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IN CONVERSATION WITH...

Regina Myer, President, Downtown Brooklyn Partnership – New York, USA

‘Success needs to be defined for the broader community in terms of design, affordability and accessibility to promote equitable growth’

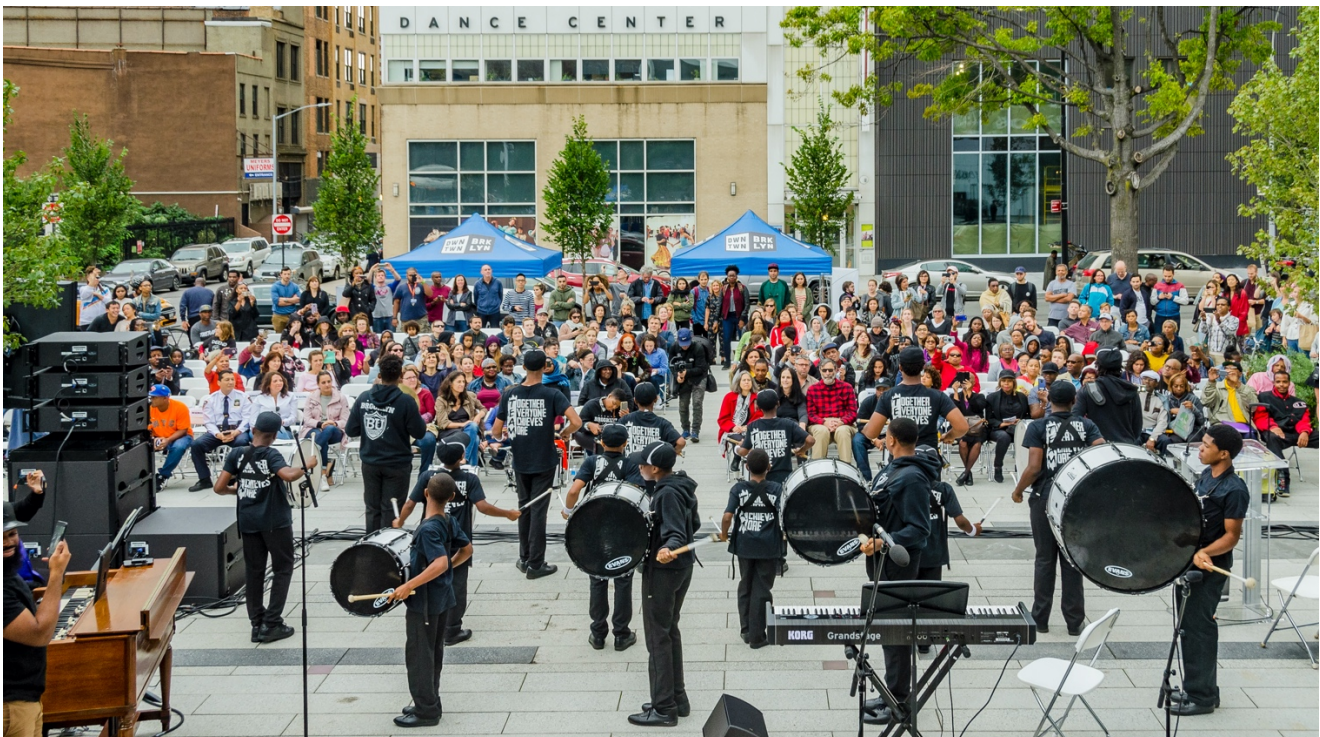


Image: Giles Ashford. Courtesy of Downtown Brooklyn Partnership.

Regina Myer is President of the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership (DBP), a not-for-profit local development corporation that serves as the primary champion for Downtown Brooklyn as a world-class business, cultural, educational, residential, and retail destination.

From 2007 to 2016, Regina served as President of Brooklyn Bridge Park, overseeing one of the City's largest public works of the last century. Prior to that, Regina was the senior vice president for planning and design at the Hudson Yards Development Corporation, and the Brooklyn Borough Director for the New York City Planning Department.

She received her BA and Masters in Urban Planning from the University of Michigan, and resides in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

You have been the President of the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership – henceforth DBP – since 2016. What would you say is your biggest achievement so far? And do you have any regrets?

It's been great being at the helm of the Partnership for the past 3 and a half years. I would say my biggest achievement thus far is charting the continuing evolution of Downtown Brooklyn as NYC's most vibrant mixed-use downtown. We are no longer dominated by one specific use as we once were (for example the Fulton Street shopping district or the municipal center). Now the foundational meaning of the Downtown is its vibrant mixed use which puts innovation and culture at the forefront.



Image: Jordan Battiste. Courtesy of Downtown Brooklyn Partnership

Your position at DBP is the latest step in your long and successful career as an urban planner. What do you consider the most striking evolution in city planning over the years and what would you say is the biggest challenge facing the field going forward?

That's a great question, and perhaps only made more important by the difficult time we are in now.

Looking back, I would say that overall the most striking evolution in city planning over the years is how the importance of cities, the world over, has evolved. When I started my career in the mid-80s, the importance of the City was still questioned. I have had the privilege of working on projects that have defined a part of New York City's ascendance in the past twenty years, and that has demonstrated to me that the power of urban living is the most sustainable for our planet, and the most meaningful in terms of community. There are some many ways that this is demonstrated, but let me give you two examples. In terms of climate change, again and again we are reminded that city living, dependent on mass transit instead of private vehicles, represents the cleanest mode of transport. In terms of new development, we have learned, over and over, that success needs to be



defined for the broader community in terms of design, affordability and accessibility to promote equitable growth.

‘Recent events shine a blinding light on the need for drastic change within our social structures, which calls for a more equitable distribution of affordable housing and education resources’

There will be many challenges in the short term for the field. Many if not all municipalities will be facing significant, if not structural budget issues, at the same time when the call and need for infrastructure rebuilding is the most needed – for improved healthcare, especially in our low-income communities, for increased amounts of affordable housing and access to education and job opportunities.

DBP describes itself as ‘a not-for-profit local development corporation that serves as the primary champion for Downtown Brooklyn as a world-class business, cultural, educational, residential, and retail destination’. Can you tell us more about what this entails practically and give us an idea of your day-to-day activities?

The Downtown Brooklyn Partnership is both a membership organization and an umbrella organization for the three Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) that cover Downtown Brooklyn. The Partnership’s diverse activities include attracting new businesses and improving the environment for existing companies, facilitating the construction of public spaces and streetscapes, supporting and promoting Downtown Brooklyn’s cultural assets, and encouraging a sense of place and an engaged civic community.

‘I love jobs and challenges that are an amalgam’!

My day to day activities run the gamut from meetings with members regarding new initiatives, speaking engagements to promote the Downtown, to working with my team on a huge variety of projects. Some of our achievements last year include construction of a new park in the heart of the Brooklyn Cultural District (which was renamed for the famed jazz singer (and local resident) Betty Carter. To finish the project on schedule we worked hard with park designers, contractors, and local officials for over two years. We also work to attract and support great new restaurants, and one big success has been the reopening of the historic Gage and Tollner restaurant on Fulton Street, in the heart of the district. We worked with the restaurateurs on marketing, permitting issues, and identifying early supporters.

DBP manages three Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) that cover the whole of Downtown Brooklyn. How do you cohesively manage such a massive area when it comes to community building and activation, public programming and branding?



Actually, it's terrific that we cover such a large area. Downtown Brooklyn's diversity calls for flexible management in a number of ways. Programmatically, we approach the area as one community, with branding and public programming that serve everyone. Our programming is focused in four different plazas: Albee Square, MetroTech Commons, the Plaza at 300 Ashland, and Willoughby Plaza. We present over 100 events in a typical season, with each plaza known for its signature events. Our branding is consistent throughout, to promote the entire district and to give our constituents and visitors to the area a sense of consistency across our communications via email and social networks.



Image: Giles Ashford. Courtesy of Downtown Brooklyn Partnership.

Where do you look for inspiration? What examples and case studies in the US or worldwide most excite you and do you see DBP replicating these in any way?

I look EVERYWHERE for inspiration!

I love to travel and meet people in my field and learn not just through case studies, but through experience. Last year I spent 10 days in Japan, touring new developments with local officials, teaching a class on Brooklyn development at Meiji University, and visiting wonderful shrines, of course.

Earlier in my career I visited the South Bank, which convinced me that New York needed to have a great waterfront that included meaningful cultural use. When I was building Brooklyn Bridge Park, I applied that lesson, incorporating the Brooklyn Historical Society and world-renowned theater company, St. Ann's Warehouse, in the rehabilitation of the historic Empire Stores and Tobacco Warehouse buildings, and a boathouse and historic vessel for dining into the park design, and by partnering on a multitude of successful public art projects.



Downtown Brooklyn is home to prestigious cultural institutions such as the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), and fosters a thriving grassroots arts and cultural scene. What role does culture play in DBP's services and are there opportunities to expand your activities to further accommodate cultural assets and events in Downtown Brooklyn?

Culture plays a huge part in DBP's services, since the Brooklyn Cultural District, comprises so many world-class cultural organizations representing nearly every artistic discipline. The diversity and vitality of these groups is unmatched, and represents one of the City's great cultural assets.



Image: Giles Ashford. Courtesy of Downtown Brooklyn Partnership.

We have a robust programming calendar that highlights the cultural institutions in the area throughout the summer season – including dance, film, music, all presented in the district on public plazas we manage. Three years ago, we ramped it up and instituted the Downtown Brooklyn Arts Festival, with the mission of specifically highlighting all of Downtown Brooklyn's cultural offerings on the newly created plaza across the street from BAM.

Another signature event in Downtown Brooklyn is the Brooklyn Book Festival, which we have supported for over a decade.

We also manage 80 Hanson Arts, a small office building that is dedicated to non-profit arts groups such as the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA), Storycorps, Bang on a Can, and BOMB Magazine. This spring, as part of the JR exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, we will be installing a large mural by JR on the highly-visible east façade of the building.

As part of Governor Cuomo's \$10 Million Downtown Revitalization Initiative funding awarded to Downtown Brooklyn last year, DBP is managing a \$600k DTBK Public Art + Placemaking Fund. Potential projects include large-scale art and placemaking installations, performances, and ADA capital improvements to public cultural spaces. I couldn't think of a better time to support artists and invest in our public spaces.



In December 2019, DBP published a *Public Realm Action Plan*, which sets out an ambitious vision to pedestrianize Downtown Brooklyn. Can you tell us more about the origins of the project, its evolution from conception to release, and the next steps in realizing this vision?

We unveiled a new vision for the public realm in Downtown Brooklyn that reorients its streets toward pedestrian use, and creates a greener, more sustainable, and vibrant downtown. The Public Realm Action Plan, created by DBP in collaboration with design firms Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG Architects) and WXY architecture + urban design, lays out a cohesive vision and series of strategies beyond what any central business district in NYC has attempted – to pedestrianize the road network, boost safety for cyclists, and improve public transit efficiency. Finally, the plan is geared toward establishing a sense of place and strengthening Downtown Brooklyn’s identity.



Image courtesy of Downtown Brooklyn Partnership.

I have always felt that for Downtown Brooklyn to truly thrive, the streetscape must serve our constituents more successfully. Today, Downtown Brooklyn faces a number of physical challenges – from disorienting street grid connections and inactive streets at night, to congestion, gaps in the bike network, and a lack of green and open spaces. The plan tackles these longstanding issues head-on.

Next steps in this effort is to study how our vision can be implemented in key corridors. We are now working on an additional phase of work, and hope to be able to report some exciting news later in the year.



DBP has been running a 'Living Lab' program since 2018, partnering with tech startups and using DBP-operated public spaces as testing grounds for smart city technologies aimed at solving operational and quality of life challenges facing cities. What key insights, risks and opportunities has this program uncovered and how do you see it influencing your urban planning strategy?

In the category of 'practice what you preach', I feel that, as a champion of innovation, DBP needs to be part of the process. To do this, we instituted the **Living lab** program, using DBP-operated public spaces as a testing ground for smart city technologies. DBP partners with early-stage tech companies to test out their technologies throughout Downtown Brooklyn. This gives the companies valuable, real-world data on their products, highlights the brand of the neighborhood as a center for innovation, and provides potentially valuable data for DBP's operations. Thus far, we've been focusing on issues such as the neighborhood's walkability, sound levels, and street usage.

GCDN's next research piece will look at strategies that can be used to preserve the cultural identity of a neighborhood and capture value, either pre-emptively, during, or after a cultural district has been established. Would you say that capturing value is a concern for DBP and, if so, what tools/strategies do you use to tackle this issue in your day-to-day practice?

'One of the keys to Downtown Brooklyn's success has been the ability to leverage new opportunities to support the arts through public-private partnerships in new development projects'

In many cases, we have worked with the City to advocate for the inclusion of space for artists, space for cultural institutions, and public arts to be included in new developments. Two new projects that employ such a partnership are: 80 Flatbush, a development on Flatbush Avenue that includes two new schools and space to be allocated specifically for cultural use; and a proposal from Gotham Developers located in the Brooklyn Cultural District which will incorporate an expansion for the Brooklyn Music School.

GCDN and AEA Consulting are also partnering on a study commissioned by UK-based innovation foundation NESTA to explore the relationship between cultural anchors and their local creative industries. How would you describe the contribution of cultural institutions and the cultural sector to the creative industries in the context of Downtown Brooklyn? Where does DBP sit within this ecosystem and do you work specifically to foster a relationship between local cultural assets and creative industries?

We have always argued that there is a strong relationship between artists, cultural institutions, and innovation industries. Last spring, we released a report that backed this up in its finding that Brooklyn has emerged as one of the nation's leaders in the innovation economy. The study showed that the borough's growth in tech start-ups, creative companies, and innovative manufacturers has significantly outpaced Manhattan and other leading cities. I strongly believe that this growth in the



innovation economy wouldn't have happened without the large investment that the City and the private sector have made in culture over the past 20 years.

DBP is one of the first members of GCDN, having joined in 2014. What do you most value in your long experience with the network and what do you hope to get from your membership going forward?



Image: Jordan Battiste. Courtesy of Downtown Brooklyn

Our association with GCDN is invaluable. Downtown Brooklyn's Cultural District is one of its most unique and important components, and having the ability to learn best practices from across the globe is paramount to our ability to help it continue to thrive. A great example is being able to participate in conversations with colleagues during the current health crisis, which has been both incredibly instructive and supportive. I look forward to the next convening to continue the conversation, learn from colleagues the

world over, and visit another fantastic city!

Finally, we would be remiss if we didn't address the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on DBP. What are you doing short term and how do you see things unfolding long term?

The health crisis has had a profound effect on Downtown Brooklyn and NYC as a whole. We are working on a number of fronts to address the COVID-19 pandemic in Downtown Brooklyn.

1. We immediately launched a fundraiser for The Brooklyn Hospital Center, our local hospital which became one of the epicenters of the fight against coronavirus, to deliver meals from local eateries to staff working on the frontlines. The campaign, which set an initial fundraising goal of \$25,000, has raised nearly \$40,000 to provide approximately 3,600 meals and counting. With the campaign, the community really came together to support our healthcare workers, *and* our local eateries who are struggling to survive.

2. In response to the City's call for Open Streets to allow for social distancing, we have partnered with the City to open a number of blocks for pedestrians and cyclists. These streets are closed to through traffic daily, with delivery and construction vehicles and local traffic permitted to access the streets on an as needed basis.

The City's economic recovery rests on the ability for us to feel safe on our streets — they must feel inviting and navigable to workers, residents, and businesses. Closing off traffic, especially in high-density, mixed-use areas such as Downtown Brooklyn, will enable our retail, food and beverage, and small businesses to get back on their feet as they negotiate a new reality.

We hope this is just the beginning of Open Streets in Downtown Brooklyn's key commercial corridors, and a wider program to create more open space as we continue to grapple with COVID-19. Reorienting key thoroughfares toward pedestrian use won't just make the City more pleasant for the vast majority of New Yorkers — it will also support businesses, save jobs, and help save lives.

3. Our food + beverage and retail stores are facing reductions in capacity that — in addition to fixed costs — will make it incredibly difficult for them to survive the repercussions of the pandemic. Corollary to the expansion of Open Streets, DBP is advocating to permit restaurant and retail business operations on sidewalks and streets. We are working to identify potential locations for expansion of Open Streets, the use of curb lanes and sidewalks for seating and retail transactions, and full street closures, all to support the re-opening of our restaurant and retail businesses.

Thinking about scenario planning, what threats and opportunities do you foresee and what do you need the most at this moment? (All crises are opportunities, don't feel embarrassed).

'Yes, this crisis presents an opportunity to push through some ideas that the City wouldn't have even contemplated a year ago'

In terms of the real estate market, Brooklyn fares well as an attractive live-work environment. There is a documented concentration of talent in Brooklyn — especially in the innovation industries and in the arts. In current circumstances, with workers preferring to walk or bike to the workplace, Downtown Brooklyn should become one of the more sought-after office locations.

The desire to work in pedestrian and biker-friendly areas, and we are pushing to have Downtown Brooklyn at the forefront of this movement — starting with implementation of our public realm vision plan. Downtown Brooklyn should be largely car-free, and we really think that is an approach that will increasingly attract the most forward-thinking companies, and that City agencies are now more likely to consider bolder plans in order to support NYC's economic recovery. So, yes, this crisis presents an opportunity to push through some ideas that the City wouldn't have even contemplated a year ago.

