

The Great Surge of 2012: Rotterdam-on-Hudson vs. Gaia's Eminent Domain

The next delirium to beset New York City will likely be a mega-plan to defend the coastline. The idea of a storm surge barrier for the city is not new – it was proposed in 2009 – and the near catastrophe of Irene gave the discussion a good deal of urgency. Sandy cinched the deal – of which only the details remain to be contested.

If history is a guide, one can expect a tsunami of rhetoric to sweep away all but the hardiest mangroves of common sense. And the pitch of said rhetoric will likely be fervent enough to distract most folks from any possible conversation about how to build a more economically diverse, equitable, and self-sustaining city – one that harnesses the best energies of its people toward a constant process of adapting to change.

In a recent *New York Times* opinion piece, “Deciding Where Future Disasters Will Strike,” McKenzie Funk, a journalist working on a book about “the business of climate change,” discusses the building of a multi-billion dollar storm surge gate across the Narrows between Brooklyn and Staten Island.

The Dutch, he writes, when making decisions on which land to protect from the sea, “simply run the numbers, and if something is worth less in terms of pure euros and cents, it is more acceptable to let it be flooded. This seems entirely reasonable. But as New York begins considering coastal defenses, it should also consider the uncomfortable truth that Wall Street is worth vastly more, in dollar terms, than certain low-lying neighborhoods of Brooklyn, Staten Island and Queens – and that to save Manhattan, planners may decide to flood some other part of the city.”

He further asserts “the hard truth that areas outside a Narrows barrier could see an estimated two feet of extra flooding. If a wave rebounding off the new landmark [the barrier] hits a wave barreling toward it, it could make for a bigger wave of the sort that neighborhoods like Arrochar and Midland Beach on Staten Island and Bath Beach and Gravesend in Brooklyn may want to start fretting about.”

Behind the fog of Mr. Funk's language swim some fishy notions indeed, not least that of “pure” dollars and sense, and the presumption of Wall Street's inherently high value. Using this calculus, Bill Gates' life is more worth protecting than Mr. Funk's is, based on the number of zeros in the former's bank account.

It is an uncomfortable truth that the comfort of truths is relative. For example, a Clydesdale once accidentally stepped on my friend's foot, breaking three bones. The

Clydesdale was not, apparently, uncomfortable – it was just shifting its weight. “Truths” that come armored in hard-nosed adjectives are frequently invoked, wittingly or not, by people with a stake in concretizing a situation advantageous to themselves, or to those they speak for, while leaving aside both history and changing circumstances. Such statements, couched as common knowledge, often take the form of false premises that mask a weak, or non-existent argument.

What came to be called Lower Manhattan had few, if any, permanent settlements prior to the arrival of the Dutch. What made the area valuable to Europeans, beyond the fur trade or any other economic activity, was a physical resource: a well-protected harbor – the still-latent capacity that became, centuries later, the Great Port of New York.

But in New York, as in other former port cities, the value of downtown real estate has grown increasingly abstract since it is no longer tied to the sea. The financial center flourished where it did primarily because of the multiplex commercial activities generated by the port. Until the mid-twentieth century, it made sense for banks and insurance companies to live next door to shipping. But containerization, and with it the impetus to move port facilities to less congested and built-up sites, arrived at the same moment as the beginnings of modern telecommunications.

Today, Wall Street exists as a symbol of wealth far more than as the key constituent in an ensemble of finance, commerce and maritime trade. When the buttonwood tree – which sheltered the Street’s first stock traders – died or was cut down, the market went on. It had long since moved indoors because the traders had the horse sense to come in out of the rain. An electronic market hardly requires a brick and mortar Wall Street. Such financial “centers” have already largely dispersed. Apart from the emotional ties we may feel toward them, what makes the high-rises arrayed along the southern fringe of Manhattan island worth more than a pleasant beachfront community on Staten Island?

The answer is another truth, more uncomfortable for some than others, but ineluctable nonetheless. FiDi, as it is known in real estate hipsterese, represents gazillions of investment dollars bound up in a colossal web of debt – ten billion or so having been poured into the new WTC / transit hub complex alone. What argument can possibly justify such vast resources – much of gotten directly off the public – being channeled toward so vulnerable and geographically minute an area, particularly one whose economic function is ever less site-dependent? If financiers yearn for the animal warmth of their fellows, can they not find it on land more likely to stay above water?

So, let's run those numbers again. In "pure" dollars and cents, what does it cost to keep the Sacred Bull of Bowling Green from floating away, versus moving him to, say, the High Line. Oops – they don't allow animals. What about Times Square? Or better still, Central Park? The sheep haven't used that meadow in a long time. He might be very happy there, smelling, at last, the clover.

Whatever befalls our symbols, what is presently clear is that the sustaining structures of our lives and livelihoods are now open to the kind of reconsideration that only becomes possible after a sea change. I hope what I have written above will be of use toward a public evaluation of our infrastructure, resources and prospects when these are examined in the broadest and deepest sense. A famous architect once tagged our city with the adjective "delirious." Is this the moment when the fever breaks and we find our collective urban mind, perhaps for the first time, lucid?

