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Rising Above the Rails at Hudson Yards

By Douglas Feiden



Land-hungry New York City developers have been creating enormously valuable property out of thin air for more than a century by building concrete platforms over rusty rail yards.

Now Related Cos., with the help of media behemoth Time Warner Inc., is poised to take this classic form of real-estate alchemy to a new level.

The developer is on the verge of a two-pronged deal in which Time Warner would move to a planned 80-story new headquarters atop a platform Related would build over a rail yard on the far West Side. At the same time, Related would buy the Time Warner Center, the company's decade-old world existing headquarters at Columbus Circle, for more than \$1.3 billion, according to people familiar with the deal.

If a tentative agreement is signed, it would be a game-changer for the sprawling rail yard that has been recognized for decades as one of Manhattan's great undeveloped sites. The relocation of a prestigious company like Time Warner there would provide an enormous boost to Related's \$15 billion Hudson Yards plan to develop a 13.4 million-square-foot megaproject on 26 acres.

Much of it would be built on two massive podiums above acres of tracks. "We're constructing a new city-within-a-city to hand over to our children," says Jim White, an engineer and 30-year construction veteran who is overseeing the building of the platform for Related.

To be sure, it will likely take years—perhaps even decades—before Related can claim unqualified success. The developer will have to ride out the ups and downs of future economic cycles, adjust to fast-changing technology, surmount daunting construction hurdles and face multiple other challenges to make its vision a reality.

But its reclamation technique has been well-tested. Minting land on vast platforms over active rail lines in a city where it is bewitchingly scarce is a venerable Manhattan tradition: Starting in 1902, some of the world's most

treasured real estate was conjured up out of cinders and soot when the New York Central Railroad submerged its tracks and yards, capped them with a steel deck and spurred the development of Park Avenue.

"Ride into Grand Central and what you see—columns rising from below with a hard deck above and buildings and roads and open spaces above that—is remarkably similar to what we're doing at Hudson Yards," said Ron Wackrow, 66 years old, the Related executive vice president overseeing all design and construction at Hudson Yards.

These days, the esoteric art of platform design also figures in other New York developments. Forest City Ratner is eventually planning to build a large platform next to its Barclays Center project, on top of which the master plan calls for six residential towers and open space. One block east of Hudson Yards, Brookfield Office Properties Inc. BPO.T +0.12% broke ground in January on its \$4.5 billion Manhattan West office development. That project includes a 2.6-acre platform over the same tracks that Hudson Yards will be spanning.

Long backed by the Bloomberg administration, the covering of the West Side rail yards could reshape the western end of Midtown just as the burying of the rails north of Grand Central Terminal fueled a boom in Midtown East. Related's project calls for a forest of four residential and commercial towers, including Time Warner's prospective site to the north and an office building now under way on West 30th Street anchored by Coach Inc. COH +0.45% A public plaza and five-story luxury shopping mall connecting the two office towers will also sit on the podium.

"Covering Park Avenue moved the central business district from downtown to Midtown. Now, this could expand it into far westward territory," says Alexander Garvin, the urban planner who proposed capping the yards in 1996 and worked on the city's unsuccessful bid for the 2012 Olympic Games, which called for a new stadium on the site.

The first platform at the heart of Related's plans—between 10th and 11th avenues—would cost roughly \$750 million and take more than two years to complete. It must be built, gingerly, inside a sprawling rail yard with 30 tracks on an upper level, where the LIRR parks and maintains its trains, and three tunnels on a lower level, through which Amtrak and NJ Transit ferry its passengers.

Anchored in bedrock and serving as the foundation for the buildings above, which range from 600 to 1,300 feet in height, the deck will rest on 300 caissons, which are watertight, vertical retaining supports, with about 200 of them interspersed among the tracks. The caissons weigh between 4 and 60 tons and will be sunk to depths up to 80 feet below the rails.

The underbelly of the platform, the lower sections of its structural trusses, will be about 20 feet above the tracks, Related says. All three railroads say they're closely monitoring design and construction to avoid train interference and ensure safe operations.

To pinpoint the exact location of railroad infrastructure and utilities, Related began drilling exploratory pits in the railbed in May. It starts relocating utilities later this month, a five-month task, then undertakes the delicate, 14-month installation of caissons in January, riding the rails with specially engineered equipment to drill through soil and rock.

"The technology is far superior to what was used at Grand Central," says Mr. White.