to sidewalks throughout the district. The components include:

... *Barrier-free intersections*, to speed foot traffic at points of greatest congestion and assure access to everyone. Corners, cleared of poles and street furniture, will be paved with red granite to cue pedestrians with color and texture and will dip down in a smooth radius for easy passage of carriages and wheelchairs. The new corners will connect with graphically-expressed crosswalks and scored concrete sidewalks.

... *Plantings*. Where pavement widths and subsoil conditions allow, traffic-tolerant trees are called for, in formal pairs near intersections and in informal clusters on streets.

... *A lighting palette* with better coverage and color for both streets and sidewalks. Street light from new cobrahead lamps placed at consistent intervals will be amplified by intimate light from an array of attractive lower fixtures positioned on stairs, trees, marquees, newsstands and storefronts.

... *New trash receptacles* that meet high standards of appearance, security and servicing and allow for waste recycling.

... *Standard news kiosks* to replace a miscellany of newsstands that are now ugly centers of tawdry merchandise. The BTA-designed kiosk is an attractive, functional information and news source with exterior lighting and other features helpful to operators, customers, and the streetscape.

... *A complete new sign/signal network* designed for "user-friendly" information flow. From a forest of disparate lights and signs now clustered on available poles, BTA identified four distinct groups of message-users and developed a new sign system for them. Separately-located signs with international symbols and distinctive typography, colors, and shapes will deliver clear messages to vehicle drivers, vehicle parkers, public transportation riders, and way-seekers. Suspended overhead street markers and traffic signal arms set back from corners are features of the new intersections.

For Benjamin Thompson and Associates, selecting and shaping these components into a new streetscape was a congenial assignment, given the firm's global experience in ground-level architecture. Project manager Jane Thompson approached the sign problem with particular gusto.

"Surely one cause of gridlock in midtown," she observes, "is the number of drivers and pedestrians who can't tell where they are and where they are going and who drive badly while trying to figure it all out."

Analyzing and solving design problems were only parts of the task confronting BTA. Threading the maze of agencies with regulatory power over district thoroughfares could pose an even greater challenge and cause unforeseeable delays. The New York City Art Commission, the Department of Consumer Affairs, the Department of Transportation, the Parks Department, the Fire Department, the Landmarks Preservation Commission and Community Boards Five and Six headed a list of agencies to be addressed.

It was Rosenblatt who conceived a novel approach to the quest for multiple agency approvals. He suggested that a few blocks be developed as a "prototype demonstration district" for new streetscapes. Once approved, this full-scale operating model might be recreated anywhere in the district without elaborate additional reviews, thus significantly speeding the construction

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*The goals of the Partnership range from improving pedestrian life to stimulating retail trade.*

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*Rosenblatt's concept of a prototype demonstration district eases the approval process through the city's administrative maze.*





BTA's vision of East 42nd Street, with new lamps, trees, restored buildings and storefronts, has won support from fast-food franchisers whose current facades clash with each other. Right: BTA's barrier-free intersection (model view) has no corner poles or fixtures to impede pedestrians or the handicapped. Red granite pavers cue foot travelers

to a change, and smoothed-down curbs serve strollers and wheelchairs. Lower right: BTA would replace midtown's mess of messages with well-spaced signs cued to moving vehicles, parking vehicles, bus and subway riders, and way-seekers. Intersection plan includes sign placements.

program. A city administration eager for visible progress welcomed the idea, and BTA's drawings, models and slides began to move more smoothly through agency channels.

"Transportation Department officials had never before been presented with a midtown plan, in full color, locating every single street and traffic sign," Jane Thompson noted in discussing the review process. "When we unrolled our proposal—a consolidation that reduced sign units by 50 percent—they knew we meant business." So far, demonstration district plans have won most of the essential authorizations, and construction is scheduled to start mid-1991.

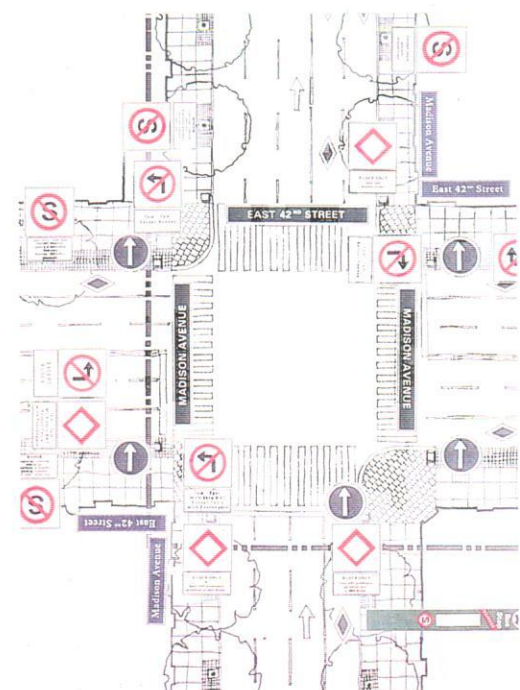
As important to the streetscape as corners and kiosks are office facades and storefronts. Since the early days of the Partnership, real estate consultant Elizabeth Rodgers has been keeping track of the district's 600 shops and restaurants, noting vacancies, instances of neglected maintenance and tacky promotions. To some owners and proprietors she offers the Partnership's *Storefront Guidelines*, a BTA-assisted leaflet showing ways to make stores more attractive to customers; for others she has a model document for incorporating BTA-drafted design criteria into new lease agreements. Through other

efforts by Rodgers some empty display windows in the district have been transformed from "missing teeth" into show-cases for art.

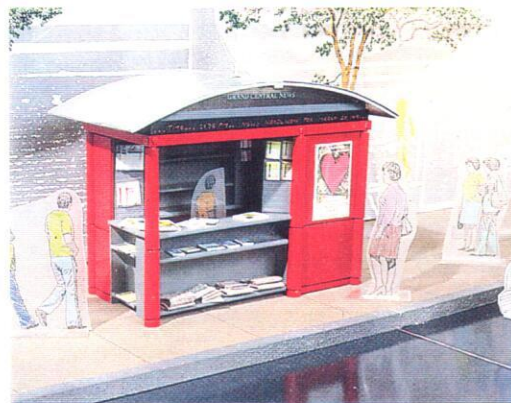
The Partnership has made design workshops available to district retailers, with encouraging results. When the new franchisee of a McDonald's outlet on 42nd Street was made aware of the actual architecture behind the eatery's garish false front, he showed interest in making a change. He and four neighbors are now talking with BTA about coordinated storefront redesign. Their leadership may result in an important architectural restoration and better business for the shops; it will surely have an influence on other merchants.

Meanwhile the Partnership has made an impact on the district in other ways. Some 50 uniformed GCP security officers patrol the area on foot from 7:00 am to 11:00 pm, providing an effective crime deterrent and a vital link to the New York City Police Department. In their first two years on the job, the area's crime rate dropped almost 30 percent.

A team of white-suited street sweepers patrols the area every day, attacking litter and garbage truck leavings and emptying clogged storm drains and trash baskets. A special detail from this team keeps walls







A BTA model shows Pershing Square recreated as a public space on both sides of the viaduct. Paving would continue through a glass-walled cafe under the viaduct's arches. Left: New bus shelters will appear in the demonstration district, along with trees, new lamps on standards and buildings,

recycling-age waste receptacles, new paving, new signs, and a prototype news kiosk. Lower left: BTA's proposed electronic-age newsstand is designed to brighten the street with moving headlines and video displays and to function well in all weather for operators and patrons.

and street stanchions free of graffiti and misposted bills, reducing repetitions of vandalism. These highly visible workers in white are some of GCP's best emissaries.

In a former city shelter not far from the Terminal, the Partnership has set up a Multi-Service Center that offers hot meals, counseling, job training and housing placements to the district's homeless men and women. A club with membership cards available for the asking, the Center operates on the premise that the act of joining can be enough to change an attitude of despair to one of self-help. There are now more than 600 card-carrying members, a quarter of whom have moved through the Center's "Pathway to Housing" into rental units. Homeless "Pathway to Employment" trainees help run the Center, and some are employed by local banks to persuade their peers that automatic-teller alcoves are not for sleeping in, that the Center is a better place to seek shelter.

If these operating units function well—and there is much evidence that they do—it is partly because of the leaders chosen by Biederman, all seasoned professionals who were able to hit the ground running. Besides Rosenblatt, the staff includes Vice President for Security Richard Dillon, a 32-year veteran of the New York City Police Department who had been

borough commander in Queens and the Bronx and chief of Manhattan detectives. Tom Gallagher, sanitation VP, is the former chief of cleaning operations for the New York City Department of Sanitation. Social Services VP Jeffrey Grunberg was drawn from directorship of the Psychiatry Shelter Program at Columbia University by "a chance to help homeless clients without fostering the typical shelter syndrome."

Visitor services and special events are high-visibility Partnership operations run by Paula Horowitz and Oceola Bragg, respectively. Horowitz oversees a staff of bilingual greeters who field questions and hand out leaflets by the thousands from a window in mid-Terminal and from three custom-designed sidewalk carts. Bragg finds performers and co-sponsors for an array of indoor and outdoor live and video performances that have gained a large noontime following. Her biggest success has been a long-running music and dance series in the lobby of the Pan Am Building, sponsored by the owner, Metropolitan Life.

Local press coverage and letters and calls suggest that New Yorkers are responding positively to the Grand Central Partnership undertaking. The desire for a change is great. There have been problems, of course. Neighbors of the Multi-Service Center raised an outcry when they were menaced





GCP's sanitation force keeps streets free of litter and walls and posts free of graffiti and handbills.

by loiterers on their street. Grunberg then negotiated changes in the policy of a private service agency that made public display of the needy—i.e., waiting outdoors for meals—a condition of their aid. The question of whether bringing the homeless indoors (for any help short of housing) amounts to masking the problem is one of many not easily answered. The charge that problems are simply being pushed beyond district boundaries is offset by the gradual proliferation of B.I.D.s in adjacent areas.

Other programs are building on GCP's foundation and following its lead. A "Grand Central Initiative," announced by the governor and the mayor at Thanksgiving 1990 to help house the Terminal's homeless, has strong ties to the Partnership's pioneering social service work. Late in 1990 Malkin and Biederman announced plans to establish a 34th Street Business District. Center city leaders in Philadelphia, Louisville and Richmond have consulted Biederman; others have simply followed his example closely.

Professional groups are starting to take notice. The American Society of Landscape Architects gave BTA and Grand Central Partnership a top 1991 award for urban design, and the American Planning Association chose GCP for top 1991 honors in its implementation category. GCP has also made its mark with the International Downtown Association, a Washington-based group that pays close attention to the special assessment district phenomenon.

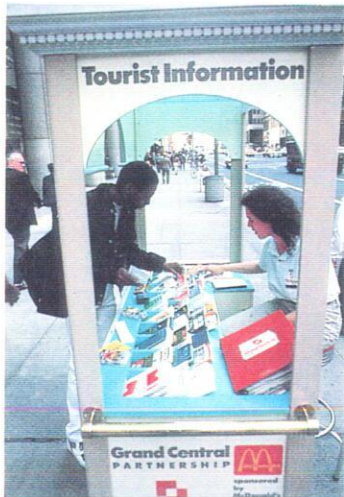
There are also signs of changing real estate values. Recent issues of Edward S. Gordon Company's well-regarded *Gordon Office Market Report* compared average

midtown asking rents in mid- and late 1990 with those of a year earlier for eight Manhattan segments (Park, 5th & Madison, East Side, 6th & Rockefeller Center, West Side, Grand Central, Penn/Garment, Murray Hill). Only the Grand Central segment showed a continuing rise in asking rents, despite hard times.

Paul Goldberger of *The New York Times* has followed the planning for, and changes realized in, both the Terminal and its business improvement district. In a mid-1990 assessment he raised the question, "Is this [the BTA plan] going to turn Grand Central's neighborhood into a theme park or shopping mall?"

His answer was reassuring. "Ben and Jane Thompson are knowing students of the cityscape and too savvy as designers to risk selling New York down the river of cuteness. . . . The truth is that the Grand Central neighborhood does not work as it is now—it is too dirty, too pressured, too troubled by a large homeless population and too lacking in amenity for everyone else—and there is no reason to shrink from letting it get a little bit more civilized. The designers of Grand Central Terminal envisioned a vast, monumental building at the center of a complex urban web; that is what we have had for three-quarters of a century, and if both the center and the web are properly cared for, there is no reason their symbiotic relationship should not continue far into the next century."

GCP's uniformed greeters and their leaflet-laden carts are welcome sights to both tourists and midtown regulars. Cart design by Keith Godard of Studio Works.



## TENANT DESIGN CRITERIA

(from a leaflet addressed to tenants)

The Grand Central Partnership has much to offer you, the owners and tenants in the District. The design and appearance of your store or building is an important part of the area's new image. Strong retail activity is the key to midtown economic strength. Retail vitality and good store design go hand in hand. Well-designed shops and enticing eateries attract customers and bring them back.

### Storefront Design

- Make sure that your shop's appearance makes a good first impression.
- Relate the design of the storefront to the architecture of the building.
- Keep your storefront simple.
- Use quality materials.
- Design your sign to tell people who you are.
- Make the size and location of your sign an important design consideration.
- Choose an attractive sign that will wear well.
- Make your sign easy to read.
- Accentuate your sign with light.
- Try to avoid using temporary signs.

### Lighting

- Invite people into your store with light.
- Highlight your merchandise.
- Let your merchandise speak for itself.

### Awnings and Greenery

- Consider using awnings as a handsome complement to your store.
- Complement your store with flowers and greenery.

### Security and Maintenance

- Select security devices carefully.
- Understand the need for effective night security.
- Remember that good maintenance is good business.

Grand Central Partnership is eager to work with you on the design of your storefront. Grand Central Partnership offers individual design advice free of charge. Lists of experienced designers, contractors, fabricators and installers are available at Grand Central Partnership's offices, where a more detailed set of design guidelines may also be obtained.



## Grand Central Business Improvement District: Some Constituents

### Property Owners

Cooke Properties Inc.  
The Durst Organization  
Equitable Life Assurance Society  
Hines Interests Limited Partnership  
Helmsley-Spear, Inc.  
H.J. Kalikow & Co., Inc.  
LaSalle Partners  
W&M Properties, Inc.  
The Mendik Company  
Metropolitan Life Insurance Company  
Milstein Properties Corp.  
Olympia & York Companies (USA)  
The Penn Central Corporation  
The Prudential Property Company  
Silverstein Properties Inc.  
Stahl Park Avenue Co.  
Sterling Equities, Inc.  
Sumitomo Corporation of America  
Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association

### Corporate Tenants and Owners

American Home Products Corporation  
Booz, Allen & Hamilton Inc.  
Bowery Savings Bank  
Bear, Stearns & Company, Inc.  
Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A.  
Chemical Bank  
Conde Nast Publications, Inc.  
The Daily News  
Davis Polk & Wardwell  
Manufacturers Hanover Trust Co.  
Pfizer Inc.  
Philip Morris Companies Inc.  
Simpson Thacher & Bartlett  
Sterling Drug Inc.

### Hotels

Grand Hyatt New York  
The Roosevelt  
Helmsley New York

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## Design and Development Credits

### Developer

**Grand Central Partnership**  
New York, New York  
Peter L. Malkin, *Chairman*  
Daniel A. Biederman, *President*  
Arthur Rosenblatt, *Vice President for Capital Projects*  
Elizabeth Rodgers, *Retail Consultant*

### Master Planners and Designers

**Benjamin Thompson & Associates, Inc.**  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
Benjamin Thompson, *Principal*  
Jane Thompson, *Partner in Charge*  
Jim Van Sickle, *Associate in Charge*  
Diana Tracey, *Project Architect*  
Tony Ricci, *Project Administrator*  
Stacey Bridge, Catherine Cagle, Wendy Hill, Scott Parker, Elena Saporta, Tomm Van Dyke, Lynn Wolff, *Landscape Design Team*  
Brian Cavanaugh, Greg Etter, Colin Flavin, Andrew Kinoshita, Helena Korpela, Susan Lopez, Bob Lowe, Mairrie McCormack, Quanyny Porter, Monte Riggs, John Shank, David Sliwinski, Jason Springer, Debbie Vliet, Lou Chien, Michael Dobler, *Project Team*  
Emily Axelrod, Penny Hudd, Phil Loheed, Jim Piatt, *Consultants*  
Jeff Clark, Jay Olmsted, *Studio Assistants*

### Surveyor

**E.W. Finley**  
Long Island City, New York  
Macio Jackson, Alfred Johnson

### Engineer

**Vollmer Associates**  
New York, New York  
Dan W. Greenbaum  
Fred Correale, Rick Gobeille,  
Jeff Grob, Tim Hinrichs

### Traffic

**Herbert S. Levinson**  
New Haven, Connecticut

### Signage

**Louis Nelson Associates, Inc.**  
New York, New York  
Louis Nelson, Kristin Olson

### Terminal Lighting Design

**Sylvan R. Shemitz**  
West Haven, Connecticut  
Ben Stahlheber, Joseph Zaherwicz

### Architectural Lighting Design

**Jules Fisher & Paul Marantz, Inc.**  
New York, New York  
Paul Marantz, Richard Renfro, Teal Brogden

### Planning Consultants

**Edmund Bacon**  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**William H. Whyte**  
New York, New York

### Construction Manager

**Integral Construction Corporation**  
New York, New York  
Al Lomas, Charles Wallace

### Structural

**Severud Associates**  
New York, New York  
Ed Messina, Michael Lynch

### Electrical

**John L. Altieri**  
Norwalk, Connecticut  
Andrew Sebor, Salvatore Russo

### Preservation Consultant

**REMCO Maintenance Corporation**  
New York, New York  
Joseph Bresnan FAIA

### Industrial Design

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Boston, Massachusetts  
John Zaccai, Ben Beck

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Back cover: Birdseye model view of the district identifies major buildings and shows proposed Boulevard of Light and Avenue of Green.



