

# Urban Outdoors

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Working for a more Humane New York

## **BETRAYAL ON THE BROOKLYN WATERFRONT?**

A change of name signaled a change of focus at the Brooklyn Bridge Park Coalition. The “Conservancy” would work with the park to get things done. The name change was accomplished without a discussion at the organization’s Community Council, one Brooklyn Heights civic leader told us. “What are they trying to conserve?” he asked. For fifteen years, park activists have used the Coalition as the vehicle to find a compromise between the interests of private development and the public interest in having a park at this magnificent publicly owned site at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge.

The “deal” that was struck was called the “guiding principles” and they called for a park that would have enough private development to pay for its continuing operating costs, but not its construction or capital costs. One principle called for continuing input from the community. That led to the convening of a Citizen’s Advisory Council (CAC) to provide continuing input on design and development. (NOSC serves on that Council.) At a July meeting, the Council was advised that many capital costs were to be put into a new category called “operating capital expenses” because the site, over a major waterway, was subject to unusually rapid decay. Those costs would have to be met; they were told, with income generated on the site. The CAC had not met between then and late January, after details of plans showed up in the local press.

### **FROM STAGE RIGHT: A DESIGN FOR THE PARK**

The higher than anticipated operating costs would be financed by two high-rise apartment buildings on either end of the mile long thread of a park. A twenty to twenty-five story building would be built upland of a pier that was recently added to the “park” with the unanimous support of all community leaders. (Another tall building was placed in the already “noir” neighborhood of “dumbo”.) The only alternative to the high rises is big box stores, one civic leader was told. “Take it or risk losing your park”.

The rumor began to spread that this apartment building would anchor a Queens West South, a row of luxury high-rises on what is now the Red Hook Container Port, a remnant deep water working waterfront that sees many ship visits each year. Opposition began to surface from all adjacent communities but especially from Cobble Hill. Some “Hill” residents blamed elements within Brooklyn Heights. “From the start, they would accept this park only on their terms. They would not even allow an entrance to the Park near subway stations, and they moved “development” out of areas adjacent to the Heights to communities on either end of the park.”

**LUX RMS W/VU**

The site of the proposed luxury high-rise juts out into the water from just south of Atlantic Avenue, a hard-edged major neighborhood shopping street that has remained without traffic calming redesign in spite of years of advocacy, its location between two landmark districts, and its use as a Brooklyn Tourist Bus route. It seems within touching distance of the lower Manhattan skyline. Most recently piers south of the site were proposed as a landing site for NYC's growing cruise line industry. Architects drawings were floated for a "South Street Seaport" like structure that would be used for the ships and small-scale retail that would complement the Avenue, the Park and the waterfront. The cruise port was quickly deemed unfeasible and no alternative ideas were discussed for this use that would complement the park. The cruise port was pushed southward into Red Hook, and away from the Atlantic Avenue highway exit (and frequently discussed lower Manhattan-to-airport railroad) that could mitigate its traffic impacts. At a recent CB6 meeting board member Earnest Migliaccio asked why cruise line expansions were not being considered for this site instead of 25 story apartment buildings.

### **THE TAIL THAT WAGS THE DOG**

The most successful element in the design of Manhattan's Hudson River Park is the Greenway. Even as other pieces of the Park's future are debated, and funding sources are fought over, the Greenway has turned New Yorkers out by the thousands and, insured by their presence, that there would be a park on the lower Hudson. It has also spurred development of the citywide greenways system. There is potential for a similar facility on the Brooklyn Waterfront, extending most of the way from Brooklyn Bridge Park to the Verrazano Bridge. Even as that potential is being discussed by a group that has been funded to produce a planning document, City crews are marking the streets for a scheduled spring Department of Transportation project that would erase that potential for at least twenty years. The Columbia Street Reconstruction is a water pipe project that includes widening the streets of the historic neighborhood adjacent to the port. Some of the same people that are now "outraged" by high-rise construction supported the wider streets outside their neighborhood that presage high-density development and take away sidewalk space that would allow the development of the greenway.

In the most recent drafts of the plan for Brooklyn Bridge Park, portions of the Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway have been moved from the interior of the park to a space adjacent to a roadway and under a highway. Requests by this organization (and others) to reconsider that decision have been ignored by the Brooklyn Bridge Park developers.

### **WRECKING BALLS DESTROY RED HOOK LANDMARK**

Adjacent to the container port, soon to host the some of the largest cruise ships ever built, is the mixed-use Red Hook neighborhood, often described as racially divided over the future presence of America's largest Ikea store. In fact the coalitions on both sides of this argument are both multi-racial and represent a complex set of interests including residential ownership, adjacency to streets that are to see traffic increases, and business interests that are to gain from the facility vs. those that would find business more difficult.

On the same week that City Council leaders announced that they would scrupulously examine the environmental impacts of a proposed Queens Boulevard big box store, wrecking balls destroyed parts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century landmark buildings that make up one of the last working shipyard facilities in NYC, once a location of scores of such facilities. Community leaders charged that the buildings were wrecked before the Federal environmental and historic review was completed. Asbestos dust was allowed to float from the wreckage to wherever it might go, including the adjacent school bus parking area. At a public meeting they vociferously denied State Department of Environmental Conservation's claims that asbestos was not found. Demolition was halted and asbestos was confirmed. Two months ago, City Council voted almost unanimously to allow zoning to be changed for the benefit of Ikea. Now they demand stringent environmental review for a similar store to be built along Queens Boulevard, a street with many adjacent big boxes and a subway line.

Asked about high rise development adjacent to Brooklyn Bridge Park, one Red Hook civic leader noted that he would gladly have one twenty story luxury high rise adjacent to a new waterfront park in Red Hook instead of Ikea. Red Hook is a peninsula with almost no public waterfront access. "The same people that are opposing the apartment building supported Ikea" he said. "Lets put the Ikea at Atlantic Avenue."

## **ORGANIC INFRASTRUCTURE**

There is much to like about the newly unveiled plans for Brooklyn Bridge Park. They take advantage of what is already there with an extraordinary overlay of infrastructure and organic elements. Visitors to the park will find mystery, surprise, and opportunities to explore the mimicked natural landscapes that the design firm, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates calls "roof gardens" on the piers. Walking paths below the piers, near the water, will offer views of the shadowy world of historic hard-edged maritime infrastructure. All eyes will be focused on Oz, the crystalline skyline across the river. The ever-changing landscape of berms and "dunes" that the design firm has created will lead visitors into the park much like the multilevel walkways from the city into Prospect and Central Park.

Even as battles over new skyscrapers are fought, advocates will need to focus on adding new opportunities for children of all ages and for healthful physical activities within the adventurous landscape. Can one large berm accommodate a BMX bicycle course that will teach young people about the need to focus attention, and will attract adult spectators to admire the agility of the youth? Can the Greenway be moved into the park so that families can enjoy a park experience instead of traffic noise and fumes? Can a swimming opportunity be shoehorned into the space in a way that will not break the bank and be outdoor in the summer and be indoor for at least some of the cooler months? Can an indoor space be created that is open to the sky and tropical in feel so that seniors will want to walk there and read under life nourishing natural light in the darkness of winter?

## **THE NEED FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Most interested Brooklyn residents understand that Brooklyn Bridge Park will include economic development to support the park. Governmental budgets for parks continue to

decrease. Apparently fearing divisive debate, the Park developers have held their cards to their chest and choreographed a careful set of steps to avoid discussion. So much new development at the same time has made the surrounding communities jittery and has divided community members against other community members. There has been no comprehensive waterfront planning effort that seriously considered a community vision. It could have been done better and should have been. It is not too late for a mid-course correction. That correction could be accomplished by just moving the pieces. Or a wild card could be played.

A Brooklyn newspaper reported that the New York Aquarium is looking to move from one site in Coney Island to another. The current resurgence of Coney as a sports and amusement place may create an opportunity to create a “Tivoli” and move the Aquarium to Brooklyn Bridge Park and turn part of the park into a ferry access NYC visitor’s attraction. Has that option been discussed?

### **WALKABLE NYC WORKSHOP**

Wednesday, March 30, Brooklyn College. A walkable Flatbush Avenue? Impossible you say? Learn more at NOSC’s Walkable NYC Workshop co-sponsored by NYS Department of Health and the Greater Southern Brooklyn Health Coalition. More info: [dave.lutz@treebranch.com](mailto:dave.lutz@treebranch.com)

### **Take a Walk, New York!**

**Sunday, February 13, 2005. Victorian Flatbush. 10 AM.** From one of the best looking college campuses in America to the classic wood Victorian neighborhood that grew up adjacent to the Brighton Beach line after the development of Prospect Park, this walk through Brooklyn history will feature what is perhaps NYC’s first “garage” neighborhood, built with the automobile in mind. Alan Ginsberg leads. FREE

**Saturday, February 19, 2005. Members Only Walk.** Bayonne Bridge and Urban Jersey. On Staten Island we will bus to the footpath of the Bayonne Bridge, a rainbow arch span over the exotic Kill Van Kull. Depending on the whims of our walk leader, Mike Selender, we walk to the Jersey City PATH station (\$1.50) or take a trolley ride on the brand new light rail line (\$1.50 additional). This is a NOSC MEMBERS ONLY walk; you can join at the beginning of the walk (\$35-12 walks). Meet at the Staten Island ferry, Manhattan side at 9:15 AM or the Staten Island side at the #40 bus ramp at 10 AM.

These additional walks will be fleshed out on the [www.walkny.org](http://www.walkny.org) website as the dates draw closer

**Sunday, March 6, 2005. Canarsie. 10 AM. FREE**

**Saturday March 12, Coney to Gateway. FREE**

**Sunday April 3 2005, Members Only Walk.**

URBAN OUTDOORS is the monthly newsletter of Neighborhood Open Space Coalition and Friends of Gateway. It reports on citywide public space issues and the work of hundreds of local civic groups that take an interest in the spaces. To be removed from the

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**Neighborhood Open Space Coalition/ Friends of Gateway**

232 East 11<sup>th</sup> Street.  
New York, NY 10003  
212-228-3126