Is New York's Sustainability Plan Sustainable?

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SUSTAINABILITY WATCH WORKING PAPERS

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Introduction

Because it has a densely developed urban core and the largest mass transit system in North America, New York City would seem to be a model for Smart Growth – concentrating growth in dense clusters to expand opportunities for physical activity, reduce energy and auto use, and expand opportunities for walking and biking – that is, a more environmentally sustainable and healthier city. The city's increased density should theoretically help combat the public health epidemics associated with low-density suburban sprawl, including obesity, diabetes, and stress.

One of the basic premises of New York City's long-term sustainability plan, PlaNYC2030, released in April 2007, follows this logic by assuming that continued growth in the city, with the appropriate infrastructure development, can be sustainable and beneficial to the environment, and produce public health benefits. Using the language and logic of Smart Growth (Barnett, et. al. 2007) the plan favors the concentration of new development around existing transit nodes ("transit-oriented development") to accommodate a million new residents by 2030. The new development would be accompanied by improvements to public transportation and open space, better air and water quality, and reduction of the city's contribution to global warming.

I will argue that, notwithstanding the many noble goals of the New York plan, and specific improvements to the environment and public health that it promises, the plan is in substance a continuation of the finance/real estate sector's historic policy of promoting extremely high densities at the highest-valued locations, with consequent negative environmental and health impacts, and neglecting other parts of the city. This policy of market-driven land development has produced some environmental benefits associated with high-density clustered development but it has also resulted in spatial inequalities, environmental injustice, and negative environmental impacts. The 2030 plan is large and complex, and this is not intended as an exhaustive analysis. Based on over two decades of my own engagement in community and city-wide planning in New York City, I hope here to establish an analytical framework and some hypotheses about the plan that will promote further discussion and debate both inside and outside government, in New York and elsewhere. I have been a participant in the public debates about the plan and do not profess to be an outside, detached observer.[1]

In general the New York plan is a growth plan that neglects community and housing preservation, and if fulfilled will further exacerbate economic inequalities

[1] I initiated Sustainability Watch (www.gothamgazette.com), a project jointly sponsored by the Hunter College Center for Community Planning & Development and Gotham Gazette, an online journal sponsored by the Citizens Union. The purpose of Sustainability Watch is to keep alive the discussion of sustainability and promote analysis of the plan and its progress from diverse perspectives.

and disparities in urban health. The plan advances above all the interests of the real estate industry which, along with finance and insurance, is often heralded in local policy discussions as the engine of economic growth (see Fainstein, 2003) Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs), globalized financial corporations that have monopolized growth in the most densely-developed areas of the city, are creating and protecting separate urban enclaves, including luxurious cities within the city, whose more sterile environments are walled off from the rest of the city. Outside the central core, corporate retailers increasingly dominate the landscape with big box stores served by autos and trucks and not mass transit. A leading example of both of these phenomena, which we will discuss in some detail, is the proposal by the firm of Forest City Ratner, a prominent REIT, to build the Atlantic Yards project in Brooklyn. The FCR project is an example of enclave development (Angotti, 1998) that would most likely expand economic, environmental and health disparities. This trend is further reinforced by powerful neoliberal policies (Hackworth, 2007) that privatize public space and use public funds to heavily subsidize private growth.

Although inequalities between and among neighborhoods are expanding as the city becomes more of a collection of private enclaves, there are lively social movements in the city that continue to oppose these exclusionary policies. One product of these movements is grassroots community-based planning that has produced over 100 community-based plans, mostly without support from government. These plans were overlooked and not supported by the top-down model of planning for PlaNYC2030. The problems with the 2030 planning process provide a clear window into some of the more serious problems with the content of the plan, particularly the absence of strategies to address social exclusion and reduce inequalities. (Angotti, 2008)

The Reach and Significance of PlaNYC2030

New York City, one of the oldest and largest cities in the nation, has never had an approved master plan. The 1916 zoning ordinance, the first in a major U.S. city, was instituted after government declined to heed calls for comprehensive planning in the city's five boroughs. The five boroughs were consolidated into a single municipal government in 1898, and at that time only a small portion of lower Manhattan was intensively urbanized. The turn away from comprehensive planning was accompanied by the creation of an extensive mass transit system, supported and financed by private real estate interests with public assistance. This lost opportunity for truly regional planning was partially mitigated by the non-governmental Regional Plan Association and its three regional plans, but much of RPA's effectiveness was in reinforcing the centralizing trends of the most powerful real estate interests (Heiman, 1988; Fitch, 1993). In the 1960s, with funds from the federal government, the city's Department of City Planning prepared a master plan, but it was "dead on arrival" before the City Planning Commission, a victim of real estate opposition and lack of support from many neighborhood groups (Spatt, 1971).

Given this history, the announcement of a comprehensive plan for the city in April 2007 was significant and unprecedented. *PlaNYC: A Greener Greater New York* aims to establish New York as the "first sustainable 21st century city." (p. 141) It identifies three main challenges: "growth, an aging infrastructure, and increasingly precarious environment." (p. 4) To address these challenges, the plan outlines 127 initiatives covering water and air quality, energy planning, climate change, open space, housing, transportation and land use. The initiatives range from narrowly defined short-term projects such as supplying one million new street trees to longer-range efforts like cleaning up and redeveloping all brownfields.

The plan's main goals are:

- Housing: Create homes for almost a million more New Yorkers, while making housing more affordable and sustainable.
- Open Space: Ensure that all new Yorkers live within a 10-minute walk of a park.
- Brownfields: Clean up all contaminated land in New York City.
- Water Quality: Open 90% of our waterways for recreation by reducing water pollution and preserving our natural areas.
- Water Network: Develop critical backup systems for our aging water network to ensure long-term sustainability.
- Transportation: Improve travel times by adding transit capacity for millions more residents, visitors, and workers. Reach a full "state of good repair" on New York City's roads, subways, and rails for the first time in history.
- Energy: Provide cleaner, more reliable power for every New Yorker by upgrading our energy infrastructure.
- Air Quality: Achieve the cleanest air quality of any big city in America.
- Climate Change: Reduce our global warming emissions by 30%. (City of New York, 2007, 1)

It is significant that PlaNYC2030 awakened public interest in long-term planning and contributed to a minor revival of discussions about the Robert Moses legacy. But most important of all, PlaNYC2030 for the first time placed the concept of sustainability on the agenda in public discussions of city policy. The public policy discourse on environment and sustainability in New York City had lagged far behind that of other cities in the U.S., which had launched sustainability efforts in the 1990s and earlier (Portney, 2003) and clearly trailed European cities of comparable size and global importance. Because of its importance as the center of a global metropolis, the policy shift in New York City could lend legitimacy to sustainable practices and proposals already underway throughout the nation.

City Planning Outsourced

But is New York's 2030 plan itself sustainable? Whatever the merits of the plan's overall vision and individual proposals (which are discussed later on), a careful look at the planning process helps to better understand the limitations of PlaNYC2030, it's narrow prospects for implementation, and the extent to which it utilizes the discourse of Smart Growth to rationalize a market-driven strategy that is not necessarily environmentally or socially beneficial.

The 2030 plan was prepared by a management consulting team under contract with the city's Economic Development Corporation (EDC), a not-for-profit corporation wholly owned by the City of New York whose directors are appointed by the mayor. EDC provides tax incentives, bond financing and city subsidies to businesses and is effectively the city's economic development agency. The firm, McKinsey & Company, is one of the largest consulting groups serving global corporations, and Rohit Aggarwala, director of the mayor's Long-Term Planning and Sustainability Office, was hired directly from McKinsey. McKinsey's imprimatur is clearly on the plan, which looks more like a strategic planning report for a corporation anxious to save money on energy than a blueprint for city government.

McKinsey was virtually invisible to the public during plan development. There were hundreds of public forums, stakeholder meetings and focus groups, but most were designed to elicit initial responses to the strategic framework set out in the plan. The forums were designed so that civic, environmental and neighborhood groups would be familiar with the plan as it developed, but did not produce a two-way dialogue that could significantly change the plan. Colorful slide presentations showcased the plan, and people who attended were asked to submit their comments, either verbally in a limited and highly controlled format, in writing, or on the city's website. All decisions about the plan were made outside the public arena. It was essentially a one-way, top-down process and the discretion about what to put in the plan remained in City Hall.[2]

On the ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969), PlaNYC2030 would rank close to the bottom, where those who participate have little decision making power. The planning process was locked up by the mayor's office and consultants, and when it was finished it was taken around town for viewing. Even within city government, involvement was limited. There were many inter-agency meetings but the least-developed parts of the plan are those that were not specifically assigned to McKinsey, whose contract required them to emphasize energy and efficiency issues. For example, one can compare the detailed recommendations for energy efficiency with the simplistic metrics of the proposal

[2] I attended several of these meetings and focus groups, some of them public and others by invitation only. The framework of the plan did not change appreciably after these meetings, and specific proposals were only made public after the plan's release.

to provide every community district with a public plaza, the proposal for a million new street trees, or the proposal that every resident live within a ten-minute walk of a park. Without the time and staff effort, most city agency proposals barely went beyond restatements of existing goals or rough metrics for measuring limited future actions. The main role of the City Planning Department appears to have been providing the detailed demographic analysis that justified the projection of one million new residents by the year 2030.

It is most telling that the plan was never submitted for official approval in accordance with guidelines established in the New York City Charter for comprehensive plans. Section 197-a of the Charter provides for discussion and approval of long-term plans in much the same way other New York municipalities have established procedures for developing and approving their master plans. Section 197-a allows for planning at various scales, including neighborhood, borough, and city-wide plans. In a process similar to the city's Uniform Land Use Review Procedure, plans should be presented to the community boards (there are 59 in the city), borough presidents, the City Planning Commission and City Council. At each step there are required public hearings and votes. Borough presidents and city council members are elected, and represent local constituencies not represented in a highly centralized government with a powerful mayor. Community boards are appointed by borough presidents and half the members of community boards are recommended by city council members. Community boards are the only official form of neighborhood-level governance, in neighborhoods that average 135,000 people, larger than most municipalities in the state. In addition, there are thousands of community-based organizations, civic and advocacy groups that usually take part in the process. None had a vote or were involved in the decision making process.

The argument could be made that a plan review process involving 59 community boards and hundreds of neighborhoods in this city of eight million people would be unwieldy and take an unrealistically long time. No doubt such an argument was made within City Hall. Since the mayor faces term limits and at the time of the announcement of PlaNYC2030 he had less than three years left to serve, how would such a daunting public participation process have been possible? Especially for a mayor who is a corporate veteran and results-oriented, would this not have been a recipe for disappointment and failure?

The question now, however, is whether, because of the failed process, the plan will survive at all. With a fairly thin veneer of public support for the plan, the next administration could very well decide to ignore it. Since it was never reviewed and approved, nothing will bind the next mayor to follow the plan.

Survival of long-term sustainability planning may well depend on the large pool of civic, environmental and neighborhood groups that for a long time have proposed long-term solutions to the city's problems. Many applauded the mayor's plan but were called only to support it and not to "own" it. Mayor Bloomberg may lock in

some of the plan's projects and programs before leaving office by putting funds in the capital and operating budgets, and some progress may be made in changing the way mayoral agencies operate, but these are likely to fall short of the more ambitious targets that can only be achieved in decades to come.

The Growth Plan Behind The Green Veil

The problems with the planning process can be traced back to the administration's first attempt at long-term planning. After challenges to many large-scale projects directed by then-Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff, the city's Economic Development Corporation hired former City Planning Commissioner Alex Garvin to prepare a study of long-term growth opportunities and constraints in the city. This study, dated May 2006, assumed there would be a million new people by the year 2030, and found opportunities for new high-density neighborhoods along the city's industrial waterfront and on top of rail yards and roadways. Garvin's bold vision was accompanied by proposals to create new public spaces and improve mass transit to support new growth, obvious concerns of both real estate investors and current residents. (Garvin, 2006)

The Garvin plan was sketchy in many respects and if it had been put forth as a land use plan for the city it would surely have met with some harsh criticism by neighborhoods, particularly those already bearing the brunt of massive real estate speculation, gentrification, and megaprojects. Some of the opposition would have been knee-jerk not-in-my-backyard sentiment but some would also have come out of serious skepticism about the ability of the city to provide adequate services, protect existing residents from displacement, and deal with the long-term environmental consequences of growth. The Garvin plan was a growth plan that only suggested how growth might be managed and sustained, and how some environmental impacts could be addressed. Garvin explicitly rejected "needs-based" planning in favor of a growth plan, and many of the areas he targeted for "transit-oriented development" were clearly major opportunities for large-scale real estate development. The Garvin plan was commissioned without public input and, significantly, was done under the mayor's economic development office and not the City Planning Department or City Planning Commission, the entities empowered by the charter to prepare plans.

Without public discussion, the Garvin plan became the foundation for PlaNYC2030. Months after Garvin's plan, in September 2006, the mayor created a Long Term Planning and Sustainability Office within his Office of Operations, and an advisory group. Seven months later they unveiled PlaNYC2030, on Earth Day 2007. One can only speculate what happened within City Hall between the Garvin and 2030 plans, but it would appear that the anticipated criticisms of the starkly growth-oriented Garvin plan may have nudged the mayor's office towards embracing a sustainability discourse and an emphasis on issues of environmental quality. The presence of environmental justice advocates on the mayor's advisory panel may explain why the plan cites the public health epidemic

of asthma and community participation in brownfields redevelopment, and places a priority on affordable housing. However, these environmental justice concerns did not translate into any major new initiatives that were not already in place before the plan and social equity is not a major theme in the 2030 plan, as shown below.

Missing: Planning at the Neighborhood Level

PlaNYC2030 sets goals for the executive branch but nowhere to be found are specific goals for the hundreds of neighborhoods in the city, except as recipients of citywide projects and programs. Nor is there mention of the more than 100 community-based plans, ten of which were already approved under Section 197-a of the city charter. Instead, there are many city-wide quantitative goals that, without any specific geography, will be difficult to put into practice.

For example, the goal that every community board should have a public plaza evades even the question of how a plaza is defined, where it would fit in each of the 59 community districts, and even how many districts feel they truly need one. What of community districts that have other priorities for public spaces? What of the districts where there are more important priorities? Each year, the 59 community boards prepare statements of community district needs for publication by the Department of City Planning. These are not reviewed or mentioned in PlaNYC2030. To its credit, the city's Department of Transportation plan initiated a city-wide program to reclaim street space from auto use and turn it into public plazas. However, this program is limited to land over which the department has jurisdiction and could have a much greater impact if it were part of a larger effort by the city to expand public space.

Many issues critical to low-income communities of color are notably absent from PlaNYC: preservation of existing affordable housing in gentrifying neighborhoods, the siting of waste facilities, industrial retention, living wages, education, noise, public health crises like obesity and HIV/AIDS, immigration, and discrimination. Communities of color comprise the majority of the city's population and New York is one of the nation's most segregated cities. (Lewis Mumford Center, 2000) Critical issues like traffic and parking throughout the boroughs seem to have been submerged by congestion pricing for Manhattan (see below) and a far-off promise of bus rapid transit. And the real-world impact on neighborhoods of the city-wide initiatives outlined in the plan are never spelled out. For example, there are no growth targets for community districts, or targets for the expansion of schools, community facilities and infrastructure to meet the needs of growth. Absent even general targets, the plan tends to elicit limited interest in areas struggling simply to meet existing service needs.

PlaNYC adopts a narrow management approach to city-wide planning, using rough quantitative metrics that fail to resonate with the everyday lives of people in their communities and do not necessarily make any sense in the specific

geographies of communities. Realistic land use planning is needed in order to apply the general goals of the plan, but land use planning is also needed to set realistic and sensible goals in the first place. For example, as the advocacy group New Yorkers for Parks has pointed out, the goal that every resident should live within a ten-minute walk of a park is so broad that it has little meaning for communities who would plan to make green space accessible for all. Many people need public space on the block where they live, and for some people even a ten-minute walk is too long. Many green spaces serve regional recreation needs but do little for people living next door. Many public space needs can be satisfied best in areas not normally considered "green" – stoops, sidewalks, sitting areas, bicycle racks, etc. Community-based planning is needed so that all of the diverse city functions and services can be coordinated and planned at the local level, where they interact in complex ways that rough metrics and centralized agencies simply cannot address. Complex, holistic views of the city are formed both at the grass roots and city-wide levels; they should both be part of a city-wide planning process, and any attempt to reduce them to simple quantitative management tools will make the planning process more and not less difficult in the long run.

PlaNYC's methodology is strikingly linear instead of holistic, dealing with simple cause-effect relations that may have little to do with comprehensive environmental health or community well-being. For example, it is said that planting a million trees would reduce greenhouse gases by a quantifiable amount. But in the absence of a program to improve stewardship over everything green, both public and private, a million trees may make little difference. Congestion pricing would reduce car trips by a predictable percentage. But as the recent congestion pricing debate proved, it is simply not enough to make one isolated change a city priority when its local impacts are not clear.

Congestion pricing was treated as the lynchpin of the plan's pledge to reduce congestion in the city. The proposal was to charge a fee to all cars entering Manhattan below 60th Street, an area encompassing the borough's most developed business districts. The plan was originally proposed by the New York City Partnership, an elite group of downtown businesses. The opposition to congestion pricing was able to play on the widely-held perception that benefits would mostly accrue to downtown interests. There were no measures to reduce traffic or congestion outside the business district.

The proposal for congestion pricing was defeated because it was not part of a comprehensible city-wide approach benefiting the broad public interest. Fears that some communities would lose out while downtown businesses stood to benefit were not addressed in the original proposal. City Hall's "results-oriented" thinking ignored the complexity of life. It would be worth questioning this narrow management approach, especially because New York is a multicultural city where many residents, perhaps even a majority of the population, grew up in cultures that value holistic, comprehensive thinking and find linear, mechanistic

approaches to be alien. Within African, Asian and Native American thinking, for example, there are powerful holistic theories that integrate instead of disaggregate the human experience. Perhaps this explains in part why community-based planning has taken hold in communities of color. And environmental justice advocates have long criticized how some measures touted as good for everyone in the city actually have disparate effects in different neighborhoods and reinforce inequalities.

EQUITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

The myth that measures that are good for the environment by definition benefit everyone equally and hurt no one disproportionately was a stimulus for the emergence of the theory and practice of environmental justice (Agyeman, et. al., 2003). The collection and disposal of waste from throughout the city has indeed benefited all communities, but when the facilities to transport and treat the waste are concentrated in low-income communities of color, as they often have been in New York, it is clear that the negative impacts are not distributed equally. (Sze, 2006) Roadways indeed benefit drivers from across the economic spectrum, but low-income communities are disproportionately burdened because their communities are concentrated in the areas with the most dense highway networks, and truck and bus traffic. While PlaNYC2030 admirably acknowledges the disproportionate burden on low-income communities of poor air quality, as expressed in asthma hospitalization rates, there is barely a hint that questions of social equity and inclusion are any significant long-term concern in other parts of the plan such as transportation, and in the broad growth scenario.

While the plan calls for the creation of 265,000 new housing units, most of them affordable (using 80% of AMI, a fairly liberal measure that leaves behind many low-income households), there is no mention of the sizeable number of affordable units being lost through the everyday marketplace and the process of gentrification. Recent estimates are that 40,000 affordable units are being lost every year. Additional losses are likely because of recent cuts in the budget for public housing, continuing loss of middle-income subsidized units to privatization pressures, and the erosion of rent regulations. In sum, reductions in public programs and the relaxation of regulatory powers – the pillars of the neoliberal urban policies that have grounded city policy since the fiscal crisis of the 1970s -- are never addressed or challenged.

Other examples abound of the plan’s benign neglect of equity issues that communities of color care about. For example, absent are concerns about racial profiling by the New York Police Department, unequal access to quality education (education is not mentioned at all in the plan), child care, the more than one million people who rely on some form of food assistance, the 35,000 homeless people, sustainable jobs, and equitable economic development. In a city that consistently ranks as one of the most racially segregated in the country,

there is no hint that the geographic differences might in fact overlap significantly (they do) with economic, racial and environmental inequalities.

Comparison may be made to London's long-term sustainability plan, released in 2004, which places social inclusion among the plan's top three priorities. The London plan is also a growth plan but unlike PlaNYC2030, it was prepared within the context of a regional and international framework that formally recognizes equity and social inclusion, the Greater London Authority Act and 1999 European Spatial Development Perspective.

> For example, the London plan includes a strategy to make childcare more accessible and affordable in an effort to support equality in the workplace for many women to whom childcare is a barrier to work. Inequality in the workforce, the Plan argues, is a barrier to social cohesion and therefore in conflict with the goals for the Plan and the City. Other initiatives to address inequalities in the workforce aim to eliminate "labor market discrimination and the mismatch between labor supply and demand, focusing on key target groups and communities living within London's most disadvantaged areas." ….The London Plan argues that "action is also required to improve mobility, access to information, appropriate training, jobs brokers and recruitment networks and to change the attitudes of employers to the provision of training and the recruitment of unemployed people in general, and more specifically, those disadvantaged in the labor market including older people." (Cowett, 2008)

PlaNYC has no explicit economic development policy but one would have to deduce that growth in population and housing will be the major new stimulus to the economy. There is not a hint that industrial retention might be a long-term priority, even as the city faces a decline in the financial industry and a new fiscal crisis resulting from yet another cyclical downturn in the property market. There is no concern about establishing a diverse local economy, attracting green collar jobs and industries, or stimulating the city's large service sectors. It is ironic that the plan that came through the city's economic development agency lacks an economic development plan.

An argument might be made that affirmations of social inclusion might undermine any possible consensus on basic environmental issues. But the stunning defeat of the mayor's proposal for congestion pricing in Manhattan in the first year after the 2030 plan suggests just the opposite. And if sustainability is not just and inclusive, is it sustainable?

SMART GROWTH? ATLANTIC YARDS AND ENCLAVE DEVELOPMENT[3]

Atlantic Yards is a proposal to build the largest-ever residential project in Brooklyn by using the state government's powers of eminent domain and

[3] See also Angotti (2007a; 2007b).

substantial public subsidies. It would be the most densely developed project in New York City. While it is curiously not mentioned in PlaNYC2030, the project is supported by the Bloomberg administration, and is promoted by both the administration and the private developer as an example of transit-oriented development, green building, and sustainability.

The Atlantic Yards proposal is a premiere example of the kind of development advocated in the long-term sustainability plan: the concentration of density around transit hubs, affordable housing, public open space, and promises of green building. The Atlantic Yards project is one of New York City's six pilot green neighborhood projects (LEED® for Neighborhood Development, discussed below). It also resembles in many ways other giant new developer-driven megaprojects that dominate centrally-located areas in the city, including Midtown West (which the mayor calls the city's "last frontier") and the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site. Thus it is an appropriate case study with which to assess the 2030 plan.[4]

In 2003, Forest City Ratner (FCR), a national Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT) that has virtually monopolized office development in downtown Brooklyn, proposed to build over a million square feet of office space, 4,500 apartments, and an arena for the Nets, a basketball team owned by FCR principles, above the Vanderbilt rail yards, owned by the Metropolitan Transit Authority. The rail yards separate the residential neighborhoods of Prospect Heights and Fort Greene, east of downtown Brooklyn. FCR was already known among Brooklynites for its Metrotech complex in downtown Brooklyn, a 1980s suburban-style office enclave that absorbed generous public subsidies, turned its back on the adjacent African American neighborhood, and did little to boost local businesses. FCR also built the Atlantic Center, another forbidding mall that earned opprobium in the local press for its fortress-like design that seemed to keep the neighbors away. To ease the way for its knock-out punch at the Vanderbilt Yards, FCR got the governor and mayor to back their plan before it was announced, and got the State and City to throw in at least $229 million in direct subsidies (over a billion with tax incentives).

The protest by a broad coalition of residents and businesses was immediate and slowed down the development with three major court cases until the steep decline in the real estate marketplace foreced it to crash. A popular documentary, Brooklyn Matters[5] exposed the developer's manipulation of the public approval process and issues of race and class, and the potential environmental impacts. A more inclusive, community-based alternative[6] developed by local groups, the UNITY plan, assumes no condemnation of property, moderate density, a smaller footprint, diversity in scale, and a more contextual configuration. There is no

[4] Portions of this section are based on Angotti (2008), which discusses the Atlantic Yards project and alternative community plan but does not address PlaNYC2030.
[5] www.brooklynmatters.com
[6] www.unityplan.org. I was part of the technical team that assisted in the preparation of this plan.

basketball arena in the UNITY plan. The Principles for Responsible Development that emerged from the community planning process stress the need for diversity of scale and integration of new development with the existing neighborhoods, and include an affordable housing component.

Based on research carried out for the Council of Brooklyn Neighborhoods, a coalition of local groups, the environmental impact assessment for the project revealed just how shaky the developer's Smart Growth claims were.[7] While the project was to be built over the third largest transit hub in the city, no transit improvements were planned and subway lines and platforms already over capacity would become even more crowded. Some bus service would be cut and there would be no additional surface transit. A garage with 3,600 spaces would guarantee an increase in local traffic. And with most arena fans driving to games, impacts around game and event times would be significant. Even the developer's low estimates of vehicular traffic increases would not be mitigated and make an area that is already a major hazard for pedestrians and cyclists much worse. The developer proposed to provide 400 bicycle parking spaces, which might help a handful of bike commuters from the area who would pay for the service, but a project design that cut the superblocks off from the surrounding grid by closing and demapping public streets would do little to encourage bicycle use.

In sum, the only thing that is "transit-oriented" about the plan is that the site is already served by mass transit. But that can also be said for just about anywhere in New York City. In the context of New York City and the largest mass transit system in the nation, "transit-oriented-development" is being used to rationalize and brand megaprojects without improving access to transit or discouraging auto use.

Another claim is that this 22 acre project would include 8 acres of public open space, thereby providing an environmental benefit to an area lacking in open space and improving walkability. Included in the 8 acres is the lobby of the basketball arena and a private green roof. Our detailed design review showed that most of the open space would be in fact interior courtyards for the 17 towers making up the complex. While the project uses deep public subsidies to favor professional basketball, the planned recreation space includes only half of a public basketball court – that is, one hoop. The tower-in-the-park would effectively create a private enclave by closing public streets. The open space would be in permanent shadows, and the project's towers would put surrounding residential blocks in shadows. This would clearly increase energy costs, preclude the use of solar power, place a number of public parks, playgrounds and gardens in permanent shadows, and have negative public health impacts.

[7] See the comments by the Council of Brooklyn Neighborhoods on the Draft Scope of Work and the Draft Environmental Impact Statement at www.cbneighborhoods.homestead.com (prepared by a consultant team that I headed up under the Hunter College Center for Community Planning and Development).

The developer's environmental review outlined a mitigation strategy to deal with the increased noise and air quality impacts of the project in a way that has become all too common in this densely developed city. The mitigation is to provide double-paned windows and air conditioning for both new and existing residential units. The consequences for long-term sustainability implied by such a mitigation strategy are telling. The strategy would promote a living environment where the only way to stay healthy is to remain indoors with the windows closed and, in warm weather, with the air conditioning on. Aside from the obvious long-term energy impacts of such an approach, and a possibility that indoor air quality may be no better or even worse than outdoor air quality, what does this say about Atlantic Yards as a *planning model*? Is it only a place to warehouse people instead of an active community that encourages people to interact with one another? If residents have to stay indoors to stay healthy, what good is the "public" open space? And what effect would this have on the city's obesity epidemic, particularly among children, if children have to stay indoors? Or wait for their turn to toss a ball through the new neighborhood's single hoop?

In a public review process that shielded the developer's plan from any in-depth dialogue with local residents, two marathon public hearings allowed hundreds of people three minutes each to make their statements. But all decisions were made by the developer in consultation with the far-away state development authority that appears to have exercised limited oversight. The process reflected in some ways the same top-down approach that guided PlaNYC, an approach informed by a faith in developer-driven growth. Using as a starting point the existing and long-term needs of people who live and work in the city – that is, long-term sustainability – would surely have required a more inclusive process.

Green Neighborhood Development?

Forest City Ratner is promoting Atlantic Yards as a model for green neighborhood development. This suggests that there may be some merit to the developer's claims of sustainable and smart growth, but community opposition suggests that it is just a marketing gimmick. .

The United States Green Building Council (USGBC)[8] a group with over 12,000 member organizations and 70 chapters, including real estate developers, environmental organizations and professionals, seeks to promote the development of energy-efficient, healthy and environmentally-friendly buildings. USGBC operates the voluntary LEED® certification system that rates buildings as Certified, Silver, Gold and Platinum (the highest). LEED® is a voluntary system and claims to provide an incentive for environmentally sustainable and healthy development. Concern that LEED® certification has been too narrowly focused on individual buildings and does not take into consideration the relationship of the building to the urban environment led the USGBC to develop standards that look beyond buildings to communities and urban regions. The new LEED® for

[8] www.usgbc.org

Neighborhood Development standards address the concern that individual buildings might 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. In theory, this is a welcome development for New York City, where LEED® certification too often has been used as a way of branding and marketing highly-valued new real estate development and protecting buyers from the city's environmental and health problems instead of helping to solve these problems. Green buildings are becoming relatively healthy enclaves surrounded by unhealthy public spaces.

The neighborhood development standards were developed with explicit reference to Smart Growth principles. The USGBC collaborated in the project with the Council for New Urbanism[9] and Natural Resources Defense Council[10]. These national groups have played an important role in the critiques of sprawled suburban development and auto dependence. 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 infill development in 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 walkability.

The problem with LEED® for Neighborhood Development in New York City is its reliance on Smart Growth principles. While standards that encourage the concentration of development and the location of new buildings near mass transit might keep the purveyors of sprawl in the suburbs from getting points, this logic just doesn't make sense in New York City. First of all, mass transit is just about everywhere. A lot of new luxury megaprojects have access to mass transit without making any significant contributions to the improvement of transit service or increasing the capacity of already over-burdened systems. They may in fact create further burdens on transit and thereby encourage more people to use cars. These projects also serve higher income residents, who tend to own more cars, and lots of parking is provided to meet their needs.

Six pilot projects in New York City are being used to test and develop the standards for LEED® For Neighborhood Development. They include large-scale developments like Atlantic Yards that are located in communities that have raised serious questions about the proposals and challenged whether they should be built in the first place—not a question that the rating system addresses. In other words, the model for Neighborhood Development has no place for community support. 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 put up the money to do so. (The New York chapter of the USGBC includes among its sponsors some

[9] www.cnu.org
[10] www.nrdc.org

of the largest developers in the city, such as Related, Tishman Speyer, and Silverstein Properties, along with environmental and professional groups).

The Atlantic Yards plan does not create a walkable neighborhood, promote sustainable energy use, or create a healthier environment. The developer has demolished perfectly sound buildings, and would directly displace almost one thousand residents. Indirect displacement would affect thousands of residents and hundreds of small businesses. Instead of the attached low- to mid-rise brownstone walkups and mid-rise apartment buildings that characterize the surrounding neighborhoods, it would implant the more energy-intensive high-rise elevator buildings in large superblocks. It would create a luxury enclave off the city's grid, where any environmental and health benefits would be disproportionately enjoyed by those who live and play in the exclusive enclave; relatively high levels of childhood asthma in the surrounding neighborhood would likely increase, especially for those households that will not enjoy the luxuries of the newly constructed "green" buildings.

Two other New York City pilot projects also raise serious questions. The City's Willets Point project would create an isolated enclave, unconnected to Corona and other Queens neighborhoods, and set a bad precedent for brownfields cleanup by displacing 225 viable businesses and 1,800 jobs.[11] Columbia University's West Harlem project (Manhattan) would also create a separate educational enclave and faces strong opposition from local residents and businesses.

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. Participation in decision making by neighborhood residents and businesses would likely produce a plan that better integrates new and existing development.

One of the USGBC's six green neighborhood projects in New York City, Melrose Commons in the Bronx, is being built in the context of a comprehensive community-based renewal strategy spearheaded by Nos Quedamos/We Stay[12], a local non-profit. The development strategy advocated by this community group came about after local activists defeated the city government's bulldozer approach that would have displaced residents and businesses. The community plan focuses instead on preservation, contextual development, and truly affordable new housing.[13] This is one among many grassroots efforts to bridge the gap between green building and local neighborhood development. The city's planners might well have begun their search for long-term sustainability with these existing models and charted a planning process that would link them with

[11] http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/landuse/20070509/12/2164
[12] www.nosquedamos.org
[13] http://www.sustainable.org/casestudies/newyork/NY_af_melrose.html

planning to address the larger systemic, city-wide, regional[14] and global issues over coming generations.

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[14] Another problem with PlaNYC2030 is that it does not address the New York metropolitan region, only the City of New York, which makes up about a third of the region's population and an even smaller percentage of the region's land. Since the water, air and waste systems, for example, are strongly influenced by regional trends and policies, significant opportunities for long-term planning are being passed over. There are significant political obstacles to regional planning, but the 2030 plan presented an opportunity to launch a meaningful regional dialogue.

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