



RAIL-ROADING RATNER

Brooklynites battle Bruce Ratner's plans to change their neighborhood

By Sushil Cheema

At sunset, at most intersections in this part of Brooklyn, it is actually possible to see the sun set. The only high-rise building is the 34-story Williamsburg Savings and Bank Tower, an unobtrusive part of the view of swirling orange, yellow and blue at the end of the day. The area near the Vanderbilt Yards offers one of the most striking vistas. Many of the area's residents are hoping to keep it that way.

But last week the state released documents that argue for the use of eminent domain to clear out the 22-acres of blighted land and allow for the implementation of the Atlantic Yards development project by Bruce Ratner of Forest City Ratner Companies (FCRC): a basketball arena and 16 luxury high-rise buildings, some over 60 stories high.

"FCRC believes that Atlantic Yards will help bring all of the surrounding communities together by bridging the rail yard, which has served as a scar on this part of Brooklyn for too long," says Joe DePlasco, a spokesperson for FCRC.

But at a time when the use of eminent domain to seize land for private development projects has roiled communities throughout the country, this Brooklyn project is facing its own set of opponents. A large and loud set at that.

"We don't like it. It's a terrible plan, and there are a million things wrong with it," says Scott Turner of FCRC's project. A musician and graphic designer, Turner founded Fans for Fair Play, a local group that uses sports interests to oppose the Ratner plan. "Ratner is using sports nostalgia of the Brooklyn Dodgers," Turner says, referring to FCRC's 2004 purchase of the New Jersey Nets and goal of moving the team to Brooklyn in time for the 2009-2010 basketball season. "He bought a team to make the luxury condo project more sexy."

Turner, a Brooklyn resident since 1988, understands what draws people to the borough. "It's not the idea of living next door to a huge suburban shopping mall," he says, alluding to a completed Ratner project near the Atlantic Center, a shopping complex with stores like Target, DSW, Old Navy and Circuit City. "People come here because they don't want to live in Manhattan."

Rising rent costs have forced Turner to move out of the area to Greenwood Cemetery, but the Atlantic Yards project still draws his attention. "I miss the old neighborhood," he said, "but I don't miss what it's going to become."

It is not development itself that Turner and other community leaders are against. Rather, it is the process by which the Ratner plan is being put into affect.

Daniel Goldstein of Develop Don't Destroy Brooklyn calls the FCRC plan undemocratic. What particularly draws his ire is that FCRC's bid to the MTA was lower than the MTA's stated value of the site and lower than the bid placed by a group behind a community-supported plan known as Extell.

"It is the process, scale, density, and public costs, the abuse of eminent domain," that Goldstein opposes. The mere threat of eminent domain, he adds, has already emptied out many buildings as tenants fear they will not get a good deal on their property should they choose to wait and be forced out. In his own building, Goldstein remains the last tenant. FCRC, he says, bought out the other 37 units and insisted that those people not speak to the press and say only that Ratner has treated them well.

FCRC documents state that most of the project site consists of vacant buildings, empty lots and gas stations. Any displaced residents are offered an off-site residence during construction and a new one in the development at their current rent rates. If he himself had left as his fellow tenants have, Goldstein says, his building would now be sitting empty. "Ratner can't build this project without my apartment."

"It's a greedy development project," says Sandy Balboza, president of the Atlantic Avenue Betterment Association. Like Turner and Goldstein, he cites traffic as one major area that will be impacted by Ratner's plans. "The intersection of Flatbush and Atlantic is one of the biggest bottlenecks." Of an arena over the Atlantic Rail Yards, he says, "It's already a very difficult spot in terms of traffic, and I don't think it's appropriate to put it there."

A resident of Brooklyn Heights for 36 years, Balboza says he came to the area because he likes the quiet, close-knit neighborhood. "It's just a very comfortable neighborhood. I like to see the sky. I don't like skyscrapers. It's a brownstone neighborhood."

Development that benefits the neighborhood and helps it grow and keeps its essence intact is what these community leaders seek. "It should be development that is for the neighborhood," Balboza says. "It shouldn't be development that uses eminent domain, with buildings so high they cast shadows." He adds, "A real city is organic, and to wipe out a good section of the neighborhood isn't what a city is about."

"One of the things we find unbelievable is the statement that the neighborhood will not be changed by this development," says Sue Wolfe, President of the Boerum Hill Association and a resident of Boerum Hill since 1975. "It's an absolutely absurd

statement. If you put 16 skyscrapers among three brownstone neighborhoods and an arena, you cannot say the neighborhood will not change.” She adds, “Frank Gehry and Laurie Olin are not urban planners,” referring to the two leading architects on the Ratner plan. “It’s too big a space to not have a professional urban planner on the team.”

What makes all these leaders cringe most, however, is the Environmental Impact Report released last week that states the area on which Ratner wants to build is blighted. “Most of it doesn’t pass the laugh test,” Goldstein says. Overall, he compares the report’s credibility to Colin Powell’s presentation to the U.N. at the start of the war about weapons of mass destruction.

“The blight that they talk about is a phony issue,” Balboza says. “You’re the one creating the blight by forcing people out of their homes and leaving things vacant.” He reflects on how local residents have helped the area grow during recent decades. “People came into the neighborhood and saved the buildings. We came here and renovated. “We were not speculators. We just wanted a home.”

Ratner’s act of buying out the neighborhood to make way for his own development project does not sit well with Balboza. “It’s block busting,” he says.

These community leaders also agree that FCRC has not treated the community well, particularly, they say, since it refuses to communicate and address their concerns. The Ratner camp, however, claims it has involved the community extensively. DePlasco says, “FCRC executives have attended hundreds of community meetings,” citing community board meetings, housing forums and city council hearings as examples. “Some of these meetings were called by community groups and agencies, and some were organized by FCRC to solicit community input directly.”

DePlasco also points out that FCRC has worked with many organizations in the community to develop a Community Benefits Agreement that will provide the community with amenities ranging from job training to affordable housing, but the countering groups do not think that is enough.

And the opposition is putting up a strong fight. “There are 500 volunteers for Develop Don’t Destroy Brooklyn,” Goldstein says over the phone while on vacation. “I think it’s kind of a grassroots movement, the likes of which the city has not seen in a long time.” And for now, he contends, the sun will set again and again over Ratner’s plan.