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Urban planner on why MSG must move to make way for a new Penn Station

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WHO HE IS Executive director, Grand Penn Community Alliance

BORN Washington, D.C.

RESIDES Red Hook, Brooklyn

EDUCATION Bachelor's in art and biology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; master of architecture, Harvard University

ON HIS CV Washburn was the chief urban designer for the New York Department of City Planning and president of the Pennsylvania Station Redevelopment Corp. He also served as public works adviser to Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan. His work to make Moynihan Train Hall a reality made him a *Crain's* 40 Under 40 honoree in 1997.

NEW URBANISM No surprise, he's a Jane Jacobs fan—and he has his own fans as well. In 2007 *New York* magazine described Washburn as a man of “urbane Greek god looks that had most of

the Janeheads at the pub cruising him in that discreet New Urbanist way.”

Alexandros Washburn is an architect who served as the city's chief design officer during the Bloomberg administration, where he helped design the Harlem Children's Zone, the High Line and Hudson Yards. Previously he helped convert the Farley Post Office into the magnificent Moynihan Train Hall. He is now leading the Grand Penn Community Alliance, a group advocating for a new, improved rail hub that isn't entombed by Madison Square Garden.

Everyone agrees Penn Station is terrible, but what should be done?

We need a station worthy of New York. That means building a station in which commuters have as good an experience as Amtrak riders, with a waiting hall as good or better than Moynihan. The new station needs 21st-century transportation capacity, and every platform and train must be accessible to everyone.

Couldn't a station like that be built while leaving Madison Square Garden alone?

No, the forest of columns at track level [makes it impossible](#). Those columns support Madison Square Garden and stand in the way of basic passenger improvements, like installing elevators and ramps. Until the columns are removed, there is only so much you can do to Penn Station.

Madison Square Garden owner James Dolan seems to like its location, though.

A new Garden would make more money than the existing one. The next generation of Madison Square Garden would fit in the western, [unbuilt half of Hudson Yards](#). I made sure that was the case when serving [as chief urban designer] in the Bloomberg administration.

What pressure can the government bring?

In 1963 the city granted Madison Square Garden a [permit](#) to operate for 50 years and in 2013 renewed it for 10. The permit expires in June, and the city should give the Garden four more years at the existing site while it builds a new arena. Four years is how long it took to design and build [Barclays Center](#) in Brooklyn.

What if the Garden still refuses to move?

The Garden is aware of the better economics a few blocks west. The new Yankee Stadium makes more money than the previous one across the street.

Apart from keeping the Garden in place, what else is wrong with Gov. Kathy Hochul's [plan](#) to pay for a new Penn Station by developing office towers?

Establishing a private goal first and then trying to get the public around it is back-asswards. Also, the market for commercial space is uncertain. The developer, Vornado, [doesn't want to build](#).

What's an alternative?

Look at the High Line. In that case, the city invested \$100 million to build the park and rezoned the surrounding area. That resulted in \$3 billion worth of private investment and buildings that are generating property taxes. There's lots of development that can be done in the Penn Station neighborhood without supertall towers blocking the light.

Wouldn't it be expensive to rebuild Penn Station with public money?

The current situation [isn't cheap](#), either.