

BAM And Its Cultural District

by {ga=mwinstongriffith}

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As a high profile institution that has managed to attract a great deal of public and private funding, the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#) has for years been a lightning rod for community activists leery of the "high" culture -- such as ballet, symphonies and opera - that it is world-renowned for showcasing. Although situated on the borderline between commercial downtown Brooklyn and residential Fort Greene since 1908, BAM (as it is universally called) has recently come to represent the front line of the Manhattan-style development invasion that seems to be slowly rising out of the East River like an occupying army, threatening to subsume Brooklyn skylines and life-styles forever.

Perhaps nothing calls into question the role that large cultural institutions play in the development of neighborhoods more than BAM's \$700 million plan to build a new 14 square block cultural district. The BAM Local Development Corporation has been working on the details and financing of this district for years, but things recently came to a head when community activists demanded to have their concerns included in the BAM Local Development Corporation's plans, causing public officials to threaten to pull the project's public funding.

The fear is that the BAM district will import new housing, businesses and cultural facilities and essentially re-engineer the cultural personality, not to mention residential and commercial real estate markets, of Fort Greene. Specifically, community activists are calling for the details of plans to be made public, and for those plans to reflect locally articulated economic development visions and needs.

The process BAM and community activists use to resolve this matter over the next few weeks -- BAM will begin meeting within the month with the Coalition of Concerned Citizens, a Fort Greene grassroots group, to try to work out an agreement -- will do more than determine if BAM can secure public funding. It will serve as a negotiation for Fort Greene's cultural soul. In this instance, the term "culture" is a fig leaf for issues we do not like to name explicitly -- particularly race and class.

In other words, we are faced with a question: Will BAM use its expansion as an opportunity to further engage and support the kind of culture Fort Greene is well known for -- a racially integrated, funky avant-garde flava -- or is BAM striving for a more homogenized, euro-centric kind of sensibility, consumer taste and artistic expression?

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An eclectic colony of performing art events, restaurants, up-and-coming artists and students -- a pulsating, multi-income Mecca that attracts people from all over the world and incubates talent and creative energy from the surrounding area -- is an exciting vision. An enclave of overwhelmingly white, privileged residents, artists, merchants and their patrons on the order of the Upper West Side is not. A clue to which the folks at BAM might prefer is evident in a comment by Harvey Lichtenstein, the chairman of the BAM Local Development Corporation: "The life and activity around Lincoln Center make me slobber at the mouth."

David Vine, a PhD student in cultural anthropology who has written extensively on the nexus between cultural and economic development, suggests that BAM's plans are a Trojan horse hiding an economic and racial takeover of Fort Greene. "This is not unique," Vine says. "If you look at the history of neighborhood development and similar projects around the country you'll see that 'cultural development' is a precursor to the displacement of large numbers of low-income people." Vine goes on to say that because it's "hard to argue against and oppose the bringing of culture, this kind of development often masks other interests, particularly commercial ones".

Although BAM is better known for cultural events that require high priced tickets and playbills, to be fair, BAM's offerings also include less high brow poetry slams, world music concerts and Dance Africa, a week long celebration that also features an African-styled outdoor marketplace. Also, what complicates the argument against BAM is that some of its most outspoken community critics are solidly middle class, people who have, perhaps more quietly, already helped make Fort Greene a trendy, pricey neighborhood.

Yet, no matter what your income or race, if you live, work or even pass through Fort Greene it will be impossible not to be affected by what is being proposed. The BAM cultural district has the power to not only completely transform Fort Greene as we know it, but send ripples across Central Brooklyn. The latest fact sheet I've seen issued by BAM promises 1.56 million square feet of development including a visual and performing arts library, a 350 seat theater, 100 units of market rate housing, 250 units of subsidized units and a boutique hotel.

My experience in community development tells me that BAM's negotiations with community activists and elected officials will follow the typical patterns of appeasement, but ultimately the larger commercial interests will prevail. BAM, at least if it is savvy and/or cynical enough, will do just enough to make sure the "community" has a voice in the process, promise local people jobs and retail space, give safe harbor to some local artists and cultural institutions and allow some folks from the hood to shack up in some of the "affordable" housing slated to be built.

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It is just a shame that cultural change -- whether it occurs on the West Bank or the Upper West Side -- is so often reduced to an equation of us versus them, light-skinned against dark-skinned people, the haves and the have mores. New York is capable of so much more nuance and possibility. There are very few neighborhoods in this city - yes, Fort Greene included - that couldn't stand to be more diverse in its makeup, more tolerant to change and less parochial in its thinking. It's now up to BAM to prove this is the kind of community it seeks to build.

Mark Winston Griffith, a writer whose work has appeared in the New York Times, Essence and Spin, is also founder of the non-profit Central Brooklyn Partnership, which organizes people to build economic power.

To read more about Fort Greene - and to contribute your own news and views, as well as reports of potholes - go to the [Fort Greene Gazette](#) , the first of our Community Gazettes.