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IT'S NOT ABOUT THE ARENA

Marshall Brown wants you to understand, "It's not about the arena." Mega-developer Forest City Ratner's plan to bring the New Jersey Nets to a 19,000-seat Frank Gehry-designed arena atop Brooklyn's old Atlantic Avenue Railyards is about one thing and one thing only. "It's a very big real estate deal."

Brown is rapidly becoming the Brooklyn version of Daniel Libeskind (but cooler, with no intimidating Teutonic wife, rectangular glasses or turtleneck). The dreadlocked 31-year-old urban designer is director of the Atlantic Yards development workshop and chief salesman of the UNITY plan, an innovative community-envisioned alternative to mega-developer Forest City Ratner's \$2.5 billion, 7.7-million-square-foot project.

Prospect Heights City Council member Tish James kicked off the development workshop almost a year ago. Having spent months walking door to door during her electoral campaign asking people what they wanted and needed in the neighborhood, she generated a lengthy laundry list. "Basketball arena" wasn't on it. Spurred on by James, Brown and his three partners organized a daylong session of brainstorming, visioning and community input followed by weeks of design. The result was the UNITY plan.

When you take a look at the UNITY plan the flaws in the FCR proposal and the Bloomberg administration's general approach to development become so much clearer. The UNITY plan includes space for a new school, recreation center and daycare, facilities that meet the needs Tish James found near the top of her list. It proposes a public park connected by a ribbon of greenway instead of a series of privately owned courtyards. Its lower-rise buildings mesh with the context and character of the surrounding neighborhoods yet manage one another to include more retail space and nearly the same amount of housing as the FCR plan.

The UNITY plan doesn't require eminent domain or propose the demolition of any existing homes or businesses. It builds only atop the MTA's railyards. Instead of creating the kind of windswept superblocs that proved to be such a failure at the pre-9/11 World Trade Center site, Brown's team extends neighborhood streets through Atlantic Yards. This creates more frontage for retail and new connections between neighborhoods that have traditionally been cut off from each other. The smaller blocks also allow local construction firms to compete with one another for pieces of the project. "It's like a pizza," Brown says. "Sell it by the slice and you make more money."

While FCR touts its ability to create jobs and affordable housing, Brown believes that the community can do better and expect more. "We can go beyond housing and build homes. We can go beyond jobs and build businesses and careers." Ultimately, this is the biggest innovation of the UNITY plan—the idea that those traditional political commodities, "jobs" and "housing," aren't enough. For hundreds of millions of dollars of public money, New Yorkers can expect more.

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