Re-considering the BQE

-a linear park-
Built during the height of the automobile age, the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, better known by its acronym BQE is a mostly elevated highway built during the reign of Robert Moses, the master builder. It effectively cuts through and connects the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens and provides circulation into Manhattan. While it still acts as a major vehicular artery for the city, its construction had divided century old communities, it is notoriously congested, and like many projects from the same era, its physical presence continues to choke the new wave of development in areas surrounding it.
3.

Now we face the recent demise of the automobile industry which promoted such construction. The inevitable concern over sustainability and the rising need to accommodate urban growth while maintaining a sense of human scale renders the BQE a product from a bygone period.

This proposal questions the viability in the existence of the 20th century elevated highway as we move forward into a new era, and proposes a more human oriented reconstruction plan that will allow for future development that in turn will revitalize, nourish and serve the inhabitants, while making economical sense. While measures have been taken to continuously re-patch and repair portions of this highway, mainly due to ease traffic and congestion, no grand vision has been manifested that will truly adopt to the changing times. They frequently fall short of becoming a valuable investment for future generations to come.
At the Northern Section of Brooklyn, the BQE running north-south, 24 foot high and 140 feet wide, dissects the neighborhoods of Williamsburg and Greenpoint. Many ethnic groups inhabit these neighborhoods, including Germans, Hasidic Jews, Italians, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Poles. The split occurs without regards to the underlying community. Just a few subway stops from Manhattan, in recent years, the area’s proximity to Manhattan has spurred the influx of new generations of younger residents. They have made the area into a community with a burgeoning art scene and subsequently, recent developments have turned the area into one of the fastest growing areas within New York City. The number of its inhabitants is expected to grow exponentially. The two neighborhoods combined are experiencing a rapid growth, however much needed infrastructure such as schools, commercial zones, health care facilities, and transportation to support the community is left underdeveloped.
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In these neighborhoods, the streets have traditionally developed along the stops off of the L and G subway lines, the presence of the steel mega structure has decreased the connectedness of these enclaves. It has prohibited the connection of the East and West sections of this area. This lack of synergy between pockets of development has hastened the areas development as a whole, and will not be improved as long as the elevated structure exists. During its conception of the BQE, while a more creative approach was taken into the designing of certain stretches of the Highway, such as at the more affluent Brooklyn Heights with its promenade, the depressed section through the neighborhood of Caroll Gardens and South Williamsburg, in most areas, little concern was given for the previously existing fabric of the neighborhoods. The BQE served to supply the need for the industrial age, and more emphasis was given towards industrial growth while a more holistic vision of future development was pushed aside. By being a physical barrier the BQE depreciates the value of the adjacent blocks. Pollution, Noise, Lack of light, are main reasons for the degradation of its adjoining lots.
6.
The proposal takes the 0.6 mile stretch of the BQE from Metropolitan Avenue to McGuiness Boulevard and buries it underground. The elevated highway, when buried underground exposes a linear patch of untouched urban land that is available for development. This land should be mainly retained as an open park. The adjacent blocks which are currently either vacant or of low value and will benefit significantly from this development. A new zoning resolution shall be established that will allow for commercial development as well as low rise residences. Schools and health care facilities will be erected along this park. Careful considerations shall be made to restrict the height of buildings and the masses that are allowed to be built. Cultural institutions will be encouraged to take roots along the park. The abundance in artists in the region will in conjunction spur creative activity and bring vitality to the area. All of these benefits, with the subsequent rise in land value of the adjacent lots, and the extending neighborhood will offset the cost in the reconstruction in the long run. The initial funding should be subsidized by the government while a detailed financing plan between public and private entities, along with neighborhood land owners can be devised with economic return in mind.
With our need to decrease dependency on oil, the consequent development and spread of vehicles with lower CO2 emissions which produce less noise, less pollution, creating a covered roadway and running roads underground will become much more reasonable in the near future. The need for the brutal, forced integration of an overheard roadway onto an urban fabric will be obsolete, and a tendency of the past.
Above the depressed highway, there will be a continuous park 140 foot wide and 0.6 miles long. The park area will be below the street level so that the street traffic and the park level is on a different layer. The park shall be landscaped with indigenous horticulture and provide natural habitats for wildlife. This area will provide a much needed recreational area for the neighborhood as well as becoming a destination. It will serve as a continuous promenade and a bicycle path, and will connect the various institutions along the park. A tram line can connect the blocks along the way. A stream will run through it providing irrigation for pockets of gardens that are managed by the community. Local farm activity will be encouraged utilizing the newly available land.
Markets can be held during certain days of the week with designated areas along the path designed as public gathering spaces for outdoor concerts and performances, a vibrant art scene. Commercial tenants such as restaurants and retail can open up along the park to promote commercial activity and invite visitors from around the city and beyond. Restaurants by the park can utilize the availability of the local gardens in the park to promote farm to table dining.
Along the BQE, there are other neighborhoods that can benefit also from a similar approach. However different the characters of the adjacent neighborhoods may be, what is common is that the elevated highway will prevent the adjacent area from taking a course towards positive development. However, what they conceal is an opportunity for development that is promising. If a similar approach is adapted along the entire BQE, a even longer continuous park and a transportation axis can be developed. There are currently many cities in the US that face similar predicaments. New Orleans, Los Angeles to name a few. This project can set an example for these cities, and serve as a fore runner in the way we deal with past developments, and shed light to how we can reuse past projects that are otherwise a cause of deterioration of neighborhoods.