The Nets Arena Is Not The Real Issue In Development Of Downtown Brooklyn

by {ga=tangotti}
Thursday, April 22, 2004 12:00 AM

Â

Should downtown Brooklyn get a 19,000 seat basketball arena designed by world famous architect Frank Gehry? Developer Bruce Ratner, who proposes to build the arena for the Nets, a team he hopes to own, seems to want everyone to believe this is the question Brooklynites and their elected officials have to answer. Ratner is a principal in Forest City Ratner, downtown Brooklyn's biggest office developer. Forest City built the Metrotech complex in the 1980s and most recently the Atlantic Center Mall.

Take your eye off the ball for a minute or you'll miss the real game. The most important contest for Brooklynites and all New Yorkers is the public debate over what kind of downtown we need and want. Should the downtown of tomorrow be just offices, arenas and high rise apartments? Or should it be a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week community with a variety of opportunities, a healthy and safe environment, and a better quality of life? Should it be served by mass transit or cars? Should it have housing opportunities for people at all income levels?

Unfortunately, the fast-moving balls in this development game have taken the public's eye off the fundamental issues at stake. It's not development versus no development, jobs versus no jobs, housing versus no housing, but what kind of city do we want? Instead of debating this basic question, everyone's forced into the developer's court, where the pros are throwing hook shots and faking everyone out.

Another fast move by Ratner is to draw attention away from the real estate scheme behind the arena. Gehry's signature building would be accompanied by 4,500 apartments, 2.4 million square feet of office and retail space, and some 3,000 parking spaces at downtown Brooklyn's busiest intersection. What's really happening is the tail is wagging the dog. The New York Times, for example, titled its December 11, 2003 article "A Grand Plan in Brooklyn for the Nets' Arena Complex" but buried in the article is a revealing statement by Ratner that "it was not economically viable without a real estate component." In other words, the arena alone is a loser. This squares with the findings of most economic studies that sports facilities lose money and have to be subsidized. In this case, Ratner is still likely to benefit from public subsidies for the arena while making a killing on the larger deal. We'll never see these moves because they're being made in the private game Ratner is playing with public authorities.

Ratner hired big name basketball players like Bernard King to convince the public that the arena will give every kid a chance to be a pro, enhance their self-esteem, and cure asthma. But according to the local group Fans for Fair Play, "By stitching together a few Brooklyn Nets jerseys, having Bernard King show up at a press conference, and cloaking their scheme in syrupy Brooklyn Dodgers nostalgia, they believe we'll fall for a ruse using the seduction of a pro-sports team in order to build a massive real estate/commercial development."

Wind-up cheerleader Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz marches around the borough claiming the Nets are the reincarnation of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Governor George Pataki and Mayor Michael Bloomberg are "on board" Ratner's bulldozer. Pataki sent the signal to his appointees on the board of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, who own the rail yards over which most of the project will be built, that they should give it to Ratner - or at least that's the impression Ratner is giving us.

Mayor Bloomberg can hardly turn his back on Ratner's arena at a time when he's trying to finesse his proposal for a Jets stadium on the West Side of Manhattan using the same kind of fancy footwork. After all, bad stadium feelings can spread. On the West Side the real deal is the 28 million square feet of office space and 10 million square feet of apartments, not the green-washed "eco-friendly" football arena decorated with post-modern windmills. Another thing the two stadium proposals have in common is the fiction created by the developers that most fans will use mass transit instead of parking in the huge garages that will be available both on and off the sites.

Many Brooklyn community groups are mobilizing against the Ratner proposal. A full collection of articles and arguments pro and con may be found online . In an article for Gotham Gazette, the City Council person for the area, Letitia James, pokes holes in the arguments that the development will bring lots of jobs and affordable housing, while having a minimal impact on traffic, congestion and the environment. However, all the debate is still focused on Ratner's agenda, not the most important item -- what kind of city do we want for our children and grandchildren?

Ratner's Past Projects

While everyone's watching Forest City Ratner's fast passes, they forget the damage the company has already done in Brooklyn. Imagine that Ratner actually had to compete with other developers to get the land he wants. Imagine there is a competent public planning body to

select the best proposal. The first thing they would look at is Ratner's most recent Brooklyn project, the Atlantic Center Mall. This shopping center looks and feels like a medieval fortress. It arrogantly turns its back on the surrounding residential neighborhood and is built for the quick entry and exit of shoppers in cars. The "public" space inside the mall is minimal, poorly equipped but well endowed with electronic and human surveillance. The streetscape around the building is like a concrete wasteland with a handful of trees. If being a good neighbor is a criterion for getting public support, Ratner would be in trouble.

Ratner's Metrotech is bad planning on a grand scale. This 7 million square foot 14-building complex in downtown Brooklyn is a classical suburban office mall. On one side the complex turns its back on the nearby Fulton Street, a bustling and popular venue for working people. On another side the six-lane Flatbush Avenue divides Metrotech from the Myrtle Avenue shopping strip in Fort Greene. Metrotech's interior green space isn't really used by the public at large but serves as a back yard for the corporate tenants.

One of the first planning principles for new downtown development should be the integration of the project with the rest of the downtown. If the Atlantic Center Mall and Metrotech are an indication of what Ratner's new development will be like, we'll have another segregated, wall-off enclave in a downtown where streets are increasingly clogged with traffic and polluted.

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.

by {ga=tangotti}
Thursday, April 22, 2004 12:00 AM