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Neglected Manhattan Transit Hub Is to Undergo a Major Makeover

By C. J. HUGHES



Left, a rendering of the renovated George Washington Bridge Bus Station, which is to be completed by spring 2013. The station, above, was designed by the Italian architect Pier Luigi Nervi and opened in 1963.

For decades, the George Washington Bridge Bus Station in Upper [Manhattan](#) has seemed like the also-ran of Manhattan transportation hubs.

Unlike the Port Authority Bus Terminal on West 42nd Street, where a traveler has dozens of options for heading across the Hudson River and across the country, the George Washington has only a handful of commuter lines serving New York and [New Jersey](#), and one subway line, the A train.

And even though the building, with its sloping tentlike roof panels, was designed by the Italian architect Pier Luigi Nervi, it has never had the cachet of, say, Warren & Wetmore's Grand Central Terminal, perhaps because of its modernism but also its distance from Midtown.

The two-block station, between West 178th and West 179th Streets, near the ramps to the upper deck of the George Washington Bridge, seems poorly maintained, with large chunks missing from the tile mosaic above the main entrance. The retail spaces around

and in the three-level structure, which is divided into two sections by Broadway, are often vacant.

Now, though, a long-delayed plan to refurbish and expand the station is back on track, as its Upper Manhattan neighborhood goes through changes of its own.

On June 30, the board of commissioners of the [Port Authority of New York and New Jersey](#), the building's landlord, voted to proceed with a \$183.2 million renovation of the 294,000-square-foot station, which has not had a major renovation since opening in 1963.

In a private-public collaboration, the Port Authority has joined with a development team of principals of SJM Partners, of [Palm Beach](#), Fla., and Slayton Equities, of New York. The team will develop and manage the space for 99 years, under the terms of a lease signed on July 21. The Port Authority will contribute \$83.2 million and the developers \$100 million.

“There’s been a long time when we’ve wondered, how do you transform what’s really just plastic unappealing space?” said Christopher O. Ward, the executive director of the Port Authority. “The challenge is, the industrial architecture of 1960s transportation facilities does not always lend itself to a modern retail world.”

To meet that challenge, the renovation will quadruple the amount of retail space at the station, to 120,000 square feet, in part by opening long-shuttered space on the eastern half, which has storefronts on Broadway and West 178th and West 179th Streets.

But the developers will also install tenants on the site’s west side, in spaces that, based on surviving signs, once housed a barber, dentist and an off-track betting parlor.

Developers would not name specific retailers during negotiations, but Stephen J. Garchik, the president of SJM, said a supermarket is poised to take one of the station’s largest spaces, a 25,000-square-foot ground-level berth, along a part of Broadway with many chain restaurants.

Other possible tenants include a women’s clothing store for a 25,000-square-foot space, and a fitness center for a 20,000-square-foot third-floor space, Mr. Garchik added, saying that he would pay \$800,000 a year to rent the station for 99 years. He hopes to

collect rents of as much as \$175 a square foot for some of the stores, more than four times the current top rents of \$40 a square foot.

The deal also is attractive because the station is exempt from property taxes as a public building, and eligible for various tax credits because it is in a low-income area, he said.

“The size is not overwhelming for us,” said Mr. Garchik, whose firm usually does construction projects and whose portfolio includes the National Science Foundation headquarters in Arlington, Va., which has stores and straddles a subway line. “But it’s very exciting.”

The renovation, which is to begin in January 2012 and is expected to be finished in spring 2013, will include the station’s waiting areas, concourses and gates. Many of those spaces appear dingy, with dropped ceilings that seem to be stained with cigarette smoke. Circular banks of pay phones that dot stone floors are among the station’s period details.

The phones and ceilings are likely to be removed in the renovation, which is intended to give the station a brighter and airier look, Mr. Garchik said.

In addition, Mr. Ward said, the station, which handled four million passengers and 300,000 bus trips in 2010, will increase the number of gates to 22 from 17, to help alleviate crowding at the Port Authority station on West 42nd Street, where the 183 gates are near capacity. The Port Authority said the station would continue to function during the renovation.

The Port Authority has come close to renovating the station before. In 2008, the commissioners approved a \$152 million deal, though the recession dashed those plans. Similarly, in 1999, a plan to build a 12-screen movie theater on the roof fizzled.

But the current project may be coming at an auspicious time. Many of the nearly 20,000 employees of nearby Columbia University Medical Center and NewYork-Presbyterian hospital, which are expected to continue their expansions, commute from New Jersey by bus through the station.

In addition, the expansion of Columbia University into the nearby Manhattanville neighborhood will increase the need for better bus service there, says Robert D. Yaro, president of the Regional Plan Association, a research and advocacy group.

Given that the trains of [New Jersey Transit](#) and PATH are often full, and the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels regularly jammed, “anything we can do to take pressure off the Hudson crossings is a real plus,” he said.

Mr. Nervi, the architect of the station, was known for designing the Palazzetto dello Sport in Rome, which was used in the 1960 Summer Olympics. Mr. Yaro said the station renovation might give people a better appreciation of the architect’s work as well.

“It’s a remarkably elegant building, and when it’s restored,” Mr. Yaro said, “it will be even more so.”