Community development done right

What's the typical scenario for developers building projects in New York? A developeratches a plan—without community input—for luxury stores, condos or offices. When the plan is unveiled, local residents object. “The buildings will wreck the neighborhood,” they shout. Process ensues, contested public hearings delay the process, and before long there are questions about whether the project can go forward at all. It's a now-in situation. Projects get stopped altogether, or they wind up being purely commercial. Either way, there's little or no public benefit.

That's why urban planners are closely watching new proposals for the Kingsbridge Armory, which aim to play a very different role in development. At issue are plans to turn a massive, run-down building in the West Bronx into a mix of stores, restaurants, local nonprofits and a small business incubator. "Shops at the Armory" promises to bring new life to the castle-like fortress by drawing people and activity into its now-deserted drill hall and lecture rooms.

What's unusual is the role local residents have been asked to play, helping to modify the project early on so they're not faced with a take-it-or-leave-it decision later. In 2005, a local group—the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition—started working with the union that would represent employees in the hopes of forming the Kingsbridge Armory Redevelopment Alliance (KARA). Over time, KARA brought the community together around very realistic goals, not development-stopping demands.

The vision they've laid out is both attractive and attainable. KARA wants to see public schools as part of the use of half a million-plus square foot, city-owned site. They want to see space for recreation and for community groups. And they want to be sure that the jobs created are good, unionized jobs, open to local residents—the construction work necessary to build Shops at the Armory as well as the permanent jobs for retail and building service workers.

Including space for schools in the project is something the city can do. The rest should be negotiated with The Related Company, the developer. If Related executives are smart, they will work closely with KARA. Fulfilling local, social needs on a project like this is rare, and would speed every stage of development. The public uses would root the project in the community. And, if all sides can get it right in the Bronx, this might be the breakthrough model that smooths future development throughout the city.

Letters

Oil prices spark reader debate

MAMMARION: To the reader who claims the price of oil is solely the result of supply and demand, and not the party in power, I beg to differ. Anyone may remember a much maligned president, named Jimmy Carter, back in 1977 we scooted when he asked us to turn back our thermostat, mucked things up so we used solar panels on the White House and cried “fool!” They called for us to “be free of foreign oil by the year 2000. What a difference a government and world this could have been.

SCOTT MACDONALD

VIA E-MAIL: I’m not a Harvard educated economist, but I know if I owned an oil refinery that sells $12 refining a barrel of oil into a barrel of gasoline, I don’t have much incentive to work while the cost of my raw materials are at an all time high. Why would I lay out all that money to make the same product but not work as many days, not work as much, and still have reserves of gas to sell.

JIM TROY

Bush’s imaginary magic wand

MASSAGUERA: In yet another press conference, President Bush claimed he’s doing the best he can during the hellish fuel crisis (among other crises) saying “If l had a magic wand, I’d wave it, make it all go away.” OK, all together now: if we had a magic wand, we’d wave it and make the Bush administration go away. What a sleight of hand!

HERB STARK

“If you continue to be obedient to God...you will not participate in a recession.” Branch

HARLEM: Unless you’re living under a rock, you probably know about the rising gas prices. I have the best solution in the world. If you continue to be obedient to God by tithe 10 percent of your earnings and follow the biblical principles to financial prosperity you will not participate in a recession. Gas could rise to $15 a gallon and it would not affect you at all. When you believe it or not, it’s a fact.

OMAR J. BRANCH

The health risks of looking younger

NEW YORK: In today’s society, the quest to look younger than you did at 21 has many Americans paying thousands of dollars, risking their health and even taking with death. At some point you have to ask yourself, how far are you willing to go to look younger? I think in the past 10 years alone more than 50,000 people have been responsible for 16 deaths.

TYRA BINGO

Metro cartoon

by Corey Randolph

The metro cartoon TOBY, Robot Satan