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## Atlantic Yards: A “Done Deal?”

by Tom Angotti

06 Mar 2007

The Atlantic Yards megaproject proposed by Forest City Ratner in Brooklyn had all the appearances of a “done deal” when it was first announced almost three years ago. Brooklyn’s biggest developer boasted solid support from Governor George Pataki, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz. Basketball fans applauded the plan to build an arena for the Nets, the professional team owned by developer Bruce Ratner. And many advocates for affordable housing cheered Forest City Ratner’s pledge that half of the new housing packed into 16 giant towers would be “affordable.”

The general feeling among Manhattan-centric urban policy pundits seemed to be that Atlantic Yards was just a harmless piece of Manhattan-like development opposed only by a small group of narrow-minded Brooklyn brownstoners, and that, as Errol Louis of the Daily News has written more than once, the opponents would do best [“to accept the reality of the plan.”](#)

Indeed, in the beginning of March, the New York Post, in an article entitled [Ratner Readies Wrecking Ball](#), reported that the developer plans to demolish 12 buildings, on Pacific and Dean Streets, and Flatbush and Vanderbilt Avenues, “as he revs up efforts to being building his \$4 billion Atlantic Yards project.”

But a new film, [Brooklyn Matters](#), uncovers a deepening vein of displeasure with the project that spans a wide political spectrum, in Manhattan as well as Brooklyn, among community leaders and urban planners. In addition to the [“resignation and bitter apathy”](#) referred to by Brooklyn resident Jennifer Egan in her recent New York Times op-ed essay, there seems to be a warehouse of active resistance and also a minefield of new obstacles. Three new lawsuits against the project will tie the project up for a while. The Spitzer administration is looking closely at this and a host of other Pataki deals that left mushrooming public costs. Critics are attempting to expose the affordable housing package as something of a front for what they say is really a massive luxury project. And now community groups are working on expanding their own plan for the area that sets aside Ratner’s vision.

### Brooklyn Matters

The film Brooklyn Matters was produced and directed by independent filmmaker Isabel Hill, who a decade ago produced a documentary entitled Made in Brooklyn, which took a critical look at the city government’s planning and zoning policies that undermine productive industrial areas. For the new documentary, Hill says she had hoped to include spokespeople for Forest City Ratner, but the developer did not respond to multiple requests for interviews. However, Bertha Lewis of ACORN, a housing advocacy group that supports the project, is interviewed in the film, as are other supporters, and many are shown in action at heated public forums. The urban planners and architects who voice their opinions include former city Planning Commissioner Ron Shiffman, architectural critic Paul Goldberger, and me.

Despite the impression that attitudes toward the project split along racial lines -- blacks supporting it and whites opposing it -- the film makes clear there are eloquent people of color in the opposition, from activist Bob Law to Councilmembers Letitia James and Charles Barron.

There are in fact unexpected harmonies among the diverse opposition chorus shown in the film. Julia Vitullo-Martin of the conservative Manhattan Institute (director of its Center for Rethinking Development) lashes out at the enormous density of the project and its failure to connect with the surrounding neighborhoods. Kent Barwick of the liberal Municipal Art Society blasts the use of eminent domain to transfer ownership of viable developed properties to a single large developer. Both left and right now seem to agree that this project is too large and dense (it would be the densest in the city), and that state officials are both abusing the government’s condemnation powers by using them to favor one powerful developer, and [overriding the city’s normal public review process](#).

What this has meant is that the only opportunity for local residents and businesses to comment publicly on the project was through the environmental review process, mandated under state law. But this review was found in a

report by the [Council of Brooklyn Neighborhoods](#), a coalition of over 40 local groups, to be “insufficient in both process and substance.” There were only two public hearings – one in October of 2005 on what is called the “Scope of Analysis” for the environmental review (basically the outline of potential project impacts that would have to be analyzed), and one to receive public comments on the “Draft Environmental Impact Statement,” over 4,000 pages of detailed, highly technical analysis, which was held in August of last year, when many residents were on vacation and community boards were in recess. Those who missed that public hearing may find both entertaining and shocking the footage in *Brooklyn Matters*, in which hordes of hard hats from throughout the region shout down requests by neighborhood leaders for more time to evaluate the project’s impacts, and ACORN’s troops joined the chorus.

Despite many appeals for changes to the plan – including calls by many project supporters for a reduction in size -- this did not happen.

## The Disappearing Affordable Housing

For those on the liberal side of the spectrum, the developer’s promise of 50 percent affordable housing was certainly a most compelling one. No private developer has ever made such a huge pledge. It is understandable why ACORN, one of the largest advocates for affordable housing in the nation, would accept the developer’s invitation to sign a contract – a Community Benefits Agreement – that promised its support in exchange for the developer’s commitment.

Michelle de la Uz, director of Fifth Avenue Committee, one of Brooklyn’s largest non-profit affordable housing developers, tells *Brooklyn Matters* how, within weeks of the announcement of the benefits agreement, the developer added more residential units to their project in a way that reduced the percentage of affordable units to about 30 percent. Then the developer defined “affordable” so liberally that it included a huge swath of “moderate-income” households that would be making far more than the median income for Brooklyn. In fact, less than 14 percent of the apartments in the proposed development would be affordable to households making less than the median income.

## Three Court Cases and the UNITY Workshop

Opposition groups have filed one lawsuit and two more are lined up and ready to go. This may create more problems even should Forest City Ratner eventually prevail in court, since “market timing” may force the developer to alter its plan or postpone its completion indefinitely. Landscape Architect Laurie Olin, who was hired to make the project’s interior courtyards look as if they were [public open space](#), recently told the *New York Observer* he thought [it could be 20 years before the project is completed](#), twice as long as projected.

Forest City Ratner has requested permits to demolish buildings it owns in the area, even though it cannot build the first phase of the project, including the arena, as long as the project is tied up in court. Demolition might help Forest City Ratner create “facts on the ground” that favor eventual implementation of the project. But the history of giant urban renewal projects like this one is telling. New York City, including downtown Brooklyn, has had many large urban renewal areas that remained vacant eyesores for decades after they were cleared for redevelopment. Forty years after the clearance of the Hoyt-Schermerhorn Urban Renewal Area in Boerum Hill, the vacant sites are just now being built on.

Meanwhile, neighborhood residents are also thinking long-term. The [UNITY Plan](#) (which stands for Understanding, Imagining and Transforming the Yards) was developed three years ago as an alternative plan after workshops sponsored by Councilmember Letitia James and coordinated by architect Marshall Brown. Brown, along with Ron Shiffman and I, are convening a series of workshops to update and expand the plan, so that it covers areas that are being blighted as Forest City Ratner buys and vacates properties. To the people attending the UNITY Workshops, *Brooklyn matters*, and nothing is a done deal until it is done.

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Gotham Gazette is brought to you by [Citizens Union Foundation](#). It is made possible by a grants from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the Altman Foundation, the Fund for the City of New York, the John S. and James L. Knight

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