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[Readers' Opinions](#)

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Don't Bury West Street

By GENE RUSSIANOFF

In remaking Lower Manhattan, New Yorkers want to turn West Street, a busy thoroughfare that separates Battery Park City and the World Trade Center site, into a promenade.

That's a wonderful idea. Not so wonderful is the belief that this downtown Champs-Élysées can be created only by submerging West Street and running traffic underground for nearly a 20-block stretch from above Chambers Street to the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel. Such a plan would be a colossal mistake. It would divert money from more important transportation priorities and delay downtown's revival by more than a decade.

Estimates for the West Street project started at \$2 billion and are now climbing to \$3 billion. These numbers will soar again if the tunnel has to be built to bear the weight of new office towers set atop it — another idea under consideration.

The design, engineering and construction challenges are enormous. The miles of communications and utility lines that are now under West Street would have to be moved, along with major water, gas and sewer mains. Complex underground ramps would have to be built and great ventilation shafts sunk.

Burying West Street would also keep much of Lower Manhattan in limbo. The project would take four years to design and another six to eight to build; it would turn downtown's western corner into a construction zone, plagued with traffic jams and littered with debris.

Given the efforts — and the hundreds of millions of dollars — that have been spent to retain and attract new businesses and residents downtown, why would we want to paralyze the area for a decade?

We have been here before. First there was Westway, a proposal in the 1970's for an Interstate highway along the West Side of Manhattan; the project would have buried West Street. In 1985, after more than a decade of debate, Westway was abandoned. The \$1.7 billion that had been allocated by Congress for the project was used to fix New York's crumbling transit system and to revamp West Street from Midtown to Lower Manhattan.

In the early 1990's, New York transportation officials rejected submerging West Street because of exorbitant costs, lack of financing and the disruption it would cause. They wisely didn't want to end up with a New York version of the Big Dig, Boston's disastrous, overbudget effort to bury its downtown expressways.

Proponents of burying the roadway say that things are different now because the federal government could pay most of the tab. But this is unlikely, with \$4.5 billion in federal Sept. 11 transportation funds already set aside for other projects. These include the \$2.75 billion plan to connect a tangle of downtown subway and commuter stations and the \$500 million project to rebuild the South Ferry subway station and subways and train lines. All these projects would do more for Lower Manhattan than burying West Street. And any new funds should go to more worthwhile projects, like an additional subway line for the East Side and connecting the Long Island Rail Road to Grand Central Terminal.

There is a better way to improve West Street. For \$200 million or less the street could be made into a grand surface promenade.

The model is, in fact, the Champs-Élysées, a grand boulevard with eight lanes of traffic — same as West Street — and with no tunnel underneath. What works in Paris could work as well here: wide pedestrian-friendly sidewalks lined with tall shady trees and stores and buildings.

That's not to say the boulevard would be easy to create. The east side of West Street is flanked by loading bays and perilously thin sidewalks. The west side is a patchwork of open spaces, many of which are unused.

Still, it has a better chance of success than a submerged West Street. It's difficult to create a vibrant public space above an underground expressway. And the tunnel could lead to more traffic in the area if it is so long that drivers avoid it for fear of missing their turnoffs.

So forget the West Street tunnel. It's right to raise a grand boulevard on the surface of West Street — just don't bury it.

Gene Russianoff is a lawyer for the New York Public Interest Research Group's Straphangers Campaign.

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