“Historic Preservation and the Changing Face of Large-scale Redevelopment Projects in New York City: An Analysis of the Brooklyn Atlantic Yards Project”

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The proposed Brooklyn Atlantic Yards project is poised to irreversibly change the face of Brooklyn and the difficulties of making preservation claims are ample. They involve every type of barrier and encompass the ways in which the project planning process is taking place as well as the inherent limitations of preservation tools available to manage this type of redevelopment. Notwithstanding these barriers, the answer to whether or not preservation is possible at the Brooklyn Atlantic Yards is a resounding yes. Beyond possible, it is of tremendous importance to understand the greater implications for both the borough of Brooklyn and the future of historic preservation efforts that appear to resist economic growth development. Preservation is possible at the Brooklyn Atlantic Yards and is taking place on websites, in meetings, articles, and expressed in the voices of the city.

Though the proposed Brooklyn Atlantic Yards project is an anomaly in terms of scope and scale in relation to the history of development in Brooklyn, it signals a larger trend in New York City’s redevelopment policy. This trend involves concessions in public funding, bypassing of standard public review processes, broad support from state and city government, and is now backed by legislation that has determined economic development to serve the ‘public purpose’. Government, also viewing property development as economic development, goes to great lengths to attract expansion activities, often ignoring the damaging social and infrastructure aspects of such projects. This is clearly the case at the Brooklyn Atlantic Yards, where it is continually claimed that the project, and the way it is being carried out, ultimately serves the greater good of the city.

The egregious scale of the proposed Brooklyn Atlantic Yards project demonstrates why it is so critical for preservation planning to find its voice in light of this type of development. Since before the project’s announcement, and despite a limited public review process, efforts have been made towards historic preservation. Though less involved with existing buildings, community groups and advocates have formed to provide accurate information about the injustices of the project planning process, the anticipated impact to historic resources, quality of life, diversity, and sense of place. These groups have taken the initiative to organize and educate themselves and the greater community towards a productive dialogue about the implications of what it means to have this type of development unfold at the heart of several historic residential neighborhoods. They have appealed to local government officials and worked to verbalize the stakes, while attempting to demonstrate that they are neither opposed to growth nor succumbing to the "not-in-my-backyard" syndrome (NYMBYism). The final challenge for these groups remains to more firmly establish that preservation efforts need not hamper new housing, job opportunities, and economic development. Rather, that these goals should be realized within the context of a more open process towards a more equitable development that balances "a forward-looking vision with respect for Brooklyn’s heritage.”