

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Blooming Of Downtown Brooklyn

This is the year of Brooklyn, but you'd never know it in New York. The season's top theatrical event—the visit of England's Royal Shakespeare Company—took place in Brooklyn, at the handsomely restored Brooklyn Academy of Music. Generally, it is easier to get New Yorkers to cross the Atlantic to London than to cross the East River.

Politically, as well as culturally, it is the year of Brooklyn, with a Brooklyn man in City Hall and a Brooklyn man in the State Capitol at Albany, which gives Brooklyn both clout and cachet. And with Manhattan marking time in an atmosphere of recession and gloom, most of what is happening in New York is going on quietly across the river.

Actually, the blooming of downtown Brooklyn should not really take New Yorkers so very much by surprise. It wouldn't if they didn't keep looking the other way. A walk across the Brooklyn Bridge on a magical early spring day or evening reveals more than its accustomed romantic beauty. (How spoiled we New Yorkers are; but this is part of our dubious charm.) Downtown Brooklyn has no easy answer and is still fraught with real and continuing problems, but there is enough visible accomplishment in terms of design, development and the creation and reinforcement of community and amenity for a dozen other cities.



Brooklyn's lessons in architecture and urbanism—which largely involve informed efforts to turn around an area decimated by a residential and commercial flight to the suburbs of the 1950's and 1960's—are heartening. And so are the role and achievements of the city agency in charge, the Office of Downtown Brooklyn Development, now under the direction of Richard M. Rosan, working in collaboration with exceptionally strong and dedicated local groups. This is one of those on-the-spot Mayor's planning offices that have done more for New York in terms of positive development policy than any single idea or action initiated by city government in the last decade. And at the moment, when the more glamorous planning offices are in a bind or a stalemate, Brooklyn is paying off.

You don't have to be a closet Brooklynite to know about Brooklyn's brownstone revival, but the first thing that strikes the visitor is the startling dimensions of the residential renaissance. These neighborhoods go on literally for miles, ringing downtown Brooklyn. They have an

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incredible population of 275,000—at least as big as three medium-size cities. Beginning with Brooklyn Heights, the revival moved to Cobble Hill, Boerum Hill and Park Slope—four areas that have been declared historic districts. Still another, Fort Greene, is in the process of designation.

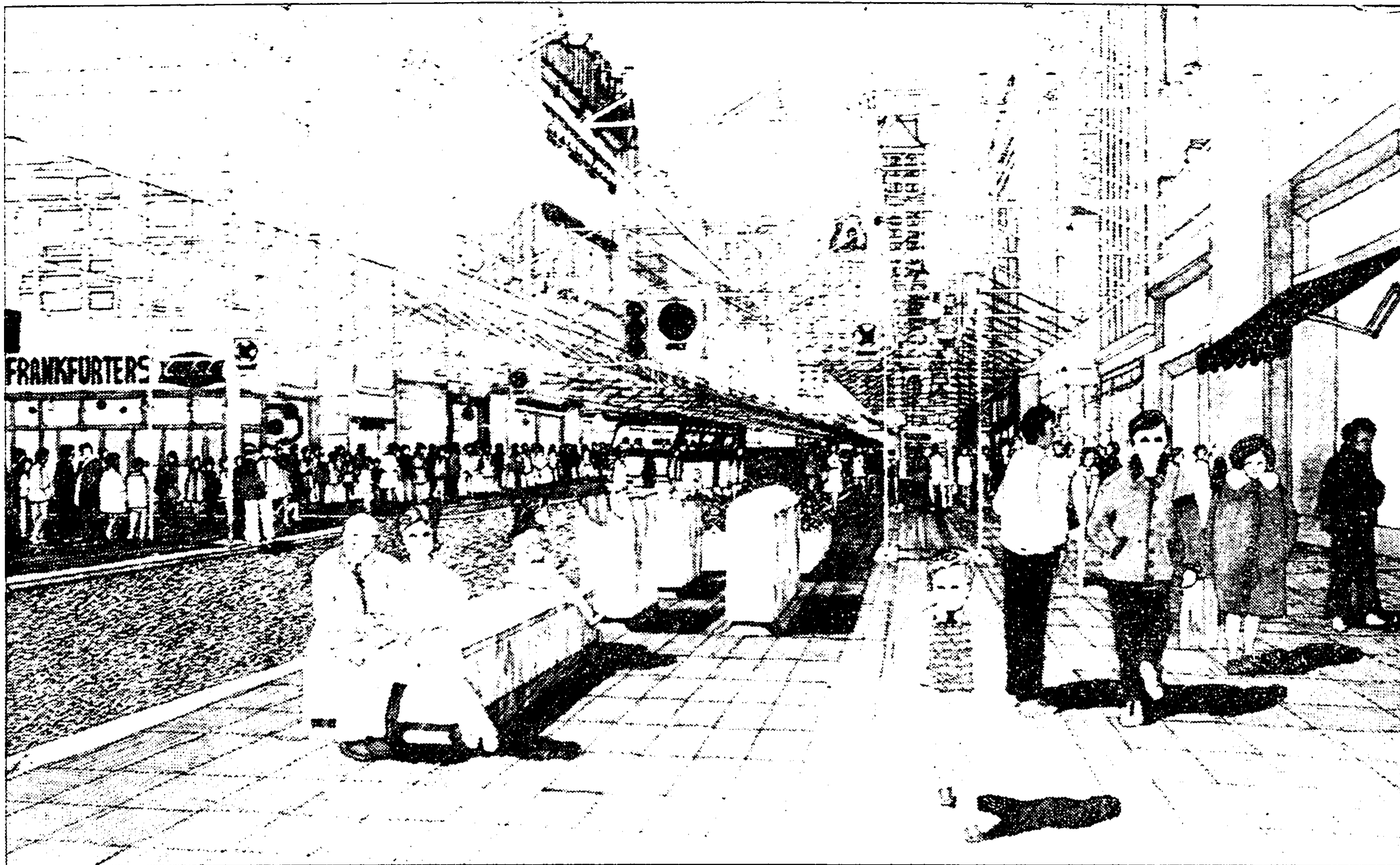
Almost all of these seemingly endless, superb streets of 19th-century row houses were once slated for the bulldozer brand of urban renewal. That figured, of course, since the easiest thing to demolish is a treasury of intimately scaled, rich architectural styles of exceptional craftsmanship and quality. The revival that took place instead was a spontaneous, snowballing, hootstrap operation of individual and collective gut faith, born of a dedication to the principle that New York is livable and made by a young, committed, urban middle class.

If you want to know the extent of such faith, it is worth noting that with the exception of a few local Brooklyn institutions, New York banks would give no loans or mortgages on any of these houses in any of these areas. Has anyone ever estimated the disastrous impact of such "sound banking policy" on cities, even when street wisdom was in the act of proving the bankers wrong? They have a lot to answer for. (They'll handle the buildings now, at quintuple markups in sound, marketable neighborhoods.)

This charm, comfort and beauty, from tree-lined streets and blooming back yards to Eastlake parlors and sun-filled kitchens, is within a stone's, or a subway's, throw of the big apple. Transportation facilities are excellent, although they need upgrading like the rest of New York's mass transit. Everything converges on downtown Brooklyn. And if the natives don't want to cross the river, they have an overwhelming concentration of their own cultural and educational institutions.

Again, if one stops to think about it, the score is stupefying. There are at least a dozen educational institutions, with 45,000 students enrolled in them, as compared to 26,288 students in Cambridge, Mass. Baruch College is now moving toward realization on 13 acres of the Atlantic Terminal renewal site after 10 years of backing and filling. There is a small, steady, loyal stream to the dance programs (outstanding) and exhibitions (ditto) of the topflight Academy of Music and Brooklyn Museum. (One draw, even with Manhattan's easy riches, is dinner at Gage and Tollner's landmark restaurant, an island of authentic food and atmosphere in the expensive ersatzschmier of New York dining.)

And that's not all, as they say in boosterville. Just beyond the bridge is Brooklyn's civic and commercial center. About 67,000 people, divided between the public and private sectors, work in its businesses, courts, government



Fulton Street may be turned into a pedestrian mall, covered by a plexiglass arcade.

agencies, law and insurance offices and retail enterprises. And these are not just buildings—we are also talking about architecture. From the solid granite Romanesque Revival Post Office and the neo-classical Borough Hall to the nifty Art Deco of Corbett, Harrison and McMurray's 185 Montague Street (headquarters of the Office of Downtown Brooklyn Development), there is more substantial, stylish, top quality building in downtown Brooklyn than one can shake an architectural historian at. Block for block, it is some of the best, most underpublicized landmark territory in New York.

Most of the pivotal change and the concentrated redevelopment effort have taken place in this central business district, around Fulton Street. There has been commercial spillover beyond, from the brownstone neighborhoods, revitalizing Atlantic Avenue as well, with its older ethnic strengths and burgeoning antique and specialty shops. Atlantic Avenue is now surprisingly reminiscent of New Orleans's Magazine Street in both character and renewal. The development office has devised a special Atlantic Avenue zoning district to protect just those urban and architectural features that would be lost, without controls, in the regenerative process.

With the Downtown Brooklyn Development Association, the planners have made steady progress in the Fulton Street area. Abraham and Straus and May's have held on,

while the famous movie houses died and traditional shopping turned into a redundancy of fancy shoes and wigs. But even with suburban defection and social change, this section still has the sixth largest sales volume of all U.S. central business districts, and one of the planners' proposals is a Fulton Street pedestrian mall. This seems about to go ahead. (Not the least problem is the repeated political, social and commercial mobilization needed, year after year, as every project inches forward one hearing at a time.)

A good deal less visible remedial action has also been under way. The Livingston-Bond garage that opened recently does more than provide parking space; it is a coordinating facility for off-street unloading, goods handling and new shops. Two handsome new, key buildings have been completed by the firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill—for Con Ed and the New York Telephone Company. Under careful planning persuasion, they feature such mandated urban assets as arcades and new subway entrances as well as far-above-speculative-quality design.

There have been disappointments. Dreams of large amounts of new office space have died with the real estate market. Housing plans have collapsed, brought on by the failure of UDC, and it is hoped that the city will pick up some of the housing pieces.

But nothing is too big or too small for the Brooklyn planning office. A clear indication of its eye and attitude is a series of tidy, tiny, "traffic island" parklets throughout the area—carefully repaved, with trees and benches. The strength of a local planning office is that, unlike a centralized agency, its attention is focused on every street corner. This is the only kind of planning that really works.

We have saved the best till last. Downtown Brooklyn not only has an unparalleled view of Manhattan, it has a wonderful waterfront. The development office's Fulton Ferry waterfront plan ranges from the building of a small park and ferry slip, almost completed, to a pair of imaginative schemes to use a fine "modernistic" factory for the Brooklyn Museum Art School and the city-owned Fire Boat House for a Brooklyn Bridge Museum. (One of New York's secret treasures is the set of Roebling's inch-by-inch watercolor renderings of the bridge in the original wooden file cabinets in the base of the Brooklyn tower.)

Long range plans would link the area with the South Street Seaport on the Manhattan side. But it isn't necessary to wait for that to happen to explore the architectural marvels of the dramatic brick Empire Stores with their griffins and eagles and arched gates at the water's edge. Last one over the bridge this spring is a loser.