

CITY POLICY AND URBAN RENEWAL: A CASE STUDY OF FORT GREENE, BROOKLYN

Winifred Curran
Department of Geography
Hunter College
New York, NY 10021

ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the primary role played by city government in the process of decline and renewal of an inner city neighborhood. It is a case study of the Atlantic Terminal Urban Renewal Area (ATURA) in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. It traces the role of city government in the decline of the neighborhood, the declaration of the urban renewal site, the virtual abandonment of that site for nearly thirty years, and the later process of gentrification. The city policy of creative destruction of the landscape resulted in a rent gap in Fort Greene that provided the opportunity for the current development. The focus is on the development of Atlantic Center, a large commercial facility in addition to a development of publicly subsidized townhouses for middle income homeowners, built as a result of a public-private partnership. The city's policy of property-led growth, in which real estate development has become a substitute for community development is examined. The manner in which this project has been developed, despite the vocal opposition of the community, indicates that Atlantic Center has been developed to recognize a short-term profit potential rather than to achieve the long-term revitalization of Fort Greene.*

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn is similar to that of many neighborhoods that experienced decline and "white flight" in the 1950s and 60s, and that have since been rediscovered in the waves of gentrification in the 1980s and 90s. What is quite stark about the history of the decline and renewal in Fort Greene is the causal role played by urban policy. Together, the city and private real estate interests have engaged in the creative destruction of the landscape, devaloring it so that later development, and profit making, can occur.

The loss of manufacturing jobs that was one of the most decisive factors in the decline of Fort Greene was a direct result of city policy, namely that of Robert Moses and his use of Title I funds. This loss of jobs, accompanied by the construction of massive public housing projects in the area, led to increasing ghettoization and the "white flight" from Fort Greene.

The conditions in Fort Greene were so bad that the area was declared an urban renewal area by the city in 1963. In keeping with the general trend of the

practice of urban renewal, the designation of the Atlantic Terminal Urban Renewal Area (ATURA) may have done more to accelerate the decline of Fort Greene than to arrest and reverse it. The site was cleared and then left abandoned for close to thirty years, while attempts by the city to develop it failed to come to fruition.

This trend was finally reversed in the 1990s, when the site was developed in a mix of commercial and residential uses. This process, however, was wrought with its own problems, principally the objections of neighborhood activists to the scale of the commercial development and the type of high-income housing proposed for the residential component. While what was built represents a compromise of sorts, the poor design and ill-considered nature of the developments pose a threat to the unique character of this brownstone neighborhood.

Atlantic Center has been seen as a model of property-led public-private partnership revitalization (Davis, 1996). A closer examination shows that the concerns of community members about the project are justified, and that relying exclusively on public-private partnerships for real estate development is not entirely

beneficial to the surrounding community

This paper will briefly examine the history of Fort Greene (Figure 1) as a neighborhood and its process of decline. It will then look at the history of the neighborhood as an urban renewal area and the failure of many development plans. Finally, the commercial project that was built will be examined and the implications of urban renewal policies discussed.

HISTORY OF FORT GREENE

The early reputation of Fort Greene was quite similar to the poor reputation it had during its period as an urban renewal area. In the 1840s, Irish fleeing the potato famine made the area a notorious shantytown, more renowned for its poorhouses than the brownstones that would eventually be built there.

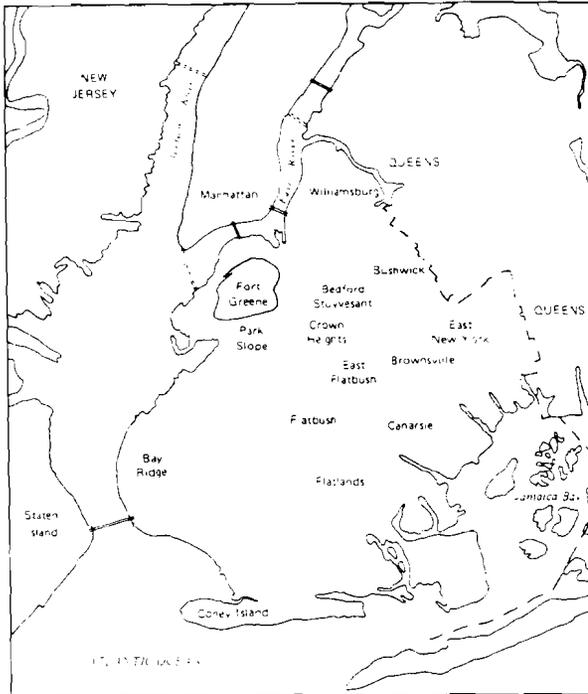


Figure 1: Location of Fort Greene (from Connolly, 1977)

By the 1850s, Fort Greene was undergoing major residential development. The expanding middle class made this neighborhood a pleasant residential district, second only to Brooklyn Heights in attracting business and professional men (Lockwood, 1972). It was during this era that the fashionable brownstones and row houses that have made the area a landmark district were built. Some of the fine Queen Anne and French Empire row houses of the neighborhood were built by Walt Whitman when he was a carpenter (Glueck and Gardner, 1991). The neighborhood exhibits nearly every architectural style of New York row houses from the 1840s to the turn of the century.

Fort Greene was a black enclave as early as the 1860s, a period during which the neighborhood was “swarming with colored craftsmen” employed in the maritime trades at the nearby Brooklyn Navy Yard (Connolly, 1977, p.9). By 1900, the area around Fort Greene Park was the only concentration of black settlement in Brooklyn. It should be emphasized that the black population was one of skilled workers and that they formed the basis for the black middle class.

The loss of jobs due to the Depression coincided with the increasing immigration of blacks to the area that contributed, in part, to its decline. Racism played a large role in the continued decline of Fort Greene. The Mortgage Conference of New York mapped Brooklyn block by block to indicate the presence of blacks. Mortgage loans were determined according to this map (Connolly, 1977). Those areas with any concentration of blacks were denied mortgages. As in other inner city neighborhoods, this redlining encouraged the process of white flight to the suburbs.

Hand in hand with the process of increasing black population and increasing suburbanization was the loss of manufacturing jobs. The area of Fort Greene around the Brooklyn Navy Yard had been a particularly strong center of manufacturing (with companies such as the Cumberland Packing Corporation, the manufacturers of Sweet ‘n Low). It was said that, ‘Brooklyn’s strength depends on the industry concentrated along the waterfront’ (quoted in Schwartz, 1993, p.236). However, after World War II, it became city policy to remove that industry, a process accelerated by Robert Moses.

Moses changed the face of downtown

Brooklyn with money provided by Title I, the federal program for urban renewal. Though the money was federal, Moses determined the way in which it was spent, with support from the city administration. Moses' wholesale removal of manufacturing and warehousing of the poor became a model for urban renewal in the rest of the country (Caro, 1974). Moses envisioned a downtown Brooklyn Civic Center, based on the model of Washington, D.C., with wide tree-lined boulevards and great public buildings. He had decided that downtown Brooklyn would become a center of government offices, universities, and hospitals. Moses' attempt to create this Civic Center in Brooklyn signaled the death of manufacturing in the area. In order to allow for the expansion of Long Island University (LIU) and Brooklyn Hospital, and the construction of residential towers for the white middle class, land had to be condemned. The site clearance for the Brooklyn Civic Center was a project in job clearance. From 1945-1955, 259 industrial or commercial sites were cleared, removing 8,200 jobs. This constituted what clerks called the largest condemnation in history, in which the city took title to 23 blocks (Schwartz, 1993).

Even businesses that were not condemned outright were affected. American Safety Razor, which had been looking to expand, decided not to, for fear that it, too, would eventually be condemned. American Safety Razor decided to move from Brooklyn, selling to Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute. This meant the loss of 1200 jobs, 20% of which had been filled by black workers (Schwartz, 1993).

Part of the Moses plan for the redevelopment of Fort Greene involved slum clearance. "We may add to the public housing to clean up the slum areas," Moses said, "and thus genuinely rehabilitate the entire neighborhood" (quoted in Schwartz, 1993, p.241). Of course, since Moses did little to disguise his contempt for public housing, and especially its black residents, the projects built did not rehabilitate the neighborhood, but rather created concentrations of poverty that exist to this day.

Thus, with the loss of manufacturing jobs, and the increased social polarization of the area, Fort Greene became a postindustrial landscape long before many other parts of the city. Moses, with his Title I projects, accomplished what was planned but never admitted. These projects "redefined entire neighborhoods, providing visible redoubts and

unmistakable boundaries, enclosing interior villages, and raising blank exterior walls" (Schwartz, 1993; see also Caro, 1974). Robert Moses solidified Fort Greene's status as a slum.

With the loss of manufacturing jobs, those middle class families that could move out did. Those who could not remained. Following the typical pattern for inner city neighborhoods, middle class homeowners moved to the suburbs and were replaced by households of lower incomes, a process that would continue until the neighborhood was "invaded" by households with low, virtually stagnant, incomes. Costs of maintenance exceeded income, and deterioration began. This led to overcrowding, subdivision of houses, and the eventual transition from home ownership to rental tenure. Disinvestment escalated as tenants became poorer and poorer and those landlords that could invest elsewhere chose to do so, leading to rapid deterioration and abandonment (Beauregard, 1986).

This "creeping tide of disinvestment" as Peter Salins refers to it (Salins, 1981) led to the designation of the Atlantic Terminal Urban Renewal Area (ATURA) by the city in 1963. ATURA received federal urban renewal funds in 1968.

THE HISTORY OF ATURA

The Atlantic Terminal Urban Renewal Area (see Figure 2) includes the Atlantic Avenue subway station, the largest in the city system, and the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) Terminal. At the time of its designation, the area contained the Fort Greene Meat Market, small businesses, and residences. In order to clear the site for urban renewal, the existing structures were condemned. The meat market was moved to the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn, and the residences were razed, displacing, according to one estimate, 2,800 families (*The Phoenix*, June 27, 1974).

The neighborhood bordering the urban renewal area went further into decline because of the existence of ATURA. Residents were reluctant to invest in their homes or the neighborhood for fear that their buildings would also eventually be condemned. This led to a further deterioration of the housing stock (*The Phoenix*, June 20, 1974).

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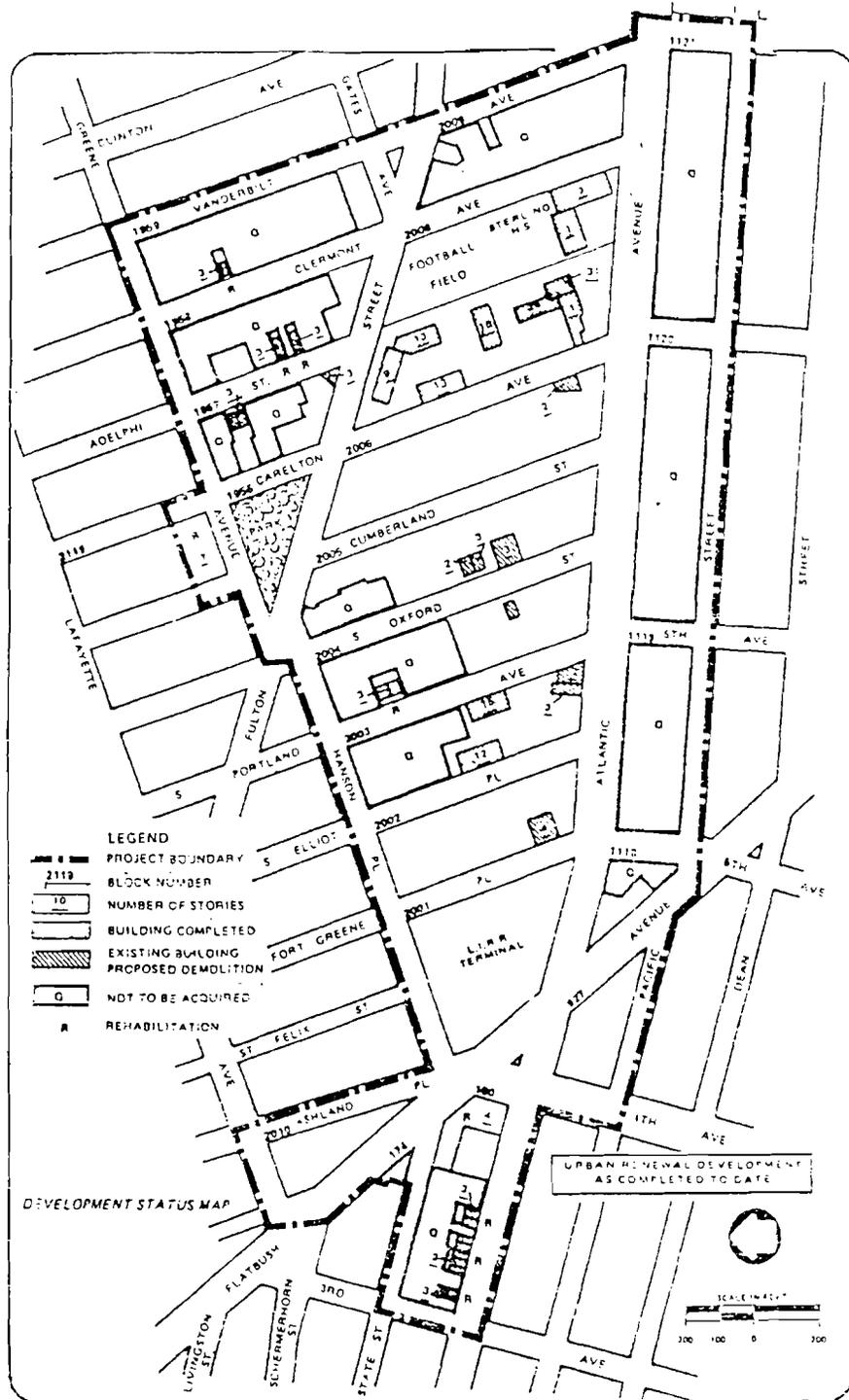


Figure 2: Atlantic Terminal Urban Renewal Area (Source: Urban Renewal Atlas, 1988).

Even more important in the continued decline of Fort Greene than the fear of condemnation was the eyesore created by ATURA. Land was cleared, but nothing was built for nearly thirty years. The area, "filled with scattered debris, occasional houses, and abandoned cars" (*The Phoenix*, April 19, 1973), became the focal point for the traffic in prostitution in the area. The lack of progress, and prolonged decline, led residents to call ATURA a "rip-off from the beginning" (*The Phoenix*, June 27, 1974, p.3)

The original plans were promising. The project was to spend \$40 million on affordable housing and community services. The Fort Greene Non-Profit Improvement Corporation was named to build 600 low income and 1400 middle income apartments in addition to a 400-unit project to be built by the New York City Housing Authority. Also planned were two health clinics, two day care centers, a community center, and a public education complex to serve 13,000 students from kindergarten to college (*Daily News*, April 6, 1969).

The principal component of this educational complex, and the idea that kept ATURA afloat for over ten years, was the plan to relocate Baruch College to Brooklyn, which was included as part of the master plan for the City University of New York (CUNY) in 1967. Politicians insisted that moving Baruch to Brooklyn would give the city the opportunity to change a "blighted, deserted, darkly lit, dangerous area into a modern, dynamic hub for a revitalized borough" (*Daily News*, March 12, 1973). The campus was supposed to anchor the area and to encourage commercial, retail, and residential development by the private sector.

The saga of the plan to move Baruch to Brooklyn is long and convoluted. Originally planned for the site that had been cleared above the LIRR terminal, the Transit Authority insisted that Baruch buy their air rights, which were prohibitively expensive. Meanwhile the chancellor of CUNY announced that he favored a site at 2 New York Plaza (*The Phoenix*, November 29, 1973). A tug of war went on between Brooklyn and Manhattan politicians, with Manhattan politicians insisting that the new campus would take too long to build and be too expensive. Although the plan was shelved during the 1975 fiscal crisis, it refused to die. As late as 1980, Brooklyn Borough President Howard Golden still insisted that Baruch was part of the "rosy future" he saw for Atlantic Terminal

(*Brooklyn Paper*, February 2-March 4, 1982, p.7), despite the fact that at this point the plan was opposed by leaders of other colleges in Brooklyn, who feared that Baruch would threaten the stability of their institutions.

Another of the big plans for the site was a sport stadium, on this site which had once been mentioned as a possible location for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Unlike the Baruch plan, this idea faced intense community disapproval. The project was described as a Madison Square Garden type facility with over 15,000 seats. The plan for the sports complex died during the fiscal crisis, when Governor Carey disbanded the New York State Sport Authority which was to have studied the project.

This stadium proposal was being floated at the same time as the Baruch plan, despite the fact that the chances that either of these facilities would be built was slim. Yet, the city continued to clear land as though these sites would be built, thereby turning the site into a wasteland "more attractive to rats than to people" (*The Phoenix*, December 11, 1975).

While the city was planning grand, but unattainable, schemes for the Atlantic Terminal site, the non-profit organization charged with building the housing component of the original plan was having difficulty getting the city to live up to its obligations. After the Fort Greene Non-Profit Improvement Corporation had already raised \$200,000 in seed money from private sources for the total site and land use plan, the city reneged on its promises to contribute funding. The secretary of the organization charged, "This is a perfect illustration of the city's lack of genuine commitment to the improvement of this community of Brooklyn" (quoted in *Amsterdam News*, March 25, 1972, C3).

Indeed, the city did seem to be following the policy of "planned shrinkage" advocated by the city Housing Administration head Roger Starr in 1976 as a response to the city's fiscal crisis. Though Starr only mentioned neighborhoods such as the South Bronx and Brownsville in Brooklyn as areas whose decline should be "accelerated" by public policy (quoted in *New York Times*, February 3, 1976, p.35), what occurred on the ground in Fort Greene was strikingly close to the plan advocated by Starr. After the fiscal crisis, all plans for ATURA were shelved. The only parts of the original ATURA plan that were ever built were parts of the

housing component. The New York City Housing Authority did build a 300-unit project that was completed in 1974, somewhat smaller than the 400-units originally planned. The project, called Atlantic Terminal, is an example of the "tower in the park" at thirty stories, built in a period when this design for public housing had already been discredited.

The other housing built was that of the Fort Greene Non-Profit Improvement Corporation. Completed in 1975, five co-op apartment buildings for low-middle income families were built with a total of 504-units in twelve and fourteen story buildings. These buildings stood "alone in an area of frustrated development plans" (*Daily News*, December 8, 1975).

Even after the fiscal crisis, city plans for Atlantic Terminal never came to fruition. Plans to restore the Atlantic Avenue subway station and LIRR terminal were continuously delayed and suffered from a lack of funding. Beginning in 1977, plans existed to modernize the subway lines in conjunction with commercial development and an office tower that would fit in with the goals of ATURA. The Board of Estimate approved \$20 million for the project, but the Transit Authority received only two bids, both of which exceeded \$20 million, suggesting the amount was inadequate for the project. Even without a plan, the MTA planned to demolish the existing terminal, a plan fought by community groups who wanted to restore this example of beaux-arts architecture. With the fate of the building in the hands of the court, the MTA decided to condemn the site to a different kind of death, abandonment. Members of the Coalition to Save LIRR Terminal termed this "corrosive for Brooklyn," citing the occurrence of fires and vandalism and the presence of drunks, prostitutes, and muggers (*The Phoenix*, August 28, 1980). The terminal was eventually demolished, and to this day, the site has yet to be renovated. That was the last of the big plans for ATURA until the inception of the plan that led to the current development.

THE PRESENT PLAN

By 1985, when it was announced that Jonathan Rose had been selected as a developer for the site, Atlantic Terminal was described by one reporter

as a "desert of dirt, asphalt, rubble, and weeds." Yet, Jonathan Rose of Rose Associates saw "enormous possibilities for up-side growth. What's interesting to us is what the area could be like 20 years from now. We're willing to invest now because we think we're getting in on the ground floor of something quite extraordinary" (*The Phoenix*, January 24, 1985).

And indeed, they were. Interest in ATURA had been rekindled because of the gentrification that was occurring in Fort Greene. Property prices began to soar after the neighborhood was designated a historic landmark district in 1978 (*New York Times*, October 15, 1989). This, combined with booming real estate prices in Manhattan, made Brooklyn, and Fort Greene in particular, an attractive place to invest. The development at Atlantic Terminal became possible because of the "urban pioneers" who had brought about the neighborhood renaissance of Fort Greene. The president of the Downtown Brooklyn Development Association credited the brownstone movement with "creating a psychological climate for business and government investment" (quoted in *The Phoenix*, June 9, 1977).

This led to the creation of a public-private partnership between the city and Rose Associates. Rose was granted rights to the project without any public bidding process, and the city agreed to invest in site preparation and capital improvements. This development supports Gale's assertion that government subsidies are only forthcoming once the economic base of an area is sufficiently healthy to justify it (Gale, 1984). Rose proposed a mixture of high-income co-ops with a commercial center to include a 600,000 square foot supermarket, a 1,000 car garage, and a ten screen movie theater, in addition to two office buildings. In order to facilitate the development, the city spent, by 1992, \$166 million in capital improvements in addition to forgoing tax revenues. This amounted to nearly three quarters of the capital budget for economic development. In this same period, Forest City Ratner (which was brought in as the developer in 1991 when Rose Associates could no longer afford to fight the extensive community opposition) had invested only \$380 million, only a little more than twice as much as the city (Fainstein, 1994).

Where Fort Greene had once been ignored because of the policy of planned shrinkage, it was now experiencing "selective revitalization" (Rosenthal,

1980) because of its likelihood to attract commercial and residential development, in conjunction with the neighboring Metrotech center and other developments in Downtown Brooklyn (also controlled by Forest City Ratner). All these developments are part of the attempt to create a third central business district in Downtown Brooklyn in an attempt to attract businesses that might otherwise move to New Jersey or Long Island. This plan is advocated by the Regional Plan Association (RPA), an organization of businessmen and planners that, though private, has been extremely influential in planning and policy decisions in the New York metropolitan area since the early part of this century. Bruce Ratner, head of Forest City Ratner, is a member of the RPA. In order to achieve this third business district, massive subsidies have been given to attract these firms. This was seen as an "appropriate and very practical approach to give away the store to get the first firms in" (quoted in Fainstein, 1984).

WHAT WAS BUILT

The project as built represents a compromise from the original plan, the result of both intense community opposition and the fiscal uncertainty of the early 90s. The efforts to attract offices for the proposed office towers were unsuccessful. What exists on the commercial portion of the site is a 400,000 square foot mall, with Pathmark and Caldor as the anchor stores, and a 670 space parking garage. These are built in the big box style of suburban stores. Again, this is in keeping with what the RPA sees as desirable for sites like Atlantic center (RPA, 1996). Establishing the mall as the centerpiece of ATURA supports Sharon Zukin's assertion that, "Shopping centers have replaced civic gatherings as arenas of public life. Despite private ownership and service to paying customers, they are perceived as a fairly democratic form of development. Moreover, they are believed to "open" downtown by creating a sense of place" (Zukin, 1991, p.51). While this was certainly the intention with Atlantic Center, it has been more successful at attracting vehicular traffic than foot traffic (*New York Times*, October 27, 1996).

Though Fort Greene is a neighborhood that has long been under served by the small number and poor quality of retail establishments, the effects of this

type of development on the neighborhood are far from beneficial. Black activists are concerned that the stores are not hiring people from the neighborhood. This is typical of these types of developments. Where public funding has been spent supporting large building projects, the associated jobs have often gone to people living elsewhere (Turok, 1992). Another issue is the lack of retail space for community businesses. The big box stores do not allow for the accommodation of local businesses (*Amsterdam News*, September 28, 1996). Another fear is that the enormity of the new commercial development will put smaller businesses out of business. Ron Schiffman, the director of the Pratt Center for Community and Environmental Development, contends that the mall threatens the viability of smaller shops and detracts from the urban feel of the surrounding brownstone neighborhoods (*New York Times*, July 21, 1996).

The design of the mall is indicative of a racial divide. It was designed with a fortress mentality, indicating that those operating the stores in this shopping center are afraid of their own customers. There are few windows. Although there are places to eat, there is absolutely no place to sit. Every shopper who leaves Caldor has his or her bags searched. As one of the authors of a recent book on urban malls commented, "It doesn't connect to any neighborhood. It's a suburban mall formula. It doesn't create street life. It is isolated in the environment" (quoted in *Brooklyn Paper*, April 24, 1998, p.4).

Once again, the results of city policy is the destruction of the landscape, in which the influx of capital has created an environment that destroys the character of the neighborhood, when it was that character that made the area a desirable site for investment in the first place. More than anything else, Atlantic Center is the perfect example of a property-led development that is characterized by "discord between land-use and transportation provision, the lack of coherence in the overall design and phasing of development, the underprovision of public space, and the poor aesthetic quality of many of the buildings" (Turok, 1992, p.374).

CONCLUSION: POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The history of urban policy in Fort Greene has been one of creative destruction. The decline of the neighborhood was certainly exacerbated by city policy. The revitalization of the neighborhood is also threatened because of the types of developments the city has chosen to pursue as part of urban renewal. The development of ATURA is being seen as an example of the success of public-private partnerships in urban renewal. It is a questionable success at best. The city has spent an extraordinary amount of money to attract development that might have occurred anyway. By designing the Atlantic Center in the big box suburban style, the city and the developers are destroying the landscape they intended to revive. The unfriendly design of the development downgrades the uniqueness of the neighborhood. While providing some desperately needed commercial facilities, Atlantic Center does not add to vitality to the neighborhood, and in fact, detracts from it.

In the implementation of the development of ATURA, the city has patently ignored the interests of the community. Though Fort Greene did need some more retail establishments, the scale and design of Atlantic Center was strenuously fought by community activists, and is still a point of contention, as further development on another ATURA site is planned.

After actively neglecting ATURA for close to thirty years, the city, in its desperation to finally get something built, is sacrificing the long-term revitalization of Fort Greene to its trickle down theory of property-led development.

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