

MY BROOKLYN – TRANSCRIPT

Jamel Shabazz: When I picked up the camera there was something magical about holding that instrument in my hand. I saw magic, I was able to see things differently. I grew up in Red Hook Housing Projects in South Brooklyn. I was born in 1960, and my family for some reason had migrated there. The majority of the people who lived in that complex had Southern roots and it was family, the neighbors looked out for one another. You see stoops where young girls were doing other girls' hair. This is before bottled water, when we grew up there was no bottled water. This was kind of like normal to do back in the 70's, you wouldn't do it now, but it was something that was customary. The community that we lived in was Black and Hispanic for the most part. We had Cuban, we had Dominican, we had people from Panama. This is in Prospect Park, 1980, where surprisingly kids were swimming in the water. It was just a really good time. And then all of a sudden, everything just changed. There's nothing wrong with that, but it still saddens you when you see it. Because I meet people now and they say, "I live in Bed Stuy," and you're from Russia, you're from France. It's like, wow. So it's like, people have been replaced. Gentrification is real. People do need a place to live, but my whole thing is, what's happened to the people?

Kelly: This Brooklyn, the one of graffitied subway cars and stoop life, was the one I moved to in the 1980's. I didn't know it at the time, but I was part of a new wave of migration to the area. Like a lot of people, I had come to New York right out of college, following my dream of becoming a filmmaker. I chose to live in Park Slope, a residential neighborhood close to Downtown Brooklyn, because the rents were cheaper than Manhattan and it was a diverse community that reflected a lot of my values.

The city was coming out of some hard times, but new people were moving in, buying and renovating brownstones, and starting small businesses. I liked the neighborhood feel, and the mix of old and new. Over the next two decades I lived in six neighborhoods in Brooklyn, places like Boerum Hill, Fort Greene and Clinton Hill. I loved Brooklyn. And a lot of other people seemed to like it too. By the year 2000, the influx of newcomers had transformed these neighborhoods. Brownstones sold for three million dollars. Brooklyn had become a hip, expensive brand.

Don't get me wrong. Some of the changes were appealing to me. But over the years I noticed my African American and Puerto Rican neighbors were moving out, and I started to feel like the neighborhood character that drew me to Brooklyn was slipping away.

Except for Downtown Brooklyn. There, nestled in between all these brownstone neighborhoods, was a stubborn holdout against gentrification: Fulton Mall. It was an 8 by 3 block area centered on Fulton Street right off Flatbush, across the bridge from lower Manhattan. It was always bustling with people who travelled there from all over Brooklyn to shop and socialize.

Jamel: There was just something special about that place. That's an area you can go to and you are definitely going to see people you went to school with. I can actually get down here at twelve o'clock in the afternoon and leave at 7 o'clock at night, cause I'm seeing so many wonderful people and my spirit is being rekindled. I'm engaging in so many

conversations. And this was the place to be at. Downtown Brooklyn was the nucleus. All buses, all trains, pretty much brought you Downtown Brooklyn.

Kelly: Then, in 2002, the city announced that big changes were in the works for Downtown Brooklyn.

Bloomberg: New York is in a fierce competitive worldwide competition. We must offer the best product and sell it forcefully. We will launch the Downtown Brooklyn development plan, giving it room to grow for the next century. When completed, it will make Brooklyn a rival of Los Angeles for office space. Take that for stealing our Dodgers!

Kelly: This grabbed my attention. I didn't often shop at Fulton Mall, but somehow its survival mattered to me. I had grown up in parts of Canada and New England, and I had moved to New York because of the possibilities it offered for expanding my world, for interacting with people from different backgrounds. Every neighborhood I'd lived in had changed, displacing the people who felt they belonged there, and I knew my presence helped fuel that change. What was Brooklyn becoming? Who was it for? And who was calling the shots?

MAIN TITLE

Rahsun: Growing up in Brooklyn, you know, my first little shot at entrepreneurship, I used to get Downtown at 9 o'clock in the morning on Saturdays, and I used to have two dozens of roses, and I used to sell a stem of roses for 50 cents. I got a little name down here on that corner, you know there was a man who had a store there, and he used to call me "Rosie" like that there.

Kelly: I met Rahsun Houston when I went down to Fulton Mall to take a closer look at the area. A social worker with deep roots in Downtown Brooklyn, Rahsun introduced me to a lot of the local businesses owners.

Beltman: Come to Fulton Mall, Hoyt and Fulton, where the sales are always famous. This is what you need, the Beltman, 11 years. I got socks, everybody needs socks.

Sandy: We have the Fry bake with salt fish, we have curry chicken, curry potatoes, stew beef, curry shrimp, curry beef, oxtail, dumplings ...

Joyce's Customer: I just retired and I moved to Delaware, and I come all the way from Delaware to Brooklyn to get my hair done.

Husband: Even with the bad parking, I'm still willing to take her here because she loves the shop so much.

Gift: This is A&B Bookstore. We specialize more in African American, that's the community we really serve. So if somebody wants to know about their Caribbean history, this is the place that they come, it's a place of learning.

A&B sales clerk: This right here is Street Knowledge Publishing, we call it urban fiction. It's a lot to do with the ... I guess they make a lot of comparisons to the hip hop music, this is hip hop, in words.

Fino guy: Young kids, they will wear this type of colors in the church. The older men will wear this color, they like the basic colors, the black, the grey, the blues. What we call the Godfather style. A lot of the ministers on television, you see them wear a lot of these nice long suits, different colors and stuff like that. Back in the days, they called it "zuit suits."

Stanley: It just has that urban feel, where you can feel free, dress how you want to dress, speak how you want to speak, not feel ... you know what I mean? Like you don't belong a certain place.

Arnold: We have all kind of celebrities come here. We got Isaac Hayes, he keeps a bald head, but all he wants us to do is trim his beard, which he really doesn't want anybody to really touch. So I do that. And then we got Flava Flav who comes in for the shape up, Jack shapes him up.

Jack: Flava!

CD Salesman: I've been a vendor out here since 1974. I got a product now that I have a lot of peace in selling. I have one of the biggest collections of Malcolm of anybody in the country. I have King, I have a large collection of King, if you go in the store you'll never find it.

Hair Customer: It's an old cliché, but you know, the melting pot theory. You pour all of these different people and things and ideas and differences into this pot, and you goo it out, and it's all really tasty.

Rahsun: It's the harmony of Downtown, it's those little things that you can't really go nowhere else and do. That's the reason why I love Downtown.

Jamel: When I think about Fulton Street Mall, personally for me as a photographer, the musical soundtrack to the mall and DT Brooklyn is jazz, R&B, it's reggae, and it's hip hop. So all that music makes up that area. I mean, a lot of music videos were made down there because that was the heartbeat of Brooklyn, so a lot of artists did go down there to produce music.

Kelly: The music scene in the 1980's and 90's had revolved around the Albee Square Mall, an enclosed pavilion right in the middle of the Fulton Mall. It was written about in songs by the Beastie Boys, Jay Z and -- most famously -- Biz Markie.

(Albee Square Mall song)

Dezo: You had Big Daddy Kane, you had Biz Markie down here in the mall like every other day. These guys went to school down here, and sometimes on the corner you would see like a group of guys standing there, and they'd all be sitting there rhyming to each other. That was when the big chains was out, and everybody used to wear the big chains. The major

jewelry shops who sold those chains were in the ASM.

Jamel: As we transitioned from boom box to walkmen, guys still carried their boom boxes with them, they played their music and just wanted to share it. These were breakdancers, they had the music playing and they would be performing, you know, doing their little b-boy thing, which was great.

Craig: Abraham and Strauss was retailing Fubu gear, by the 1980's and 1990's you all of a sudden had black designers, and they were designing for and selling to a young urban audience producing what we describe now as a kind of hip hop culture which was moving across the United States, but its roots are right here in NY.

NY1: Downtown Brooklyn is about to get a makeover to make it a vibrant, 24-hour hub complete with job, housing, academic and cultural opportunities.

Kelly: In 2002, the news media started releasing details about the Downtown Brooklyn Plan.

NY1: Officials say the plan will provide much needed office space, create thousands of office and construction jobs, build new housing units, and preserve and generate tax revenues.

Barron: They started telling us that something was coming into Downtown Brooklyn. They're coming in with ideas of hotels and office buildings and parking lots for the office buildings ... The city council, we have power over land use, the rezoning, whether they upzone, and whether commercial turns to residential and vice versa, so we knew that we would have some say so in this.

Kelly: The core of the Downtown Brooklyn Plan was a change in zoning that would have a massive impact on the Fulton Mall area. It would allow 30 and 40 story buildings in areas that had been, at most, six stories high. It would also allow for residential development in an area that had historically been only commercial.

Barron: I believe that this is an overall gentrification plan, and "gentry" is the clue. If you look at that, that means the elites. The upper class, they want to come back, and even the middle class is going to suffer. And forget the lower class, in this class stratified system, we are definitely going to suffer.

Kelly: It was true that my neighbors from the upscale, surrounding communities weren't shopping at Fulton Mall. Even so, the area was hugely profitable. It had long been known as the third most successful shopping district in New York City, right after Fifth Avenue and Madison Avenue in Manhattan. I decided to talk to people in my neighborhood to find out how they felt about the mall.

Woman at Farmer's Market: The Fulton Mall? Oh. I don't shop there, if that's what you're asking. It's kind of rundown and the stores aren't very good, so I wouldn't really go there to shop.

Man: I think the FM is a great space, I'm a sneaker lover and I'm a fashion lover and being able to dip in and dip out, and get that experience with the Pakistani Indian man, the Asian person, the McDonald's, Macy's, that mixup, that's Brooklyn, that's Fulton Mall.

Woman: I think conceptually it's a really great idea, it's a public space, pedestrian area, people can walk around and shop. But in reality, I wouldn't want to be there at night, the types of stores are what you'd find in a B grade mall.

Man: I didn't know you could get a Scarface beach towel, but you can, apparently, on the Fulton Street Mall.

Kelly: It's the third most successful shopping area in NYC.

Man: Well, McDonald's sells a lot of hamburgers too, it doesn't mean they're any good. So I would sort of think about it that way. As they say, you can't polish a turd.

Radessa: Occasionally I go there, but not that often. Nothing interests me there now except Macy's sometimes.

Allison: What's your opinion of it, just as a space?

Radessa: It's nice. In general it's nice. I don't want to see it go. Because a lot of people like the Fulton Mall. My daughter, my grandchildren love to go there to shop and it's been there for a long time.

Erich: I think it's a really weird space and I don't know how to interact with it, and I think they should just make it go away. But I'm also worried ... maybe it's like a race thing, too, because it seems like people do shop there. So maybe there's stuff for African Americans that ... I don't know ... maybe that's part of it. It kind of feels like it might be.

Alvin: It may not be aesthetically appealing for someone to go there now, but some people have had roots here for 20, 30, 40, 50 years. So what do we tell them? Oh well, you don't matter because this new person who's been here for six months has enough money to say you should be gone?

Kelly: Even though we all lived in the same neighborhood, when we talked about Fulton Mall it was like we were in different universes. It was common for white people to talk about Fulton Mall the way these folks at the farmers' market did. And while a lot of black people didn't shop at Fulton Mall, they never put it down in the same way. On the internet, things got even more polarized. Whenever gentrification came up, there were hundreds of posts about the pros and cons of the changes Brooklyn was going through. People concerned about what was happening were called "whiny white folks trying to save a trashy, ghetto mall." There were references to crack, SUV's and gold teeth. Being anti-gentrification was equated with being "pro-stabification" and "pro-shootification." Some old timers just wanted new people to leave. Other posters thought longtime residents should just be thankful their neighborhoods were improving.

This stuff hit me close to home and brought all my questions about the racial dynamics of neighborhood change to the surface. After being priced out of a few Brooklyn neighborhoods, I had moved to Fort Greene in 1999. At the time, it was a predominantly black community, and the cheap real estate allowed me to become a homeowner – I bought an apartment and renovated it with my husband.

I loved living in Fort Greene, especially after I had a daughter, but it was starting to go through some of the same changes I had lived through in other neighborhoods. What was the impact of my presence in my neighborhood? Was the kind of change I kept seeing inevitable? At the very least, I thought I should understand something about how my neighborhood, home to some of the most beautiful housing stock in NYC, had fallen on the hard times that now made it possible for me to live there. I turned to historian Craig Wilder for some help. He lived in a nearby neighborhood undergoing some of the same changes.

Craig: We're in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. I spent the first 21 years of my life here, and went to school in this neighborhood, grew up here and ultimately actually studied the neighborhood.

Craig: Bedford Stuyvesant was virtually all black by the time we were born, my mother remembers it as an integrated neighborhood. She grew up in a neighborhood where there was still lots of Jewish families, lots of Irish families, and her Dad bought the brownstone that she was born in and that we grew up in back when it was a predominantly white neighborhood and there were very few black families. One by one, neighborhoods changed rather dramatically in Brooklyn. The nickname for my neighborhood was “Do or Die, Bed Stuy” by the time I got to high school and college. And I remember the struggles that parents like my mother had, finding decent schools for us to go to and worrying about what happens to young black boys and young black girls in a city and a neighborhood that really is being overwhelmed by crime.

Craig: What basically Brooklyn faced was what cities across the United States faced. You know, the first great challenge that's going to really reshape urban space is the Great Depression. And our attempt nationally to actually respond to the Great Depression has left lasting scars on American urban space.

Kelly: Craig explained that one of the government's main strategies for stimulating the economy during the Depression was encouraging people to buy homes. For the first time, the government began securing mortgages. At the federal level this strategy might have been well intentioned, but things got complicated when they had to determine which areas were safe for lending.

Craig: At the local level they began to work with what were always referred to as sort of “community experts.” Rarely were they actually in the community, and their expertise was largely in banking and insurance and real estate development. And what they did is they divided Brooklyn up into 66 neighborhoods and assigned these neighborhoods

names and grades. A was excellent, B was very good, C was caution, and then D was “danger.” And D was colored red on maps. These grades were not given for things that are obvious. So a beautiful neighborhood didn’t necessarily get you an A. A neighborhood with railroad tracks running through it and dilapidated industries didn’t necessarily get you a D. But one of the most consistent ways of figuring out what grade a neighborhood was going to get was simply race and ethnicity. The reality is that any neighborhood that had 5 percent or more black population immediately got a D. Bedford Stuyvesant gets a D at a time when it’s about 95 percent white.

Kelly: Over the years, I had heard people talk about redlining, but I never fully grasped what it meant. Neighborhoods with any black people, like Bedford Stuyvesant and Fort Greene, were put under a kind of financial quarantine. Mortgages, or even home equity loans, were impossible for anybody to get.

Craig: For the 95 percent of Bedford Stuyvesant residents who aren’t black, what it meant was actually that they faced a choice: they could stay in their houses and watch those houses decline in value, or they could try and get out of that investment as quickly as possible and move into one of the neighborhoods that were being developed in the suburbs and in South Brooklyn under a promise of racial purity, under a promise that this would not happen to them again.

Jamel: It’s when I moved into East Flatbush that I start to see that the Hasidic Jewish community that I felt was well-grounded, they just started to leave immediately. In a matter of five years, they were gone. And we couldn’t understand why. I had no idea why they moved out.

Kelly: By 1970 half a million whites had left Brooklyn. The beneficiaries of segregation were the developers who were selling them new homes. Blacks and Latinos, ineligible for loans and barred from many suburbs, were more and more concentrated in urban areas. Brooklyn became home to the largest black community in the United States.

Craig: Hundreds of thousands of white people are moving South, toward the all-white districts, and thousands of black people and Latinos are actually moving north into these segregated districts. They’re packed into declining districts, and districts we’re withdrawing the public services from. The very resources that people depend upon to sustain a kind of quality of life are actually being withdrawn. And we’re moving them into these newly developed districts in South Brooklyn and Long Island. And so one of the great sort of myths, I think, of the process of ghettoization in NY and across the United States, is this idea that Black people and Puerto Ricans and non-white folk more generally, moved into neighborhoods and destroyed them. But the real story is that what they did is they kept the real estate market from collapsing. They built community gardens. They created block associations. And they did all of these things that actually kept, neighborhood by neighborhood, block by block, house by house, Brooklyn viable through one of the most miserable periods in the urban history of the United States. And Downtown is part of that story-

Kelly: Fulton Street's grand department stores started to follow their white customers to the suburbs, and DTBrooklyn emerged as a largely African American and Caribbean shopping district.

Craig: For me, DTBrooklyn is just sort of filled with all these memories, and even now when I walk down there I kind of see past the stores that are there, and I'm looking for Abraham and Strauss. We loved Abraham and Strauss. It just seemed like you walked into a museum. There were flowers everywhere and that woman who stood in the information booth which was actually a big marble thing, it looked like a vase, and you just sort of stared up at her and asked her questions. We wanted to talk to her all day long.

As a kid I just remember it's where you went every year, it was back to school shopping, it was summer shopping, every school play, this is where you went to actually get the outfit, the uniform, the costume, whatever it was. It happened DTBrooklyn. One of our favorite restaurants was always Junior's. So here you have what's basically a Jewish deli, which all of a sudden is actually selling soul food.

Kelly: By the 1970s, all but one of the big department stores had gone, and the flow of resources out of the city had taken its toll on Downtown Brooklyn.

Jamel: The first mall that opened up in Brooklyn was King's Plaza. And King's Plaza was in the heart of a community where people really didn't want you. More than likely, back in the 70's, you got attacked. So it became very dangerous to go out there, a lot of the stores kind of made you feel unwanted. So you just got to the point where, why deal with this when I can just go 20 minutes from my house, 20 minutes in either direction you're Downtown Brooklyn.

Craig: And then a new group of entrepreneurs actually found space downtown, and created new businesses, new industries, new services. These were great entrepreneurs in some ways, these businesses knew how to respond the demographic changes in their community and to continue to make a profit.

Raul Gift: When you come here in the 1980's, 1988 when I was here, nobody wanted to be downtown. We used to pay \$2,500 a month. And our third to fourth month, we couldn't pay the \$2500, and we went to our landlord. He so wanted this building to stay rented, that he knocked off \$500 from the rent. So we were here when nobody wanted to be here.

Craig: These kinds of wars about space, I think, need to be dealt with a little bit more honestly. And the process of gentrifying Brooklyn is not necessarily a process of making Brooklyn a better place to live. We were supposed to learn something from our history. Last time we took millions of people across the United States, and we basically imprisoned them in small sections of cities, and we set public policy that destroyed many of their lives. And now 40 years later, we've decided that those neighborhoods have value and so we're in the process of distributing them and disbursing them again for the convenience of someone else.

Commissioner: We will now return to the public hearing relating to DTBrooklyn.

Amanda Burden: We're hearing testimony, hearing thoughts, hearing concerns, and over the next few months we'll make our decision.

Kelly: The public hearings on the DTBrooklyn Plan began with the plan's advocates presenting their case.

Burke: Once approved, the development plan will generate 8,000 construction jobs and over 18,000 permanent jobs, as well as 1,000 housing units and \$100 million in public infrastructure improvements.

Kelly: But some business owners had seen the environmental impact statement, which projected 100 small businesses, employing 1,700 people, would be displaced by the plan. And it actually said the businesses that would be displaced "are not of substantial economic value to the city" and "do not contribute substantially to neighborhood character."

Austin So: For many decades Asian immigrants, as you may know, were banned from entering the U.S., and when that ban was lifted, the first place that Korean Americans settled down in and opened small stores was Fulton Mall and Church Avenue. As a matter of fact, my own family was a part of that trend. I wonder what would have happened to our American Dream if we were suddenly and without notice evicted from our home and our store with little compensation.

Commissioner: If it could be determined that the businesses that you represent could get space at a reasonable cost in this plan, would that be acceptable?

Austin: I think some of the owners would be willing to stay if they could get a reasonable price, but I don't see how that's likely happen.

Commissioner: What are the plans, if you know if any plans, to provide affordable business space for small businesses?

Walsh: One of the issues is, when you add a million square feet of space, that provides a lot more opportunities. That's the first issue. There will be many more options of space.

Commissioner: The fact that you said that one million square feet will be available, that doesn't necessarily mean that it will be affordable.

Walsh: That's right.

Commissioner: So what I'm trying to ask is, what efforts are being made so that space will be affordable to small businesses.

Walsh: Well, we're going to work with each and every one of the property owners to make that happen.

Kelly: Two months later, the city planning commission passed the plan, without making any changes to protect small businesses. A month after that it was approved by the City Council.

Barron: Where was all the discussion on affordability, on gentrification, is there any eminent domain going to be used? We didn't even go there. We approved it. After a hearing on it and debating it, we approved it. I think I was the only one that voted against it. And I was very very disappointed with my colleagues. We should have said "no."

Kelly: I wanted to find out where the Downtown Brooklyn Plan came from, and why such drastic changes were deemed necessary in an area that was already so profitable. I decided to start with the most obvious place: the Department of City Planning.

Purnima: The idea was that this area is attractive, there are these business owners willing to pay a premium to be down here in Downtown Brooklyn, and yet the range of uses that you saw there was very limited. Why could people who live and work in Downtown Brooklyn not have access to a much wider range of uses, people were going outside of Brooklyn to do that kind of shopping, and there is absolutely no reason why Downtown Brooklyn cannot be that more diverse, more vibrant, a place for all economic strata, a place for all racial groups, a place for every kind of business to come and locate here.

Kelly: So instead of just serving a predominantly maybe black, Caribbean, lower income ... like what was missing?

Purnima: The range of uses. I think it's not just even that it was serving the minority communities that well. Now we are getting the area's first health food supermarket, in the Toren, which is going to serve everyone. A few years ago you could not have attracted something like that to Downtown Brooklyn. Do minorities not deserve a better range of food options in this area? A better range of clothing options?

Kelly: This didn't make any sense to me. Everybody who lived in Brooklyn knew there was a huge variety of chain stores just blocks from the Fulton Mall. Still, this idea about diversity had a lot of traction.

Joe Chan: The challenge that we're really faced with on the Fulton Mall. Number one is, it's not a race or a class challenge, but there is an issue of retail diversity. If you want to buy a cellphone, the Fulton Mall is a place where you will not be at a loss of places to go. If you want to buy a pair of sneakers.

Kelly: Joe Chan was at the center of every discussion about development downtown. City planning might have passed the plan, but Joe Chan was in charge of implementing it. A lot of people, including reporters, got confused and referred to him as a public official. In reality, he was the head of the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, which received money

from the city as well as donations from private interests like real estate developers. I met with Joe Chan and asked him about the rationale for the DTBPlan.

Chan: Ten years ago, not all of my friends would live in Brooklyn, and those who chose to move to Brooklyn chose to move to Brooklyn largely for economic reasons. Today, there are very few of my friends who would not live in Brooklyn, or who would not go to a bar or restaurant in Brooklyn. People are coming now because they're choosing a lifestyle. And that lifestyle being a little less mainstream, a little more creative and off the beaten path, and that's something we've got to capitalize on.

So if you think about Downtown Brooklyn as morphing into an exciting 24/7 downtown, a place where you can come on a weeknight and there will be retail strips bustling with people, people sitting outdoors at cafes, people heading to night classes, that's the type of vision that we're trying to advance.

Beverly: Right there was John's Bargain Store. You came down here and if you had money, you could get 2 pair of sneakers for \$1.99.

Randy: Off the table. What was the song? Rejects make your feet feel fine, rejects they cost \$1.99!

Kelly: Like many people, Randy Leigh and Beverly Corbin, longtime community residents and activists, were caught off guard when the Downtown Brooklyn Plan was passed.

Beverly: I was shocked that you know, this plan was even devised without even taking a poll from the people in the Downtown Brooklyn area who lived here, more or less than the people that shopped here.

Randy: You can't stop change. That's something we know we can't stop. But we invested a lot in this community, we built this community. They choose to revamp this place, to rezone it. And uh, to kick us out of here, basically-

Kelly: Randy and Beverly belonged to FUREE, a grassroots organization that was bringing DTBrooklyn residents together to advocate for the interests of the existing community.

Randy: This is our alternative plan here we're working on right now. This is to help with the fight, to show them it's not going to work, we don't want that here, this is our neighborhood, we're fighting to keep this.

Woman: I'd like to see Macy's stay. When I go to Manhattan, when I go to Macy's on 34th street, I feel lost.

Woman: I had no problem with the movie theater over there, and it hurt my feelings when they closed it. I sure wish they'd make me happy and put another one in its place, I don't ask for much.

Woman: I think a big library, a big resource library, we can do research, the high schools are close by, the kids can go do some research.

Tom Angotti: Development isn't the be all and end all of life in the city, and if you ask most people in neighborhoods what they're concerned about, they are also concerned about schools, transportation, health care, they care about many things.

Woman: I think when you're going into an area or a neighborhood and you want to invoke change, you have to get the voice of the neighborhood, you can't just do it arbitrarily because you can.

TITLE: THREE YEARS LATER – 2007

Ian McKellan (Over Downtown Brooklyn Partnership Video): From the intersection of Flatbush and Tillary, a new residential community is emerging. These new towers will transform Flatbush into a boulevard streaming with residents and neighborhood shops. Life along Flatbush will soon reflect the 24-hour nature of the city. Visitors will cross the Manhattan Bridge to explore an exciting world of new restaurants, hotels and cultural venues.

Kelly: Three years after the rezoning, the vision for downtown had changed dramatically. Instead of office buildings, and 18,000 jobs, we were getting a forest of luxury highrise condos. Between 2004 and 2007, developers broke ground on 19 new luxury condo and rental buildings, totaling almost 3,000 units. They felt out of scale and out of place, and they were marketed to a totally different group of people than the ones shopping in DTBrooklyn.

Alyssa: What essentially happened is, the game changed. Midway through the 2000's, suddenly these office jobs weren't coming and you saw the beginnings of a real estate bubble, a huge amount of capital ready to invest in real estate. It resulted in this shift in priorities that I think wasn't planned, but when there was money to be made, everybody wanted to make money.

Barron: When they build luxury condos, that doesn't bring jobs to the neighborhood. And let's say they did say, "All right we'll give you 25 percent of the construction jobs, or 30 percent." That's temporary. Cuz after it's built, those jobs are gone. And a condo doesn't bring you a job, that just brings some income for and profit for the developer.

Kelly: By 2007 the housing market was hot. I know because I got divorced and started looking for an apartment to rent somewhere near downtown Brooklyn. It was shocking, I had a good job, and even I couldn't find an apartment that would eat up less than half my take home pay. And forget about the luxury condos. They were starting at almost \$400,000 for a studio and went up into the millions.

Rahsun: This is the phone company, right here in Brooklyn. Everybody in this borough has paid their phone bill here. This is one of the huge complexes that are converting now, that's turning into condominiums. It seems like most of all the big major buildings that are

down here, slowly but surely they're being converted into lofts. And I don't think I'll know anybody personally that'll be moving here.

Kelly: Buildings that had been full of professionals for decades emptied out as they were converted to condos. The people who had worked in the offices and shopped at Fulton Mall, were gone.

Jeff: Verizon, which has turned into Bell Lofts, was here three years ago with 2,--- people in the building, and we used to feed them every day, and now I serve about 10 or 20 construction workers instead. And I've been doing that for the last year. And actually taking money out of my family's nest egg and borrowing from family members, just to keep the business afloat.

Arnold: The big buildings over here ... people are moving here who have a lot of money, so they're going to be looking for bigger stores to be opening up over here. It may shut down a lot of the smaller businesses like myself. But let's hope that these people that are moving into these big buildings will come down here and get their haircuts here. We'll keep it ten dollars, they don't have to worry. They probably might even put a cappuccino machine in or something.

Kelly: It was nice to think there was room for everybody at Fulton Mall, but the rezoning had created a kind of real estate feeding frenzy, and some landlords were raising rents in anticipation of big chain stores coming in. One store, Diamond Girl, announced they had to close because their rent increased from \$15,000 to \$45,000 a month.

Gift: What's happening in the DT area is the rent is going up so rapidly that I don't think our growth is fast enough to keep us here in the DTBrooklyn area. I think sooner or later it's going to push us out of the DT area.

Kelly: A lot of the small business owners say, "My rent has gone up so much since the rezoning," like A&B Books, for example. He says, "I'm struggle to survive." What about them?

Purnima: Change is always difficult. It doesn't get accomplished overnight, it doesn't get accomplished easily, and I think businesses, smart businesses learn to adapt. And while we are completely sympathetic to the fact that people go through difficult times, that's not a reason not to change. New York is a living city. It's been transforming for the last 200 plus years, and it is going to continue to transform.

Tom: When I hear people in government say, "oh, well, change happens, it's normal, let's just let it happen," I have to ask them in return, "What are you doing in government? Why do we need you?" We don't need somebody to sit back and say "We can't do anything, change is always good, let it happen." This passivity is really a mask for a very active promotion of new large-scale development.

Kelly: Tom explained that zoning, while it might seem technical, was a powerful tool at the city's disposal, and the Bloomberg administration was using it a lot. The Downtown Brooklyn rezoning was just one of 100 that together were impacting over 20 percent of the city, reshaping the landscape on a level unseen since Robert Moses built his giant projects in the 50's and 60's. It wasn't just commercial districts – residential areas were targeted too, like 4th Avenue in Park Slope, not far from the mall. Michelle de la Uz, whose organization has been building affordable housing in Brooklyn for 25 years, showed me the impact of that rezoning.

Michelle: This is Fourth Avenue, one of the busiest streets in NYC actually. And what happened was, the visual here is just amazing. If you turn around here, you can see above the BP sign, that was the height of all buildings, basically 4 to 5 stories. Developers were given the ability to go from 5 stories to 12 stories. Each floor has at least four apartments selling for more than \$700 a square foot. So literally the city of NY handed the developer millions of dollars of buildable rights without asking for anything in return. What was here were five rent stabilized properties with 48 units of housing that were affordable. And what happened was demolition, and no requirement to replace those 48 units of rent stabilized housing, no requirement whatsoever, and the creation of luxury housing.

Michelle: NYC is a highly segregated city, and it has only become more segregated. And the inequity has grown under this administration very very significantly. The city of NY has literally rezoned thousands and thousands of blocks, downzoning to protect “neighborhood character” primarily in upper middle class communities that are primarily white, although not exclusively, and upzoning in communities primarily of color that are working class contributing towards significant gentrification and displacement. That is not normal change. That is public policy specifically creating the change.

Barron: You know who determines the agenda in NYC? The mayor, Michael Bloomberg, developers, and the speaker of the city council. They determine whether they want gentrification, they determine whether developers are getting \$100 million worth of free city money. They call it subsidies. When we get free money, it's welfare. When they get free money, it's subsidies. Well, either we're on subsidies and they're on subsidies, or we're on welfare, and they're on welfare.

Kelly: Subsidies were originally intended to bring investment to distressed neighborhoods. But Alyssa Katz showed me three luxury buildings next to the Fulton Mall that were getting big tax breaks in a hot real estate market.

Alyssa: To our right over here we have the Toren, in front of us the Avalon Fort Greene, and to our left, The Oro. The Oro has more than 300 apartments, and each of those apartments is receiving an average of \$9,000 in tax abatements every year. So while most New Yorkers have to pay real estate taxes on their housing, Oro residents don't, and they won't have to for the next ten years.

Kelly: The ORO condo would receive almost 40 million dollars in tax breaks. The developer was not required to provide any public benefit, like affordable housing, in return.

Alyssa: Any of these buildings could have arrived here and not fundamentally transformed the area had the approach to investing in Downtown Brooklyn looked different. Had it really focused on integrating the strengths of the neighborhood that existed rather than seeing the existing community and the existing clientele of the retail as an obstacle. And it really rings up very powerful issues about race, about class and about what New York really should be.

Kelly: In fact, the Pratt Center had led the creation of an alternative plan for the area. It proposed an integrated old-meets-new aesthetic, using vacant floors instead of demolishing buildings, enhancing the current retail to include hip hop fashion and music, and engaging a diverse group in the planning process. These plans were shared with the DBPartnership, EDC and City Planning, but they didn't implement any of the recommendations. I wondered what it would have taken for them to seriously consider the Pratt Plan.

John Tuys: Over the last eight years, the Bloomberg Administration, the City Council and the EDC have done every possible thing they could do to help a developer make a buck in NYC.

Mayor Bloomberg: If you don't like wealthy people or successful profit making businesses, you're not going to have a city. We want to attract those people here, that's where we get the money to help those who are less fortunate.

Woman: If the developers have all been incentivized to come and develop this part of Downtown Brooklyn, instead of just the incentive being "developers, we'll give you off on your taxes, we'll give you free land, we'll give you money for infrastructure if you'll just come here and build. Why isn't it also, "And developer, you will then get to build, but the part of the money you will pay us is going to go to improve things for the people who live here, and part of the incentive should have gone back to the community. And I'd like you to promise to work on that.

Chan: I'm absolutely committed to working on that.

Woman: I want you to succeed!

Kelly: Despite the pushback, the Downtown Brooklyn Plan was steamrolling forward. Landlord Al Laboz, who owned almost an entire block of properties adjacent to the Fulton Mall, started evicting all his tenants so he could sell the block vacant for a large highrise project.

Tom Angotti: Zoning isn't just a neutral tool, it actually increases the land value of property owners. So when the city goes in and upzones an area that big developers really want, overnight the value of the land can increase up to ten, 20, 30, 100 times its original value.

Jeff: I've gone to the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce, and I've spoken to the people in charge of development, And they told me, "Don't worry about it, there's nothing to worry about, we haven't even been approached about your block." This was about six months ago. Five months later I get a note in the mail saying I have to be out in 30 days.

Arnold: "Please take notice, that you are hereby required to quit, vacate, and surrender possession of the subject premises to the landlord by September 30, 2007." If we don't get out, Laboz may send a marshall here to evict us.

Jeff: What we're being offered is nothing. Nothing to relocate, nothing to move our equipment, nothing to store our equipment. So we're sort of in a bind.

Joyce: Someone has bought this building with a lot, lot of money. Very soon I think I have to move out, to find someplace. I have two kids in college, one is in London School of Economics, and one is in Williams College, second one. I have to support them, for that I spent 20 years to build up this business and now I have to move. Then I might lose all the customers.

Kelly: A similar situation was playing out a block away, where a new development threatened to eradicate the Albee Square Mall, the focal point of early Brooklyn hip hop.

Scherille: We are getting pushed out of our community, and we cannot stand here and allow it to happen. We have to voice our opinions, we have to organize and we have to fight.

Kelly: The proposal struck a nerve because the site was city land, and people expected some public benefits from the new project. Instead, the developer was planning another highrise, with 1,000 units of housing, 80 percent of which would be luxury. The retail component failed to include space for the businesses that would be displaced, or any commitment to living wage jobs.

Sitt (at hearings): Good afternoon everybody, ladies and gentlemen, for giving us the opportunity. My name is Joseph Sitt, I am the biggest developer and technically the biggest beneficiary of the whole DTBrooklyn Plann.

Kelly: At the center of the controversy was Joe Sitt, who had bought the lease for the Albee Square Mall in 2001. Back in 2004, he had lobbied heavily for the Downtown Brooklyn Plan.

Sitt: We are big national developers, it's true. But unlike every other development, this is our home town, this is where I'm born and raised, this is where I still live, this is the city that I really care so passionately about.

Kelly: But Sitt never had a chance to deliver on his commitment to Brooklyn. Just weeks after the rezoning, he announced plans to sell his lease. The 37 small businesses in the mall were suddenly facing the possibility that their building would be demolished.

Todd: This is the famous Cuzin's Duzin coffee right here, we make our stuff fresh on the spot, in the oven with a lot of lovin' cuz we're Cuzin's Cuzin. We even had Project Punch here, Mama Made Lemonade, we're coming out with another one called Ghetto Grape.

Thor Equities did what they had to do, as far as they sold it, cause it's business, strictly business. But I think they should have gave us a little more leeway and told us what was going on so we could prepare to do something else if that's what we wanted to do.

Ted: Pretty soon DTBrooklyn is going to be McDonald's, Taco Bell and big corporations. There's not going to be no individual owners down here.

Todd: Maybe they'll have an equity firm for us that we'll be able to get money from. I mean, we've invested money in here. We've kept this place up.

Ted: I've invested my life here, my friend. 26 years. When you have a business and you sell a business, you get money. I got nothing.

Kelly: Because the mall was on city land, the sale of Joe Sitt's lease had to be approved by the Economic Development Corporation, the organization that represents the city in all big development deals.

Woman: When FUREE went out to the mall and did outreach, and spoke to almost every small business owner in that mall, no one knew about this today, which again, is deplorable.

Randy: I've lived in the Downtown area you're trying to destroy for over 45 years. I've raised my children and I'm raising grandchildren. Excuse me, can I have your attention please? Thank you. I'm also a vet from Vietnam. People put their life savings in businesses and they're going to be displaced. It's small businesses who let us put stuff on layaway. When we don't have money for food they give us credit. Big businesses don't care, they don't know us, they wouldn't help us. This agency is supposed to represent the people. You should all be fired.

Wanda: How could the city go to sleep at night knowing that they're going to force this down the very throats of people that live in the communities? It is so unfair. And I am so angry that we have to come out here and speak and hope that we can touch your hearts, that maybe when you go back you'll say "We have to rethink it." You need to rethink it.

EDC guy: Thank you very much for attending.

Woman: Did you have any questions for any of the people who testified?

EDC guy: No, we do not.

Tom: The economic development corporation does more planning than the city planning department. They don't have to report to the city council, they're basically an arm of the mayor. And what they do is negotiate deals with big developers. What happens in those

negotiations is all behind closed doors. ~~There's no sunshine in these meetings,~~ we don't know what promises are made, it's a very shadowy portion of government. So something is really fundamentally wrong with handling development this way, taking it out of the public realm and putting it into an executive office that has no oversight.

Kelly: The Economic development corporation approved the lease transfer. All the small businesses were evicted, the new developer received 3.2 million dollars in tax breaks, and Joe Sitt walked away from DTBrooklyn with \$100 million because of the DTBrooklyn Rezoning.

Chan: I don't know the financial details. I would guess that Joe made money off the sale of the ASM site, as he's entitled to. He made an investment and he got a return on that investment. You know, it's a very easy thing to say that private sector interests should not make money but the only way they are going to invest, is if there's the potential to make money.

Kelly: Public private partnerships like the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership emerged during the fiscal crises of the 1970's when cities were abandoned by the federal government and desperate for private investment. But looking at Brooklyn today, I wondered, where was the public side of this relationship? The partnership was promoting big private development, and doling out hundreds of millions of dollars in city contracts, but it was shielded from public scrutiny. For example, it got contributions from developers, but didn't have to disclose who they were.

FUREE woman: Where's Joe Chan? Under his watch over 100 small businesses have been displaced to make way for luxury development and mostly low wage jobs.

Lucas: So right now we have some FUREE members who are going to go into the building to deliver a letter to Joe Chan that explains exactly how Joe Chan could work with us and other people in the community to produce real good jobs for DTBrooklyn and the surrounding neighborhoods.

Kelly: FUREE was working hard organizing people, but the DTPartnership was spearheaded powerful, well-connected players, some of whom had positioned themselves to make a lot of money off the DTBrooklyn Plan. Fred Harris, the Sr. Vice President of Avalon Bay, a national developer, built 800 units of luxury housing on Myrtle Avenue and was building an additional 800 on Bridge Street. Al Laboz, who evicted the businesses on Willoughby Street, sold Harris the land for the Bridge Street project for \$71 million, roughly five times its value before the rezoning. Greg Wolpert, of the Stahl Organization, was building a 50-story tower on Bridge St. Paul Travis, a former Vice President of the Economic Development Corporation, was a partner in the Citypoint project on the Albee Square Mall site. Developer Don Cappocia built Toren. And, I found out, Joe Sitt and several key board members were part of a business advocacy group that wrote the original DBPlan and gave it to the City Planning department.

And the results of all this? By 2011 there were 6,300 new units of luxury housing downtown. In addition, 700 affordable units were built, but some of these were for families earning as much as \$130,000 a year. Residential development would receive tax breaks for 15-25 years. In 2011 alone, these totalled more than \$200 million.

Craig: The process of gentrification is not about people moving into a neighborhood and other people moving out of a neighborhood. The process of gentrification is about corporations sectioning off large chunks of those neighborhoods, and then planning out their long term development. And in that process one also is planning out the removal of large numbers of people whose community attachments are there. It's actually about tearing down neighborhoods and building different neighborhoods. And the idea that the city doesn't have a role in making sure that the collective aims of the people are actually achieved in development is obscene.

Maisha: They said at the end of August the mall was coming down so they wanted everybody out. We asked if we could put a location, a sign in front of the mall where our new locations will be, and they told us no. We lost a lot of customers, people just don't know where we're at.

Joyce: I moved over here and thank god, most of my customers followed me. I got help from them.

Kelly: the city helped you?

Joyce: Not, no, not at all. I don't feel like I was treated right. I hope they consider the old community, I mean, to build up the new one I think they have to consider the old communities too. That's what community is, share. That's what I want.

Rahsun: You see how many people have moved out of here, Kelly? See how all the stores are gone now? These guys are just hanging on by the skin of their teeth, because they're going to be getting the pushout, too.

Kelly: In 2011 I met up with Rahsun Houston again, to see how all the new development was playing out on the ground.

Rahsun: You got all the major stores, they're coming in, the smaller stores are going out. We have the Sheraton Hotel on Duffield Street. Who thought about the Sheraton Hotel coming to Duffield Street? Are you kidding me?

Look at this, it's 3:30, look up and down this avenue right now, just look. All of these were businesses right here. Wow. The bagel guy. This block is completely abandoned now. Wow, this is Bridge Street. Complete total empty block. No stores open on this block.

Hey Leroy, how are you doing. These are guys and these are families that have been downtown all their lives. To tell you the truth I don't frequent downtown like I used to, because there is nothing here for me to come and frequent about.

Joe Chan: Things are going amazingly in Downtown Brooklyn. DTBrooklyn really over the last 18 to 24 months has re-emerged as one of NYC's premiere retail destination. You know, we've got Shake Shack, we've got a Creperie that's opening at 80 Dekalb Ave., we've got a Smash Burger that's opening in the same building. We've had an expansion of Brooklyn Fare, which is DTBrooklyn's first supermarket, and a very dynamic emergence of the Chef's Table there, which is the first eatery in Brooklyn ever to get 2 Michelin stars.

Lori Rafael: We have a great desire and a pent up demand for the same kind of shopping that everybody else has, so when the right physical and demographic and logistical setup presents itself, we can see those big boxes swooping in, and we have an influx of regular mall stores that's really going to put the mall back in Fulton Mall.

Jamel: This is in front of the Albee Square Mall. Part of me is missing right now. Not only is the structure of the mall gone, that's one thing, but the people are gone. So it's a hell of a thing to see, for me, having been a child of the 1960's, growing up, seeing things then and looking at how things are now, it's very troubling. There's no sense of joy, despite the countless cafes that open up and the restaurants, there's still an emptiness with me. Fine, I can eat in restaurants now that weren't there 20 years ago, but what I'd prefer is to see some of the people I used to eat with 20 years ago. I miss engaging them vs. being in a restaurant that I'm the only person there and I don't know nobody.

Arnold: The landlord saw the new hotels coming in, he raised the rent up high, shoot, he raised it up another \$2,000 a month.

Jack: Here we are, we tried saving the business, and now they're getting rid of us from here. It's crazy. It hurts, it really hurts.

Arnold: I know a lot of members of my family who left New York, because they can't afford the rent anymore. Now we're separated, I miss being around my family.

Jack: It's time to go. It's time to go. It's a dead end. And we're in the dead end.

Kelly: It occurred to me that there was a new kind of redlining happening, only this time in reverse. Soon a wealthier class of people would be calling Downtown Brooklyn their own, whether that meant living, shopping or hanging out there. A hundred thousand people a day had shopped at Fulton Mall – a population that was now being pushed to the margins of the city.

In 2010, my ex-husband and I finally sold our apartment in Fort Greene. Even though I made money off the sale, I couldn't afford to buy anything anywhere near Downtown Brooklyn. I ended up in Sunset Park, a few miles away, which is nice, but yet again, I

feel like my daughter and I are starting from scratch. I miss walking in my neighborhood and running into people I know. With time, I'm sure more people like me will arrive, and while part of me likes the idea of the changes that will come with them, another part of me fears this neighborhood will change too quickly, displacing my Mexican and Chinese neighbors.

When this area changes, I'll probably have more options than most of the people here. But this all has me wondering whether anybody benefits from a city where people have less and less ability to put down roots, to build community and to participate fully in public life.

Craig: This is not the only way that a city gets governed. This is not the only way that development happens. We actually have real choices, but it's not going to happen if we submit to a kind of defeatism which says that the corporations have all the power and the politicians are with them, so there's nothing we can do about it. And it's not going to happen if we actually don't get beneath the slogans. Because gentrification isn't a simple thing, it's actually a set of real decisions, a set of real decisions that ordinary people can intervene in, but we actually have to make that decision.

Kelly: In the summer of 2011, I invited a whole array of people from all over Brooklyn, to come and be filmed. I asked them, "What is Your Brooklyn?"

Ann: My Brooklyn is black, it's white, it's straight, it's gay, it's affordable.

Calixte: Going to parks with the kids and seeing people you've seen many times.

Frankie: My Brooklyn is old school, we stick together.

Pamela: Artistry and family ...

Isabel: A wonderful connection of neighborhoods

Lynne: Where people yell to one another from across the street because they want to know what's going on in your life.

Ken: There's a lot of different people crammed into Brooklyn, and that's one of the things I really love about it.

Woman: It's a place where I can raise my kids, and they can raise their kids.

Woman: My Brooklyn is fresh, drop and full of love.

Kelly: I hadn't felt hopeful in a long time, but that day I was touched by the fact that we all valued so many of the same things. Despite all the gentrification, there's still a really diverse community here. But it won't stay that way unless we can keep it affordable. We need to talk to one another about what's important to us. We need to connect the dots

between city policy and neighborhood change. And if what we value is being threatened, we need to advocate for what we really want and need.

Man: My Brooklyn is a place for people who love and respect Brooklyn, and the people of Brooklyn.

Dara: My Brooklyn is the United Nations, where flags used to line the streets from every country -- Russia, the Ukraine, Jamaica, Guyana, Haiti!

General Steele: Brooklyn!