impasse over a line that referred to creating human settlements only with buildings with both "vertical and horizontal walkability" (that is, without mechanical lift systems—which would limit supported development to six stories or fewer). Supporters and opponents of the proposed wording argued emotionally for their sides, with supporters of the language associating tall buildings with the most nightmarish problems of state-subsidized and -managed housing projects. Many in attendance, however, argued that for the movement to remain relevant, it couldn't take a universal stand against more dense development. Eventually, the entire proposal was shuttled to a future committee meeting for clarification.

Some level of committee referral is to be expected as a response to a proposal like this from the floor, clearly, wordsmithing becomes an absurd art form in a room of one hundred and fifty people. But the debate about highrise buildings (as well as other differences of opinion expressed at the Green Council) arguably rises above the level of word choice to indicate a real identity debate.

To its credit, the CNU has never adopted a rigid decision-making structure or membership criteria, preferring a flexible and grassroots-based system. But early on, CNU leaders also recognized the dangers of allowing individual actors to employ the term "New Urbanism" to describe work that at best accidentally misunderstood the principles of the movement, instead of potential new partners than trying to bring new followers into the fold. For such a rare, large gathering of powerful minds, much time was devoted to discussion of real and perceived slights towards the movement, instead of constructive responses like supporting the work of Jane Jacobs as the base of the movement. Clearly, a new follower's participation in the work of Jane Jacobs can be taken to the board of directors for consideration as official policy, including potential revisions to the Charter of the New Urbanists.

A real lesson for New Urbanism is the list of enemies the international language movement has engendered. Esperantists have also defined the efforts of international bodies like the United Nations because those groups have relied on more traditional means of solving the problem of international communication (adding more languages, hiring more interpreters and translators, and ensuring that all employees are multilingual). New Urbanists should avoid such rigid positions. While it's clear they deserve a seat when issues of sustainability are being discussed, they should focus on being good tablemates, even if the Transect is not what is being served.

To proponents, the $4 billion Atlantic Yards project in Brooklyn, New York, is a model of urban redevelopment. Designed by the architect Frank Gehry and consisting of sixteen towers and a basketball arena on 22 acres, it would extend and revitalize Brooklyn’s downtown, add residential density near a transit hub, and include subsidized housing. It also would return professional sports to the borough, which hasn't been "major league" since the baseball Dodgers left for Los Angeles in 1958.

To detractors, however, Atlantic Yards represents “extreme density” and the corruption of public processes. Including nearly three hundred apartments per acre, it would encroach on surrounding historic lowrise neighborhoods, burden local infrastructure, and create a deadening pattern of superblocks. Critics also claim its present form depends on hundreds of millions of dollars in public subsidies, tax breaks, and increased development rights, plus the use of eminent domain to benefit politically powerful special interests. Kent Barwick, president of New York’s venerable Municipal Art Society (MAS), sponsor of a recent exhibition on the work of Jane Jacobs, has suggested that Atlantic Yards might be “this generation’s Penn Station” because of the “abundance” of the public processes involved. Just as the demolition of that landmark structure in 1963 for an arena and office complex accelerated the preservation movement, the battle over Atlantic Yards has prompted new outrage in the city about single-source deals and inadequate community consultation.
Details in Dispute

Atlantic Yards was announced to national fanfare in December 2003 by the Brooklyn developer Forest City Ratner Companies (FCRC), an arm of the Cleveland-based company Forest City Enterprises. The firm had spotted opportunities during Brooklyn’s decline and subsequent rebound, building architecturally undistinguished malls and an office complex. However, this project, on a six-block site, 8.5 acres of which are occupied by yards used by the Long Island Railroad, would be more complex and far-reaching. Its initial narrative emphasized the prestige of a professional sports franchise for the borough—the New Jersey Nets, which a group headed by FCRC’s Bruce Ratner bought in 2004. And Gehry’s role suggested the developer’s newfound concern for high-profile architectural design in Brooklyn’s continuing revival.

Early plans called for the arena to be open by 2006, but the project’s construction has been delayed by the environmental review process, protests, lawsuits, the credit crunch, and a lack of affordable housing bonds. The project’s configuration has also changed dramatically. Initially, the four mixed-use towers wrapping the arena (two of them at least fifty stories high) would have included space for ten thousand office jobs. Citing market changes, FCRC swapped offices for condos, then restored some office space.

Housing remains the largest component of the project. Of 6,430 approved units, 4,500 would be rentals—with 2,250 of these subsidized (900 for low-income residents). The gain, however, might be offset by displacement in nearby neighborhoods. A substantial advertising campaign for the project has also consistently avoided the issue of scale, showing no buildings taller than fifteen stories. Over the last three years such controversy has turned public hearings on the project into street theater. In general, poorer, mostly minority Brooklynites—many from groups supported and funded by the developer—and union construction workers have touted the jobs and housing the project would create, while closer-in residents have criticized its density and traffic impacts.

Critics argue that, while the project would border Brooklyn’s largest transit hub, where ten subway lines and a branch of the Long Island Railroad converge, it would also compound traffic at corners already plagued by gridlock. The project would also include 1,100 arena parking spaces and more than 2,500 spaces for the housing, thanks to antiquated city policies that require 0.4 spaces per household in outer-borough projects, no matter the adjacency of transit. Critics also point out that the arena, Gehry’s first, would not only be wrapped by highrise structures but also sit directly across one street from row houses. (The state must still override zoning that bans sports facilities within two hundred feet of residences.)

On two sides, the arena would also present glass walls near major avenues, an effort at openness that has raised security qualms. And for construction staging, the developer would capitalize on a dubious claim of blight to snag a 100-foot wide rectangle, later to house a 272-foot building, at least five times as tall as its neighbors.

The State Override

Other neighborhood complaints, resonating citywide, have targeted the way permits have been issued by state and local agencies. Typically, such a project would have to go through New York City’s Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP)—a post-Robert Moses reform which requires an advisory vote from affected local community boards, mandated public hearings, and approval by the City Planning Commission and City Council. But Atlantic Yards was fast-tracked via the Empire State Development Corporation (ESDC), the alter ego of the state Urban Development Corporation. The agency, formed in 1968 in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., was granted “amazing powers”—in the words of the noted planner Alex Garvin—to override zoning and pursue eminent domain to assist the poor.
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Above: Photomontage by local photographer Jonathan Barkey, based on 2006 plan (since trimmed), shows perspective from south side of Dean Street below project’s center. Image from www.pbase.com/AtlanticYards.
Today, the ESDC typically shepherd megaprojects like the Times Square redevelopment and Ground Zero reconstruction. Thus, while the ESDC conducted public meetings to collect testimony during the Atlantic Yards environmental review, the process produced few changes—and a lawsuit-proof record of more than 22,000 pages.2 Perhaps the most contentious claim made in the public review, and development is that the site—an irregular area chosen by the developer, not by public process—is blighted. Among other blight causes, some critics deride the developer’s rezoning—both the site—and a lawsuit-proof record of more than 22,000 pages.2 Perhaps the most contentious claim made by critics of Atlantic Yards is that the site is a blighted property, a term defined by the New York General Development Corporation’s (ESDC) standard for blighted properties.3

ESDC conducted three public meetings to review the plan’s environmental impact.4 However, both the trial and Court appeal have been filed.5

The plaintiffs argued that the project was a sweet-spot opportunity to build a world-class arena and stadium.6

As approved in December 2006, the project would cost $4.5 billion. Rising construction costs have already boosted the expected arena tab from $575 million to $750 million, but critics argue that the project’s overall cost could exceed $1 billion.7

Indeed, the developer acknowledged in March 2008 to the New York Times that all but the arena was on indefinite hold, blaming lawsuits and the credit crunch.8

However, the grassroots coalition Develop Don’t Destroy Brooklyn has criticized the lack of government planning and public support for the project. The developer has begun marketing 130 luxury suites, averaging $150,000 a year.9 This would offer a good chunk of the cost of building the arena—assuming it ever gets built.

Notes

1. As approved in December 2006, the project would cost $4.5 billion. Rising construction costs have already boosted the expected arena tab from $575 million to $750 million, but critics argue that the project’s overall cost could exceed $1 billion.

2. The complete project probably will not be successful in any case without the enactment of larger policy changes to reduce traffic impacts, such as a $5 billion arena naming rights deal with Barclays Capital and several other “partnerships” in the wings.

3. For more on the Atlantic Yards project, visit the following websites: FCRC.com—Forest City Ratner Companies; Atlanticyards.com—official Atlantic Yards site; AtlanticYardsReport.com—author’s site; 100Boro.net—Develop Don’t Destroy Brooklyn; NonLandGrab.org—No Land Grab; www.empire-see.org; www.nyc.gov; DDDB.net—Develop Don’t Destroy Brooklyn; MinorArtSpace.org—Municipal Art Society site.

Opposite: A May 2008 revision of the arena block shows a newly rectilinear office tower and an arena with glass facades and a new metal skin. Model/rendering by Gehry Partners.
Today, the ESDC typically shepherds megaprojects like the Times Square redevelopment and Ground Zero reconstruction. Thus, while the ESDC conducts open public meetings to collect testimony during the Atlantic Yards environmental review, the process produced few changes—and a lawsuit-proof record of more than 22,000 pages. Perhaps the most contentious claim made during the project’s development is that the site—an irregular area chosen by the developer, not by public process—is blighted. Among other blighted properties may be added to a project outline. A long-shot Supreme Court Appeal has been filed.

The other suit, in state court, charged inadequacies in environmental review. It, too, was defeated in the trial court.

While Forest City Ratner sought a speedy schedule to resolve the inevitable appeal, hoping to open the arena by 2010, a state appellate court scheduled oral arguments for September of 2008, making it unlikely the developer will be able to meet this timetable.

Even though the developer has begun demolishing buildings it owns and constructing a temporary railyard, it can’t start arena construction until the lawsuits are cleared. Indeed, the developer acknowledged that the entire arena has been on indefinite hold, blaming lawsuits and the credit crunch. The newspaper also reported that the developer was taking the unusual step of essentially cold-calling office tenants for the flagship tower. Faced with the looming possibility of a stand-alone arena sans towers, the project’s architect critic accused the city of making cameras without breaking eggs.”

The ESDC document shows that, after a hurried ULURP process with gag orders. The UUPRC process has its own problems, and too many brokers. The developer has begun marketing 190 luxury suites, averaging $1,000 per year. This would offer a good chunk of the cost of building the arena—assuming it ever gets built.

Notes
1. As approved in December 2006, the project would cost $4 billion. Rising construction costs have already boosted the expected arena tab from $6.5 billion to $10 billion, by far the most expensive arena in the country. Construction delays suggest a significant increase in the overall price tag.
2. Former Deputy Mayor for Economic Development Dan Doctoroff has claimed that the city’s efforts as “making omelets without breaking eggs.”
3. In a December 2007 interview after he announced his departure from the mayor’s office, Doctoroff acknowledged to the New York Observer that critics of Atlantic Yards had had an impact. “It happened again, and we were to ask if I would encourage them to take Atlantic Yards through the ULURP process, I would say yes.”
4. The developer also has a $400 million arena financing deal with Barclays Capital and several other “partnerships” in the wings.
5. The complete project probably will not be successful in any case without the enactment of larger policy changes to reduce traffic impacts, like proposed congestion pricing.
6. The limited pool of affordable housing units rights deal with Barclays Capital and several other “partnerships” in the wings.
8. Former Deputy Mayor for Economic Development Dan Doctoroff has claimed that the city has learned from Robert Moses and managed to achieve development without alienating communities, characterizing the city’s efforts as “making omelets without breaking eggs.”
9. In a December 2007 interview after he announced his departure from the mayor’s office, Doctoroff acknowledged to the New York Observer that critics of Atlantic Yards had had an impact. “It happened again, and we were to ask if I would encourage them to take Atlantic Yards through the ULURP process, I would say yes.”
10. Ratner stated, “We anticipate finishing all of Atlantic Yards by 2018.” However, his cousin, Chuck Ratner, CEO of the family company Forest City Enterprises, in 2007 told investment analysts (in response to “There are about two other projects,” “As株洲 is, on our business, those things take very long times, most often, frankly, longer than we anticipate.”
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