

brooklyn bridge

battery maritime building

brooklyn skyline

# FERRY TALE

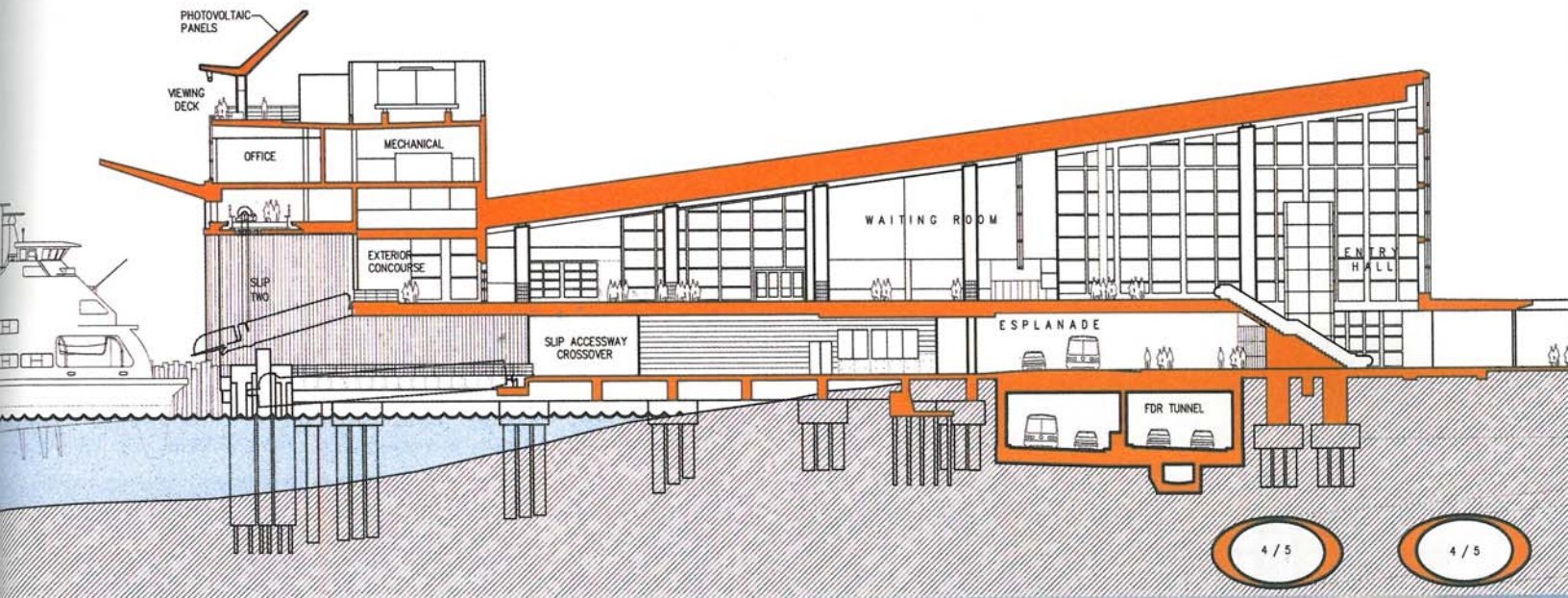
By Alec Appelbaum

A green design for Manhattan's Staten Island Ferry terminal rescues a controversial site—and reinterprets New York civic architecture.

**It's a stubborn contradiction.** New York's skyline and bridges glitter from afar, but it's been decades since the city produced a remarkable building for arriving in it. A redesigned ferry terminal at Manhattan's southern tip is about to end that drought. The project took ten years and \$135 million, spanned three mayors, and forced legendary architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown into retreat. This is the story of how Frederic Schwartz used green design to quiet political opposition, focus on user enjoyment—and birth a landmark in the process.

Next summer Schwartz Architects' new Whitehall Ferry Terminal will greet 70,000 Staten Island Ferry passengers a day with glass walls, a rooftop viewing deck, energy-efficient heating and cooling, and an entry hall with grand 75-foot-high ceilings. To understand how Schwartz expects the building to become "a place where people are celebrated," you need some context. Start with the view from the site: Manhattan's tower-packed financial district to the north, Brooklyn to the east, and Staten Island to the south. While

This page: top right and bottom, Frederic Schwartz; All images courtesy Schwartz Architects



governors island

staten island

statue of liberty

ellis island



low-rise Brooklyn bustles with immigrants and skyscraping Manhattan teems with commerce, the relative arcadia of Staten Island boasts high home-ownership rates and two-parent households. It's a constituency that has often been ignored by the louder, more famous boroughs—even when the city designed a public space specifically for its residents.

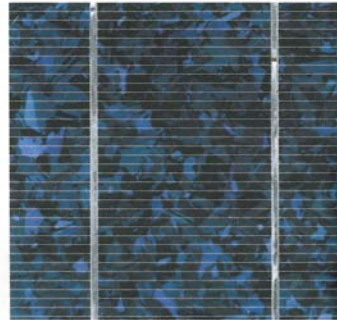
After a 1991 fire damaged the terminal where island commuters enter Manhattan, New York City staged a design competition to replace it. Venturi Scott Brown & Associates (VSBA) and Schwartz jointly submitted a barrel-vaulted design with a 120-foot-diameter clock. It won unanimously, but the jury lacked an essential perspective. Although there were jurors who represented museums, design schools, and governments, no one had been selected to represent Staten Island itself. Arthur Levitt, the stock-market expert who chaired the panel, deemed the building “more significant... than the Twin Towers or the Empire State Building, largely because of its location and because of its whimsy.”

But in 1992 Staten Island didn't need whimsy. A movement to secede from the city had intensified that year; a secession referendum passed two-to-one in 1993. By entrusting its skyline to panelists like Cesar Pelli, who practices in New Haven, and Robert Campbell of the *Boston Globe*, the city seemed oblivious to

The new Whitehall Ferry Terminal in Manhattan will include retail space, observation decks, and a public plaza, as the site plan illustrates (opposite page, top left). Shown in elevation (top), the building features a rooftop deck with panoramic views stretching from Brooklyn to Ellis Island and including Staten Island, the community served by the ferry. Evident in architect Frederic Schwartz's early sketch (opposite page, top right) are green features such as park space and photovoltaic panels.



The terminal's coated-glass walls (left and below left) are energy efficient and provide astonishing views of the city and harbor surrounding its prime location (bottom). Rooftop photovoltaic cells (below) generate enough energy to light the building's offices.

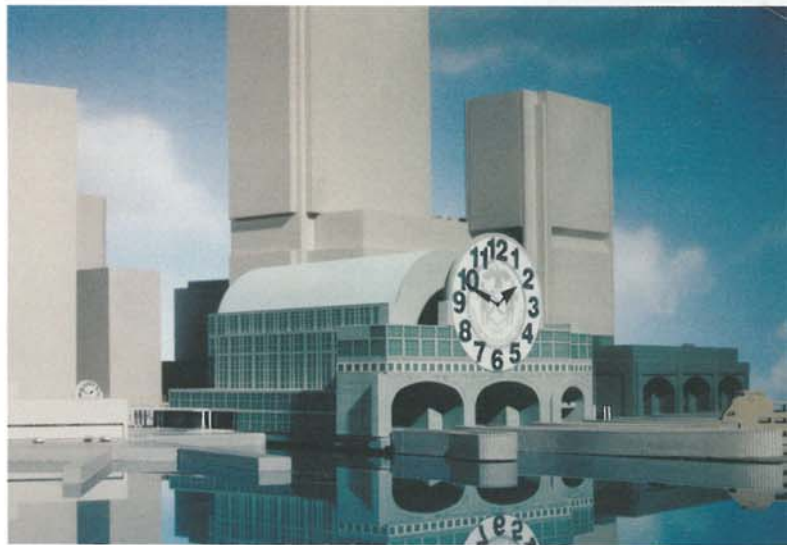


Staten Islanders' day-to-day concerns. Objectors—most vocally, borough president Guy Molinari—protested that the clock would obstruct views of Manhattan, prick commuters' consciences when the ferry was running late, or generally substitute an aesthete's idea of monumental "whimsy" for the functional improvements riders badly wanted. "People reacted about the grandness of the idea," says Tamara Coombs, a writer and the founder of the Ferry Riders' Committee. "You're talking about a terminal in which escalators break down, where they could never get the sign right about which slip the boat was going to dock in." And so Staten Island politicians made the blueprint into a battleground.

Venturi and Scott Brown, who quit the project in 1996 and haven't seen Schwartz's design, energetically defend the clock. "The community hadn't been involved and incorporated," Scott Brown says. "It's classic that they take it out on the architects, who are viewed as hounds of the oppressor." She and Venturi stress the painstaking attention they paid to residents' concerns about practicalities like subway access. Schwartz, who had run VSBA's New York office before collaborating on the clock design, claims they conducted outreach throughout the design phase. "Frankly, during the controversy more things came out about features they wanted," he says.

By emphasizing scale and iconography—which Venturi says must distinguish civic buildings from their corporate backgrounds—the terminal design had become an icon more obviously than a functional hub. Scott Brown makes no apologies about that. She thinks civic buildings need to stand out from their surroundings and make their users think about virtues that are hard to measure. "Is there something [about it] that makes you feel that you... want to vote, you are happy to assume the duties of citizenship?" she asks. Secessionists had already answered that question before Venturi, Scott Brown, and Schwartz came along. Indeed Scott Brown says commuter advocates seemed peevishly preoccupied with their own comforts—and





with extending their suburban experience to the shores of noisy, mercantile Manhattan. “Can you legitimately say, ‘I’m going to start my evening on the front porch while on the ferry?’” she asks. When state legislators prevented secession and the city cut \$30 million from the terminal budget, the team submitted a new design with a swooped-up roof line and electronic wall displays. But opponents dug in their heels; Molinari razed this design too. The superstars withdrew, and Schwartz started over.

While Staten Island residents were resisting Venturi and Scott Brown’s electronic walls, Manhattan was beginning an economic recovery pinned on entertainment and razzle-dazzle. By the time Schwartz took over, Staten Island had joined in this recovery—and calls for secession had faded. “This is a building where monumentality is correct,” Schwartz says now. But the vocabulary he chose had to respect Staten Islanders’ desire for tranquillity and make them feel like valued residents—while generating the oohs and aahs that a thriving Manhattan invites.

To do that Schwartz accented openness in the 225,000-square-foot plan, with an accessible rooftop above and an expansive public plaza below. In notes, he invokes a “75-foot-high civic entry hall with spectacular views of the downtown skyline” and describes the plaza (on the site where Peter Minuit supposedly bought Manhattan for \$24) as “directional, civic, and welcoming.” The glass walls and roof deck might seem less iconoclastic than the barrel-vaulted clock and electronic skin. But to hear Schwartz tell it, they’re just as epic. Even interior spaces will take advantage of the bridge and skyline vistas: as the architect puts it, “the city becomes the walls.” Schwartz’s design reaffirms the classic cityscape and its relationship to the river. When its roof deck opens, it will restore panoramic views similar to those previously available from the World Trade Center.

While the open walls trigger historical associations, the green design makes the city seem more responsible. The glass walls use **continued on page 168**

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Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates’ original design, with its giant clock (1992, above), was deemed too whimsical by Staten Island residents. Schwartz feels the more subtle glass facade (top) will be just as great a civic landmark when construction (above left) is completed next summer.

Opposite page, top and bottom left, Lee Dunnette, all images courtesy Schwartz Architects. This page: left, Ray Jackson/Bernstein Associates; top right, Lee Dunnette/courtesy Schwartz Architects; bottom right, Courtesy Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates