After Delays, An Arts District Grows in Brooklyn

by Nicole G. Anderson
Saturday, June 05, 2010 12:00 AM

Photo by bitchcakes The proposed cultural district will bring performance and gallery space to the streets around the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

By the time he stepped down as director of the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1999, Harvey Lichtenstein's ambitions had spread beyond the walls of the art space in downtown Brooklyn. He turned his sights to the vacant lots and drab streetscapes around the concert hall, envisioning an entire cultural district.

"BAM had made a reputation as a performing arts center, but the context never grew up around it," Lichtenstein said at the time. "Now it is the right time to develop it as a cultural district."

Since the city first announced the preliminary plans for the expansion of the BAM Cultural District in Fort Greene 10 years ago, there have been delays, building relocations and canceled projects. Weathering the ups and downs of the economic and housing crises, the city has scaled back some projects while putting others on hold for an indefinite period of time. The question remains whether the original plans will ever be realized -- and when.

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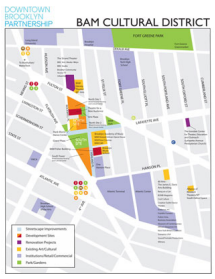
The answer to that question seems to be taking shape. After several changes in direction and design, the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership in alliance with the city Department of Cultural Affairs and New York Economic Development Corp. say they are moving full speed ahead with the construction of six projects in the neighborhood surrounding the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Certain buildings, such as the Brooklyn Public Library's Visual and Performing Arts Library designed by architect Enrique Norten, seem unlikely to ever get off the ground. The city has, though, committed $100 million in capital funding to the cultural district. It the will spend the majority of this money on six projects that will be located in and around the area between Fulton and Lafayette Streets and slated for completion by 2012.

"I am confident in the days ahead that much of the original BAM Cultural District plans will come to fruition ... and that this year, 2010, will be a significant one for the BAM Cultural District," said Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz.

Longer Process, Downsized Plans

Even years before the recession set in, further stalling development, the plans for the cultural district had fallen behind schedule. The BAM Local Development Corp. , under Lichtenstein's direction, oversaw all projects and budgeting, but after rumors of mismanaged money and inefficiency, the city intervened and put the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership in charge of the development of the Cultural District in 2006.



Downtown Brooklyn Partnership The latest master plan for the BAM Cultural District. (For a larger version of this image, go here .

By the time management had changed hands from BAM LDC to the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, the reality sunk in that certain projects were never going to get off the ground.

What remains, though will provide additional performing and gallery space several blocks from the planned Atlantic Yards development.

The city has dedicated funding to the renovation of the faĂ§ade and ground floor of the now vacant Strand Theater on Fulton Street, next to the BAM Majestic Theater. BRIC Arts and Urban Glass will use this space to expand their programming. Urban Glass plans to open a new gallery and retail space, while BRIC Arts, will create a multidisciplinary arts and media center including opening a gallery and performance space. If plans stay on schedule, the Strand Theater is projected to be up and running by tall 2011.

A month ago, BAM celebrated its groundbreaking of the Richard B. Fisher Building, a flexible 250-seat theater for BAM performances that will also provide a 1,400-square foot rehearsal studio space for community and education programs. The new building, designed by H 3 Hardy, will house the Max Leavitt Theater Workshop and an exhibition space in the lobby for visual artists.

Over the last five years, the Theater for a New Audience has moved three times, but it seems that this group -- specializing in Shakespeare and classic works -- will finally have a home. This December it will break ground on a 299-seat theater in the cultural district.

Frank Gehry and Hugh Hardy originally designed the building, but Gehry has since dropped out of the project and left Hugh Hardy's architecture firm to complete it. A few weeks ago, architect, Geoff Lynch of H3 Architecture and landscape architect, Ken Smith, presented the most recent plans for the theater and arts plaza, which are estimated to cost upwards of $50 million dollars, to Community Board 2.

The city will invest in public design in the district. Known for its work with the Museum of Modern Art and 7 World Trade Center, Ken Smith's firm will revamp the streetscape, create outdoor gathering space and design the plaza between Flatbush, Lafayette and Ashland avenues. Smith will also be responsible for designing an

approximately 8,000 square foot Arts Plaza, located in front of the Theater for a New Audience.

On the Edge

Other arts projects in downtown Brooklyn lie close to, but not technically within, the cultural district. Common Ground and the Actors Fund will build a community performance theater in The Schermerhorn, a 217-unit supportive housing development that opened last year. The Brooklyn Ballet already has a permanent home in the building.

The developer, Two Trees Management, has been the force behind 110 Livingston, a 300-unit condominium and mixed art space. It will provide a performance facility on the ground floor for the multi-disciplinary exhibition and performance arts organization, Issue Project Room. While the organization waits for renovations to be completed, it has already begun hosting pre-renovation concerts in the space.

"I think the first and foremost thing in terms of expansion is that our founder, Suzanne Fiol, really envisioned Issue as a place to bring culture to everyone and make it accessible to everyone," said Michelle Amador, business and development director. The increased capacity of the new space will help enable it to do that.

The Missing Library

The arts library, with its high-profile design, had been one of the hallmarks of the original plans for the district. In 2007, the Brooklyn Public Library pulled out of the project after failing to raise the estimated $135 million needed for design and construction costs. Meanwhile with the recession and the accompanying budget cuts, the library's financial position has become weaker.

While the Brooklyn library has withdrawn, the Department of Cultural Affairs said in a statement that "a library continues to be a part of the vision of the district, although no plans have been made at this time."

Rob Perris, district manager for Community Board 2, believes there is still hope for a future library. Theo original plan, he said, "was an extremely ambitious project. They were just not able to raise the kind of money that they had in their hearts. " But, he said, there is a possibility for a "more scaled back library facility."

Lost in the Housing Crisis

The collapse of the housing market brought another setback to the original plans. The Brooklyn Arts Tower
-- a mixed residential and cultural center designed to house studio space for Danspace Project Inc.
-- has been shelved for the foreseeable future until the real estate market improves.

The North Site 1 and North Site 2 on the BAM master plan from Downtown Brooklyn Partnership's website are designated for "mixed-income housing and cultural center," but minimal information has been made available to the public about the development of these sites.

"The city remains committed to maximizing affordable housing units along the cultural area, which we all agreed to," said Markowitz. "And they are continuing to work with a designated developer to evaluate the financing because this all takes money. At this moment obviously, an announcement of the design and the actual construction timetable -- we're not there yet. It will take a year or two more. But the good news, it is not off the table."

"The Brooklyn Arts Tower, like many projects across the city, was subject to the dynamics of the housing market over the last several years," the Department of Cultural Affairs said in a recent statement. "The city continues to work with the developer to evaluate appropriate next steps for this project."

Even in its scaled back state, city officials think the cultural district will enhance the arts scene in Brooklyn -- and beyond. "These major public investments in cultural venues and infrastructure build on Fort Greene's rich cultural legacy by providing space for emerging artists and sustainability for cultural organizations," said Cultural Affairs Commissioner Kate Levin. "In the next few years, we will see an enhanced, vibrant arts destination for Brooklynites and all New Yorkers."

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