

**Imagining Brooklyn: Authentic and Cool**  
**Q-and-A Session**  
**February 26, 2007**

*This is a partial transcript of the discussion following the two panels' presentations..*

**Session One**

Question: This is a question for everybody: I think you've all dealt with it in one way or another. There seems to be this encompassing [sense] of leaving Brooklyn and Brooklyn values behind ... Brooklyn is encompassed by all these different communities that have clashed at times, Jews, blacks, Italians, whoever it can be – and then we want to leave and there are aspirations to get out of Brooklyn. And now people are aspiring to come to Brooklyn. And people who were born here probably won't be able to afford to be here. What do we attempt to preserve what makes Brooklyn *Brooklyn*. Should we attempt to preserve some of the negative things about it so that it remains quaint and interesting on a sociological level or an academic level?

Dorinson: First of all, you make the assumption that ghettos are by definition bad. There are voluntary ghettos too. Certain cultures feel more comfortable. I'm not saying we shouldn't integrate, but Brooklyn, unlike Manhattan, is really not a unified entity. It's a conjuring of neighborhoods with sub-cultures. And often they clash, they fight for space, they fight for part of the top-dollar, and there is a social mobility as was pointed out in the discussion of "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn." Where does the Nolan family wind up? They end up in Queens. Where does Alfred Kazin walk? He walks across the Brooklyn Bridge to Manhattan and lives on the West side of Manhattan. The same with Norman Podhoretz, for whom my admiration is well under control. But my point is Brooklyn represents middle-class, working-class identity. For those people who want to "make it" in a big sense, including some of the rappers, they lose their identity, they lose their mooring. There are some like Sam Levinson who stay in Brooklyn and his bridge – he refers to the Brooklyn Bridge in some of the archival material I'm reading now right here in Brooklyn College – the Brooklyn Bridge is the Brooklyn College, a bridge to success and a bridge to mobility.

Nadell: I think it's a very interesting dynamic that's really being tested right now and I think one of the reasons why Brooklyn is so popular in certain media and among certain people is precisely the authenticity that's tied to a working class neighborhood identity. And of course, when people start buying brownstones, people start moving in who are not from the borough itself, things do look a little bit different. But the interesting thing is, as Paul pointed out, it's only happening in select areas of Brooklyn and other major areas of Brooklyn are not yet being touched by this and have not yet entered the popular imagination in the same way. That's a tough question, and the question will be how far will this desire for this Brooklyn authenticity go, and then could conceivably engender an erasure of this idea of authenticity. So what do we do about it? I don't know. All cities change and development always happens, but what is becoming alarming in my mind is the way that things like affordable housing are being taken out of the equation. Before,

affordable housing used to be one way of countering this, but the way it's being proposed is that it's pushing affordable housing for those people who cannot afford current real estate prices out farther and farther into less desirable places. So, it's a really complicated question. And I'd be interested also in seeing if the audience had opinions about this. I do think that part of the way that this kind of development happens is by employing this nostalgia of an authentic Brooklyn. I mean, Marty Markowitz is the king of nostalgia and embraces development using this nostalgia and it would be interesting to see what, if anything, can happen with this. It's a great question but unfortunately I don't have very good answers for it right now.

Williams: I think a good question to think about is, you know, what we might mean by "authenticity" and what indeed is "authentic." ... When they come in and drop a brand new stadium to replace the one that you remember from 50 years ago – I think we really have to question how much are we just trying to hold on to things that really no longer exist, and/or exist in our minds. Having said that, I guess to deal kind of directly with what I was talking about, the one thing that we need to keep in mind is that when the housing projects were originally built, by and large – and maybe someone will correct me on this – by and large you did have a lot of middle class and lower-middle class people moving in there, i.e. teachers, etc., solid, steady working folk. It definitely did not have the connotations that they've developed up to this point, and much of that has come through demographic shifts, some of them by choice, some of them forced. And the intentional abandoning and neglect of services and spaces where specific people were warehoused. I'm not really sure how to connect all of that, so I think I'll stop there. But I think the key question is who, as Gil Scott Heron asked, who will survive America? And I think it's an important question to ask. Who's going to survive Brooklyn? Or, who's going to survive New York?

## Session Two

Question: Well I'd like to ask a question and make a comment at the same time. About four years ago I was walking with a friend. He's a professional tour guide now ... And we would take out-of-towners from the Midwest, from the heartland, and we would take them to Bed-Stuy to show them brownstones. They were impeccable. They were better cared for than any other section in Brooklyn. And the point that Lou would make and that I would echo was that this was a class phenomenon and not a race phenomenon because you had a sense of empowerment through ownership and where people changed from the lower class and were elevated – many of them transit workers and benefited from unions – and they were able to buy their property and take care of their property. And the people that we took on these tours were so stunned. It was a wake-up call. I wonder if that's something that may affect your thinking on Clinton Hill – class rather than race.

Sammons: It does affect my thinking. Thank you for that conjecture. I think it's useful to understand those two always in conversation with one another. These are these pressures that people feel. I'm not positive that property ownership is in the long run equally adequate across racial lines for people to exercise their freedom and develop their

lives in the way that they would like to. Clearly, in Clinton Hill it seems like the purchase of property and the control over land has been useful for those people who have that and particularly, they've been able to build kind of an ideological apparatus on top of that. But I'm as yet unconvinced, class is absolutely always already there.

Question: I travel Brooklyn by bicycle and keep my ear to the ground, and I know a little something about landmarks and architectural history... And architectural history, when you go back, has a class element in that. You made reference to those signs in Clinton Hill: There's the Pratt family ... so yes there is that class angle to it. These beautiful homes in Brooklyn, be they in Bed-Stuy, Park Slope, Clinton Hill or wherever you go were built by upper-middle class people ...

Foulkes: Landmark designation works by having the approval of the community. I live in Prospect Heights, which chose not to approve what the landmark commission recommended at the same time that Clinton Hill and Fort Greene and Park Slope and Crown Heights and Bed-Stuy were getting those designations. Prospect Heights chose not to. So I think that there are embedded questions, still, about class that are about that. They supposedly at that time chose not to because they worried that it meant they wouldn't be able to change the facades and the way that they could would be costly to do so and to maintain what you have to do for landmark status in those districts. So there are some communities there that clearly wanted that, but there are also communities too that did not because they recognized that it could be an economic restraint on them that they wouldn't be able to meet and they didn't want to meet. And now, Prospect Heights is desperately trying to get that status because of the impending Atlantic Yards project and the neighborhood has changed to such a degree that we think the community is going to agree to it. So there is, I think, an underlying class issue sometimes.

Ted Sammons: I don't think that landmark preservation necessarily leads to something negative. That's the last thing that I would want to suggest. What I do want to suggest, though, is it's fraught. There are some aspects of landmark preservation, particularly of building in relation to property value, in relation to social context – I guess the way that the social conditions of the neighborhood are affected by rising rents. ... A story that I wanted to tell that I'm glad I didn't because it would have taken too much time, but the Society of Clinton Hill in 1985 successfully repelled a development program that was going to have a jail in the area. There was going to be a big correctional facility that was going to be built. The people in the neighborhood did all these surveys, and environmental impact report, and all this different stuff, and they were successful in repelling that correctional facility there. Now what was interesting was that part of the way that they were able to repel that correctional facility was to say, "We're already too poor, and if you put this here it's going to topple." You've got all these people on welfare, a high infant death rate – with all these things it's going to be terrible. It's excellent that people were bringing that information to the fore, and that they were making that a part of public discourse. But what's funny is that by relying even more and more heavily on the landmark preservation legislation, they're affectively turning over all the power over to a bureaucracy that have even less control over. It's almost a bait and switch procedure. All right, we'll let you have these time by time, moment by moment

successes when it is comfortable for the state to not have to regulate the real estate market in the area. When it's comfortable for the state to do that, the state can back off and let those people run their lives the way they want to, but when it becomes a part of Bloomberg's interest to do what he wants to do with Starrett City or what Bloomberg wants to allow to happen at the Atlantic Yards project, landmark is just another card to be looked at and thrown away. There are no real teeth to it. It's not as though it would become something that would go all the way to the Supreme Court. Even though it's federally protected – all that means is that it's officially on the books that the people have to be consulted, that's all. So it's, "Okay we consulted you, and here comes the wrecking ball."

Audience member: That's incorrect.

Sammons: How so?

Audience member: I'll give you an example. In my neighborhood, there was a lot next to the Montauk Club, which is in the Park Slope historic district.

Sammons: My question would be, where did that buck stop? And I don't believe that the buck stopped at the local community board. I believe that that flaw was exploited by the local community board successfully, and I applaud that. I think that was an excellent use of that kind of legislation. What I'm suggesting is there's a lot of faith that is put in a larger state apparatus that will back you up, and that state may not do that. It sounded like they did in that instance.

Osman: I think it's important to show the power dynamic is different in defining places. I think that it might be misleading to point to one neighborhood as authentic versus one that's inauthentic in a sense that they're calling in Clinton Hill but it's actually Bed-Stuy. The Bed-Stuy name was formulated in the '40s, and it was once an Italian, white-ethnic area and then it became a black area, and now it's gentrifying. You ask different people, and different people may have a different sense of neighborhood definitions, different senses of places. There might be overlapping senses of places, different power dimensions. If you asked someone in Park Slope in the '50s "Where are you from?" they wouldn't necessarily use a neighborhood definition. They would probably mention a parish ... They might mention a gang turf; people have a variety of senses of place. It could be a thing where you rely too much on neighborhood definition, deciding who's here first. You might end up finding that people have networks of places; you might see a transnational sense of place. Place is complex.

Audience member: Everybody is talking about preservation, but what about things that aren't worthy of preservation? What about something like one of Robert Moses' projects that might be exceedingly dangerous at this time and everyone could agree that people could be housed in a much nicer fashion if something were done. Will anything be done to better something like that? There are so many neighborhoods that hinge on being in the midst of a very dangerous conglomerate of housing.

Foulkes: I appreciate the comment about Robert Moses. The re-evaluation of him is positive. I think most people agree that since Moses' time, there hasn't been an ability – for some good reasons, perhaps – to have these sort of large scale interventions. What I think Atlantic Yards is to represent, however, is the ability to have a large scale intervention. And unlike Moses, even though he was never elected, he at least was doing so through government means where Atlantic Yards provides a very good picture of ... what I'm saying is that private/public partnership is what's being relied upon now to intervene in these things and those partnerships are generally not addressing large scale problems. I don't see much hope for that, actually, occurring in the ways that money and power operate.

Osman: The question is usually opposite. Most people never look at anything built from 1945-1960 as having any historic value. Things like housing projects [are seen] as dehumanizing failures. That's a good question though. Historic doesn't necessarily mean Victorian. ... I think you're right though, how do we decide what was really a failure and needs to be knocked down and what does have historic value?