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Atlantic Yards and the Sustainability Test

by Tom Angotti

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Mayor Michael Bloomberg's long-term sustainability plan, ([PlaNYC2030](#)), is aimed at stemming global warming and promoting energy efficiency by concentrating new construction near transit hubs and using green building technology. At the same time, the mayor proposes to reduce traffic in densely developed areas with congestion pricing, to encourage bicycling, and to build new public open spaces in every neighborhood.

[Forest City Ratner's Atlantic Yards](#) project in Brooklyn claims to do all of these things – along with providing thousands of new apartments and jobs and bringing a major league sports team, the NBA Nets, to Brooklyn. Yet curiously the mayor's voluminous 2030 plan includes no mention of the megaproject, Brooklyn's largest-ever. And in many respects, Atlantic Yards, which was driven by the developer and backed by the state with minimal city involvement, would actually undermine green development and be unsustainable in the long run.

Not Transit-Oriented Development

Atlantic Yards is promoted as a prime example of "transit-oriented development" because it is located over the third largest transit hub in the city. Yet Forest City Ratner plans to build a parking garage with 3,670 spaces, and in the first phase, which could last 10 to 20 years, create over 2,000 spaces in open parking lots. These would attract more cars and increase traffic congestion. At the same time, the plans currently provide for no improvements to subway and train stations, which are already over-capacity, and no additional trains. Bus service, under the latest proposals, would not be expanded and could even decline.

This "transit-oriented" development would bring in some 15,000 to 20,000 new residents of mostly luxury housing, a demographic that relies heavily on auto use. It would serve up to 18,000 Nets basketball fans during each game – fans who would come largely from the auto-dependent outer boroughs and suburbs and who will prefer to use their cars in the late evenings when games let out. Located at the far edge of downtown Brooklyn adjacent to the residential neighborhoods of Fort Greene and Prospect Heights, Atlantic Yards would become a park-and-ride hub for suburban commuters, not a walkable, transit-oriented community. If the mayor's congestion pricing plan gets implemented, through traffic to Manhattan would surely decline, but Atlantic Yards and many other projects like it would quickly fill the void. Even the environmental impact statement prepared for the Empire State Development Corporation, an enthusiastic backer of the project, found that most intersections near it would have significantly more traffic during morning rush hours and after Saturday Nets games.

There is no plan to reduce roadway capacity or introduce congestion pricing in Brooklyn. The small bicycle parking facility proposed for Atlantic Yards, which will probably charge a fee, can hardly substitute for a safe biking environment, something unlikely to exist as traffic gets worse.

If Atlantic Yards becomes a model for transit-oriented development in the city then just about any major project near a transit hub will be able to wear the mantle of sustainability, even if it ends up encouraging more, rather than less, driving. In the U.S. city where mass transit is everywhere, transit-oriented development could well lose its meaning unless there is a clear and direct connection between land use development and mass transit improvements. Transit-oriented development should include transit improvements.

In advancing his plan, the mayor noted the unacceptably high rates of asthma, especially in areas with substantial traffic. According to the [Council of Brooklyn Neighborhoods](#), the environmental impact statement projects no remedy for the high asthma rates in Prospect Heights.

Not Energy-Efficient

Forest City Ratner claims the new buildings in Atlantic Yards will be "green" because they would meet the requirements for energy efficiency established by the Green Building Council, an industry group. Some storm water would also be held in an on-site pond so it would reduce overflows at the local sewage treatment plant when it rains.

But environmentalists are increasingly aware that individual buildings can meet green building standards but still be part of environmentally damaging and unsustainable projects. To build its project, Forest City Ratner would demolish sound historic buildings like Ward's Bakery. Since new construction consumes enormous amounts of energy compared to sensitive renovation, this would further burden the environment.

The environmental impact statement shows that the project's 16 towers would place a huge swath of land in the neighborhood in permanent shadows. This would severely reduce access to natural sunlight and increase the need for heating, artificial light and the use of fossil fuels in the area. It will limit the potential for solar power in the future. Given the height of the buildings, all the buildings would use elevators, further increasing energy demands.

An Indoor Environment

Finally, the health and well-being of local residents can be compromised even in "green" buildings. While indoor air at Atlantic Yard might be healthier than in conventional buildings, the developer acknowledges that noise levels in its project will be intolerably high. Their solution is double-paned windows and air conditioning. That will increase energy demand, but the noise outside means adults and kids will be less likely to venture out of doors, adding to the immobility of a population with already epidemic proportions of obesity and heart disease. In sum, buildings may be green and fresh but the vitality of urban life will be drained from them. Brooklyn's famous stoop life will be a remote fable.

The eight acres of public open space in the 22-acre complex may not help much. When you look closely at the plans, it is apparent that the space is almost entirely private: interior courtyards for the luxury complex, the lobby for the proposed Nets basketball arena and a private green roof. Much of this private space will be built over the public streets that the city will cede to the developer. In perpetual shadows, the open space would be barren and uninviting for most of the year. As for recreational opportunities, the project that brags of its affinity with basketball hoops will have only one hoop that kids in the area can use -- if they can get past the project's security guards.

The Vanderbilt Rail Yards would be an ideal location for one of the public plazas that the mayor proposes to build in every community district. The three-block-long rail yards are big enough to fit a plaza as well as substantial new housing development. The plaza could be a central focus for vibrant residential neighborhoods, but to be consistent with PlaNYC2030, it should be a truly public open space. If either developers or local residents are allowed to turn public spaces, built and paid for with public funds, into private preserves, they will not encourage the active living and civic engagement foreseen in the long-term plan.

As Atlantic Yards demonstrates, more "green" buildings for downtown offices and new upscale towers may become the norm throughout the city. Will these new structures be part of sustainable neighborhoods, viable public spaces, and diverse communities where everyone can go for the green? Or will they help segregate the clean and green from the rest of the city?

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