



## Essay

### THINK SMALL. THINK BIG.

**By Conn Nugent**  
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The person most responsible for New York's recent run of good fortune may be a professor from Harvard. It was James Q. Wilson of the Harvard Government Department who coined the "broken window" theory of crime prevention. Little things matter, the Wilson theory goes, especially when it comes to infractions of public order. If a broken pane of glass goes unrepaired, other panes will be shattered, and then doors will be jimmed up and down the street. If graffiti on a train goes unremoved, more graffiti will follow, and so will robberies in the cars and stations. No tolerance for petty lawbreaking leads to fewer incidents of major lawbreaking.

It works, mostly. So when former Police Commissioner Bratton brought the broken-window theory (and tighter management and smarter computers) to the NYPD, and when Mayor Giuliani backed him, crime went down. Of course, New York crime went down for a number of reasons fewer young men in the general population, more bad actors locked up for longer sentences, more cops (thanks to Mayor Dinkins), less crack cocaine. But it's hard to deny that police attention to matters heretofore considered beneath their dignity (fare beating, say, or squeegee extortion) played a considerable part in reducing crime and changing the reputation of the City.

And it was that last factor changing popular impressions of New York safety that many say has been key to a rising real estate market and to an upsurge in the number of businesses wanting to start, or expand, within city limits. Throw in a bull market on Wall Street, a flood tide of smart, industrious immigrants, and a new international chic for New York specialties like hip-hop, couture, and opinionizing, and you've got the makings of a boom.

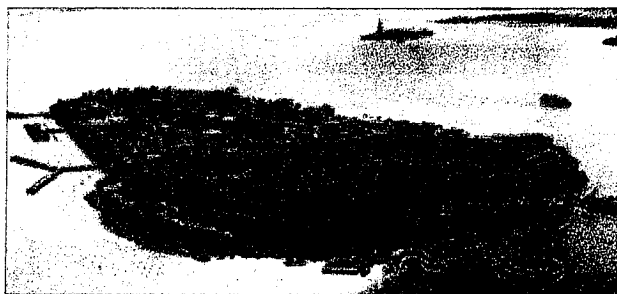
The boom is hardly universal. Unemployment stays high, and it's tough to get an entry-level job in this town (with enough pay to raise a family) that doesn't demand a level of technical competence beyond the reach of most high school graduates. And changes in welfare eligibility will increase the competition for, and depress the wages of, low-skill jobs in general.

But public revenues exceed public expenditures, if only for a moment, more people want to enter the City than leave it, and in general there's a spring in Father Knickerbocker's step. Thanks to thinking small about broken windows, maybe now we can afford the luxury of thinking big again about public facilities.

Maybe we can think about doing something worthy of our municipal ancestors.

Today we are the beneficiaries of the energy and optimism of the 19th and early 20th centuries. New York's systems for the provision of transit, water, greenery, New York's public buildings and spaces these were great gifts. Our generation's legacy tends more to private splendors, welcome as contributions to the aggregate wealth, deficient as elements of civic intercourse. The various Trump towers may be more or less all right, but where are the 1990s analogues to the Public Library, Grand Central, Brooklyn Borough Hall?

There's some hope along the Hudson, in the shape of a serpentine park that will squeeze the west shore of Manhattan from the Battery to Inwood Hill. There may soon be a new rail connection between JFK and Jamaica Station. Enthusiasts talk up venerable good causes such as the Second Avenue subway, the cross-harbor freight tunnel, and the burying of the Gowanus Expressway. All are worthy, at least until we run the costs and benefits.



But there are two public-works challenges that require immediate attention and that promise unusual benefits. The first is the opportunity to convert the Post Office on Eighth Avenue into a new passenger rail station, to be named (sooner or later) after its indefatigable

proponent, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The second is to do something, anything, with Governor's Island.

The new rail station is vital for a number of reasons, not least of which is the totemic significance of doing something grand and communal one block from where Pennsylvania Station was razed 25 years ago. Train travel itself deserves our every encouragement, for its environmental desirability, for the comparative advantage it confers on central cities, and for the intrinsic civic-ness of the technology itself. The chance to revitalize a McKim, Mead & Wright building for an impeccable purpose may be worth almost all the cost over-runs it will surely entail.

And Governor's Island? Two things are sure: the Mayor won't get to build a casino and the environmentalists won't be able to convert the whole place into parkland. Like it or not, the island will end up with some mix of private/public, profit/non-profit. Will the officers' quarters become a conference center? Will NYU or Columbia expand into the harbor? Will anybody live in the old Coast Guard

dormitories? Will cars be allowed? Citizens Union Foundation will stay tuned, and try to lend a hand to good work already underway at the Regional Plan Association, the City Club, and other sister organizations. To someone who takes the ferry to Governor's Island, stands by Fort Independence and gazes at the towers of Lower Manhattan a half-mile distant on anyone's list of scenic superlatives the stakes don't get much higher.

**Photos: Old Penn Station (Library of Congress); Governor's Island (GSA)**

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