

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Essex Crossing Is the Anti-Hudson Yards

The new mixed-use mega-project on the Lower East Side heals a civic wound with hundreds of affordable apartments, community perks and a sleek home for Essex Market.



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Even half-done, Essex Crossing, on the Lower East Side, is shaping up as one of New York's most promising new mixed-use developments — the anti-Hudson Yards.

A \$1.9 billion, six-acre, for-profit mega-project occupying several blocks around Delancey Street where traffic barrels onto and off the Williamsburg Bridge, it replaces what had been a vast no-man's land and gaping civic wound with new subsidized apartments, a bushel of community perks, parkland, a movie multiplex, office and retail space for local businesses and a capacious new home for the city-owned Essex Market.

Launched a decade ago during the Bloomberg administration, shepherded through the de Blasio years by New York's Economic Development Corporation and master-planned by SHoP and Beyer Blinder Belle, two big city-based architecture firms, Essex Crossing results from long years of ground-up neighborhood consultation and holistic planning. If you have been anywhere near the Lower East Side lately you could hardly have failed to notice the egregious new supertall that the opportunistic developer called Extell has imposed some blocks away along the waterfront around the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges.

Other developers are now bidding to erect more towers there. Taking advantage of anomalous zoning regulations, these projects have provoked some very loud, angry protests from residents who feel the buildings are being shoved down the throats of a largely poor, immigrant, low- and mid-rise community.

By contrast, while some Lower East Siders remain leery, a relative lack of vocal opposition to Essex Crossing since 2013 — when a consortium of developers and investors calling themselves Delancey Street Associates won the competition to do the project — seems testament to the virtue and value of arduous, upfront negotiations and plans. This may come as close as we can now get, in a political system obeisant to private enterprise, to balancing equity with gentrification.



A map of the entire project, which includes nine buildings and covers six acres. Credit...QuallsBenson

You might ask: Is this how things should work? Democratic presidential candidates have been arguing the question in terms of health care and wealth taxes. Here, the issue is housing. During the Reagan era, federal authorities got out of the business of constructing public housing, offering private developers tax credits in return for building affordable units. The developers, properly regulated, were supposed to profit from their own efficiency while cities would benefit from the addition of more mixed-income housing.

The process depended on a responsive, vigilant government. A new report by the New York City Department of City Planning shows housing production in the metro area is falling increasingly short of job growth. The area produced 2.2 new housing units per net new job between 2001 and 2008; just 0.3 units last year.

With widening inequity and runaway rents outpacing many cities' ability to produce more subsidized homes, there is a growing call on the left for government to do more. But government can be slow, inept and profligate just as private developers can rake in tax breaks without always delivering on promised benefits.

At Essex Crossing, the city and developers seemed to have operated on the same wavelength, so the process worked. Four of the nine buildings are now finished. Consulted about optics, local residents said they didn't want monolithic brick towers, which might remind them of 1960s and 70s public housing. They didn't much like Bernard Tschumi's shapely but garish blue-glass luxury condo tower, either — its arrival in the neighborhood a dozen years ago seemed to plant an incongruous flag for colonizing bourgeoisie — so they didn't want tons more glass and gloss.

In response, Essex Crossing's boxy, mostly bland exteriors are variously clad in brick and metal by a variety of architects. Handel Architects has devised the project's centerpiece, the 26-story Essex, a half market rate, half subsidized rental tower, with 195 apartments. Its podium makes room for a 14-screen cineplex, the largest organic rooftop farm in Manhattan and for the Essex Market, with the first phase of a new enterprise called the Market Line in the basement.



242 Broome, whose shimmery facade in anodized aluminum changes color with the shifting light. It will house the International Center of Photography. Credit...Field Condition



A furnished apartment in 242 Broome. Credit... Mark Wickens for The New York Times

Nearby, the Rollins is a 15-story, L-shaped, amber-colored brick residential slab by Beyer Blinder Belle, with a Target and the East Coast's largest Trader Joe's at its base along with a nice new pocket park designed by West 8, the Dutch firm that landscaped Governors Island, just to the north. Dattner Architects designed the 14-story, 100 percent affordable Frances Goldin Senior Apartments, around the corner, which includes a new medical center.

And SHoP conceived the twisty 14-story mixed-income condo project called 242 Broome, whose shimmery facade in anodized aluminum changes color with the shifting light, picking up on the sepias of nearby brick buildings, the blue of the sky. Architecturally the most memorable design, 242 leans over the sidewalk to the west and steps out toward the street-wall on the south, bonding on the north like a conjoined twin with a new home (opening in January, fingers crossed) for the International Center of Photography, whose entrance is a transparent glass curtain wall framed like an old Polaroid snapshot.

This stretch of the Lower East Side used to be called the Seward Park Urban Renewal Area. During the 1950s, the city's powerful planning czar, Robert Moses, decided to bulldoze dozens of old tenements. These were buildings where, years before, Jewish and Italian immigrants settled, replaced by African-Americans and Latinos. Through the early 1970s, the demolitions displaced some 1,800 poor and working-class families, most of them Puerto Rican, turning homes into vacant lots.

The city promised to replace the lots with new low-income dwellings. But for years Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, in cahoots with William E. Rapfogel, who ran the taxpayer-financed Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, conspired to thwart redevelopment proposals floated by local housing advocates because they threatened to undo Mr. Silver's Jewish voting base.

Mayor after mayor failed to make headway. Ultimately, Mr. Silver was convicted on corruption charges, Mr. Rapfogel went to prison for a kickback scheme and a path cleared for Essex Crossing, which finally makes good on the city's half-century-old promise. Among its provisions: The project sets aside subsidized apartments for tenants evicted all those years ago who now want to return. Most have moved away or no longer qualify for aid or have died. But nearly 30 former residents have come back.

In all, Essex Crossing creates 1,079 new apartments, more than half permanently designated for low- and middle-income tenants, a percentage much higher than the city's inclusionary zoning rules require. Apartments selling for millions now mix with ones for families of two earning as little as \$15,000 a year, and some for those earning zero.

To mollify skeptics, developers front-loaded community benefits like a new senior center, new quarters for the Chinese-American Planning Council, which offers early childhood education programs, and for the Lower East Side's Henry Street Settlement to do work force development. A stylish new cafe called the GrandLo opened last year, operated by the century-old Grand Street Settlement as a nonprofit job training site for local at-risk youth.

In concert with the local school district, Essex Crossing started after school classes that introduce teens to the ins and outs of the construction and development businesses. Project EATS manages the organic farm, which serves up free food and wellness instruction to seniors, families and children.



The view of the Essex from Delancey Street, with unfinished buildings behind it. Credit...Mark Wickens for The New York Times



Essex Market with the new Market Line downstairs, which opens soon. Credit...Mark Wickens for The New York Times



Mark Wickens for The New York Times



Mark Wickens for The New York Times

Most conspicuously, the project gives Essex Market a sprawling new home. The storied Lower East Side fixture evolved from a mess of open-air pushcarts at the turn of the 20th century selling pickles, herring and hats. In 1940, Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia moved the market indoors, to what became its famous but increasingly dingy, squalid quarters north of Delancey. Designed by SHoP on the ground floor of the Essex, the sleek new Essex Market opened this spring at more than double the size of the old market. It's a spectacle of bespoke stalls, with subsidized rents for legacy vendors. Exploiting the sloped contour of the movie theater seating above, the market gets loads of light, pouring in through soaring windows revealed by the angled, white, sculptured ceiling, which yields space for mezzanine-level seating and a sunny, glassed-in teaching kitchen.

Come Thanksgiving, ribbons will be cut on the inaugural tranche of vendors at the Market Line, in the basement of the Essex. Three-quarters of the vendors are immigrant, minority or women-owned businesses, half from the Lower East Side. They include local favorites like the Pickle Guys, Nom Wah, Ends Meat, Veselka and Essex Pearl.

Rents for the market's lower-margin businesses will be supported by its high-margin ones, akin to the way mixed-income housing works. When built out, the Market Line will eventually host homegrown art and clothes merchants, a music space and will stretch three blocks underground all the way from Essex to Clinton Streets.

I checked out the construction site not long ago. The décor is New York after a rain at night: all shiny black brick and polished concrete beneath an unfinished ceiling. Sunlight filters through street-level windows at the Delancey Street entrance and via the wide, open staircase that spills down from the Essex Market. The brick and concrete will disappear behind signage and the hordes of shoppers and nosherers expected to come, hunting down bauernwurst from Schaller & Weber, the old-time Yorkville butcher, and alcapurrias from a Puerto Rican newcomer called Que Chevere, part of whose profits, customers are told, will benefit Autism Speaks.



The view from the roof deck of the Essex. Credit...Mark Wickens for The New York Times

The project's developers expect to rake in plenty of cash from all the market-rate condos, apartment rentals and commercial office and retail spaces. Rising real estate values on the Lower East Side have accelerated neighborhood gentrification but also helped subsidize the project's abundance of affordable housing and community services.

I was curious to learn that Mayor Bill de Blasio hasn't yet showed up for any of the official openings at Essex Crossing. Its profitability makes a good argument for demanding more in the way of public benefits from other large-scale private developments.

At the same time, the project is a reminder that what can seem like kneejerk public resistance to new developments, even ones that promise affordable housing, can't simply be chalked up to NIMBYism. If residents don't know how, or whether, a project fits into some shared, participatory, longer-term vision for a neighborhood, then the most modest new condo tower can become a call to the barricades.

Essex Crossing earned its community buy-in by delivering on promised benefits upfront. That's still no substitute for city planning.

But it points toward a better way.



A view from the Rollins, north toward the Essex and new construction. Credit...Mark Wickens for The New York Times