

Fulton Street Mall: New Strategies for Preservation and Planning



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fulton Street Mall: New Strategies for Preservation and Planning is a collaborative project of the Pratt Center for Community Development and Minerva Partners. Its goal is to lay the groundwork for Fulton Street Mall's future by combining the best historic preservation and redevelopment measures in order to preserve and nurture the Mall as a unique and vibrant public place.

The project was developed using a “values-based” preservation planning approach, a relatively new method for studying and planning the future of historic places. Values-based preservation planning recognizes that places – or spaces made culturally meaningful by use and users – are important to different types of constituents for different reasons. It takes into consideration that meaning and value change over time: in order to fully understand the meaning of a place, and its potential for the future, one must examine the various ways in which the place is valued by different contemporary constituents. This requires looking at the economy, the built environment, and the culture of a place, as a whole, before determining what should be retained or transformed. And it requires deliberately bringing the voices of Mall users into the conversation.



Over a year's research and consultation, we found that the Fulton Street Mall is an important place to many different groups of people who feel a strong stake in its future. Economically, the Mall is thriving. The

place has long supported – and still does support – social activity and social bonds woven out of economic activities and cultural expressions.

Like the Greek agora, Arab souk, near-Eastern bazaar, or American Main Street, the Mall is an economic marketplace that fosters many types of interaction, functionally serving as a public square that has considerable historical and cultural value. But despite its popularity among a diverse range of shoppers and visitors, and its profitability, it is often maligned by some who live or work nearby as a place in need of radical transformation.

This report details our research findings and proposes a number of actions designed to advance historic preservation, redevelopment, and community development goals in concert.

FINDINGS & STRATEGIES

FINDINGS

1. Fulton Street Mall's historic buildings are significant past, present, and future cultural and economic resources; they are currently underutilized, poorly maintained, and often hidden from public view.
2. The Mall has a thriving and diverse economy that supports a variety of retail types, with a balanced number of national chain stores and local independent shops, and a surprisingly strong network of small vendor-entrepreneurs.
3. Shoppers, workers, and visitors value the Mall as an important place that is counted on as much for social networking as for shopping.
4. The Mall functions significantly but poorly as a public space; deficiencies include the quality and quantity of standard amenities, as well as foreboding side streets leading to and from Fulton Street.
5. Misperceptions of the Mall among non-users present a significant challenge to preserving the contemporary culture of the Mall and nurturing its future.

STRATEGIES

1. Address the physical appearance of the Mall with innovative and culturally sensitive façade improvement, building conservation and new building design techniques that embrace the aesthetic theme of "old meets new." We believe this can be done with an administrative approach, developing and implementing new guidelines within the existing zoning framework.
2. Better utilize buildings by activating vacant upper stories and carefully planning a mix of uses (retail, arts/cultural, residential) that supports the dynamism and diversity of the Mall and makes it more of a 24-hour place. This can begin with several demonstration projects that model particular upper-floor uses at appropriate locations.
3. Promote and enhance the current retail themes found on the Mall: urban wear, Hip Hop fashion and music, uniquely Brooklyn.
4. Improve the public realm and enliven the side streets – through urban design, streetscape amenities, and cultural programming – to enhance the experience of shoppers and visitors on Fulton Street, as well as workers and residents to the north and south. This will facilitate the public gathering that takes place in this vibrant marketplace.
5. Engage a broad and diverse group of stakeholders in the planning process from this point forward.

NEXT STEPS

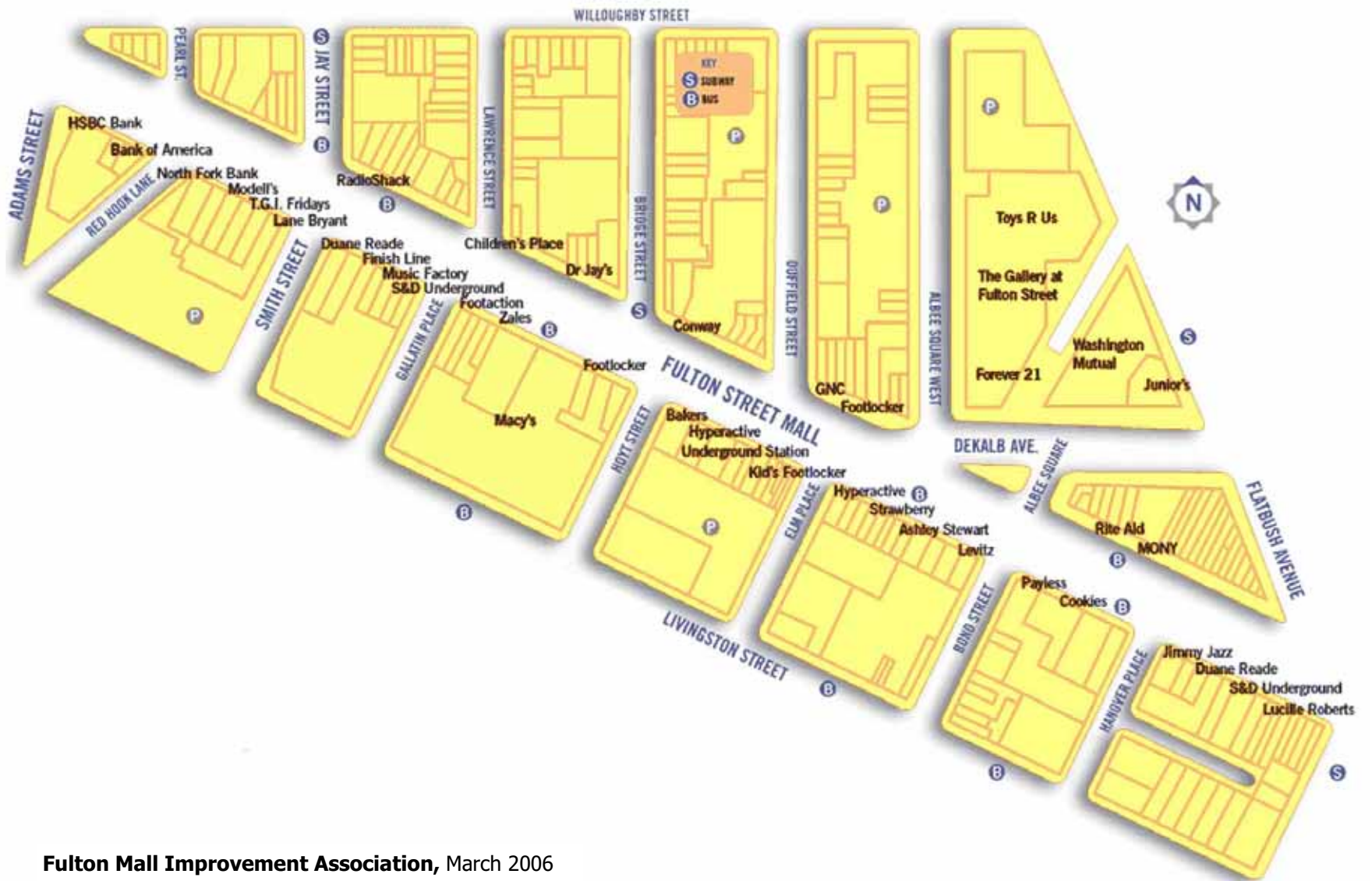
Changes to the Fulton Street Mall's built environment, managed in ways that resonate with historical patterns and traditions as well as the wants, needs, and styles of current shoppers and merchants, can broaden the Mall's constituency without displacing those who currently shop there. The solution to many of the short- and medium-term issues and opportunities of the Mall lie in the creative use, layering, or packaging of existing policies and programs.

It is important for planning activities to address Fulton Street at three scales: individual buildings; block fronts and assemblages; and the Fulton Street Mall as a whole. Because there are multiple voices guiding this thinking, solutions will also be multiple and varied.

- Model potential upper-floor uses by matching specific sites to expanded retail use, arts & cultural use, and mixed-income residential; and demonstrate creative application of existing funding incentives and policy strategies.
- Implement guidelines, incentives and enforcement for better building maintenance, culturally sensitive façade and storefront improvements, innovative signage strategies.
- Market the Mall based on its existing cultural strengths and retail mix.
- Address streetscape issues, lack of urban design amenities, and unappealing side streets.
- Create a planning task force with a diverse and broad set of stakeholders.

As the context of downtown Brooklyn grows and changes with new plans for office and residential development, Fulton Street Mall becomes an increasingly important resource. If old and new can be successfully combined, all the unrealized cultural and physical opportunities can be tapped, and many diverse voices can be brought to the table, the Mall will continue to serve as a vibrant commercial center and important social space for its current constituents while at the same time attracting new shoppers and visitors and strengthening its local support network.

In nurturing the past and the best possible future for Fulton Street Mall, we will be preserving a significant, unique and broadly appealing place in the heart of downtown Brooklyn.



Fulton Mall Improvement Association, March 2006

PREAMBLE

There are big questions about the future of Brooklyn's Fulton Street Mall. What will change? What should change? What shouldn't change? To answer these questions, we must first answer the question, "What is valuable about the Fulton Street Mall?"

This report offers some answers to the questions of Fulton Street Mall's past, present and future based on a year of study, observation, planning, and consultation. Our studies and recommendations are driven by a desire to understand the *whole* significance of the place – looking beyond the particular, narrow interests of one constituent group or another, one aspect or another. In the following pages, we identify the "values" of Fulton Street Mall, weigh them against the challenges and opportunities that face this downtown Brooklyn commercial hub, and recommend several specific strategies for retaining the vibrancy, diversity, and unique culture of the Mall while planning for development that will enrich its future.

We approached this project as planners, as community advocates, and as preservation advocates.



Brooklyn The Way It Was, 2003

As planners, we are committed to rooting plans for the future in data about the present. We collected data on a wide

range of issues: from interviews, surveys, historical archives (including documents and images), socio-economic data, government reports, photography, and mapping. Because of the prevalent biases about Fulton Street Mall among people who don't know it, we felt it was critical to ground our exploration in concrete data and detailed study of the place's contemporary conditions.

As community advocates, we are committed to change that responds to the needs of a wide range of groups with a valid stake in the present use and potential future of a place. For Fulton Street Mall, this is a broad and varied group – encompassing business and property owners, shoppers, workers, other Brooklyn residents, business groups, city officials, civic and neighborhood associations. Some of these groups have primarily economic interests, some have primarily social and cultural interest, some have historical or aesthetic interests; most have some combination of all these interests.

As preservation advocates, we are committed to conserving material from the past. Preserving old buildings, important stories, and significant memories creates richer built environments and richer lives. In terms of traditional historic preservation, some of the extant buildings on Fulton Street should be protected by public policy and materially conserved. But the real opportunity for preservation lies not in conserving a few lingering pieces of the past under glass, while the rest of downtown Brooklyn changes in ways incomprehensible

to the past. The real opportunity – also the real challenge – is to preserve the past in ways that make it relevant to the present and the future.

This challenge is one the stakeholders of Fulton Street face today, but it is reflected by a challenge facing the entire field of historic preservation. In the last 10 years, many professionals in this field have acknowledged the need to go beyond the traditional practice of identifying, assessing, and conserving architecture. How can preservationists recognize the non-architectural values of historic places and contribute to the conservation of the *place* itself? How can they meaningfully involve economic and social perspectives and non-expert intelligence in research and decision-making?¹

Fulton Street, with its future in question and with many types of value evident, provides an excellent opportunity to test methods for meeting these challenges. Hence, our work here has been built upon three key assumptions that weave together the perspectives of the preservationist, the community advocate, and the planner:

- 1) preservation of architecturally and historically important buildings is a means to an end, and not an end in itself;
- 2) the improvement of neighborhoods and commercial precincts should offer benefits to all, without displacement of the low-and moderate-income



constituents who frequently bear the burdens of new development without sharing the benefits;

- 3) acknowledging the multiple and diverse stakeholders in downtown Brooklyn means finding multiple solutions that don't privilege one group's interests over another.

From the community perspective, historic and cultural values are not separate qualities. Places are understood and experienced as wholes, and the presence of contemporary social and economic values has to be recognized. In so doing we enrich the planning effort, making it more inclusive and, we hope, more effective in preserving the best of our communities while allowing them to grow and change in positive ways.

PROJECT GENESIS AND METHODOLOGY

Fulton Street Mall: New Strategies for Preservation and Planning was sparked by the Summer 2004 passage of the Downtown Brooklyn Redevelopment Plan², which effected numerous land-use policy actions to enhance office development opportunities in areas surrounding the Fulton Street Mall. The plan allows for an additional 4.5 million square feet of Class A office space, a million square feet of retail, and 1,000 units of housing in and around downtown Brooklyn. It delineated two urban renewal and residential redevelopment sites on either end of the Mall – one at Adams and Fulton Streets; and one at the triangle created by Flatbush Avenue, Dekalb Avenue, and Fulton. To promote site assemblage, the Plan increases allowable floor area on the north side of Fulton Street. But nowhere does it



Downtown Redevelopment Plan
Downtown Brooklyn Council 2004

specifically set forth a vision for the Mall itself.



Expanded Development Areas
Downtown Brooklyn Council 2004

With the Plan clearly poised to have an impact on the existing built environment, two preservation organizations, the Brooklyn Heights Association and the Municipal Art Society, took an interest in the historic architecture of downtown Brooklyn, including several buildings on Fulton Street that they were concerned might be at-risk of demolition as new skyscrapers began to rise in the area. They began a campaign to protect these architectural gems through designation as New York City landmarks.

Initial observation of the Fulton Street Mall indicated that while historic structures are certainly a presence, the character of the

Mall was not derived from its architecture alone. It comes from the businesses that inhabit the Mall's buildings, and most importantly, from the people who frequent the Mall and infuse it with a kind of community vitality that is rare in New York City. While the use of landmark designation holds the potential to protect a few architecturally distinct buildings, protecting the *place* will require thinking beyond landmarking.

The Mall's complex "sense of place" is not easy to define at first glance. But what is readily apparent is that the environment of the Mall engages large numbers of people, many of them African-American and Caribbean, and that some of the most popular businesses are based in an urban aesthetic that is generally associated with African-American culture in New York and other cities.

The economy on the Mall has been thriving by all accounts. But following the passage of the Redevelopment Plan, there was a prevailing sense among the downtown business community that it was a place that needed improvement – perhaps drastic improvement. Some people essentially called for a reinvention of the Mall, entirely replacing its cacophonous mix of businesses, people, and signs with a more comfortable and sanitized feel.

These early observations inspired us to begin thinking about how we might contribute positively to the energy that would

soon be put toward improvement of Fulton Street and downtown more broadly. The impulse of preservation organizations to vouchsafe the area's interesting history in the face of pending change had already touched a nerve with the local business community and with policy makers who felt the improvement of the downtown business environment might be compromised by preservation efforts. In other words, the gap that frequently opens between neighborhood advocates and the development community became apparent. On one side, a handful of groups were speaking out against the potential demolition of important structures; on the other side, decision makers were saying the structures might in fact be standing in the way of progress.

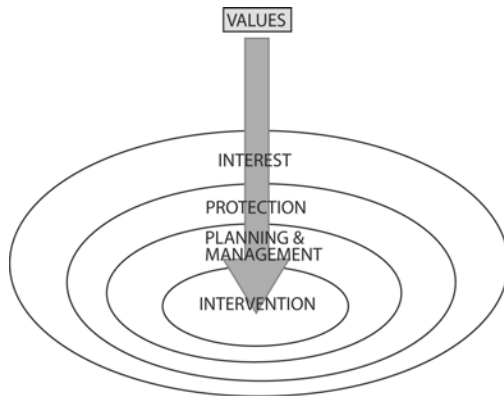


Our view was that both parties had valid things to say. But where, in this dialogue, was the voice of the large number of people – by some reports 100,000 per day³ – who create and partake of the street culture and commerce of Fulton Street Mall? Who were those people, and what did

they think about the Mall? What, in their view, would be worth preserving? What would constitute "improvement"? The opinion of Mall users seemed to us to be an important key to defining its character, strengths, and weaknesses. And yet it looked as if plans for the Mall's future might be shaped without their input.

Fulton Street Mall: New Strategies for Preservation and Planning

was formed as a collaborative project between the Pratt Center for Community Development and Minerva Partners with the goal to examine the Mall from all angles and deliberately bring the voices of Mall users into the conversation. The project was developed using a "values-based" preservation planning approach, recognizing that places – or spaces made culturally meaningful by use and users – are important to different types of constituents for different reasons. It takes into consideration that meaning and value change over time. In order to fully understand the meaning of a place, and its potential for the future, one must examine the various ways that the place is valued by different contemporary constituents. This means looking at the economy, the built environment, and the culture of a place as a whole, before determining what should be retained or transformed.



Values and Heritage Conservation.
 Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles 2000

The project received important start-up funds from the J.M. Kaplan Fund, and additional support came from the New York Community Trust, Surdna Foundation, and Pratt Institute's Faculty Development Fund. The local business community recognized the importance of understanding the place from various points of view – including that of Mall users – and enthusiastically and generously encouraged the work, with grants coming from the Downtown Brooklyn Council and the Metrotech BID/Fulton Mall Improvement Association.

From July 2004 to September 2005, a number of studies were conducted to illuminate the past, present, and future potential of the Mall. Completed studies include:

- Historical research
- Interviews, surveys, focus groups
- Ethnographic research and behavioral mapping
- Land-use, market, and zoning studies
- Policy research
- Tools/incentives research
- Case studies/comparables



Researchers and contributors to the studies included professional preservationists and planners, Pratt Center staff members, and students: graduate students from CUNY, the New School, and University of Pennsylvania; preservation, planning, and architecture students from Pratt Institute (See Acknowledgements). Student work, led by project principles and esteemed colleagues, was a vital source of creative input.

THE HISTORY OF FULTON STREET

Fulton Street has been the commercial main street of Brooklyn since the early 1800s when dry goods merchants first established businesses on “lower” Fulton Street near the Fulton Ferry landing.⁴ By the 1870s, plans for the Brooklyn Bridge were underway and this area’s network of surface and elevated rail had begun to develop. Already prosperous dry goods merchants like A.D. Mathews, Joseph Wechsler, A.S. Wheeler, and others began to purchase property on “upper” Fulton, east of Brooklyn’s City Hall (present-day Borough Hall) and relocate their stores near the transportation nexus forming around the bridge landing.



Downtown Brooklyn 1905 USGS

Soon a number of large and fashionable new buildings were erected to house these “department stores” – Wechsler Brothers, Namm’s, A.D. Mathews & Sons, Frederick Loeser Co., and others anointing upper Fulton as Brooklyn’s retail heart. Shops of all kinds located near the big stores, mostly occupying the existing building stock of 3-to 5-story structures on Fulton Street and side streets to the north and south. Multiple floors of retail offered all manner of comparison goods to shoppers who arrived by street trolley or elevated train. The area was rich with shops offering custom and ready-to-wear clothing, shoes, millinery goods, beauty and household products, and furnishings. Professional services, everything from dentistry to palmistry, occupied small storefronts or upper floor spaces.



Loesers Department Store
King's Views of New York 1896-1915 and Brooklyn 1905

The commerce of Fulton Street attracted a vibrant array of entertainment venues that located in commercial storefronts, on easily accessed upper floors, and in lavish new buildings of their own. Vaudeville theaters, dime museums with their scientific marvels

and oddities, nickelodeon theaters, gaming rooms, bowling alleys, hotels and restaurants entertained shoppers and accommodated travelers. Some of the earliest Edison movies were shown in buildings that still stand on Fulton between Jay and Lawrence Streets.



Brooklyn Heights and Downtown, Vol. 1, 1860-1922, 2001

By 1900 Fulton Street was the locus of a thriving commercial precinct serving greater Brooklyn, a busy, if not teeming, place. Pictures of Fulton Street from the turn of the century show a cluttered streetscape, with the El dominating the appearance of the Fulton corridor and a visual cacophony of commercial signs of various shapes and sizes. For four decades, the area continued to attract new stores and entertainment venues like the large Edward Albee Theater which brought Broadway-caliber live performance, and then movies, to the area starting in 1922, and the Metropolitan Loews, Montauk and Paramount Theaters, all from the 1920s.

The urban landscape began to transform in 1940, when the Fulton Street elevated train was taken down. Subways and buses ensured that the place remained accessible. But soon after, post-WWII suburbanization began to reshape Brooklyn, causing the same kind of demographic shifts seen in urban areas throughout the nation – white flight, retail activity sapped by new suburban malls, increased dependence on automobiles, urban renewal, perceptions of urban decline. In and around downtown Brooklyn a number of urban renewal plans were drawn up as a response.

In the 1950s, the stretch of Fulton Street that connected the “lower” and “upper” Fultons of old was de-mapped by the city as part of the development of a new Civic Center. Nineteenth-century commercial buildings were replaced by modern courthouses and municipal office buildings, and a stretch of Fulton itself was transformed into present day Columbus Park, adjacent to Borough Hall.



Borough Hall
Brooklyn The Way It Was, 2003

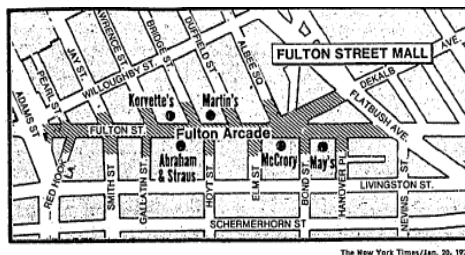
The retail strength of the area was preserved along Fulton Street east of the new Adams Street. The vast transportation system running beneath the Civic Center kept the area convenient to Brooklyn shoppers, who were by now perhaps less affluent but no less inclined to come downtown to shop and see a movie. A number of the corporate retailers bought each other out or merged, but the presence of department stores – by this time, Abraham & Strauss, Martin’s, McCrory’s, May’s, Korvettes, and others – continued to serve as a magnet for a thriving retail and entertainment environment serving an increasingly African-American population.

By the mid 1970s, the negative impacts of white flight and urban renewal – and the inner-city racial conflicts, unemployment, deteriorating housing conditions and disinvestment we now associate with them – converged on Fulton Street. The shopping and entertainment precinct remained active, but in the eyes of political and business leaders interested in pre-



venting further white middle-class flight from the borough, downtown Brooklyn – including Fulton Street – was in need of renewal. In 1973, the administration of New York City Mayor John Lindsay developed and approved a plan to turn eight blocks of Fulton Street, from Adams Street to Flatbush Avenue, into a new pedestrian mall that would restrict vehicular traffic to busses and add urban design innovations meant to enhance the experience of walking along the sidewalk⁵. The original design included a glass and steel canopy over the street that would create the sense of the Mall being enclosed. This design feature was later dropped from the project.

The plan was generally met by enthusiasm from small business owners and merchants, but in an October 30, 1973 *New York Times* article, a Castro Convertible Sofa store manager remarked, “Traffic is not the problem...It’s the purse snatching and intimidation from those who roam the streets.” The owner of a store said to be among the few independent businesses, commented that “the main reason business has dropped off in this area is that people don’t have the money to buy.”⁶



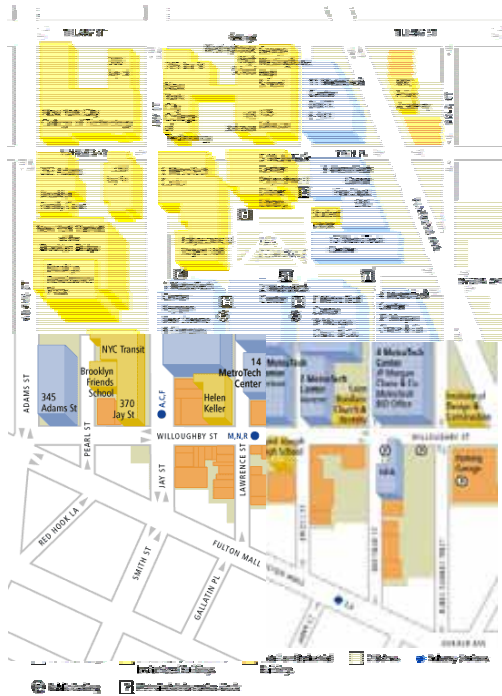
Crime and a lower-income demographic were the realities of Fulton Street during the city’s fiscal crisis. Despite being ranked as the second busiest shopping street in the city in 1971 (behind 34th Street), during the 1970s Fulton Street saw the departure of many of the stores – like Martin’s and Korvettes – that had been its biggest draws. Movie palaces like the Albee and Metropolitan Loews were increasingly perceived as dangerous – a perception reinforced by a 1974 shooting at the Albee. But to low- and moderate-income African-Americans in central Brooklyn, Fulton Street was not seen or experienced only in those bleak terms. Despite its problems, it was still the place families shopped for school uniforms and new shoes, new televisions and housewares. In some ways Fulton Street remained the busy shopping destination it always had been. Many of the department stores were replaced by smaller discount shops, but the foot traffic remained strong.

In 1977 the Federal Mass Transit Administration granted \$2.9 million to the city for the construction of the first phase of “Fulton Street Mall,” which was designed by the firm Lee Harris Pomeroy. A January 1977 *New York Times* article remarked that downtown “has changed tremendously in the last two decades. Fulton Street was once the magnet for middle-class shoppers and entertainment seekers who sought out the old movie palaces like the Paramount and the Albee. The Albee awaits the wrecker’s ball, and its site will be turned into a shopping center whose mall will blend into the Fulton

Street promenade.” Congressional Rep. Frederick W. Richmond commented that he hoped the Mall would “reverse the trend of retailers, jobs and people leaving our city.”⁷

Construction of the physical improvements – widening the sidewalks and installing bus shelters, information kiosks, and signage – took far longer than expected. Independent stores and national chains alike struggled to keep businesses alive while the roadbed was torn apart and reconstructed. By 1982, when the work was completed, other plans for downtown Brooklyn were being promulgated and debated. The high vacancy rate for commercial space downtown was abating, thanks to the relocation of city and state agency offices to vacant commercial buildings. A number of urban renewal plans were creating development sites for back-office development, among them the 16-acre, 12-building MetroTech Center.

Developed by Forest City Ratner Company and designed by a number of prestigious architecture firms – Skidmore Owings Merrill, Davis Brody & Associates, and others – MetroTech was “conceived as a means of revitalizing Downtown Brooklyn by developing office space attractive to high-technology businesses and back office operations, and integrating this activity with a major university center including Polytechnic University, New York City Technical College, and Long Island University”⁸ and built on the corporate office park model.



MetroTech Business Improvement District, 2005

The completed MetroTech Center created a self-contained office district. One block to the south, the Fulton Street Mall developed through the 1980s and 1990s as a lively commercial street increasingly known for discounted merchandise and fast food outlets. Among the shops popular by the late 1980s were Beat Street and the Music Factory, both patronized by young musicians and rap artists who counted on the selection of rap, rhythm and blues, and other genres for their DJ performances. The Mall on Fulton Street

began to take on a new identity – that of a center for hip hop fashion and music. The volume of shoppers never waned, as Fulton Street Mall maintained its prominence as the central shopping district for a mostly central Brooklyn clientele. The popularity of Fulton Street among moderate-income African-Americans rose, rents for the storefronts rose, and new shops featuring of-the-moment urban “gear” – like Dr. Jay’s, Jimmy Jazz and others, began to open.



Photo Credit: Charles Gifford, 2004

It was during this period that a number of property owners and merchants, eager for any additional ground-floor area for retail, removed stairs that led to the buildings’ upper stories. Eking out any additional square footage was seen as desirable as ground-floor rents more than compensated for the lack of use on the upper floors. Many of the smaller buildings – those on the north side of Fulton between Jay and Lawrence Streets, for example – actually bricked in their upper floor windows. Since upper-floor windows were no

longer used, a number of building owners rented the facades to billboard companies for large fees. This practice is not legal under building codes, but a moratorium on enforcing signage regulations at the Department of Buildings has allowed the situation to persist.

The billboards and bricked-in upper floor windows on some buildings lent an air of decay to the Mall that did not accurately reflect the vibrancy of the commerce or the street life taking place just a few feet below. The ground-floor retail continued to develop as a niche center for urban wear; family oriented outlets and electronic stores also remained strong. Today these different retail types can be found thriving side by side. By 2003, when business groups and the Department of City Planning formally proposed the zoning actions of the Downtown Redevelopment Plan, the Mall was much as we see it today. Thriving on the ground but underutilized and decaying above, the buildings of Fulton Street Mall continue to comprise a rich layering of historic commercial architecture and a successful commercial shopping environment, but also draw criticism from those who don’t shop there. The dichotomies of Fulton Street – from the visual differences to the perceptual ones – are the focus of this study.

FINDINGS

The various studies conducted, and the many hours of conversation with stakeholders of all kinds, have provided a solid understanding of the Mall as a place of commerce, interaction, opportunity, and cultural significance. As an historic place, as a center of social life, and as an engine of economic activity, Fulton Street Mall is an integral part of downtown Brooklyn.

1. Fulton Street Mall's historic buildings are significant past, present, and future cultural and economic resources; they are currently under utilized, poorly maintained, and often hidden from public view.
2. The Mall has a thriving and diverse economy that supports a variety of retail types, with a balanced number of national chain stores and local independent shops, and a surprisingly strong network of small vendor-entrepreneurs.
3. Shoppers, workers, and visitors value the Mall as an important place that is counted on as much for social networking as for shopping.
4. The Mall functions significantly but poorly as a public space; deficiencies include the quality and quantity of standard amenities, as well as foreboding side streets leading to and from Fulton Street.
5. Misperceptions of the Mall among non-users present a significant challenge to preserving the contemporary culture of the Mall and nurturing its future.



FINDING 1:

Fulton Street Mall's historic buildings are significant past, present, and future cultural and economic resources; they are currently underutilized, poorly maintained, and often hidden from public view.

The history of Fulton Street as the shopping and entertainment center of downtown Brooklyn is still very much in evidence, both in the built fabric and in the level of commercial activity on Fulton Street today. The street is punctuated by a number of large 19th- and early-20th-century department store buildings that retain many distinct architectural features, especially on their upper floors. These surviving structures are the visual anchors of the Mall, and, experienced together, they evoke a surprisingly strong sense of the Mall's history as a retail hub.



Photo credit: Charles Gifford, 2004

Mixed in among the visual anchor buildings (see map, next page) are smaller structures that retain some portion of their original architectural detail. They, too, add visual interest and character to the Mall, though their conditions are typically worse. Many have facades that are covered in billboards or other signage and are literally hidden from view. The signage that dominates the visual environment of the Mall is a sign of vitality, and also speaks to the historical

continuity of shopping and commerce on the street – this has been a place bursting with commercial signs from its very beginnings. However, the signs that cover window openings, significant architectural detail, and entire facades are illegal and create an appearance interpreted by some as neglect.



Former Rothchild / Ligett's, Built 1888
Photo credit: Kara Winters, 2004

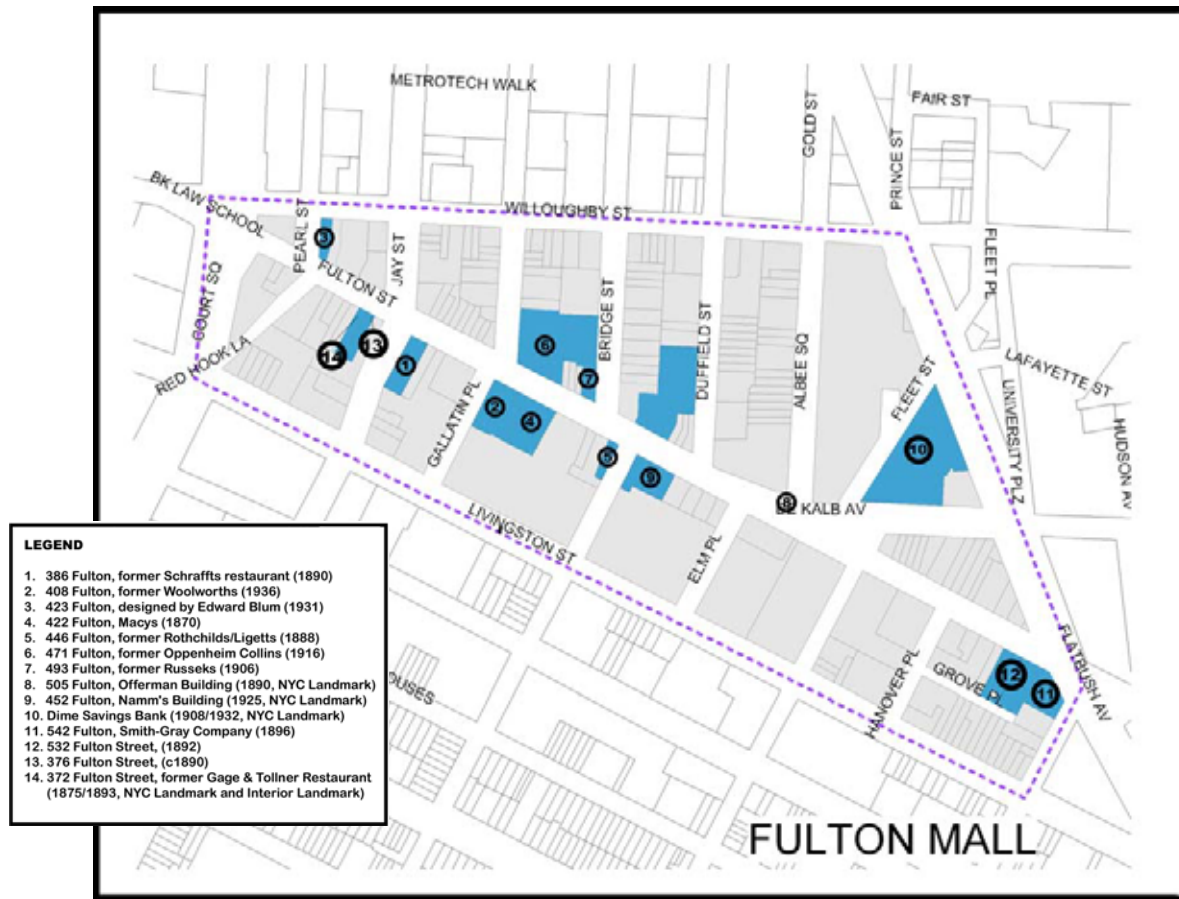
As important contributors to the "character" of the Mall, historic structures are certainly among its greatest assets. However, our study found that most of these buildings were underutilized and in some cases not

well maintained. Some have no upper floor occupants and have sealed off their upper story windows.

These poor building conditions are of concern to a variety of constituents. Business leaders and civic organizations alike have remarked on the need for better building maintenance. Participants in our survey of 310 Mall users also selected this as a critical issue: 85% percent said they would like to see some effort to fix up poorly maintained Mall buildings. And non-users of the Mall express that to them it is not an attractive or aesthetically appealing place.

Local and citywide preservation organizations have come to realize the architectural and historic value of the buildings on Fulton Street. Their interest has sparked an important dialogue about the role of the buildings in the economic growth of the Mall. There have been some positive steps to improve building conditions in the past year, but for the most part there are still serious façade issues to address.

Because of the variety of building conditions and architectural integrity throughout the Mall, a mixture of building conservation, creative rehabilitation, and wholesale redesign is warranted.



Visual Anchor Buildings
Pratt Center / Minerva Partners 2006

FINDING 2:

The Mall has a thriving and diverse economy that supports a variety of retail types, with a balanced number of national chain stores and local independent shops, and a surprisingly strong network of small vendor-entrepreneurs.

The strong economic value of Fulton Street Mall has been documented by recent articles and studies, most of which have focused on the rents commanded for the storefronts that can range from the low \$100s to upwards of \$200 a square foot.⁹

For 150 years, Fulton Street has been a retail Mecca, whether of the big department stores that came into prominence in the early 1900s, or of the local shoe, electronics, and specialty shops and national clothing and shoe outlets that populate the Mall today. It has been a place of notably rising real-estate values, and is now said to be among the most expensive retail streets in the country.



Photo credit: Charles Gifford, 2004

With a current workforce estimated at over 3,000 workers, Fulton Street Mall continues to be a place of opportunity for students, young people, people of color, and Brooklyn residents. Despite the vast majority of non-union jobs, the high unemployment rate in Brooklyn makes these employment oppor-

tunities significant.

Our studies indicate that those who profit from owning and operating businesses on the Mall can be put into four main categories:

1. Property owners, most of them absentee landlords, who are commanding very high rents for ground floor spaces and in some cases profiting by leasing facades for billboards;
2. Merchants and small business owners who own and operate independent stores or local chains (five-borough only), many of which have expanded or opened second outlets on the Mall; examples include Jimmy Jazz, Dr. Jay's, Heart & Sole shoes, and Feel Beauty Supply;
3. Regional and National corporations operating chain stores on the Mall; for example Children's Place, Payless Shoes, and Cookies;
4. Immigrant merchants who sublet spaces within stores, operating their own one-counter small businesses and making decent living wages.

The presence of the one-counter businesses emerged as a surprising finding.¹⁰ Behind a number of storefronts, floor space is divided into four or five smaller sections each occupied by a different independent business. The property owner or lease-

holder rents out sections of the store to multiple independent vendors who sell their wares in their own spaces. A count conducted this summer revealed that there were 21 storefronts hosting approximately 73 independent vendors on the Mall. Thus there are many more businesses on the Mall than it may seem on the surface.



Occupying a smaller space within a larger storefront enables the leaseholder and the independent vendors to afford the rent, which would otherwise be prohibitive. In a given store one might find an Uzbek vendor selling jewelry, a Korean vendor selling video games and electronics, and an African American vendor selling clothing with handmade airbrush designs. This system functions as an important business incuba-

tor for immigrants. A stepping-stone between outdoor street vending and a full-fledged, formal business, it requires less startup capital than the latter and has more stability than the former. In a city in which approximately 36% of residents are foreign-born, the independent vendor system allows immigrants to gain a foothold in business. Unlike the vendors who used to operate on 125th Street in Manhattan, or Fulton Street in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the Mall's indoor vendors can operate without the challenges for pedestrians or neighboring retailers that can be caused by sidewalk vendors.

The vendor system has impacts on the economy and physical condition of the Mall. It supports the escalating rents on Fulton Street Mall by enabling property owners to find occupants to pay what is asked. The ability to command high ground floor rents has a direct impact on the overall utilization of buildings, as property owners have had very little incentive to maintain and rent out upper floors because the market value for upper-floor space is a small fraction of that for the ground floors.

In many cases, property owners have removed the stairways to the upper floors in order to squeeze out more ground floor square footage for retail. Until recently, when the Class B office market in down-

town Brooklyn began to strengthen a bit, there appeared to be very little interest among property owners to even advertise when their upper floors were available.

Economically, Fulton Street Mall both forges bonds between groups and separates them: those who profit on the Mall are distinct from those who work and shop and otherwise use the place. One of the abiding questions in planning for the future is how the interests of those with more and less economic power can be brought into some equitable balance for the long term.

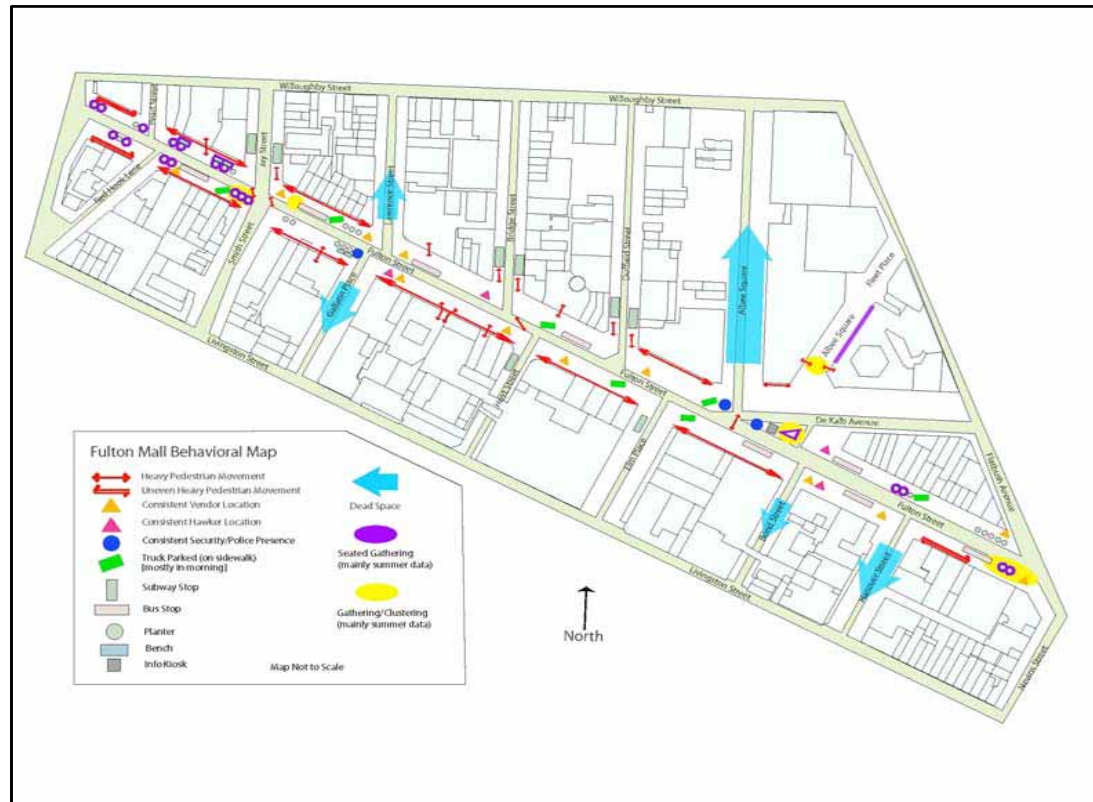
FINDING 3:

Shoppers, workers, and visitors value the Mall as an important place that is counted on as much for social networking as for shopping.

Historic places often have an additional set of values stemming from their contemporary use for social, economic or other reasons. These “social values” are often very important considerations in achieving preservation while managing change.

We designed research to assess the social values because it was evident that there are important constituencies in and around Fulton Street Mall that do not see the Mall as primarily an historic place, and do not have a voice in its management even

though they have a significant stake in its future. These constituencies – loosely described as the “users” of the Mall comprising of shoppers, workers, walkers, sitters – are important stakeholders. We collected data on the social, economic, cultural and historic values as seen by users through several means: observation and behavioral mapping; a street-level survey of 310 people – some chosen randomly, others targeted in order to gain representative samples of individuals according to variables of age, race, and ethnicity; and ethnographic



research, consisting largely of detailed interviews with more than 60 people “on the ground,” including a special study of vendors sub-letting commercial space in storefronts along the Mall.

Data gathered through these varied means suggest that the contemporary social value of Fulton Street Mall – its value as a gathering place, a place of exchange in all senses – is just as compelling as the value of its historic and cultural significance. It is not merely a shopping district. The place supports social networks that consist of economic activities such as shopping, selling, cultural expressions, wearing the latest fashions; pursuing the American dream of financial success; and everyday sociability of seeing friends, going out with family, and hanging out. These different uses or activities are interwoven: shopping activities have cultural meaning and reflect complex social networks; historic values are rein-



forced by the Mall’s continuing economic viability.

One important aspect of our research consisted of a survey administered to more than 310 people encountered within the eight blocks of Fulton Street Mall last spring. We asked a series of questions about how people use the Mall, whether various aspects of the place are important to them (public space, aesthetics), and what kinds of change they would welcome or object to. Some of the most interesting findings include:

82% are from Brooklyn; only 13% of respondents came from surrounding neighborhoods, indicating the significant numbers come from distant neighborhoods as well;

84% came to Fulton Street Mall to shop, but that’s not all they came to do:

26% also came to socialize, **35%** to eat, **27%** to window shop;

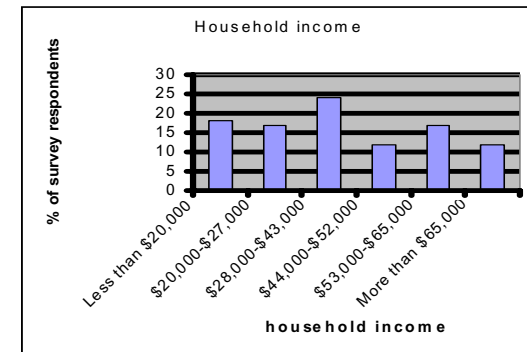
51% came to the Mall with friends and/or family;

33% thought in terms of coming to “Fulton Street Mall” while **56%** referred to coming “downtown.” Only **11%** said their destination was particular building or store;

41% “always” or “often” ran into someone they knew when they visited Fulton Street;

43% had been visiting the Mall for more than 10 years;

55% of respondents answered a question about household income: there is a diverse range of incomes among shoppers with half of respondents at or above median income for NYC;



71% of our respondents considered Fulton Street Mall, “an important place that could be improved”; a further 17% considered it, “an important place that should continue just as it is.”

Ethnographic research, through which we spoke to fewer people but in much greater depth, revealed a number of different kinds of social networks: among shoppers, among families, between specific businesses and customers, among different kinds and configurations of businesses, and for people who work and/or hang out.

Of particular note is the social value of Fulton Street Mall to the black community. Of our survey respondents, 58% described themselves as black, African, African-American, Caribbean, or Caribbean-American. The in-depth interviews conducted for the project’s ethnographic report provide the detail and individual stories to illustrate the many kinds of social relationships on the Mall. For example, we heard from a young Trinidadian woman about the significance working, hanging out, and shopping on Fulton Street Mall, all filtered through youth culture’s focus on clothes

and fashion; we heard about the symbolic importance of the Mall as a place where African Americans and Caribbean immigrants assert “the presence of the black middle class,” in their own words. From these data we draw the conclusion that social values attached to Fulton Street Mall are an important public resource. These contemporary social values should be an important consideration in planning for the future.



Luis Gispert
Public Art Fund

Consumer culture, fashion, and other artistic expressions of the African-American community and other communities of color have long been associated with the Mall, but in the past twenty years have found new levels of artistic and cultural expression. Many consider the Mall to be the Brooklyn headquarters of hip hop, the international music and cultural genre that has uniquely urban-American roots not unlike jazz.

The Mall puts on display some important achievements of African-American culture as a dominant force in the American urban scene. Of the 42% of Mall survey respondents who did not describe themselves as

African- or Caribbean American, 10% are white; 9% Latino/a; 7% “other”; 6% Asian; and 6% “European”. Thus the active contributors on the street and social life of the Mall is more diverse than it may at first appear. The varied nature of the social networks, personal narratives and historical contexts surfaced in our ethnographic research a clear picture of thickly layered contemporary social values, many of them linked with both the history and the future of communities of color in downtown Brooklyn.



Fulton Mall Improvement Association

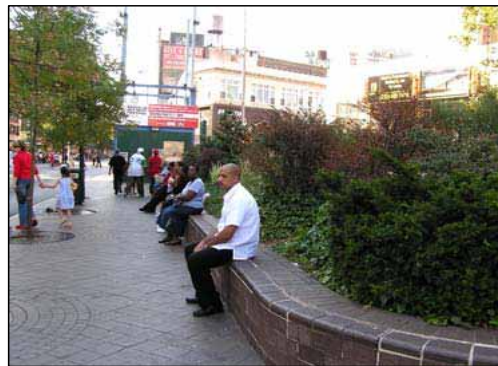
The visibility of hip hop as a theme on the Mall – expressed in the fashions, music, and street lingo seen and heard on Fulton Street – connects the contemporary Mall to its 19th century ancestor. Popular entertainment of that era found its expression in Schraffts Beer Hall on Smith and Fulton, a bowling alley on the corner of Red Hook Lane, and in the dime museums and vaudeville theaters that occupied upper floors of many Fulton Street buildings. The entertainments of that time reflected the culture of the people who shopped and gathered downtown in much the same way that hip hop expressions reflect many contemporary Fulton Street Mall users.

Fulton Street Survey Group Home Neighborhoods	
Bedford Stuyvesant	12.6%
Prospect Heights	7.5%
Fort Greene	7.5%
Park Slope	6.3%
Brooklyn Heights	6.3%
Williamsburg	5.4%
Crown Heights	4.6%
Sheepshead Bay	4.6%
Flatbush	4.2%
Ditmas Park-Prospect Pk S.	3.8%
Windsor Terrace	3.8%
Brownsville	3.3%
Carroll Gardens	3.3%
Bushwick	2.9%
Canarsie	2.9%
Sunset Park	2.9%
East Flatbush	2.9%
East New York	2.5%
Brighton Beach	2.1%
Brooklyn - Not specified	1.7%
Downtown Brooklyn	1.7%
Flatlands	1.7%
Ocean Parkway	1.7%
Bay Ridge	1.3%
Bensonhurst	1.3%
Borough Park	0.8%
Prospect Lefferts Gardens	0.4%
TOTAL number of Brooklyn residents	239

FINDING 4:

The Mall functions significantly but poorly as a public space; deficiencies include the quality and quantity of standard amenities, as well as foreboding side streets leading to and from Fulton Street.

While the social networks fostered by the Mall are by all accounts vital, the physical space itself does nothing to accommodate people wanting to gather, socialize, and sit. An observer needs no more than a few minutes on the Mall to see that in the absence of suitable seating, shoppers stop to rest in any and all locations and perch on the edge of planters. Young people gather in the open space between the Dime Savings Bank and the Gallery Mall, but stand in small huddles and don't stay long. Workers and others can, in warm weather, be found sitting on the sidewalk on folding chairs that we presume they supply for themselves.



While Mall users have adapted to poor urban design conditions, and appear to make do without the customary amenities we expect to encounter in popular gathering places, our survey findings reveal a pronounced desire for streetscape and urban design improvements. Additional seating on sidewalks and in public spaces was desired by 85% of respondents, and 71% wanted to see new lighting fixtures, planters, bus shelters and street signs.

Our observation of the use of Fulton and its side streets revealed a number of hotspots and dead spaces, and it is clear from our field data that the side streets are less traveled than the blocks along Fulton Street (with the exception of Jay and Bridge Streets). Visual analysis quickly revealed that a Metrotech worker looking down Albee Square West toward the Mall will see a long stretch of barren pavement and the unadorned solid brick wall of the Gallery Mall at Albee Square. A Boerum Hill resident looking up Hoyt Street from State or Livingston will see a dark, foreboding corridor with little retail beckoning northward. This finding is significant: large populations of potential shoppers work and live in the vicinity around the Mall. These unappealing views frame people's perceptions of the Mall, and the message they send is not a positive one.

People use Fulton Street Mall as a public space, even though it is not designed to serve as one. Blank walls and dead spaces threaten the overall sense of vitality. Addressing these issues will enhance the experience for current Mall users, and potentially attract new users from surrounding areas.

FINDING 5:

Misperceptions of the Mall among non-users present a significant challenge to preserving the contemporary culture of the Mall and nurturing its future.

Our study and outreach tapped the impressions and ideas of close to 400 people, from city agency representatives to sidewalk vendors and shoppers. The Fulton Mall Improvement Association also made available to us the video-taped focus group sessions it held in 2004, which we transcribed and analyzed. When we compared the focus groups to various other data we collected, we learned that the assumptions made about the Mall by non-users were frequently incorrect. Perhaps most fascinating to us throughout all of our outreach was the clear picture we got of the very different views self-described “non-users” of the Mall have from those who are frequent visitors to the place.

- It is a commonly held belief that Mall shoppers are almost exclusively “low-income.” Our survey reveals a fairly diverse range of household incomes among respondents, with half at or above median household income for New York City. The Mall is apparently more “middle-class” than is commonly assumed.
- We were told to expect to hear from Mall users that “price” and “convenience” are there only reasons for spending time on Fulton Street, and that they don’t like the place but have no other shopping options. This was thoroughly contradicted by the views of shoppers themselves. Many expressed that they like to visit the Mall and it holds an important place in their lives.

- There is an impression among those who don’t frequent the Mall that all of the stores are national chains or 99 Cent shops, and that there are no local independent businesses left. However, a retail analysis conducted in August 2005 shows that 45% of businesses are independent stores, 41% are regional or national chains, and 14% are local chains in the five boroughs only. And while there are a handful of deep bargain stores on Fulton Street, none of them refer to themselves as “99 Cent” shops. Thus there is far more retail diversity than is assumed by non-users, and the Mall supports a number of

Retail Tenants at Fulton Street Mall Summer 2005*		
<i>Business Categories</i>		
Independent	54	45%
<i>(includes Vendor Outlets)</i>		
Local Chains	16	14%
Regional/National Chains	49	41%
<i>By Specific Type</i>		
Independent Stores	34	29%
Vendor Outlets	20	17%
Local Chains	16	13%
Regional Chains	12	10%
National Chains	37	31%
*Survey did not include vacant spaces, doctors' offices, schools, and other non-retail uses		
Independent stores: sole location of the store		
Vendor Outlets: stores host multiple independent entrepreneurs		
Local chains: two or more store locations within the five boroughs of New York City		
Regional Chains: store locations in multiple New York counties or states but not nationwide		
National Chains: store locations in most or all		

small businesses, including those of the indoor vendors discussed in the finding on economic strengths.

- ♦ Many non-users, particularly those in the focus groups conducted by the Improvement Association, expressed that safety is a reason that they won't shop on Fulton Street. The perception that the Mall is unsafe is contradicted by steadily falling crime rates for this area and the city as a whole, the rigorous efforts by the Association to maintain a security presence on the Mall, and, perhaps most significantly, the fact that Mall users themselves don't cite safety as a concern.

The negative perceptions of the Mall among those who don't go there frequently – or at all – emerged in our study as one of the Mall's biggest problems. It is hard to avoid the fact that many of the people who hold negative views are white. Though a number of African-Americans we spoke to who don't shop at the Mall also hold similar beliefs.

There is a social divide between those who shop the Mall – a majority coming from neighborhoods outside the downtown Brooklyn area – and the more local population of residents and workers who do not. This divide appears to be based as much on economic class as on race, as we frequently heard non-users criticize the merchandise at the Mall, saying it was "cheap" or "ghetto." Interestingly, young

African-Americans also used the term "ghetto" to describe the merchandise, but when probed they explained that they meant this as a compliment.



While we don't believe the racial and class conflicts at play here are easily solved, we do feel the support of a local constituency for the Mall will be a positive step. The Mall can't thrive in the future if it is disliked by the growing population of residents and workers all around it. Broadening its appeal to non-users from the downtown area and surrounding neighborhoods will be useful in meeting two important goals – it will enhance economic opportunity for current and new business stakeholders, and it will serve a population of people who feel they are not being served by their nearest shopping district.

But in broadening its appeal, planners and decision makers must be vigilant in ensuring that the current Mall users, whose ties to the Mall's commerce and social networks are strong and longstanding, are not displaced.

STRATEGIES

To respond to these findings we recommend five strategies to build on Fulton Street Mall's strengths, address its deficiencies and fill the gap between perception and reality. Given the level of user enthusiasm for the Mall, and its brisk commerce, the strategies are aimed at improving the Mall for its current users and broadening its appeal to workers and residents in the areas immediately adjacent to it while ensuring that its historic and cultural significance are preserved.

1. Address the physical appearance of the Mall with innovative and culturally sensitive façade improvement, building conservation and new building design techniques that embrace the aesthetic theme of "old meets new."
2. Better utilize buildings by activating their vacant upper stories and carefully planning a mix of uses (retail, arts/cultural, residential) that supports the dynamism and diversity of the Mall and makes it more of a 24-hour place.
3. Promote and enhance the current retail themes found on the Mall: urban wear, Hip Hop fashion and music, uniquely Brooklyn.
4. Improve the public realm and enliven the side streets – through urban design, streetscape amenities, and cultural programming – to enhance the experience of shoppers and visitors on Fulton Street, as well as workers and residents to the north and south.
5. Engage a broad and diverse group of stakeholders in the planning process from this point forward.



STRATEGY 1:

Address the physical appearance of the Mall with innovative and culturally sensitive façade improvement, building conservation and new building design techniques that embrace the aesthetic theme of “old meets new.”

As has been pointed out, the Mall is “valued” by many different constituents for many reasons. Its *historic* value is certainly important, and it is clear that the character of the Mall is partly defined today by the visible remnants of its past. But it is as important as a contemporary place as it is valuable for its history, and it would be inappropriate to adopt an approach that seeks to pristinely preserve the Mall or return it to the way it looked at a time long gone. We urge the adoption of a very deliberate campaign to mix the *old* with the *new*. Change can and should come to some of the buildings on the Mall, and when it does it should reflect contemporary culture. We believe this can be done with an administrative approach, without requiring a zoning change.

At the center of this approach is the need to address the physical appearance of the historic buildings. The “visual anchor” buildings referred to in Finding 1 are architectural standouts and great candidates for conservation.

Listing on the National Register of Historic Places would make anchor buildings eligible for tax credits that would assist property owners in paying to have them restored. The visual anchor buildings may qualify for NYC landmark designation, and our research provides background information on them. But the key to preserving the Mall's history and culture is not simply in designating these buildings. Instead, we urge a thoughtful blending of old and new to un-

cover the Mall's hidden assets, like some of the historic facades that are now covered by signs, and the vacant upper floors, and heeding the full range of both historic and current values.



Former Oppenheim Collins & Co., Built in 1916
Photo credit: Suzanne Cooke, 2004

There are other incentives for better care taking as well. Design guidelines could be developed and keyed to existing low-interest loan programs or tax incentives, possibly by coordinating them with the efforts of groups that provide financial advice and assistance to immigrant owned businesses. The guidelines should be carefully devised to respect the “taste culture” of the ethnic groups represented by merchants

and shoppers on the Mall. Approached with cultural sensitivity and an awareness of the diverse range of design preferences among different ethnic groups, the guidelines could be extremely innovative in improving the overall appearance of the Mall without making it look inappropriately historicist.

Fulton Street has a long history of being energetically commercial in appearance. The exuberant signage seen today is not totally out of context, and the right design guidelines will be able to balance the continued expression of Fulton Street's character with increased visual presence of historic buildings and features currently covered by signs. Signage enforcement would be required as well.

Another option is to create a "conservation district" overly using the area's Special District provision. The conservation district would address the need for continuity between existing historic patterns and structures, and new construction likely to come in the future. It could be specifically constructed to be regulatory or advisory, as needed. A conservation district with associated regulations under the Special District might allow for the enforcement of design guidelines by a sponsoring entity such as the Fulton Mall Improvement Association. The precise nature of the regulations – and the extent to which the Association or other private sponsor can enforce them – needs further exploration.

Next Steps:

- Address building conditions with new design guidelines and/or a "conservation district" overly using the area's existing Special District provision.
- Model façade improvements that take creative and culturally sensitive approach to signage, storefront design, façade maintenance.
- Identify soft sites for redevelopment by private initiatives and model types of new designs that would be desirable.
- Create financial incentives to reward compliance with design guidelines.
- Explore creating a revenue stream by allowing billboards on certain buildings; a portion of the proceeds would go into a fund for use by those who comply with guidelines.
- Assist property owners in taking out façade easements for a preservation purpose; explore use of easements to restore interior ground floor stairs.
- Create a National Register Historic District or individual listings. The listing will not require regulation for private development, and offers a 20% tax credit for restorative alterations of commercial properties approved by the State Historic Preservation Office.
- Explore partnerships with social service organizations that provide financial assistance to immigrant business owners: ACCION, Bed Stuy Restoration, AAFE.
- In the absence of new guidelines, work with Department of Buildings and other agencies to ensure enforcement of existing regulations is more rigorous.

STRATEGY 2:

Better utilize buildings by activating their vacant upper stories and carefully planning a mix of uses (retail, arts/cultural, residential) that supports the dynamism and diversity of the Mall and makes it more of a 24-hour place.

The underutilized upper stories of many of the Mall's buildings present remarkable economic opportunity, and finding ways to use them will greatly improve the appearance of the Mall and help create a desirable 24-hour atmosphere. This can begin with demonstration projects that model particular upper floor uses at appropriate locations.



376 Fulton Street, built c1890
Photo credit: Piia Heive, 2004

In investigating potential uses and discussing them with diverse stakeholders, we determined that there is no one answer to the question of what uses should be seeded on

upper floors. Current property owners are becoming interested in capitalizing on improving residential and commercial market conditions downtown; Mall shoppers want more retail choices and community centers; residents and workers from surrounding neighborhoods would like restaurants and arts facilities; students from the area's major academic institutions expressed the need for housing; artists from no-longer-affordable Brooklyn neighborhoods are looking for suitable live/work space.

With hundreds of thousands of square feet of unused or underutilized space on Fulton Street, all of these choices can and should be supportable under current market conditions. But a one-size-fits-all approach would endanger the vibrancy and diversity of the Mall today. Blanket conversion of all vacant upper floors to residential use would compromise the future of ground floor retail activity, as the street life attracted by the retail does not create a wholly desirable residential environment. In addition, a number of buildings host upper-floor office tenants that we would not want to see displaced.

We believe the emphasis of developing the upper floors should be on commercial use. But commercial use alone may not create a 24-hour place that is more welcoming to non-users. A goal to use all the space for arts and cultural activity would be impossible to finance. Varied uses will enhance the dynamism, diversity, and economic strength

of the place so that all its stakeholders – current and potential – see some benefit.

This mixed-use strategy will allow a logical tailoring of new uses to buildings in which those uses are appropriate. In studying the variety of building configurations and conditions, we observed that a small number of the large former department store structures appear suitable for residential use, while other structures could easily be adapted for upper floor retail, restaurant, and nightlife facilities. One or two of the architectural standout buildings are in appropriate locations for cultural use.

The mixed-use approach also lends itself to the creation of innovative partnerships, tapping the local universities, the Brooklyn Academy of Music and other Brooklyn arts and cultural organizations, and many other potential partners.

At the moment there are relatively few eating and entertainment establishments on Fulton Street, a surprising finding given the prominence of theaters, restaurants, gaming rooms, etc., on Fulton Street historically. Our data indicate that the escalation of ground floor rents and the removal of access stairs to upper floors in order to accommodate more ground floor retail have conspired to create a climate inhospitable to restaurant operators. While the challenges of developing suitable space for new restaurants and nightlife venues appears daunting, we believe these are essential ingredients to making

the Mall a 24-hour place, and are compatible uses to those found here currently.

Next Steps:

- Commence three to five pilot projects to explore and model best upper floor uses for individual buildings and block fronts. Five sites have been identified that will allow exploration of the suitability of building typologies for different upper floor uses, including mixed-income housing, artists live/work space, cultural facilities, and multiple floor retail, and Class B office space. Decisions about feasibility of these pilot projects should be based on the needs/desires of stakeholders, financial feasibility using existing funding programs, and architectural compatibility with existing structures. Potential pilot sites:
 - ♦ Cast-iron block (Fulton Street, north side, Dekalb Avenue to Flatbush Avenue)
 - ♦ “London Character shoe” block (Fulton Street north side, Jay Street to Lawrence Lawrence)
 - ♦ Offerman building, 505 Fulton Street
 - ♦ Fulton Street, south side, from Elm Street to Hoyt Street (including 446 Fulton Street, former Rothchilds)
 - ♦ Fulton Street, south side, Flatbush to Bond

- Work with existing incentive programs to identify financing options: NHPA Tax credits, J51 Enhancement program, New Partners Program, Participatory Loan Program.
- Explore possibility of special Tax Increments Financing program or forgivable loans for upper floor residential.
- Coordinate with Department of Cultural Affairs and Brooklyn Academy of Arts Local Development Corporation regarding artist space initiatives.

STRATEGY 3:

Promote and enhance the current retail themes found on the Mall: urban wear, Hip Hop fashion and music, uniquely Brooklyn.

One of the key findings of our study was the strength of the Mall as a center for urban wear, Hip Hop music, and the latest fashions for the young and not so young alike. This is both a cultural and economic resource. These themes – embodied by independent and local chain stores like Jimmy Jazz, S&D Underground, Dr. Jay’s, Beat Street, and others – are so well established that the Mall appears in numerous foreign guidebooks to New York, directing tourists to Fulton Street where they can find what’s “in” and get it at a good price.



Built 1977
Photo credit: Renee Dessommes, 2004

Somewhat surprisingly, the strength of the urban theme neither diminishes nor is diminished by the equal popularity of family shopping venues on the Mall like Macy’s, Children’s Place, and Toys R Us. To shoppers, Fulton Street Mall is a place that offers everything needed by a family with

young children, teenagers, and fashion conscious parents.

The Mall’s niche strength is one that can be enhanced and built upon with promotional activity, retail recruitment, and public events. Attention should be paid to the current balance of independent businesses and national chains. The chains offer merchandise and brand names that people want, but the local businesses are unique and help combat the impression most American consumers have today that every shopping street is the same.

We heard from Mall users and non-users alike that “uniquely Brooklyn” is the most desirable theme of all. Certainly the definition of “uniquely Brooklyn” differs by race, ethnicity, and economic status, however because there is so much underutilized upper floor space on Fulton Street, recruiting businesses that meet the needs of a variety of consumers seems highly achievable. New developments being discussed and planned nearby – namely, the Brooklyn Academy of Music Cultural District and the Brooklyn Atlantic Yards plans – are likely to bring additional new retail to the area. By enhancing its appeal as a niche shopping district, Fulton Street Mall can remain unique and different in an increasingly competitive market.

Independent businesses are important assets that should be supported and nurtured. This can perhaps best be done by promotional activities, which the Improvement Association has already begun to work on with considerable expertise and

enthusiasm. The kinds of activities happening in Jamaica, Queens, where the local business group markets shopping day-trips to suburban organizations, churches, and schools, would bring welcome attention to the stores on Fulton Street.

Finally, there are a number of retailers that would be compatible additions to the Mall's current mix, like H&M, which has emerged over the past few years as a unique crossover brand that offers something for everyone, and all of it considered hip. Several of the Mall's buildings appear suitable for conversion for a retailer like H&M.

Next Steps:

- Market the Mall based on its existing cultural strengths and retail mix.
- Approach to retail recruitment with a "something for everyone" strategy – build on existing diversity where businesses like Children's Place, Jimmy Jazz, and Heart & Sole Shoes can thrive on the same block; recruit "crossover" retailers like H&M.
- Market the "urban wear" theme beyond Brooklyn to attract day trips from the suburbs.

- Promote Hip Hop music and culture with cultural/arts events. Explore partnerships with BAM Cultural District, Celebrate Brooklyn, Brooklyn Arts Exchange, and other cultural institutions.

STRATEGY 4:

Improve the public realm and enliven the side streets – through urban design, streetscape amenities, and cultural programming – to enhance the experience of shoppers and visitors on Fulton Street, as well as workers and residents to the north and south.

There is an obvious need for innovative thinking about the public realm on Fulton Street, and we are encouraged by the recent Request for Proposals process that has selected an excellent landscape and urban design firm to design improvements to the Mall. The addition of seating and better quality outdoor lighting will go a long way toward satisfying the complaints of current Mall users who have done without these basic amenities for too long. There is also a great opportunity here to plan initiatives that bring the level of urban design on Fulton Street up several notches and provide something exciting and new to downtown Brooklyn. This will facilitate the public gathering that takes place in this vibrant marketplace.



Forgotten New York website

Activating Albee Square and transforming it into a great public space is the highest priority. The ingredients for a great public

space are there – the triangle of Fulton, Dekalb and Bond Streets is a generous size but very poorly used at present; there is considerable space along the former Fleet Place, between the landmark Dime Savings Bank building and the Gallery Mall; and the irregular configuration of this strange intersection affords sweeping views of some of



Google Earth

Fulton Street's most prominent structures. We urge the designers think about bold steps that could truly transform this space. Consideration should be given to closing the leg of Dekalb Avenue and the bit of Bond Street to create a venue for events like performances and festivals that can serve current Mall users and attract residents and workers from surrounding neighborhoods. Partnerships with organizations like Celebrate Brooklyn and Brooklyn

Arts Exchange could be forged to plan annual events that would help brand Albee Square as a new Brooklyn location for great events. Anchored by the prominent and handsome Dime Savings Bank, this is a premier public plaza waiting to happen.

Another urban design priority is enlivening the corridors along Albee Square West going north to MetroTech, and Hoyt Street going south to the new residential developments along Schermerhorn and State Streets. These two streets make important connections between the Mall and surrounding communities, and are particularly unappealing from a pedestrian perspective.

Next Steps:

- Address streetscape issues.

- Create better public spaces for current shoppers and visitors – add seating, lighting, plantings that make a more appealing gathering space.
- Revitalize side streets that lead to Metrotech campus (north) and new residential developments (south), specifically Albee Sq. West and Hoyt Street.
- Transform Albee Square into central public square that can be used by cultural organizations for arts and performance.



STRATEGY 5:

Engage a broad and diverse group of stakeholders in the planning process from this point forward.

After an intensive year of study, are deeply convinced there is a strong interest in the future of this place among the people who use it. The many people contacted for this study consider themselves stakeholders in the Mall's future, and we hope to see them brought to the table in a meaningful way. The potential level of engagement among user constituencies is very high, and should be taken advantage of. For the non-users of the Mall, there is more reluctance about what the future holds, but their interest should be activated. Recent signs of improvement to the appearance of the Mall have not gone unnoticed by area residents and workers, and with continued positive change, these potential shoppers would join the large constituency the Mall already enjoys.

Next Steps:

- Create a diverse taskforce of stakeholders to work with planning consultants and government agencies on a planning effort for the Fulton Street Mall.
- Property owners and business leaders should reach out to merchants, shoppers/visitors, workers and community members to ensure multiple values and diverse opinions are considered.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

Fulton Street Mall is valuable in many of different ways, as seen through the eyes of its different stakeholder groups. We believe that the considerable historic and cultural values of Fulton Street Mall cannot and should not be segregated and divorced from the other, contemporary values of this place. The history of the Mall is a continuum; important meanings and experiences are accumulating as vibrantly today as they did in the heyday of the downtown Brooklyn of the last century.

By weighing the contemporary values of Fulton Street with its historic meaning and significance, we built an understanding of the importance of consciously mixing the old with the new. The dynamism of the place today is supported by the history reflected in some of the street's architecture, but only when seen in juxtaposition with signs – literal and symbolic – of the Mall's present day commercial vitality. Other histories, less well represented in the remaining buildings, are nevertheless part of the place's legacy and deserve to be researched, interpreted, and memorialized.

We learned that there are significant untapped assets in the physical and social space that is Fulton Street Mall. Thousands of square feet of unused or underutilized upper floor space offers great opportunity to property owners and developers to serve current and future consumers with more retail, new arts and cultural space, and even housing. The gregarious social life of

the Mall is not in any way supported by urban design features, and adding new amenities will enhance social interaction and open up new possibilities for cultural and arts activities. To realize both the cultural and economic values we believe it is essential to involve a wide range of participants and values in planning for the future of the space – the untapped resources must be pressed into service for the benefit of the many, not of the few.

We believe our findings and strategies will be useful to the many stakeholders who will have the opportunity to shape Fulton Street Mall's future. We look forward to seeing further exploration and initiatives unfold, led by the city in partnership with the business leadership in downtown Brooklyn and with the important input of professional planners and the constituents to whom this place matters.

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ENDNOTES

- 1) For more information on the background issues and practical implications of values-based preservation issues, see: Randall Mason and Erica Avrami, "Heritage Values and Challenges of Conservation Planning," in Teutonico and Palumbo, eds. Proceedings of the Corinth Workshop on Archaeological Site Management Planning (Corinth, Greece, May 2000). Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2002.
- 2) <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/dwnbklyn2/dwnbklynintro1.shtml>
- 3) Fulton Mall Improvement Association.
- 4) Information for this essay comes from building and neighborhood research conducted by Pratt Institute graduate historic preservation students during the Fall 2005 course Documentation and Interpretation of the Built Environment. The students used a variety of sources, including NYC Dept. of Buildings records, archival materials from the Municipal Archive, historic maps and census data from the New York Public Library, and periodicals such as *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* articles from the late 19th century. Additional information came from excellent essays in *Downtown Brooklyn: An Architectural and Urban History*, published as Preservation Working Paper No. 2, Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Columbia University, Fall 1991.
- 5) "City Plans Fulton St. Mall in Brooklyn," *New York Times*, October 29, 1973.
- 6) "Small Merchants Hail Brooklyn Mall," *New York Times*, October 30, 1973.
- 7) "Federal Government Grants \$2.9 million to Build Fulton Street Mall," *New York Times*, January 20, 1977.
- 8) <http://www.metrotechbid.org/history.html>
- 9) Fulton Mall Improvement Association.
- 10) Ethnographic research, including a study of independent vendors was conducted and reported to the project by Allison Dean, CUNY.