

The Seventh Generation

"In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."

—From *The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy*

New York City after Sandy



A house in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Basement and first floor were flooded. Three months after the storm it was still uninhabitable.

Who Benefits, Who Pays and Where's the Long-Term Planning?

By Tom Angotti

IN OCTOBER OF LAST YEAR tropical storm Sandy devastated the coastlines around New York City. Over 120 people lost their lives, thousands lost their homes and many were without power for weeks. Sandy triggered a public debate about how to protect the city and region in the future given the growing consensus that powerful storms and a rising sea level are inevitable and that climate change is for real. Local, state and federal officials are asking for over \$60 billion to repair the damage and prepare for the future.



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Photos by the author.

But who will be protected? And who will pay? These questions, for the most part, are not part of the conversation. And long-term planning is looking more and more like a nice sound bite that soothes widespread anxieties about the next storm without making most residents any safer.

Short-Term vs. Long-Term Planning

The local press is filled with praise for New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg for acknowledging the challenges posed by Sandy and proposing major new capital projects to deal with them. But behind their rhetoric calling for long-range planning is traditional short-term thinking dressed up in green. The favored measures under discussion are technological fixes such as sea

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barriers, artificial wetlands, changes to building regulations, revisions to floodplain maps and protection of utilities and transportation infrastructure. These may protect the most valuable property in the city but will do little or nothing to prepare the city's eight million residents to deal with future storms. While the proposals would serve to fortify luxury waterfront enclaves, they would abandon those living at the margins, such as the tenants in the large public housing projects of the Rockaways, Coney Island and Red Hook, who likewise received little help in the days after the storm. What is missing are measures to ensure that those who are in the greatest need get help and those who benefit most from public subsidies contribute their fair share to the recovery.

This social justice blind spot could be seen in the responses to the storm's devastation in the days and weeks after it hit. Occupy Sandy, which includes many activists who took part last year in Occupy Wall Street, and many other voluntary groups led relief efforts in the most vulnerable neighborhoods, often filling the huge gaps left by government at all levels. Occupy Sandy also helped establish notions of resilience based on solidarity instead of charity, and mutual aid instead of militarized intervention. Clearly obvious in these neighborhoods was the lack of long-term engagement by government with residents and workers.

While those who most needed assistance were ignored in government relief efforts, those who are best able to provide for themselves will now be first in line to reap the benefits. If the chief beneficiaries of the dikes and other greening measures are downtown and waterfront property owners, shouldn't they foot their fair share of the bill? If the captains of the growth machine took the risk with their capital to build on the waterfront, why is government rushing to bail them out? Will the result of new planning regulations be that only the wealthy can have waterfront views? Will repairs to the thousands of units of public housing combine with budget shortfalls and the drive towards privatization to convert these projects to upscale

enclaves? In sum, will short-term disaster capitalism rule instead of long-term equity planning?

Answers to these questions become obvious when we consider that the same political leaders who neglected public housing, promoted gentrification of neighborhoods and oversaw a rise in homelessness were the most avid supporters of upscale development in floodplains all over the city. Ambitious measures to protect the less fortunate living in low-lying Zone A were never contemplated. City Hall's policy has been to make these areas more attractive for private developers on the assumption they will take care of the job of climate adaptation themselves. Budget cuts in Washington are bleeding



Red Hook Houses, one of the city's largest public housing projects. Tenants still complain about inadequate response to the storm by the NYC Housing Authority.



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public housing to death all over the country, so the long-term trend has been towards the privatization or demolition of the giant public housing projects in these areas. (An attempt was already made in the Rockaways under the federal government's HOPE VI program, but it failed in part due to tenant resistance.)

Public officials have not expressed any regret for these actions and inactions. If the city and state administrations had wanted to seriously help the city adapt to climate change, they might have limited all large-scale development in flood-prone areas instead of promoting it as they have over the last two decades. They could have put more money into preserving and retrofitting the city's housing stock, especially public housing and homes in vulnerable areas, instead of wasting public resources on the protection of lavish upscale enclaves.

Bloomberg has been skeptical of proposals to build hugely expensive barriers in the harbor in response to Sandy, which is not a sign of prudence but a symptom of short-term thinking. Many high-end real estate interests, after all, are already on high ground, and the newer projects are likely to be built to withstand the worst. In fact, Bloomberg continues to be a forceful advocate for building more, not less, on the city's waterfront, leaving it to the engineers and architects hired by big developers to deal with protections against storm surges.

Bloomberg's Waterfront Follies

Mayor Bloomberg's signature development projects during his eleven-year term have been located along the most vulnerable upscale waterfronts. Massive public expenditures were made to protect what the administration claims to be "the real estate capital of the world."

Bloomberg's "legacy" development projects have received millions of dollars in subsidies from the New York City Economic Development Corporation. The mayor has publicly touted the planned multi-billion-dollar Hudson Yards redevelopment on Manhattan's West Side as his trophy project. He got billions of dollars in city subsidies to build a one-mile subway extension there. He is using his last year in office to try to set in stone the more controversial developments in floodplains, such as Willets Point and Hunters Point in Queens. Other projects, including cruise terminals in Manhattan and Brooklyn and commercial recreation areas such as Brooklyn Bridge Park, are in place or under development.

The Bloomberg planning strategy goes beyond direct city subsidies for waterfront projects. In the last decade the administration passed more than 110 rezoning proposals around the city, including many in formerly industrial waterfront areas, which created windfall profits for private landowners and ushered in massive new construction.

Bloomberg's rezoning of Coney Island included new opportunities for condos and commercial development near the waterfront. He has been outspoken in his support for new condos in Gowanus and Newtown Creek, both located in the floodplains of Brooklyn and saturated with toxic waste. He ignored calls from community activists to clean up Gowanus before promoting new residential development, and the administration even opposed a federally funded Superfund cleanup. The mayor argues that the best hope for cleaning up the toxic land and water lies in private real estate development, which would improve each site as it develops. However, this would only shift the problem from one property to another and still expose new and older residents and workers to toxic waste.

In perhaps the most dramatic rezoning, the City overcame substantial opposition by neighborhood groups and in 2005 rezoned the waterfront in Brooklyn's Williamsburg and Greenpoint neighborhoods. This unleashed a frenzy of luxury condo development on the waterfront, resulted in the displacement of thousands of industrial jobs and virtually wiped out one of the last remaining city neighborhoods to combine industry and housing. The area's Latino population has since declined dramatically. A similar process evolved in Long Island City, Queens, over the last two decades. In thrall to big real estate money and waterfront

views, and facing significant community opposition, City Hall never questioned the wisdom of lining the waterfront with more towers.

The Growth Machine and the Waterfront

Let's not blame it all on Bloomberg. The frenzy to build in the flood zones began in earnest in the 1980s. The aging port facilities had closed and moved to New Jersey by the early 1970s, but the city's fiscal crisis froze any efforts to redevelop the waterfront. By the 1980s the real estate market began to boom again. In 1993, the City completed a comprehensive waterfront plan and new waterfront zoning regulations. These rezonings encouraged new development on the waterfront and, instead of developing public open space, left "public access" to the waterfront in the hands of the private developers whose required "waterfront promenades" have become their front yards.

The big investment trusts, equity funds and banks that put up the money for the new waterfront properties in Brooklyn and Queens, along with the towers in Lower Manhattan that got submerged by Sandy, are now facing threats to their lower floors and bottom lines. They will certainly not pay for the repairs to the city's streets, sewers and subway systems, but if the flooding continues they will have to pay to fix their buildings. Could



New condos and older low-rise housing in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It was once a mixed use working class neighborhood, now heavily gentrified.

this mean that the selfish interests of the real estate growth machine could actually benefit all the rest of us, following traditional trickle-down philosophy? After all, some argue, it was real estate interests that made possible construction of the nation's largest subway system, and even though it was an unintended consequence, the subway has drastically reduced the need for burning carbon. Perhaps so, but imagine if the subway had been a truly public transit system from the start, as in many other big cities of the world. Then there might not have been a need for a public buyout of the first two private companies in the 1930s after they were milked dry by their investors. Imagine if instead of having three separate systems that all converged in Manhattan's overblown real estate market, and several separate suburban rail systems, there had been a region-wide system that served the vast majority of the population in the tri-state

area, which lives, after all, in the suburbs and not in New York City. Imagine if the powerful real estate interests had not nixed every serious attempt at regional planning and made New York the only major city in the nation that has never had an approved master plan.

The holistic, long-term thinking that the planning profession called for when it arose over a century ago has for the most part given way to short-term fixes to promote the growth machine. Now it is urgently needed as New Yorkers look to a future of rising seawaters and more storms like Sandy. Perhaps the only serious challenges to government's short-term thinking will arise from groups like Occupy Sandy, which have raised the most fundamental questions of who benefits and who pays. To answer these questions, long-term priorities have to be reassessed. Progressive planners should help raise these questions. **P²**