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## New York City Info

New York Underground City

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Written by Phil Roberts

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If you ask most people to imagine what New York City will architecturally look like 25 years from now, they'll probably mention something about skyscrapers, urban spaces and other monuments. How many would actually mention the underground? Millions of New Yorkers travel underground via the subway and walk in pedestrians passages between stations and transportation nodes, but imagine if New York had an underground city with shops, eateries and other establishments. An underground city connecting some of the city's high profile districts and buildings could provide opportunities to create new spaces out of old spaces.

There has been a lot written and shown on television about the underground world of Manhattan. Everyone is acquainted with the myths about people inhabiting a secret underworld, dogging raccoon sized rats and alligators. However, some of these people happen to be homeless, and spend their lives in what they see as the peaceful underground of New York City, where the hectic pace of the urban environment can be escaped. Even with the rattling of trains and other cryptic noises of steam pipes, people that live down there feel it is there home.

Underground complexes already exist in Manhattan, such as in Lower Manhattan where passageways link office towers to the PATH Station. Efforts are already underway to make this complex more substantial. Then there's Penn and Grand Central Stations, each with their own well articulated concourses filled with eateries and small shops. Underneath Manhattan there are areas known as 'sub-districts' which carry the names of the areas that they are in. The Penn Center Sub-district consists of the train station, subway station, underground passageways and extends a distance of 100 feet below the surface. The Moynihan Station project in the Penn Station/Hudson Yards area has already begun to move forward, which if completed as planned would be a underground city all too itself and transform the Farley Post Office into a transportation hub.

Other sub-districts are the Fifth Avenue Sub-district (from 33<sup>rd</sup> street to Central Park South), Grand Central Sub-district (between 41<sup>st</sup> Street and 47<sup>th</sup> Street; and Madison Avenue to Lexington Avenue), Preservation Sub-district (56<sup>th</sup> to 54<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenues), and Theater Sub-district (40<sup>th</sup> to 57<sup>th</sup> Streets; between 8<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> Streets; between 5

Some of these sub-districts have remained dormant for years or are used by the MTA to store benches and signs. In other parts of Manhattan, spaces once used as speakeasies from the time of Prohibition, are hidden away only to be revealed during the major construction project or a simple residential renovation. Other spaces used to be secret locations for parties and meetings, but some spaces were simply passageways. However, all these spaces still remain and some may still be undiscovered. It has become increasingly difficult for curious New Yorkers to perform underground tourism in areas not accessible to the public, especially post 9/11, leaving only those with strange nerves like Steve Duncan to do it.

With all this empty space underneath a crowded and expensive city, where even the air above a building is expensive, why not develop the underground into spaces where people can shop and experience New York another way?

Yes, there are issues with the inconsistency of soil in Manhattan, from bedroom in Midtown and parts of Downtown, to less stable soil in places such as the Lower East Side and Soho (hence the paucity of tall buildings in those areas). Despite the geological obstacles which would prevent New York from creating an underground city similar to Chicago, Houston, Montreal and Toronto, let's think imaginative. Instead of having one underground city interconnected by passageways, why not have more than one underground city - cities within the city.

Obviously, areas which already contain an abundance of retail space and underground areas would be good places to start. The two places that come to mind would be a Midtown Underground City and a Downtown Underground City. The

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Midtown Underground City would consist of passageways lined with stores connecting Grand Central Station, New York Public Library Main Branch, Times Square, Manhattan Mall, and Macy's to Penn Station via Gimbels Passageway. Rockefeller Center, which already has an underground shopping area, would also form one of the nodes of the Midtown Underground City. The passageways would be underneath the streets and could be extensions of the stores at street level or different stores all together.

The Downtown Underground City would connect what will become the World Trade Center Transportation Hub to Chambers Street and the South Street Seaport. Part of the plan for the World Trade Center Transportation Hub is a series of passageways and concourses enabling pedestrians to walk from Battery Park City to Broadway and John Street.

Similar underground cities could also be created in the Soho and Bowery neighborhoods.

Upgrading the underground areas of the city is a tasks which governments and the MTA will be doing in the coming years anyways, so why not take the extra step beyond bland passageways and create small underground cities within the city.

The underground cities in places such as Montreal would be helpful for New Yorkers who feel the streets are sometimes overcrowded. In Montreal, the *ville souterraine* is considered to be the world's largest underground network, consisting of 19 miles of passages lined with stores connecting malls, hotels, universities, movie theatres, transportation nodes, condo towers and over 2000 shops.

Think of the advantages of having such an underground city in Manhattan. On snowy days like we've seen for the past several weeks, where the streets and sidewalks are full of snow, an underground city would be a welcomed place to shop without worrying about snow, slush, and puddles of brown ice water that turn crosswalks into training grounds for US Olympic long-jump competitions. During those extremely hot summer days, the underground city becomes an area where some people can get away from the scorching 90 degree heat and suffocating smog. Or how about during the Christmas season when the city seems to be full of non-New Yorkers and the sidewalks are practically gridlocked with pedestrians, whereas an underground city could relieve the foot traffic and make the sidewalks less crowded. Businesses could benefit from being in Manhattan, without paying street level and above, Manhattan rent. Street level stores could also have underground storefronts and entrances facing passageways in their basements so that they don't miss the foot traffic at street level.

The access points would be at subway stations, hotel and office lobbies, stores and malls.

A design firm could be hired to create signage and typology with a distinctive New York style. The underground cities should be decorated with art and sculptures and capture the essence of New York and reflect the bright, vibrant and energetic city above.

The point of the underground cities is to bring the atmosphere of New York City underground. The space underneath Manhattan is filled with sewage tunnels, gas and steam pipes, service cables, subways, but there are many vacant spaces that feel into disuse that could be revived. Let's take liberties with this idea. Let's be explorative and imaginative. Let's increase consider the possibilities about what lies beneath.

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