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Setting Standards for Green Neighborhoods
by Tom Angotti
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Recent successes with green buildings have spurred new efforts to make whole neighborhoods more sustainable and environmentally friendly. But is the attempt to develop a "green neighborhood" stamp of approval just an industry marketing gimmick? The pilot projects chosen in New York City -- including Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn, Willets Point in Queens and the Columbia expansion in upper Manhattan -- raise some serious questions about how green these proposed neighborhoods will be.

The national push for green buildings has been aided by the United States Green Building Council, a group with over 12,000 member organizations and 70 chapters. It includes real estate developers, environmental organizations and professionals. The group's aim is to promote the development of energy-efficient, healthy and environmentally friendly buildings. The council operates the voluntary LEED certification system that rates buildings as Certified, Silver, Gold and Platinum (the highest). Its Web site states that it "emphasizes state-of-the-art strategies for sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials and resources selection, and indoor environmental quality." It describes the rating system as "a practical rating tool for green building design and construction that provides immediate and measurable results for building owners and occupants."

The Limits of 'Approved' Buildings

There are only 15 LEED-certified buildings in all of New York City. Ten are in Manhattan and, to the credit of city government, three belong to public agencies. This accounts for not even 1 percent of new buildings in the city. The cost of certification and the need to plod through the council's numerical rating system make it a non-starter for many developers, especially small and medium-sized firms. Non-profit and public developers can participate in the program only when they have the money and staff to navigate the rating system. While LEED may apply to existing buildings, interiors and community facilities, eight out of the 15 projects in the city are for construction.

Beyond all that, some experts have expressed concern that LEED certification is too narrowly focused on individual buildings and does not take into consideration the relationship of the building to the urban environment. After all, individual buildings can be environmentally friendly while at the same time contributing to destructive patterns such as suburban sprawl, displacement of viable communities and demolition of sound buildings and communities.

With that in mind, the Green Building Council recently developed standards that look beyond buildings to communities and urban regions. The new LEED for Neighborhood Development standards address these concerns. In theory, this is welcome development for New York City, where certification has too often been used as a way to market high priced real estate development and to protect buyers from the city's environment rather than helping to improve it. Now, combined with New York City's new green building law (Local Law 86) and new city building regulations, the certification standards for neighborhood development could begin to turn the gray city green.

The neighborhood development standards were developed by the Green Building Council along with the Council for New Urbanism and Natural Resources Defense Council. These national groups have played an important role in the critiques of sprawled suburban development and auto dependence. So the rating system gives developers points for: Smart Location and Linkage (30 points); Neighborhood Pattern and Design (39 points); Green Construction and Technology (31 points), and Innovation and the Design Process (6 points). In effect, the system favors development in built-up areas that have access to mass transit, projects that would reduce auto-dependence (i.e., "transit-oriented development") and designs that connect projects with surrounding areas and encourage walking.

Standards for the Big City

As admirable as these standards are and as successful as they might be in fighting sprawl in the suburbs, they

run into problems when applied to New York City. Mass transit is just about everywhere in much of the city. A lot of new luxury megaprojects in Manhattan and Brooklyn are located near mass transit, but will not make any significant contributions to the improvement of service and so will increasing the demand on already over-burdened systems. Furthermore, these projects serve higher income residents, who are more likely to own cars than other New Yorkers, and the developers offer lots of parking to meet those residents' needs.

Six pilot projects in New York City are being used to test and develop the standards for LEED For Neighborhood Development. One, Melrose Commons in the Bronx, is being built in the context of a comprehensive community-based renewal strategy spearheaded by Nos Quedamos/We Stay, a local non-profit. The development strategy advocated by Nos Quedamos/We Stay focuses on community preservation, contextual development and truly affordable new housing. This is one among many grassroots efforts to bridge the gap between green building and local neighborhood development.

Citywide, the non-profit Home NYC provides a forum for such efforts, particularly for smaller buildings and in the outer boroughs where, after all, the vast majority of New Yorkers live. The most important virtue of such efforts is that they work with building owners and tenants and engage people in their local environments in the process of change. This is what is missing in most of the LEED pilot projects.

The other pilot projects are mostly large-scale developments that displace local people and businesses. The communities surrounding these developments have raised serious questions about the proposals and challenge whether they should be built in the first place — not a question that the rating system addresses. None of the projects is a good example of a long-term community-supported strategy.

Among the six pilots, at least three raise serious questions about whether the ratings are really anything more than self-promotion for developers -- who, after all, voluntarily agreed to take part in the pilot and, as with all LEED projects, put up the money to do so. The New York chapter of the Green Building Council includes among its sponsors some of the largest developers in the city, such as Related, Tishman Speyer and Silverstein Properties.

Forest City Ratner's Atlantic Yards is being promoted as "transit-oriented development," even though the project's environmental impact study found it will encourage auto use. In addition, while the developer says it may build LEED-certified buildings, the environmental review showed that the project will leave most of the area in permanent shadows.

Similarly, the city's project for Willets Point would create an isolated enclave, unconnected to Corona and other Queens neighborhoods, and set a bad precedent for brownfields cleanup by displacing viable businesses. Columbia University's West Harlem project would also create a separate enclave and faces strong opposition from local residents and businesses. Are these the right models for green neighborhoods?

The missing element in these three pilot projects is community planning -- engagement with residents and businesses to find ways to improve the quality of life, whether through new construction or preservation of the existing built environment. City government has an instrument for planning at the neighborhood level but it is atrophied from lack of use and often abused. Since the City Charter was revised in 1989 to permit community plans, only eight have been approved. In place of comprehensive neighborhood planning, City Hall proposes either large-scale developer-driven projects or projects by individual city agencies.

This could be addressed through a rating system for community planning comparable to LEED. It is hard, though, to imagine how the city would comply with such standards. Mayor Michael Bloomberg's long-term sustainability plan, PlaNYC 2030 is mostly a city-wide plan and did not include any significant involvement by the city's 59 community boards or the thousands of community-based organizations.

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