

Gotham Gazette - <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/landuse/20040119/12/841>

The Plans For Downtown Brooklyn Ignore Both People And Public Spaces

by Tom Angotti

19 Jan 2004

The city's planners are working overtime to clear the way for over 60 million square feet of new office space in such business centers as West Midtown, Lower Manhattan, Long Island City, and now downtown Brooklyn. While realtors see a big demand for prime office space now, it remains to be seen whether this amount of commercial space will be needed in the long run with the continuing trend of gradual movement to the suburbs. City officials backing this expansion are acting more like cheerleaders for local real estate than custodians of the quality of life in our neighborhoods.

The new downtown Brooklyn rezoning plan is now moving through the city's land use approval process and local residents and civic groups are turning out in droves to raise their questions and register their complaints. Even though some were involved in earlier discussions about the plans, there are still so many things that are important to neighborhoods that are not in the plan. The key questions have to do with impacts on the surrounding residential areas, transportation, lack of open space, and displacement of existing residents and businesses.

With its [Downtown Brooklyn Plan](#), the city wants to create 4.5 million square feet of new office space and 1,000 new housing units in a small area just across the East River from Wall Street. Brooklyn civic groups say the potential expansion will be seven million square feet while the city is only considering the potential environmental impact of 4.5 million. The plan includes parking for some 2,500 cars, a 1.5 acre park, and some widening of sidewalks. The plan also incorporates proposed expansions of Atlantic Terminal, Polytechnic University, Brooklyn Law School, the Hoyt-Schermerhorn urban renewal area, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music cultural district. Atlantic Terminal is also the site of a controversial plan to build a basketball arena for the Nets while displacing perhaps 1,000 residents and businesses.

Where Are the People?

The downtown Brooklyn plan deals primarily with office buildings, not people. To its credit, the City Planning Department actually put its rezoning proposal in the context of a comprehensive overview of downtown Brooklyn. But the plan is still mostly about square feet of building space and has very little to do with the quality of urban life, which is what matters most to people who live and work in the city.

In the plan the people are invisible. The plan states that only 1,200 people now live in Brooklyn's business core. But 150,000 people live in the immediately adjacent neighborhoods. Boerum Hill, Brooklyn Heights, Fort Greene, Park Slope and Prospect Heights are blank spaces. What do these people want to improve their daily lives? Are they only passive recipients of the abundant "growth" stimulated by the rezoning? Who will get the jobs that come with development, and who will lose their jobs? How do the locals relate to downtown and what are their development needs? What do they want to preserve that might be threatened by rising property values and speculation fueled by downtown expansion? Where are the tools to protect residential and commercial tenants from being displaced? Will they get any of the windfall profits reaped by property owners whose land gets up-zoned?

Traffic is one of the biggest gripes of Brooklynites, and downtown Brooklyn is already a congestion and pollution nightmare. It is both a destination and a thoroughfare for access to the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges. The plan will only make things worse by expanding parking, which will encourage more people to drive there. The dangerous and disagreeable environment faced by pedestrians in downtown Brooklyn, which the plan obliquely acknowledges, would only be addressed by limited sidewalk widening. There's no commitment by the Department of Transportation to reduce traffic. Downtown communities remember how the department successfully undermined the recent multi-million dollar Downtown Brooklyn Traffic Calming Study, which went through years of public discussion to end up with only a few changes to traffic signals. The Department of Transportation has yet to demonstrate the will to reduce roadway capacity, the most essential measure needed to clean up the downtown traffic mess. The mayor has also backed away from his proposal to put tolls on the East River bridges, an action that would have significantly helped relieve downtown traffic. The same Brooklyn elected officials who

defend the interests of the elite school of bridge commuters are also cheerleading for the downtown rezoning, compounding the damage.

There are no improvements to mass transit in the plan except for some station upgrades that may be made by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in the future. The downtown's biggest problem is the lack of a decent surface transportation system. Buses are inadequate and perpetually stuck in traffic. Imaginative proposals for a downtown trolley loop that could be linked to the redeveloped waterfront have been around for decades but are nowhere to be found in the plan.

Disappearing Public Spaces

Not to be accused of forgetting entirely about greenery, the city's planners threw in a nice little park. Since it will most likely be surrounded by concrete and glass office towers, this public amenity is more likely to become a backyard play space for corporate tenants, much like Metrotech's little mall. In the meantime, downtown Brooklyn will become a forest of skyscrapers with fewer public spaces.

One of downtown's most lively public spaces today is Fulton Mall. The downtown plan will wipe it off the map. This historic mall was one of the city's first commercial strips that limited access by motor vehicles (city buses run through it). Once the nearby Metrotech complex was built, however, corporate tenants and white collar workers increasingly looked down their noses at the low-rent shops selling cheap goods and the management and clientele, who are mostly people of color. The mall's problems with truck loading were never seriously addressed. The city let the mall stagnate. Why can't the city's planners figure out how to preserve vital street life where it already exists; isn't that what good planning is supposed to be about?

Finally, questions about the downtown plan are growing with mounting opposition to the proposal for an arena over Atlantic Terminal. Developer Bruce Ratner commissioned famed architect Frank Gehry to decorate the arena site with one of his signature buildings. Gehry's noted Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain dropped jaws. But one can only wonder whether anyone will see his sculpted icon when it's surrounded by the commercial clutter of Atlantic Terminal. Most Brooklynites passing by will be trapped in the borough's most gridlocked intersection.

Downtown Brooklyn and its plan are large and complex. They both raise questions and merit much more careful discussion. But the starting point should be the people who live and work there, not the number of square feet of building space that should be built.

Tom Angotti is Professor of Urban Affairs and Planning at Hunter College, City University of NY, editor of Planners Network Magazine, and a member of the Task Force on Community-based Planning.

#####

In This Series:

- [Field of Schemes](#) by Letitia James
- [Netting the Nets](#) by Marty Markowitz
- [Cheerleaders for Real Estate?](#) by Tom Angotti

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 Foundation, New York Times Foundation, the Charles H. Revson Foundation, the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and readers like you. Please consider making a [tax-deductible contribution](#).

Gotham Gazette - <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/landuse/20040119/12/841>