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SQUARE FEET

Stalled Brooklyn Arts District Regains Momentum

By [TERRY PRISTIN](#)

For years, [Harvey Lichtenstein](#), the impresario who turned the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#) into an internationally known site for innovative productions, has dreamed of transforming the parking lots near BAM into a cultural district reminiscent of the Left Bank in Paris.

As exciting as this vision seemed to many residents of the rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods near BAM, it also stirred fears among longtime Brooklynites of a [Manhattan](#)-oriented enclave, where local artists would be snubbed. A recent decision by city officials may help to quiet some of those anxieties — and may finally give the long-stalled arts district some momentum.

Last month, Carlton A. Brown, a [Harlem](#)-based developer with deep roots in [Brooklyn](#), was chosen to lead the team that will build the cultural district's centerpiece. The \$385 million project, on city-owned land at Ashland Place and Fulton Street, opposite BAM's Harvey Theater, will have a residential tower with 187 units of mixed-income housing, 4,000 square feet of retailing and a 40,000-square-foot choreographic center to be anchored by the [Danspace Project](#), a 35-year-old organization that presents dance performances.

Mr. Brown's company, Full Spectrum, will develop the project with two architectural firms: Studio MDA of New York and Behnisch Architects of Stuttgart, [Germany](#).

Letitia James, the City Council member who represents the Fort Greene neighborhood that includes BAM, said she lobbied hard for Mr. Brown, who is African-American. "We are experiencing a renaissance in downtown Brooklyn," Ms. James said. "But there has been a notable absence of developers of color."

Full Spectrum's proposals also gained an edge among the field of six applications because half the units will be for low- and moderate-income tenants and because the unusual design will allow abundant air and natural light to flow through the residential tower, said Seth Donlin, a spokesman for the city Department of Housing Preservation and Development.

Though construction of the Danspace project is not expected to begin until 2009, officials of the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, a nonprofit group created last year to accelerate the process, say the designation of a developer is one of several signs that the cultural district is finally moving forward.

Work is scheduled to begin early next year on the 299-seat Theater for a New Audience at Lafayette and Ashland Avenues, which was designed by [Hugh Hardy](#) and [Frank Gehry](#). And the design process for a nearby 30,000-square-foot plaza is under way.

"Every project that has been committed to publicly is now on a finite design- and-construction timeline,"

said Joe Chan, the president of the partnership. “You’ve also got a city administration that is operating with an increased sense of urgency.” The city has pledged \$100 million through 2011 to the BAM cultural district, Mr. Chan said.

Mr. Brown’s company has extensive experience building subsidized housing, using complex low-income housing tax-credit programs and other incentives, but Danspace will be his first project in Brooklyn. Other Full Spectrum developments include two mixed-income condominiums at 116th Street and Fifth Avenue in Harlem — 1400 on Fifth and the Kalahari Harlem — and the Solaire in Battery Park City, which was hailed as one of the nation’s first environmentally sustainable residential buildings.

Raised in Jackson, Miss., where his company also has an office, Mr. Brown has lived in the borough for three decades. He has also played a role in Brooklyn’s cultural life as the chairman of Arts 651, a local nonprofit organization that focuses on art by descendants of African slaves. He was active in the coalition of community groups that raised concerns about Mr. Lichtenstein’s vision of the cultural district.

“The community saw themselves as a creative place with a lot of artists,” Mr. Brown said. “We just didn’t have the resources that we needed. Harvey thought you needed to bring in people from Manhattan — that there were not enough people to support visionary, cutting-edge arts.”

Mr. Lichtenstein, however, said it was mainly a lack of money that had slowed the arts district. “The turning point has been the administration’s putting much more emphasis on development of downtown Brooklyn,” he said.

The selection of Mr. Brown is not going to mollify all of the community’s fears about gentrification, said Brad Lander, director of the Pratt Center for Community Development, a Brooklyn-based organization. “But it does make a real difference when folks see development that strengthens cultures and values of diverse communities,” he said.

Mr. Brown said his partners had designed a model for urban living by integrating residential space aimed at different income levels with open space. “It takes an elongated Brooklyn street and stands on its end,” he said in an interview at his spartan office in Central Harlem. Of the apartments, 20 percent will be for low-income residents and 30 percent for residents who earn 80 percent to 130 percent of the area’s median income. The dance space, which will be turned over to the city, will be adjacent to the tower.

The tower will be five cantilevered blocks of apartments ranging in height from 6 to 14 floors. No resident will be more than six floors away from a shared terrace, said Markus Dochantschi and David Salazar, who met while working in London for the architect [Zaha Hadid](#) and later started their own firm, Studio MDA. The architects said that by breaking up the project into several midrise structures, they hoped to create a more neighborly and pride-instilling atmosphere than tenants might find in a large high-rise.

To finance the project, Mr. Brown said he intended to use “every form of subsidy you can find.” [Goldman Sachs](#), Full Spectrum’s financial partner in the Kalahari, also expects to invest in the Danspace project, said Alicia Glen, managing director of Goldman’s urban investment group.

Even before the finishing touches have been put on the design, however, the project has encountered a public-relations headache.

At the corner of the site is a former liquor store that was leased in 2005 to three young residents of Fort Greene and nearby Clinton Hill who planned to open a nightclub and recording studio called Amber Art and Music Space.

In August, just weeks before their planned opening — and after they say they had invested \$1.2 million — the city told them that the building would be condemned if the landlord did not agree to sell it, said Todd N. Triplett, one of the partners. “This took us completely by surprise,” he said, adding that the partners had received 7,000 e-mail messages of support. Amber has not opened.

Their broker, Eva M. Daniels, who owns a real estate company that bears her name, said the plans came as news to her as well. “If we’d been aware of it, we never would have shown the building,” Ms. Daniels said. The landlord, Juan Lopez, could not be reached.

Mr. Chan, however, said the city had made it clear for years that the site was earmarked for cultural uses and mixed-income housing. “This has been a very transparent process,” he said.

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