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Atlantic Yards: Through The Looking Glass

by Tom Angotti

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The Atlantic Yards story in Brooklyn is becoming a bit like the tale of Alice in Wonderland. In Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass, everything appears backwards, Alice is caught up in a giant chess game of powerful players over which she has no control, and the characters she meets talk nonsense.

The planning for Atlantic Yards is all backwards. Normally, government does a plan for the area, then looks at the potential environmental impacts of the plan, decides what to do, and then either does it or puts it out to private developers to bid on. In Atlantic Yards -- and increasingly in other megaprojects throughout the city -- it is just the reverse. First a private developer does a plan for the area, gets government officials to back it, then does an environmental impact statement, and in the process of looking at the environmental impacts all of the big planning issues that were never addressed in the first place come up for discussion. But the people who live and work in the area and will be most affected by the plan have the least to say about it.

The Atlantic Yards project was born two years ago when [Forest City Ratner](#), one of the nation's largest developers with a virtual monopoly on downtown expansion, proposed what now appears to be the largest-ever project in the borough. The latest version of its project includes a professional basketball arena, 7,300 units of housing, and over 600,000 square feet of office space. The developer then got Governor George Pataki, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz to voice full public support for the proposal. Then the governor unleashed the State of New York's Empire State Development Corporation, which he controls, to place at the developer's disposition the government's powers of eminent domain so that privately-owned land on the site could be assembled.

With the Empire State Development Corporation at the head of the pack, Forest City Ratner could also avoid going through the city's Uniform Land Use Review Process (nicknamed, ULURP), which would force it to face votes by the local community boards, borough president, City Planning Commission, and City Council. The developer needed to get the right to build over the rail yards owned by the Metropolitan Transit Authority, but since this is a state-run agency controlled by the governor, a hastily-planned Request for Proposals was put together so the developer could be guaranteed the rail yards. And \$200 million in public subsidies were thrown in to sweeten the deal.

Finally, two years after the project was proposed, the Empire State Development Corporation decided it would start the legally-required environmental impact study. Earlier this year this corporation issued a draft scope of work that outlined all the things they proposed to study, including potential impacts on traffic, air quality, open space, and neighborhood character, including the effects on the economic and social livelihood of the surrounding Brooklyn communities. Comments on this scope of work were due to the corporation in late October, and the agency is expected to issue what's called a draft environmental impact statement in the early part of next year.

On October 18, over 800 people packed an auditorium in downtown Brooklyn to tell the Empire State Development Corporation about all the potential impacts that the developer's plan could have -- many more than the agency had proposed to study. This hearing was a crucial turning point for two reasons. First, it tarnished the image of inevitability and consensus that the developer had cultivated around the project. It was clear even to the press that had treated Forest City Ratner with kindness that there were large sections of the community that had serious doubts about the scale, design, and cost of the project. Secondly, it pointed out the need for careful, detailed planning for development of the Atlantic Yards site so that it would knit that development into the fabric of Fort Greene, Prospect Heights, Park Slope, Clinton Hill and other neighborhoods. Ratner's Metrotech and Atlantic Terminal developments had already shown that the company, which invaded Brooklyn from Ohio, likes to do suburban-style malls. There was reference at the hearing to the Unity Plan, developed over a 15-month period through a series of community workshops, and the Extell Plan, rejected by the MTA without a hearing.

So now we're back to planning, which should have been the starting point. The three community boards affected by the project and community-based organizations under the umbrella of the [Council of Brooklyn Neighborhoods](#), among many others, seem to be raising all the fundamental questions that should go into the planning process

but that were avoided during two years of cheerleading. There seems to be a fair amount of sentiment for developing something over the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's rail yards, including affordable housing, but only a thorough planning process can produce consensus over what it should be. Community benefit agreements put together by the developer and several local groups might be useful if they too were part of a broader community planning process.

Is Environmental Review Backwards?

In this looking glass world, the environmental review process has been spun around and is now backwards. The laws establishing environmental review procedures by the city and state were designed to provide decision makers – the governor, mayor and borough president, for example – with information about potential impacts of new projects so that they could make informed decisions. Government could then determine what measures would have to be taken to mitigate the impacts before they approved or disapproved the project. But with Atlantic Yards, government leaders have already made up their minds, and given away the store. The environmental impact statement could very well end up as a useless exercise that satisfies no one except the project sponsors. Or it may turn out like the nonsensical poem, *Jabberwocky*, that Alice discovered in the Looking Glass World, filled with unintelligible jargon. Its multiple volumes will be more than your average community resident or business person can digest in the course of a normal lifetime. If past practice is any indicator, they will barely have enough time to get past the introduction before the state agency moves to put the final rubber stamp on the project.

The most troubling part of the Atlantic Yards project is that it seems to be part of a much bigger reversal in the public process set up to handle development proposals. The same thing happened with the Jets Stadium on the West Side of Manhattan, the rebuilding of lower Manhattan, and the Brooklyn Bridge Park. State authorities under the governor's control make deals with private developers, then use their powers to override local land use procedures. And compliant local politicians pave the way, undermining the few regulatory tools they have at their disposal to empower their own constituents in the planning process. And while these mega-developers go through the back door and benefit from the magic mirrors, the thousands of neighborhood developers that are the backbone of local improvement have to follow the rules and go through ULURP.

New Yorkers from the boroughs outside Brooklyn who think Atlantic Yards has nothing to do with them should think twice. Atlantic Yards could be the place where the mirror gets shattered, the King is captured, and Tweedledee and Tweedledum have to walk away in shame.

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

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