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The Gotham Growth Spurt

As deputy Mayor Michael Bloomberg spent his last days overseeing the renewal of the Brooklyn waterfront and West Side railyards, Edward Kosner reviews 'Greater Than Ever' by Daniel L. Doctoroff.



Hudson Yards on Manhattan's West Side. PHOTO: GARY HERSHORN/GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner

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In a certain way, Michael Bloomberg was the ideal mayor for 21st-century New York: He was an out-of-towner with no sentimental notions about fabled Gotham; an entrepreneurial businessman used to getting his way and to success; a multibillionaire who financed his own campaigns and owed no favors to greedy donors. And he was a very smart man who managed to keep his big ego and non-P.C. sense of humor snugly under wraps.

He also had a tough-minded fix on the city's place in the economic pecking order. New York is a luxury good, he liked to say, and people—Fortune 500 corporations, investors, tourists—are willing to pay for it. He then spent 12 years polishing what has become a golden age for New York out of the smoky nightmare of 9/11 and the Great Recession that began six years later. Critics carped that he and his fellow one-percenters intensified economic inequality in the city, but the argument never really slowed down development, and the city flourished.

Now, with many New Yorkers complaining that life in New York is raveling under Mr. Bloomberg's progressive successor, Bill de Blasio, a top Bloomberg lieutenant is telling his version of how the city was revitalized. Daniel L. Doctoroff, a recovering investment banker, was the city's economic czar as a deputy mayor for much of the Bloomberg era. "Greater Than Ever: New York's Big Comeback" is an exhaustive reconstruction of the city's revival from 2002 to 2014.

Mr. Doctoroff's book is actually a memoir disguised as an account of metropolitan renewal. It can be tedious going for all but urban-affairs buffs, but it does offer a valuable lesson in how much money, brainpower and relentless application it takes to achieve real progress in a big city beset by old-school politics, racial and ethnic conflict, and crumbling infrastructure.

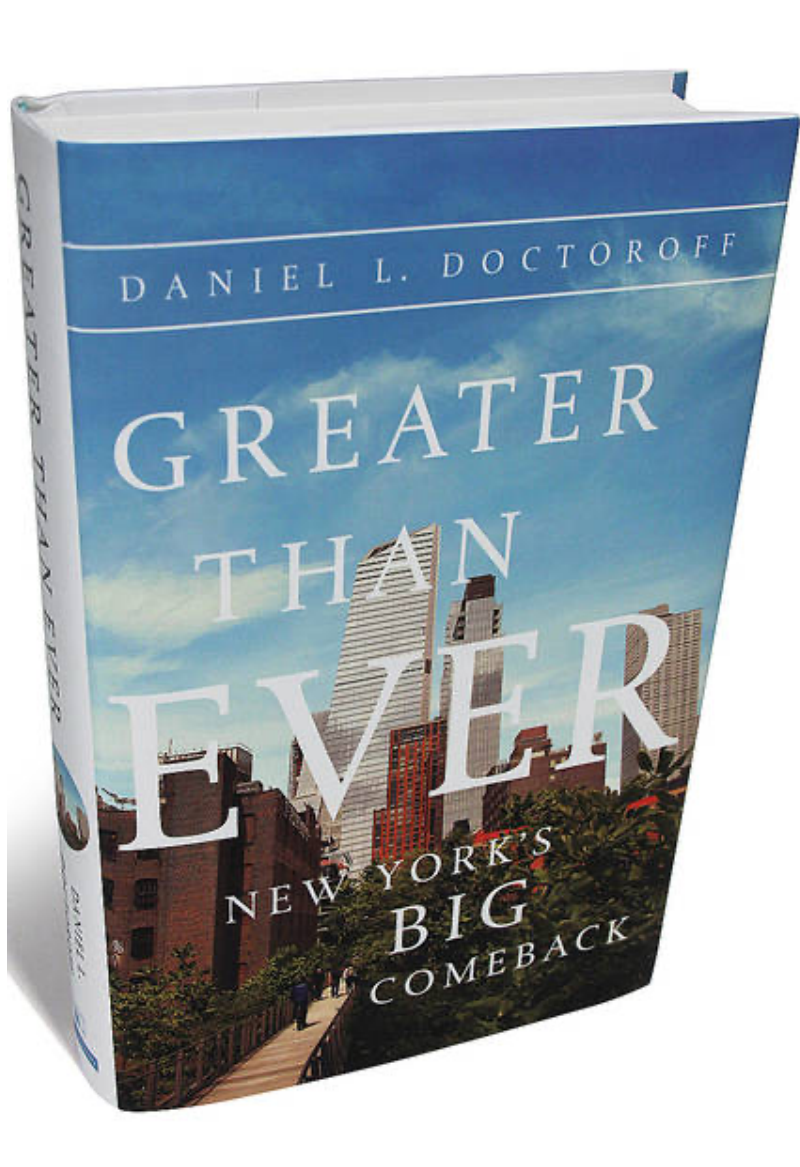


PHOTO: WSJ

GREATER THAN EVER

By Daniel L. Doctoroff
PublicAffairs, 371 pages, \$28

As the author tells it, the redemption of New York had its origin in Mr. Doctoroff's quixotic 1996 brainstorm to have the city host the 2008 Olympics. Preparing the bid, he scouted the boroughs for existing and prospective sites for Olympic events, eventually identifying the railyards on the far West Side of Midtown Manhattan and the Queens and Brooklyn waterfronts as prime locations for a stadium, the athletes' village and other venues. Days before he was sworn in on New Year's Day 2002, the new mayor hired Mr. Doctoroff to direct the city's economic development and rebuilding. The Olympic bid ultimately slid to the 2012 Games, but the Doctoroff template for regenerating the city was in place.

Mr. Doctoroff is so transfixed by his Olympic dream that it nearly overwhelms his story of the Bloomberg renaissance. Page after page is devoted to numbing accounts of his world travels to court shifty Olympic committee voters who determine the winner of the host competition. "Waiting around in a lobby until I spied someone to grab, often a person with whom I had nothing in common and who didn't

speak English well, brought out my biggest anxieties," he confides, unnecessarily. Perpetually jet-lagged, he exhausted himself and strained his marriage. Early on, a sympathetic Olympic insider tipped him that New York stood no chance, but he pressed on anyway. He made building a football stadium for the Jets on a choice parcel of the railyards the heart of the Olympic bid—a misguided idea if ever there was one—and saw it scuttled by the sensible opposition of the New York Times editorial page and the opaque State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver.

The stadium foundered in part because the city's focus at the time was the resurrection of the World Trade Center site ravaged on 9/11. Mr. Doctoroff paints an unflattering picture of New York Gov. George Pataki, who, he claims, viewed decisions about the nascent Freedom Tower through the prism of his own outlandish quest for the Republican presidential nomination.

Still, impressive progress was made. During Mr. Doctoroff's time in City Hall, the rescue of Ground Zero was one of many accomplishments. There was the transformation of abandoned elevated rail tracks on the Lower West Side of Manhattan into the tourist-magnet High Line; new stadiums for the Mets and Yankees; spanking-new waterfront parks in Brooklyn, plus rehabilitation of the Brooklyn Navy Yard and Coney Island; and a new arena, the Barclays Center, and other development in downtown Brooklyn; the conversion of Governors Island into a park just 800 yards from lower Manhattan; and the transformation of those old West Side railyards into a new Manhattan neighborhood with its own subway station, though no ugly football stadium.

The key to much of this was an early decision to rezone 140 neighborhoods from outdated manufacturing areas to mixed-use—a laborious process involving endless meetings with neighborhood groups and landlords, painstaking analyses, and more carrot-and-stick politicking than you want to know about. Some of the projects were public, some private, most a combination of the two. The Wall Street savvy of Mr. Doctoroff and the people he recruited conjured innovative financial solutions that often saved the day.

Mr. Doctoroff's reconstruction of how he and the mayor broke the impasse that was stalling the resurrection of Ground Zero is a depiction of political sausage-making at its most pungent. After six exhausting years at the mayor's side, Mr. Doctoroff left to run the Bloomberg media empire and now works with Google on the digital future of cities.

As Mr. Doctoroff points out, nearly all the projects that he and the mayor outlined at the start have now been completed. Intractable problems—homelessness and the public schools, among others—endure. But no one can fairly argue that Bloomberg and Co. didn't leave New York far, far stronger than they found it.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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