



NOVEMBER 2007

REVIEW OF DOCUMENTARY FILM ON WATERFRONT ISSUES IN NYC

by Michael Freedman-Schnapp (MUP '09)

There is a renaissance of sorts happening on New York harbor's waterfront. Since the early 20th century, when trains and automobiles replaced passenger ferries, commercial use has dominated New York City's waterfront. Now, in the wake of massive investments in New Jersey's container terminals shifting the vitality of the commercial port to the west, a motley of recreation-seekers, environmentalists, developers and politicians have turned their eyes towards the waterfront as a key resource for the area's growth.

The most visible part of this rediscovery of the water's edge is the private residential developments rising all along the harbor—from modernist towers going up in Williamsburg, Brooklyn to faux-Swiss chalet style condos sprouting in Jersey City. Yet in the shadows of these buildings are new parks, waterside bicycle trails, intrepid recreational boaters and a still-essential working waterfront of tugs, barges and fuel depots. Between these forces that meet at the high tide line lies a complex and rapidly-changing debate.

City of Water, a 30-minute film directed by Loren Talbot of the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance and Jasper Goldman of the Municipal Arts Society, explores the fissures of this debate and lands squarely in the camp of promoting recreational opportunities and preserving commercial uses on the waterfront. The film raises important questions about the wisdom of allowing large, primarily market-rate residential towers along the waterfront complemented by

small, semi-accessible strips of parkland for the public.

In the film, Philip Lopate, author of the 2004 book *Waterfront: A Journey Around Manhattan*, calls this new paradigm for the city's edge a "weird tradeoff" that brings no "real interaction between the waterfront and the streets that about it... taking out all the street life."

New York City Deputy Mayor for Eco-

bor) counter Doctoroff point by point. They eloquently state that the well-paying jobs at the ports, fuel depots, ship repair facilities and waterfront factories support tens of thousands of blue-collar families throughout New York City. Although these facilities continue to undergird the region's economy, they face imminent displacement from residential, big-box retail and hotel developments.

Doctoroff's vision for a gleaming "harbor district" contrasts with that of another member of the Bloomberg administration in the film, New York City's Director of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, Rohit Aggarwala. Emphasizing the need to keep sewage out of the harbor, create green roofs, and adopt sustainable waterborne transit, Aggarwala seems to be singing from a different hymnal. *City of Water* shows the contradiction of Bloomberg's develop-

ment and sustainability plans by the juxtaposition of these two administration officials—though the administration would insist they are one and the same.

Prominent in the film are numerous local advocates who steadily bring more people onto the water in rowboats, sailboats, water taxis and even for competitive swims in the Hudson River. *City of Water* makes a convincing case for linking water access, recreation and improvement of the harbor water quality. Erik Baard, founder of the Long Island City Community Boathouse, memorably compares the current experience at the water's edge to a gorilla in a zoo that must not be touched, but rather

(Continued on pg. 10)



ment and sustainability plans by the juxtaposition of these two administration officials—though the administration would insist they are one and the same. Prominent in the film are numerous local advocates who steadily bring more people onto the water in rowboats, sailboats, water taxis and even for competitive swims in the Hudson River. *City of Water* makes a convincing case for linking water access, recreation and improvement of the harbor water quality. Erik Baard, founder of the Long Island City Community Boathouse, memorably compares the current experience at the water's edge to a gorilla in a zoo that must not be touched, but rather

economic Development, Daniel L. Doctoroff, appears in *City of Water* as the voice of the city planners, politicians, developers, real estate interests and construction trades that are responsible for bland riverside developments like Queens West in Long Island City and Newport, a master-planned "mixed-use" community in Jersey City. Saying that the working waterfront should be kept in areas only "where it makes financial and spatial sense," Doctoroff creates an aura of inevitability for this type of development.

Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez (D-Brooklyn/Queens) and Captain Andrew McGovern (who runs the Sandy Hook Pilots, a group that steers all container ships within New York har-



City of Water

Continued from p. 3

observed. He then postulates, "When people get into the water, they care about the water and they become the best constituency for the health of the water systems."

Long-time watchers of New York City development politics and waterfront policy (litmus test: what does the acronym C.S.O. stand for?) may not find a wealth of new information in the film, nor will their perspectives be challenged. However, they might find inspiration in the carefully-crafted cinematography or new language used by the wide range of interviewees. Those beginning to wade into the deep end of local waterfront politics will discover an excellent and engaging, if brief, primer on a range of salient issues.

City of Water favors the approach to community-based planning championed by Jane Jacobs that has driven the Municipal Arts Society and Metro-

politan Waterfront Alliance's recent work in the city. The two successful community-oriented waterfront projects discussed in the film—Hunts Point Riverside Park in the Bronx and Stuyvesant Cove Park on Manhattan's east side—are gentle interventions on the existing built environment that simultaneously transform green spaces in lieu of radically shifting current uses.

The question remains as to whether a united community can ask for anything more in the face of a massive political will to build anything and build it now. Gone unmentioned in the film is the seminal battle over the Greenpoint-Williamsburg waterfront, perhaps for fear of discouraging would-be activists. In that fight, the local community pushed for a more compatible type of development whose scale would better integrate into the existing neighborhood. Yet the erection of a vertical glass box by the Toll Brothers shows the score of that fight. If anything, *City of Water* highlights the need to get involved

and get involved now. As Rep. Velázquez notes, once the waterfront is redeveloped, "That will be it. The waterfront will be gone." ■

Next Showing:

Friday, November 30th, 6:00 p.m.
at Center for Architecture
536 LaGuardia Place

The screening will be followed by a panel discussion about the future of New York City's waterfront.

Moderator: *Daniel Wiley*, Community Coordinator for Congresswoman Velazquez

Panelists: *Majora Carter*, Executive Director of Sustainable South Bronx; *Carter Craft*, Director, Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance; *Greg O'Connell*, Pier 41 Associates; *Professor William Kornblum*, CUNY

www.mas.org/cityofwater

INTRODUCTION TO URBAN DESIGN CLASS POSTER SESSION AT PUCK

Compiled by Michael Kodransky (MUP '08) and Theresa B. Do (MUP '09)



Urban Design Professors Steve Stainbrook (left) and John Fontillas (right).

"Students showed why New York City is such an invaluable urban lab to work and learn in, but it was astonishing the extent to which they demonstrated a rather robust physical planning and urban design toolkit for approaching the challenges posed by (re)developing Seward Park."

-Steve Stainbrook

"In a short period, students produced incredible concepts that were elegant and thoughtful. What makes Wagner students so great is that they can combine design and policy matters, resulting in efficient real-world changes."

- John Fontillas



Students critique each other's concept boards on the redevelopment of Seward Park.