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Donald Versus the Drawing

New York — For much of his hyperkinetic career, Donald Trump has mesmerized this city with his carefully cultivated image of a high-stakes deal maker who lives a life of conspicuous, lavish wealth. His empire consists of buildings that boast long-standing world-class identities (the Plaza Hotel), appropriate the names and architectural motifs of other world-renowned landmarks (the Taj Mahal casino), or have been gilded with his own name (Trump Tower).

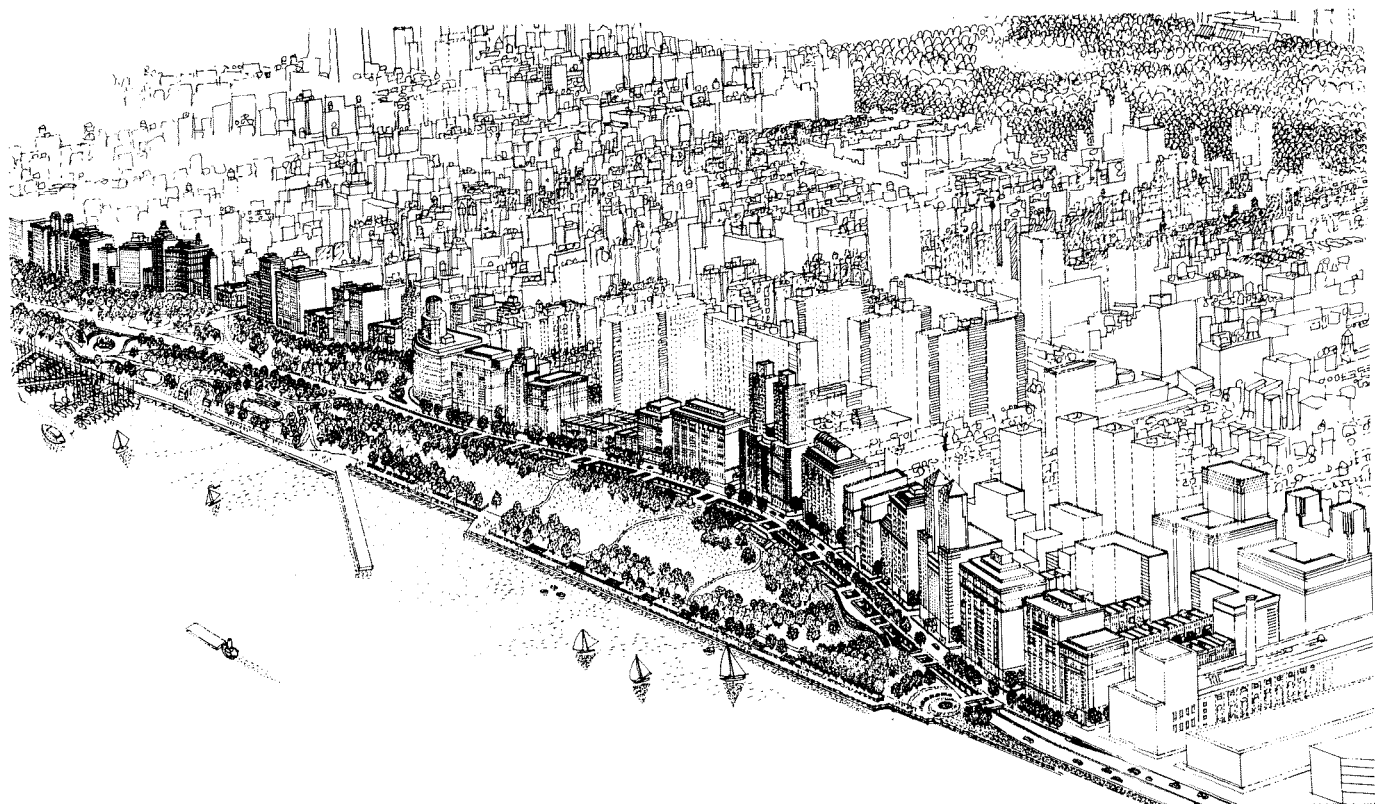
But Trump's dream to put up the world's tallest building on the Upper West Side was undone by another image, a deceptively simple pen-and-ink drawing that also mesmerized the public and gave the diverse opponents to his plans a platform for agreement.

Six years ago, Trump proposed building the 150-story tower (along with a phalanx of 60-story towers) on

an abandoned railroad yard he owns along the Hudson River, just west of Lincoln Center. The buildings would have provided space for a regional mall, television or film studios, housing, offices and a hotel.

Television City, an early version of this proposal designed by Helmut Jahn, foundered when Trump failed to lure NBC to the project. The next version was Trump City, designed by Alexander Cooper, best known here for his well-regarded master plan for Battery Park City. As Cooper's plan was plodding through the city's interminable environmental review process, neighborhood and civic groups started making plans to oppose it. Meanwhile, Trump's casino business was souring and banks worried whether he would make good on his enormous debt.

The drawing that rallied opposition to Trump City.
 Courtesy Daniel Gutman.



Then, a year and a half ago, the drawing appeared. It depicted an alternative to Trump City and was made by architects Daniel Gutman and Paul Willen, who had been commissioned by several civic groups. This scheme, called Riverside South, rested on an easily imageable concept: extending the scale and sinuous form of Riverside Drive (which separates Riverside Park from the neighborhood to the east) south through the site. The drawing showed the extension weaving inland then back to the shore, making room for a 25-acre park. And it showed that the streetwall of the buildings along the extension would range from about five to about 15 stories.

The drawing provided Trump City's opponents with an opportunity to take the high road. Instead of condemning the project for being too dense, the towers for being too tall, or the shopping mall for being in an inappropriate location, they could present a positive vision for developing the rail yards. In a city reeling from the excesses of boxy

modern towers, who could argue against extending the beloved, traditional form of Riverside Drive?

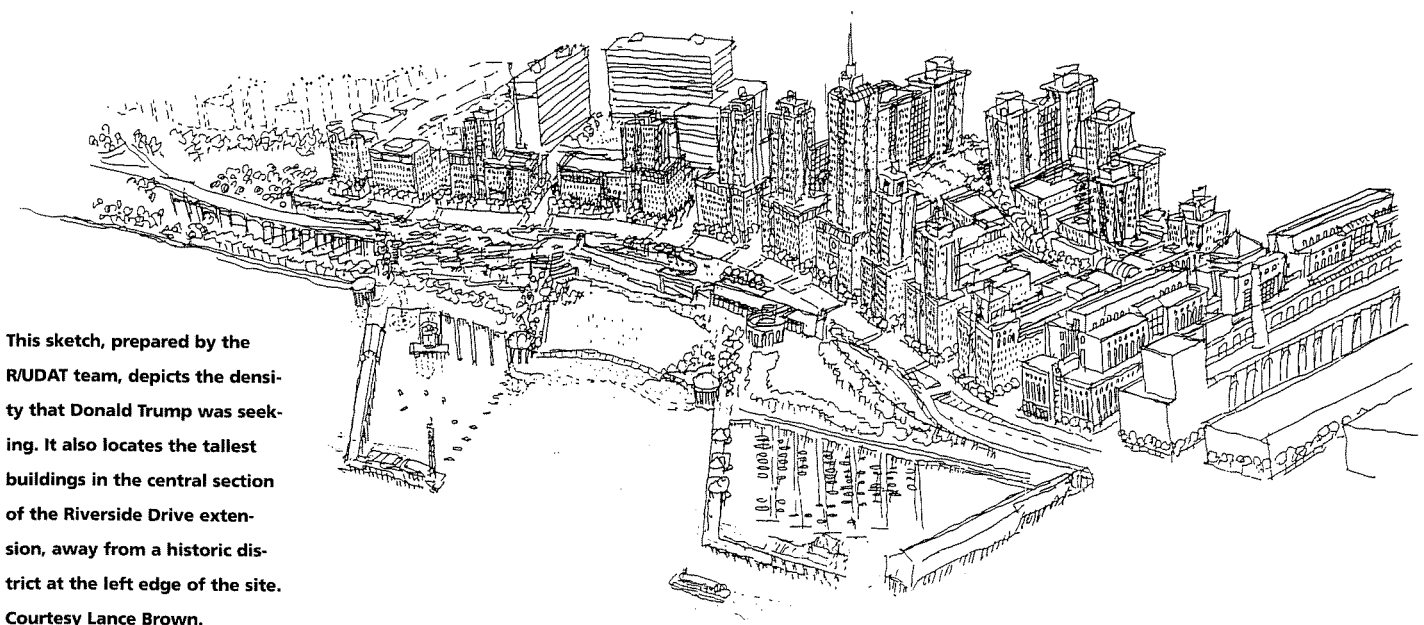
On the strength of the widely published drawing, Trump City opponents lined up behind Riverside South. Last spring Trump did too, joining with seven civic groups to create and bankroll the Riverside South Planning Corporation. This non-profit entity was charged with directing a new plan, which would follow the principles of Gutman and Willen's drawing and be prepared by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (along with Gutman, Willen and other consultants).

But it may be hard for RSPC to live up to the promise of the drawing. In June, a R/UDAT sponsored by the New York City AIA chapter, Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger and the local community planning board reported that the drawing depicted less density than Trump was seeking (and less than the city had approved for the site a decade ago). The R/UDAT team prepared a sketch that depicted how big the buildings would really have to be to accommodate the density.

Also, the drawing shows that buildings at the northern tip of Riverside South would be similar in height to buildings that are adjacent to the project site (and which are part of a historic district composed of walk-up brownstones and 10- to 15-story apartment buildings). But Trump was demanding that taller buildings be put up in this area, where there likely will be the most market demand — and the most public opposition.

RSPC's formal proposal is likely to follow the spirit of Gutman and Willen's drawing. But if the proposal strays too far from the details of height and density depicted in the original Riverside South drawing it may lose its hold on the public sentiment; its supporters may not come together with the same sense of civic purpose. The power of a drawing such as this can be a double-edged sword, especially if it raises expectations that are not met.

— Todd W. Bressi



This sketch, prepared by the R/UDAT team, depicts the density that Donald Trump was seeking. It also locates the tallest buildings in the central section of the Riverside Drive extension, away from a historic district at the left edge of the site. Courtesy Lance Brown.