

[About sponsorship](#)**Urban renewal****Up in arms about the Yards**

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A project recalls the mistakes of the past

THE Atlantic Yards, in the heart of Brooklyn, are now nothing more than a sunken set of tracks where trains are cleaned. But if all goes as planned, the yards and the blocks around will be reborn as 16 glittering towers, with an arena as their crown jewel. The \$4.2-billion scheme is one of the most ambitious in New York's history, and one of the most controversial.

Supporters—including George Pataki, the governor, and Michael Bloomberg, the mayor—say this is a model project, both for its fine design and for its civic-mindedness. Others are less enthralled. Community groups, scrambling to make their point before a period of public comment ends on September 29th, want the project either changed radically or stopped altogether.

Urban renewal in New York has a turbulent history. Under Robert Moses, the “master-builder” who shaped the city from the 1930s to the 1960s, urban renewal became voracious, often using eminent domain to snatch private property and replace lively neighbourhoods with self-contained housing projects that became barren and dangerous. A backlash against Moses ushered in the next era of urban planning, which aimed to improve the existing community rather than replace it.

Bruce Ratner, of Forest City Ratner Companies, hopes to create a new, dazzling model of development with the Atlantic Yards. He is being encouraged by Dan Doctoroff, the deputy mayor for economic development, New York's most ambitious planner since Moses. The city and state have promised to chip in \$100m each and provide a host of tax breaks, possibly worth more than \$1 billion. The project's first selling point is its designer, Frank Gehry. The second is the Nets basketball team, which Mr Ratner bought in 2002 and wants to move from New Jersey to the new arena, giving a team to a borough that has ached for one since the Dodgers left in 1957. The third is jobs: 15,000 created by construction over ten years, and 3,800 more once the project is complete. But Mr Ratner's juiciest bait is affordable housing. Condominiums would be sold at market rate, but half of the rental units, some 2,250 apartments, will be reserved for low-, moderate- and middle-income tenants.

Critics are not mollified. The project relies on public money yet flouts the community, says Julia Vitullo-Martin of the Manhattan Institute, a think-tank. The state will seize private property labelled as “blight”—including a luxury condominium building—under New York's broad eminent-domain law. The plan's “publicly accessible” parks, says the Municipal Art Society, a respected urban planning group, will in effect be private gardens. Mr Gehry's buildings are dramatically out of scale with the rows of brownstones nearby. Increased traffic will clog streets and extra pupils will strain local schools. The project will not connect the surrounding neighbourhoods; it will disrupt them.

These problems could be addressed if the project went through the city's land-review process. This subjects most big projects to hearings and approval by many local officials, including the mayor and city

council, and has often curbed bad plans. But Mr Ratner is working instead with the Empire State Development Agency (ESDC), a state body that can sponsor projects without consulting local governments. After two perfunctory public hearings, the ESDC will draw up a final plan for approval by the governor and the speakers of the state Senate and Assembly.

Opponents are not giving up. Develop Don't Destroy Brooklyn, a coalition of 21 community groups, plans to challenge the state's use of eminent domain, although a Supreme Court decision last year allows condemnation in the name of economic development. Others, resigned to Mr Ratner's scheme, are turning to Eliot Spitzer, the attorney-general and likely next governor, to ask him to curb the power of the ESDC, which is backing other big plans in the city. New York is being reshaped; the question is how.

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