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Designing Woman: A Conversation with New York Planning Commissioner Amanda Burden

Abstract

In an interview, Amanda Burden, New York City Planning Commissioner, discusses her organization's role in the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan. The biggest issues involved, why she feels so strongly about physical planning and urban design, and what her organization's concerns are in terms of physical planning for the boroughs.

Comments

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Amanda Burden's office on the second floor of 22 Reade Street, the headquarters of the New York City Planning Commission and the planning department, looks out on old New York, but it's filled with the spirit of the future.

Designing
Woman



Robert Daniel Ullmann

By Eugenie Ladner Birch, FAICP

A conversation
with New York
planning commissioner
Amanda Burden.

Eight-by-eleven photos of Burden's first grandchild, Hudson ("named after the river"), are posted on the bulletin board behind her. And everywhere there are plans, maps, and architectural renderings of projects under way throughout the five boroughs. On a side table, in an otherwise utilitarian and simple office, sits a big bouquet of flowers.

This is where Burden presides over the 13-member planning commission and 316-employee planning department. Here lies the control of the planning and land-use review processes for the 322 square miles of the nation's most populous city.

Burden received a master's degree in urban planning from Columbia University in 1992, but her career began in 1976, when she took a job as assistant to noted urbanist William H. Whyte at the Project for Public Spaces. By the early 1980s, she was vice-president for plan-

ning and design for Battery Park City, the 92-acre mixed-use development built on landfill from the World Trade Center excavation. First appointed to the planning commission in 1990, she served 12 years before Mayor Michael Bloomberg called upon her to head the agency and commission.

She quickly articulated an ambitious first-year agenda focusing on five themes: recognizing New York City as a world city and a city of neighborhoods, planning proactively for significant sites, strengthening the waterfront and open space, and cutting red tape. She talked about her progress and her background one day in June.

Q. What is your role in the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan?

A. Enhancing Lower Manhattan is obviously a core priority. We not only have to make it what it was but also plan for the next century. We are working with the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation on a number of different elements in order to advance the rebuilding effort.

Q. *What part of that is official?*

A. One example is the mapping of streets. Greenwich Street is being reinstated; therefore, we will probably have to have a review process to put it on the official map. The exact process has not been determined. Unofficially, we are called on all the time for our resources and information. The databases and historical knowledge about Lower Manhattan are here. Every other week, we meet with Alex [Garvin, LMDC vice-president for planning and development and member of the city planning commission].

Q. *What's hot right now?*

A. The biggest issue is what environmental review is required. If you use Federal Emergency Management Agency funds, it will be a national environmental protection act review. That type of review can take as many as eight years because you have to look at all possible options. The time period is shorter if you do a city or state environmental review because you only look at the particular project and its ramifications.

Q. *Meanwhile, what else is happening?*

A. Our next priority project in Manhattan is Hudson Yards on the Far West Side [from 28th Street to 42nd Street and from the Hudson River to Seventh Avenue]. We just selected Arquitectonica and Cooper Robertson & Partners to do the plan. The area is the great frontier for the expansion for office space and residential space in Manhattan. It includes so much land, but there's no "there" there. The challenge is to create character.

Q. *Does that project pose competition with the plans for Lower Manhattan?*

A. No, the Hudson Yards project is in a different time frame. It is not really developable until the subway line comes in 2009.

Q. *Why do you feel so strongly about physical planning and urban design?*

A. I think that having worked on Battery Park City is an important factor. The key thing there was how to create identity for a place. We had a very short time to implement our plan because the bonds were coming due. Putting public investment into high-quality open space, speeding approvals, and employing design guidelines worked. Without these, we would not have been able to attract the private residential investment or the World Financial Center buildings. That's where I learned how density, public open space, and streetscape could change the perception of a space. It really demonstrated to me that good design is good economic development.

Q. *Are you applying these ideas elsewhere in the city?*

A. In Greenpoint and Williamsburg [nearly

100 acres along a 1.5-mile stretch of Brooklyn waterfront], we are using physical planning to turn an unproductive manufacturing zone into an improved waterfront reconnected to its neighborhood. We are designing the open space and its linkages, the street plans, and the height and composition of buildings on the waterfront. We will tinker with the waterfront zoning to allow developers to create a diverse skyline and waterfront-access plan. We will do more physical planning in each of the boroughs.

Q. *Tell me a little more about other concerns.*

A. Strengthening the regional business districts is a priority of this administration. In the context of 9/11, it's not only important to strengthen Lower Manhattan but also to ready other places for growth. In Long Island City, for instance, we have to do some image changing and increase residential density. In downtown Brooklyn, we want to rezone so we have more developable sites—there are almost none there now. In Jamaica, we will also rezone for higher density in order to capitalize on the area's seven-minute proximity to the airport, especially since AirTrain, the new transit connection, will open in 2003.

Accommodating industries of the future is another issue. For example, we have to figure out why we don't have biotech or a biotech campus and what we can do to incentivize this industry.

Residential neighborhoods are also a concern. While the department doesn't have the ability to build housing, we can certainly upzone to accommodate more housing in appropriate areas. We have several initiatives under way including 120 blocks in Park Slope, East Harlem from 110th to 124th streets, and Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, where it is changing from manufacturing to residential.

Q. *How important are regional forces?*

A. We have to look at ourselves as part of a region. Regions are competing with each other now more than cities. When I got here, I looked at our maps and said, "Where is New Jersey?" There were absolutely no maps with New Jersey on them. Now we have them. We are looking at establishing a transportation network which can serve the whole region. What's good for the region is good for the city in every way.

Q. *Can you describe your relationship with the mayor and other agencies?*

A. This is a great moment for planners and designers in the city. It really is. The mayor understands architecture, art, and public art. And you couldn't think of implementing the ideas we are talking about if your mayor doesn't believe in them. Also, Dan Doctoroff [the former businessman who spearheaded New York's

Olympic bid, now deputy mayor in charge of planning and development] really values this agency. This administration is heavily focused on implementation—getting things done.

Q. *What's it like moving from commissioner to director?*

A. Well, if you are driving the car, you have to know where you are going. It's very different from being a passenger. The breadth of talent and the complexity of the agency were something I really did not know about until I got here. The first thing I did when I arrived was to go desk to desk to ask the staff what they did and what they thought we should be doing. They all had very good ideas. The most surprising thing was that they were so enthusiastic about the approach I wanted to take with physical planning.

Q. *Who has influenced your career?*

A. Certainly, my stepfather, Bill Paley [former head of CBS], was key. He always had a great instinct for style and extraordinary taste. For the CBS headquarters, he wanted the best architect. He chose Eero Saarinen. And he picked the jet-honed, Canadian black granite for the building. If you look at the Battery Park Esplanade, that is what is on the seawall. My stepfather taught me that building in the city is a great public service. He also built Paley Park, and the contribution it made to the city in terms of enhancing the quality of life I don't have to tell you.

Holly Whyte taught me so much. Once he took me to Paley Park and said, "Watch how people skip into that space." I learned from Holly that the health of the city is really shown in the life and vitality of its streets and public spaces.

Q. *What will be your legacy?*

A. Some planners feel that a report is enough. I want to leave a mark. Whether it's housing, improvement of architecture, use of the waterfront, the restoration of Lower Manhattan, I want to catalyze development and create places where people want to live and work.

Eugenie Birch chairs the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of Pennsylvania. In March 1986, she interviewed William H. Whyte ("The Observation Man") for *Planning*.

Resources

On the web. For Burden's strategic planning process, see www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/about/strategy.pdf. For more on Hudson Yards, go to www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/pub/fwmt.html.