UNITY
UNderstanding, Imagining, and Transforming the Yards

September 24, 2007

UNITY: A Better Way to Build at Brooklyn's Vanderbilt Yards
The UNITY Workshop
April, 28, 2007

Convened by the Council of Brooklyn Neighborhoods
The UNITY Technical Team

- Tom Angotti, Hunter College Center for Community Planning & Development
- Marshall Brown, University of Cincinnati, UNITY founder
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- Michelle de la Uz, Director, Fifth Avenue Committee
- Andy Wiley-Schwartz, Project for Public Spaces
- Dan Feinberg, Good Jobs New York
WHY UNITY?
IT’S NOT A DONE DEAL

• The FCR project is tied up in court.
• Long delays are inevitable.
• The Nets may not be able to wait
• The real estate market is unstable
• The second phase is fantasy
Why a NEW Unity Plan?
The Area Suffers From Developers Blight
What if . . . 

The entire project is completed?
Scenario 1 – Everything is Built

- Out of scale development
- New barrier between Fort Greene and Prospect Heights
• Perhaps 20 years of construction, noise, air pollution and gridlock
• At least 10 years before most of the affordable housing and open space are built
• Constant shadows
• Traffic nightmare
• Private open space
• Displaced local retailers
• Displacement of affordable housing
What if...

Only Phase I is built

Arena
Platform on rail yard
New subway entrance
2,346 parking spaces
336,000 sf commercial office space
91,000 sf retail
2110 housing units
295 units of affordable housing
Vacant Lots remaining on FCR properties

How long will they remain vacant?

FCR parking lot blight

The Hoyt Schermerhorn Urban Renewal Area was a parking lot for almost 40 years
What if . . . .

The Nets decide they cannot wait for a new arena, or decide to opt for a stadium on Coney Island?

Any of the court challenges are successful, making the arena and surrounding development impossible?

Delays cost Forest City Ratner to move forward?

The property market takes a dip?

The MTA and ESDC decide to issue a new RFP?
These Projects Were Considered Done Deals

Westway

West Side Stadium

Lower Manhattan Expressway
UNITY Planning Principles

• CONNECT Prospect Heights, Fort Greene and other neighborhoods
• Develop at a HUMAN SCALE and density
• Promote DIVERSITY AND VITALITY in urban design
• Create and preserve AFFORDABLE HOUSING
• REDUCE TRAFFIC, IMPROVE MASS TRANSIT
• Create JOBS for Brooklyn residents
• Create accessible PUBLIC SPACES
• Guarantee an OPEN PLANNING PROCESS, with transparency and accountability
We need a plan for and with neighborhoods, not a downtown plan.

Vanderbilt Yards divides Prospect Heights and Fort Green, and is near Park Slope and Clinton Hill.

It is far from Downtown Brooklyn.
Urban Design Overview - Current Separation

The MTA Vanderbilt Rail Yard is 8 acres of fallow land that currently forms a barrier between Prospect Heights, Fort Greene, Park Slope and Boerum Hill. It sits at the intersection of Atlantic and Flatbush Avenues, a major crossroads in New York. The Brooklyn Academy of Music, only two blocks away, attracts performers and visitors from around the world. There is intensive transportation infrastructure adjacent to the site. Property values in all of the surrounding neighborhoods are skyrocketing.
Urban Design Overview – Proposed Connections

The Yards hold tremendous value and potential for all of Brooklyn. But this future depends on connecting the site to its surrounding neighborhoods. Instead of closing streets, we propose extending South Eliot, South Oxford, Cumberland, Adelphi, and Clermont into the Yards. The new streets create pedestrian connections and more lot frontages. They also create smaller development sites that could be developed by multiple firms either simultaneously or gradually.
Urban Design Overview – Finally United!

Our built proposal is located within the boundaries of the Rail Yards to avoid demolishing existing homes and businesses. We have also proposed the preservation of two existing buildings on Atlantic Avenue. Instead of creating privately held courtyards, we have proposed a network of public spaces that would stretch the length of the site and connect to surrounding streets. This robust network of streets and open spaces will finally stitch the neighborhoods together.
Current Barriers

The Vanderbilt Rail Yard is not just a single site. It is currently divided into three large city blocks. These blocks now create a barrier between the neighborhoods which is difficult to cross, especially for pedestrians. The problem would only increase if the blocks were joined to become superbblocks.
New Organization

Our proposal improves on the current situation by adding more streets which would create smaller blocks. These smaller blocks would result in not one, nor three, but up to eight development sites. This would allow for greater competition resulting in greater public profit as well as a shorter project implementation period.
Diversification

More blocks will allow for diverse participation by developers, architects, and citizens. The programs, public spaces, and architecture can be enriched as well. Instead of putting all our eggs in one basket and giving 11 acres of public land to one developer without any competition, let's give more local firms an opportunity to get a piece of this very big pie.
Mixed Use Plan
Integrating Scales

UNITY also addresses the issue of higher density development. Brooklyn has a diversity of densities, building sizes and types. One can find many different scales of buildings around the Vanderbilt Yards. Building heights and massing in our proposal would be regulated to respond to these diverse conditions - from small scale to large.
Shaping Density

The Yards form the northern edge of a triangle that includes the Vanderbilt and Flatbush Avenue Corridors. One corner is defined by Grand Army Plaza. Another corner is formed by the Atlantic Terminal. Rather than increase the congestion around the Atlantic Terminal by adding even more density, we propose an alternative strategy that concentrates density at the Vanderbilt/Atlantic intersection. This will improve that currently underdeveloped intersection as well as create the opportunity for a large new public square at the Atlantic Terminal, providing an experience similar to Union Square.
Affordable Housing
Affordable Housing Plan

• Create new Community Benefits Agreement
• 60% affordable to Brooklyn residents
• All units on-site
• 40% of affordable units owner-occupied
• Permanent affordability
More Low and Moderate-Income Units Than FCR Plan

The Unity Plan Serves more low- and moderate-income people than the FCR Plan.
Transportation

NO MORE SHORT TERM MEASURES!

The city needs a comprehensive multi-modal transportation strategy for downtown Brooklyn and neighborhoods.

- Connect LIRR to lower Manhattan and JFK.
- Restore LIRR service SE Queens to Midtown
- New surface transit loop (insert streetcar company name)
A Truly Transit-Oriented Development

- Increase subway and bus service
- Limit on-site parking to special needs
- Institute congestion parking
- Enforce parking rules for official vehicles
Make the Area Walkable and Bikeable

- Traffic Calming on Atlantic Avenue
Traffic Calming on Local Streets

Textured Crosswalks

Traffic Islands
Bulbouts
Cicycle Plan

- Free indoor bicycle parking at transit hub
- Mandate indoor bicycle parking in all buildings
- Curbside bicycle racks on every block
- Two-way bicycle lanes on Flatbush and Vanderbilt Avenues (get picture of bike rack)
Open Space

Active Recreation Spaces

• Basketball courts
• Volleyball courts
• Improve Dean St. Playground
Streetscapes

Atlantic Avenue

- Street-level shops and amenities
- Street trees
- Widened sidewalks
- Traffic islands
- Extended sidewalks for bus stops
- Minimum streetwall height of 40 feet
Public Plazas
Atlantic/Flatbush Plaza

• Large open space
• Green market
• Play area
• Basketball courts
• Limited group floor retail
Economic Development and Jobs

• High quality, living wage, permanent jobs
• Preference to Brooklyn-owned businesses and start-ups
• Create the UNITY Local Development Corporation
• Local businesses, sustainable and green technologies
An Open Planning Process

- **CREATE URBAN DESIGN PRINCIPLES.** The New York City Planning Commission should hold a series of hearings to solicit community input and to set the foundation for the development of *Urban Design Principles* for the Vanderbilt Yards and environs in concert with the principles outlined in PlaNYC 2030.

- **STUDY ARENA LOCATIONS.** The Mayor, the President of the ESDC, the Borough President, and City Council should issue an RFP for a planning consultant to undertake a study to locate a suitable site for a basketball arena to be built in Brooklyn.

- **APPROVE ARENA SITE.** The Borough President, working with the City Planning Commission and ESDC, would select a site for the arena based on the recommendations of the planning consultant. Once selected, the site would be subject to the city’s land use review processes.

- **CREATE A NEW AND IMPROVED COMMUNITY BENEFITS AGREEMENT.** The City and State should adopt as policy the inclusionary housing, job set-asides and training components of the CBA, improved in accordance with the UNITY plan, and assure that they truly meet community definitions of low and moderate income; and develop a mechanism to assure that anyone selected as a developer would adhere to those principles.

- **CREATE A COMMUNITY OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE.** The Mayor, the President of the ESDC, the Borough President and the local council members should establish a community oversight committee [COC] comprising representatives of all of the affected community boards, the Council of Brooklyn Neighborhoods, Brooklyn Speaks, Develop Don’t Destroy Brooklyn, and the community signatories of the Community Benefits Agreement.
An Open Planning Process

- **APPROVE URBAN DESIGN PRINCIPLES.** Within 45 days of the close of public hearings by the community boards, the Borough President and City Planning Commission, the City Planning Commission, in concert with the COC, should approve *Urban Design Principles* for Vanderbilt Yards, based on Unity 2007 and public input, no later than December 1, 2007.

- **AMEND ATURA, CREATE SPECIAL ZONING DISTRICT.** The Department of City Planning should initiate amendments to the *Atlantic Terminal Urban Renewal Plan* and create a *Special Zoning District* for the Yards to facilitate a zoning program for four to six distinct development parcels on the site. The exact number would be based on the final site plan and distribution of developable FAR.

- **DIVIDE THE SITE FOR DEVELOPMENT.** Based on the *Urban Design Principles* and the Special Zoning District the MTA should issue an RFQ/RFP to select 4-6 development teams comprising planners, architects, builders and investors to develop a minimum of four and a maximum of six development parcels that in their entirety would comprise the MTA site running from Flatbush Avenue to Vanderbilt Avenue. The division of the site into 4 to 6 parcels will add diversity and interest to the design and will enable the development to be completed in a shorter time frame than is now anticipated.

- **LAUNCH A PUBLIC DESIGN COMPETITION.** The COC would work with professional groups and area schools to host a public design competition to select the winning teams for each of the parcels. The selected teams would have three months to work with the COC on refining and submitting their financing, design and development proposals to the City Planning Commission and ESDC for joint hearings and final adoption.

- **TRANSFORM THE COC TO A TRUST.** Upon final adoption and prior to groundbreaking, the COC will be reconstituted as a local authority, similar to the Hudson River Trust Authority, to monitor the implementation of design guidelines and community benefits.