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Smell no evil: A proposal to collect New York's trash by tube

BY DANA RUBINSTEIN
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New York City is known for many goods things and also some bad ones, including the pungent summertime stench emanating from curbside trash bags gnawed through by rats.



A pneumatic schematic. Envac.

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Salvation often only arrives early in the morning, in the form of loud, dangerous, particulate-spewing garbage trucks.

Benjamin Miller, the former head of policy planning at the New York City Sanitation Department, has a radical solution to the problem of New York City's trash removal: pneumatic tubes.

"In my dream world, we've got much of the far West Side tubed up and chunks of the East Side tubed up," he told me on Thursday. "And then we would change the building code so that if you want to build a new building, you have to put in a sewer and put in a tube."

This week the University Transportation Research Center at the City University of New York issued a report co-written by Miller called "A Study Of The Feasibility Of Pneumatic Transport Of Municipal Solid Waste And Recyclables In Manhattan Using Existing Transportation Infrastructure."

The report examines the feasibility of running pneumatic tubes under the High Line and inside the new Second Avenue Subway tube and concludes that it's both feasible and, in the long run, cost-effective.

Pneumatic tubes in those two locations would theoretically cut energy use for trash collection there by 60 percent and greenhouse gas emissions by more than half. The tubes would also reduce truck miles travelled by almost 55,000 per year.

"While our other solid and liquid wastes have long since been conveyed from our homes and places of business by sewer tubes (just as our water and gas and oil supplies have long been brought into the city by pipelines), our garbage has inertly remained in malodorous and unsightly heaps on our streets and sidewalks until, through the agency of human hands (and arms and legs and aching backs) it is slung into the rear-ends of trucks," laments the report.

It doesn't have to be that way.

A few years back, Miller was traveling in Barcelona when, to his astonishment, he discovered food-waste kiosks along Las Ramblas that shoot trash via pneumatic tubes to a terminal under the Santa Caterina Market.

"It occurred to me that since we have a lot of tunnels anyway, let's see how far we can go to using existing infrastructure, and piggyback on things we already have," he said.

The idea is not actually foreign to New York City. The researchers were able to identify three operational pneumatic waste disposal systems in the United States: in Disney World (1971), 10 Summit Plaza in Jersey City (1972), and on our very own Roosevelt Island (1975).

"We've been very pleased with the Roosevelt Island AVAC system over the years it's been in operation," Sanitation Department spokesman Vito Turso emailed me.

"Roosevelt Island is a cute little demonstration project," said Miller. "But Manhattan, that's where this stuff is needed. We've got real congestion."

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At least one other New York City pneumatic tube system in the works: at Related Companies' massive Hudson Yards project.

"It's the luxury of creating your own infrastructure for 26 acres," Related spokeswoman Joanna Rose emailed me.

"If the Related Companies were to go ahead and tube up the Hudson Yards there could be real synergies with the High Line project and then you could just keep adding more ... until you've connected the pieces," said Miller. "You wouldn't do it to the whole West side, you would do it piece by piece. But the beauty is you can do it piece by piece."

According to the report, the M.T.A. has, in the past, expressed interest in the pneumatic tube idea for the section of the Second Avenue Subway.

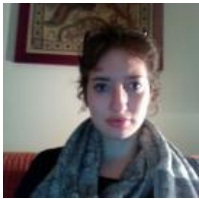
"Would it be possible, we were asked by an M.T.A. official, to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the temporary steel plate suspended over a stretch of Second Avenue between 92nd and 95th Street, under which other re-located utilities (water and sewer mains, gas lines, electricity and cable conduits) were already hanging, to strap a pneumatic waste tube—and thus offer the potential for alleviating the current problems with neighborhood waste collection, as well as the future problems of subway-waste removal?" reads the report.

(Miller and his colleagues estimate the hard costs of running a tube from 92nd to 99th streets at \$10.8 million).

The M.T.A. has apparently since lost interest.

"M.T.A. Capital Construction reviewed the idea of running trash pipes at the 96th Street Second Avenue Subway station, but rejected the idea as infeasible," emailed Adam Lisberg, the authority's spokesman.

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One reason would be good is that it would lessen the problem of pedestrians getting the shaft because standing policy is for businesses to pile their garbage up on the sidewalk rather than in the street. Because, you know, car parking is more important than pedestrians' right of way.

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