

Political Clash Clouds Future Of Science Hall

By **HOWARD BLUM**

A \$3.5 million renovation of the Hall of Science at the site of the 1964 World's Fair in Queens is to be completed this month, but the museum's future has become entangled in a political dispute.

Bess Myerson, the city's Cultural Commissioner, last summer abruptly cut off the funds to staff and operate the museum, which has been closed for three years during the renovation. She says she is determined that the institution not be run by its present board of directors.

An independent committee appointed by the Mayor has been critical of the hall's exhibition facilities and suggested that Manhattan would be a more suitable location for the city's science museum.

But Donald R. Manes, the Queens Borough President, disagrees, and he has brought the matter before the Board of Estimate in an attempt to pressure Mayor Koch to provide the \$250,000 necessary for the Hall of Science to reopen.

Mayor Caught in the Middle

The Mayor, finding himself in the middle of a political battle that has grown into something of a personal feud between Miss Myerson and Mr. Manes, is trying to arrange a settlement that will decide the Hall of Science's future without a Board of Estimate vote.

"Whatever goes on between them," Mr. Koch said, "and both Bess and Donny are my good friends, I want it understood that I'm going to make the final decision on providing the money for opening the museum. And I'm going to make my decision based on what's best for the city."

Ever since the 80-foot-high Hall of Science, with its undulating concrete walls, was erected 21 years ago as part of the city's contribution to the World's Fair, the building and its exhibitions have had their share of problems.

In language unusually harsh for a formal document, a 1967 City Planning Commission report considering what should become of the structure, said the city had been "saddled with a totally inadequate building which had poorly designed exhibit space."

The Hall of Science, however, stayed open for 19 years and drew more 500,000 people a year, according to the Queens Borough President's office.

Board Pledges to Raise \$6 Million

In June 1980, with the city's budgetary problems stabilized, an expansion program was announced. The city would contribute \$3.5 million to renovate an inadequate structure, while the board of the museum pledged to raise an additional \$6 million to attract exhibitions and perhaps expand the facilities. The museum would remain closed until the renovations were completed.

For the three years since the museum's closing, it has received more than \$800,000 from the city to pay for staff salaries and to cover maintenance expenses.

Seth Dubin, chairman of the Hall of Science board, said, "It was necessary to keep a staff because we had planned to run an out-reach program of scientific exhibitions to schools and we also needed a staff to help plan our fund-raising activities."

But Richard Bruno, executive assistant to the Commissioner for Cultural Affairs, said — and Mr. Dubin concurred — that "the out-reach program ended not long after it started, and the board raised only \$40,000 of the promised \$6 million."

Last February, Mr. Dubin told Commissioner Myerson in a letter that the board would be unable to fulfill its \$6 million fund-raising pledge without "substantial" help from the city. That prompted the current controversy, which could culminate in

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Politicians Clash Over the Hall of Science's Future

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the Hall of Science's never reopening. "Commissioner Myerson was pretty shocked at the poor performance of the board," Mr. Bruno said, "and we figured that an institution that was closed needed less funding than one that was open, so we tried to cut their budget."

"As soon as we moved to cut their funding," he continued, "Borough President Manes moved in to fight us."

The Department of Cultural Affairs did succeed in cutting back the museum's financing to \$121,000 for fiscal 1984.

However, this cut was accompanied by a compromise: At the Mayor's request, and with the support of Miss Myerson and Mr. Manes, an independent three-person committee of two museum directors and a businessman was established to evaluate the Hall of Science.

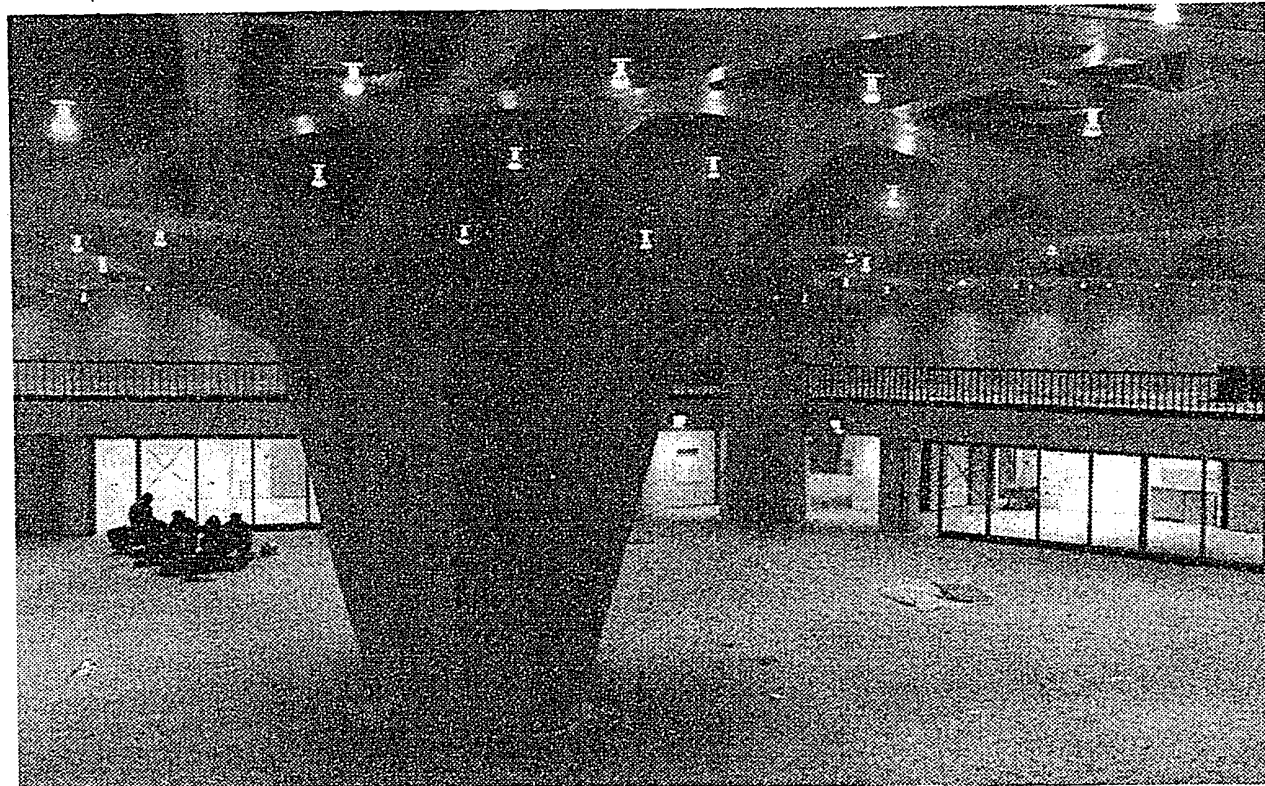
The committee's report, issued last spring, found that the museum's 30,000-square-foot exhibition space was inadequate and that its location in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park was "an incontrovertible minus."

Mr. Manes said the other day that he was "still so angry I don't even want to discuss the committee's report."

"To call the World's Fair site inaccessible is crazy," he said. "Shea Stadium and the U.S. Tennis Association are all nearby and they pack the people in."

Mr. Manes was further angered by a letter written by Miss Myerson last August to Mr. Dubin, the board chairman. "It was not just the substance, but the tone and the timing of the letter which angered the Borough President," said his spokesman, Sam Samuels.

Miss Myerson's letter said, "Although no final determination has been made concerning the Flushing site, it seems clear the Hall of Science



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Interior of Hall of Science in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, Queens, where renovation is nearly completed.

will not reopen under the guidance of your board."

Miss Myerson also said that the Department of Cultural Affairs would no longer continue to provide funds to pay for the museum's staff.

Mr. Manes's response was to introduce a counter-resolution in a political arena where, as he said in an interview, he has "a bit of clout" — the Board of Estimate. The resolution, introduced last September, called for the city to provide funds for appropriate staff and installation of exhibits

and to make clear its intention to reopen the Hall of Science in late 1984.

Though the formal resolution did not mention it, Mr. Manes said that \$250,000 would be required to reopen the museum and that the money could be released by a mayoral order.

"The purpose of the resolution was to pressure the Mayor," Mr. Bruno, Miss Myerson's assistant, said. "The Borough President was reminding the Mayor that he, too, was a very powerful man and that politics would be inextricably intertwined with any decision about the Hall of Science."

Mr. Bruno went on: "The Department of Cultural Affairs still needs to be shown that this is the right place and the right board for a science museum. Commissioner Myerson won't allow the city to throw dollars down a rabbit hole — no matter whose rabbit hole it is."

Mr. Manes remains eager to have the Hall of Science reopened at its present site. "I'm seeking the cooperation of the Department of Cultural Affairs," he said. "Not a confrontation. But I won't back away from this fight."