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Lessons from New York City's Struggle Against Amazon HQ2 in Long Island City

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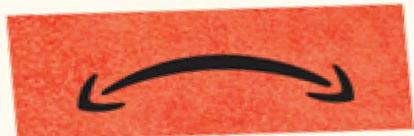
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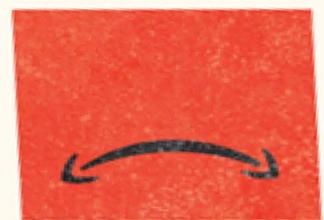
AMAZON IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

EDITED BY JAKE ALIMAHOMED-WILSON AND ELLEN REESE

The Cost of Free Shipping

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Amazon in the Global Economy

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and Ellen Reese

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Lessons from New York City's Struggle Against Amazon HQ2 in Long Island City

Steve Lang and Filip Stabrowski

For three months between November 2018 and February 2019, the entire world, it seemed, was watching Long Island City, Queens. On November 12, 2018, nearly two years after Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos announced that the company would be holding a contest for its second corporate headquarters (Amazon HQ2), New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo jointly announced that Amazon had selected Long Island City as one of its two HQ2 locations. The project, outlined in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Amazon and New York City and State, would provide up to $3 billion in public (state and city) subsidies to Amazon in exchange for building 4–8 million square feet of office space on the East River waterfront and creating 25,000 jobs averaging $150,000 per year (over ten years).

No sooner had the ink dried on the MOU, however, than fierce opposition to the plan quickly emerged. A press conference at the proposed HQ2 site was convened the following day, and local elected officials joined a coalition of local labor and immigrant rights groups vowed to fight the deal. As the buzz (and controversy) concerning Amazon HQ2 continued to grow, Governor Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio announced the formation of a 45-member Community Advisory Committee to "help shape" the plan through "robust community engagement."[1] The next two months witnessed a series of public events dedicated to the Amazon plan—including meetings, discussions, teach-ins, city council hearings, canvassing operations, Internet discussion forums, and protests. Then suddenly, on Valentine's Day, in a tersely worded statement that cited the "number of state and local politicians [that] have made it clear that they oppose [Amazon's] presence," Amazon announced that it was no longer planning to build its second headquarters in Long Island City.[2]

The shock waves from this second surprise decision emerged immediately and continue to reverberate today. Amazon's official announcement notwithstanding, there has been no shortage of blame (or credit) assigned for Amazon's sudden withdrawal from Long Island City. But while we may never know the true reason(s) for this decision, the struggle over the project and Amazon's attempt to control and manage community engagement in the planning process are instructive in their own right. From the arguments that emerged both for and against the Amazon plan we can discern the contours of the emerging struggles over urban space between big tech, the state, and immigrant and working-class communities in global cities such as New York City. The Amazon experience in Long

Island City also sheds light on the power of organizing across multiple issue areas in struggles against big tech's designs on the contemporary city.

<center>HQ2 IN LIC</center>

Amazon's announcement that it would split its second corporate headquarters between Arlington, VA and Long Island City, NY, was the culmination of a nearly two-year-long "selection" process—likened to the "Hunger Games"—involving over 200 American cities, New York included. As part of this competition, cities pitched themselves to Amazon by offering up not just financial incentives (including subsidies and tax breaks) for HQ2, but also—and perhaps more consequentially—vast amounts of city data that Amazon would otherwise be challenged to obtain.[3] New York City's initial application included five potential urban sites (Midtown West, Lower Manhattan, Downtown Brooklyn, Long Island City, Governor's Island), with Long Island City ultimately winning out.

Significantly, the MOU also stipulated that the project would be designed as a General Project Plan, thereby enabling the state to impose eminent domain and bypassing the local, city council-mandated approval process known as the Uniform Land Use Review Process (ULURP). Bypassing ULURP, according to city and state planning officials, would allow for an expedited planning process that would better suit Amazon's time frame. It would also, critics emphasized, remove the opportunities for negotiation and compromise between the developers, the city, and local stakeholder groups afforded by ULURP. Instead, like the Atlantic Yards development project before it, the Amazon plan would be subjected to a less onerous approval process under the auspices of a New York State

panel known as the Public Authorities Control Board (PACB).

THE CASE FOR HQ2

Though proponents of the Amazon plan emphasiszed the different aspects of the project that they felt would ultimately benefit the city and community, the core argument for HQ2 in Long Island City centered on quality job growth. Amazon's spectacular growth on a global scale promised further expansion and job creation with its second headquarters. Addressing the New York City Council in December 2019, James Patchett, head of New York State Economic Development Corporation (EDC), captured the logic behind this growth-oriented approach to economic and urban development. The anticipated job growth ("tens of thousands of jobs") was expected to yield $30 billion in tax revenue to the city and state—an "exponential return on investment" that could be used to deliver public benefits such as improved local schools, libraries, transit, and infrastructure. From this perspective, the multiplier effects of Amazon HQ2 represented a win-win opportunity for *all* New Yorkers. According to Patchett:

> From a jobs perspective, the Amazon opportunity will help real people in concrete ways. From the small business owner who will see an increase in foot traffic at her bodega, to the construction worker who will help build the headquarters, to the CUNY computer science student who will land a life-changing internship at the company, it is clear this deal is about New Yorkers, front and center.[4]

More importantly, the anticipated new jobs at Amazon were not just any jobs; rather, they were "tech" jobs whose growth would provide a kind of insurance against any future downturn or recession that might negatively affect the finance industry—a sector whose disproportionate power/influence in New York City has been made abundantly clear following the downturns of the early 1990s, the early 2000s (following the terrorist attacks on 9/11), and the Great Recession of 2008. Building HQ2 in Long Island City, Patchett claimed, would create a "reliable financial anchor," thereby "cushioning the city against slumps we know will come."[5]

With Amazon HQ2 firmly ensconced in the city, moreover, local educational institutions such as the City University of New York (CUNY) and the State University of New York (SUNY) would be well-positioned to create "talent pipelines" to employers such as Amazon. Along with the city and state, Amazon would invest into job-training programs focusing on under-represented New Yorkers. Students from nearby LaGuardia Community College, one of the most diverse institutions of higher learning in the world, and residents from the Queensbridge Houses, the largest public housing development in North America, were the intended targets of these new initiatives.

Patchett also lauded the Amazon HQ2 plan for the "unprecedented infrastructure investments in Long Island City" that would follow. In a neighborhood that had witnessed a massive boom in residential construction over the past decade, the Amazon plan for jobs and office space would complement the newly built housing, while reversing the existing commuting patterns that have characterized Long Island City as a bedroom community for workers in Manhattan. Far from taxing further the local infrastructure

(such as sewers and subways), the plan would actually improve it by balancing out the live/work ratio in Long Island City and generating tax revenue for infrastructural investment. Amazon HQ2 was thus promoted as an example of smart and "comprehensive" urban planning, an innovative and forward-looking post-industrial waterfront project in the hyper-diverse borough of Queens. Unlike more traditional corporate office parks and technology campuses, moreover, HQ2 would not turn its back on the surrounding city by providing services (especially food and drink) in-house. Instead, limited on-site offerings would encourage Amazon workers to venture out into Long Island City and patronize its shops and restaurants.[6]

Finally—and perhaps most importantly—Amazon HQ2 would sit prominently, and visibly, on the East River waterfront across from the United Nations. A stone's throw from the sparkling new Cornell Tech campus on Roosevelt Island, and perched on the western end of the world's most diverse urban area (Queens), HQ2 would serve as a powerful symbol of the tech industry in New York City. By locating outside of Manhattan, moreover, the world's most powerful corporation would have space in which to settle and expand, nurturing an ecosystem of start-ups and solidifying New York City's place as a rival to Silicon Valley in the process.[7]

<center>THE CASE AGAINST HQ2</center>

Opposition to the Amazon HQ2 plan emerged forcefully and immediately. In fact, the seeds of the anti-Amazon coalition that emerged had been planted well before the company's announcement in November 2018. More than a year prior, in October 2017, a coalition of grassroots community and labor groups, including New York City Communities for

Change, Make the Road New York, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), and the Alliance for a Greater New York (ALIGN) drafted a letter to Mayor Bill de Blasio and Governor Andrew Cuomo stating their opposition to any state or local financial incentives for Amazon, including sales tax exemptions, property tax abatements, or corporate income tax credits. The following July, just months before the HQ2 announcement, the same coalition of local labor and community groups organized a protest against Amazon for reportedly selling white-supremacist products on its website. Rallying outside an Amazon-sponsored summit in Manhattan, one protest organizer stated that "Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos wants taxpayer dollars and community resources to bring HQ [headquarters] to here. But we are here to say no … ."[8]

It was in such a context that Amazon HQ2 in Long Island City was announced. Critics, including city council member Jimmy Van Bramer and state senator Michael Gianaris—both of whom represented districts in which the proposed HQ2 site was located—assailed the plan on several fronts. They expressed outrage that $3 billion in public subsidies would be going to the world's richest man, at a time when New York City's own subways were falling apart and its public housing deteriorating. More substantively, critics pointed out that tax breaks rarely if ever make a difference in corporate headquarter location decisions, and were thus perfectly unnecessary.

The much-trumpeted jobs that HQ2 would create also came under fire. For low-income and working-class residents, the $150,000 per year jobs were clearly not intended for them. In place of job guarantees for local residents of public housing, Amazon offered job fairs and resume-building workshops. When pushed by council

members and protesters at city council hearings, it offered just 30 customer service center jobs for Queensbridge residents. Moreover, critics viewed the $5 million that Amazon had pledged for tech training programs as a pittance at best, and entirely self-serving at worst— particularly considering how the city and state were also expected to contribute $5 million each to these programs.

Another issue of deep concern for the opposition to HQ2 was the anticipated residential displacement effects of the project. In the midst of an affordable housing crisis, with a spate of luxury residential developments already pushing rents steadily higher, tenant organizers in Western Queens were highly critical of the further gentrification that HQ2 would unleash. The thousands of new high-income individuals working for Amazon would not just be living in the newly built housing of Long Island City, but would be colonizing the working-class and immigrant "frontline" communities of Astoria, Sunnyside, Woodside, Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, and Corona as well. Local anti-gentrification activist groups such as the Justice For All Coalition and Queens Neighborhoods United saw Amazon as, in the words of one activist, a "great neutron bomb of gentrification" in Western Queens.

For the local elected leaders who opposed Amazon HQ2, however, perhaps the most egregious flaw in the plan was the way it sought to subvert the urban policy-making process itself. Specifically, by bypassing ULURP in favor of the General Project Plan, critics argued, vital public input and consultation would be excluded from the HQ2 planning process. This, according to Van Bramer, was nothing less than a state-backed, corporate subversion of democracy:

Bypassing ULURP is a direct assault on community engagement and consultation on a project that would change the face of Queens … It's outrageous, secretive and the height of corporate Democrats tripping over themselves to provide corporate welfare to the richest man in the world without any community review or votes.[9]

Reinforcing this argument was Amazon's track record in Seattle, Amazon's first and only headquarter city. In a meeting co-organized by RWDSU and Make the Road New York, in the time period between the two city council hearings on Amazon, local elected officials, union members, and community activists heard directly from a delegation from the Seattle City Council. At the meeting, the Seattle delegation discussed Amazon's impact on local rents and income inequality, as well as the methods and tactics (including threatening to freeze all construction in the city) it employed in battling against efforts by local elected officials to enact a worker tax on corporations to fund affordable housing and homeless services.

Thus, as the debate over HQ2 intensified in late 2018 and early 2019, the opposition mobilized around an expanding set of concerns that moved quickly beyond the local effects of the plan, linking groups across space and issue area in the process. For example, though the plan itself included no warehouse worker jobs, Amazon's track record of poor and dangerous labor conditions and aggressive union-busting efforts in its fulfillment centers across the country came under scrutiny. Organizers shared Amazon "horror stories" at public meetings and Internet chat groups and drew attention to existing conditions at one of its fulfillment centers on Staten Island, where more

than 2,500 workers were employed. This issue emerged most visibly in the two New York City Council hearings devoted to Amazon HQ2 in December 2018 and January 2019. In the December hearings, as a group of Staten Island workers announced their plans to unionize on the steps of City Hall, inside the council chambers Amazon's Vice President for Public Policy was grilled by council members about Amazon's warehouse working conditions. During the hearings, the executive stated that he could not guarantee that Amazon's Staten Island workers would not be required to work more than eight hours per day.[10] At the follow-up hearings in January, the same Amazon executive admitted that Amazon would not commit to remaining neutral in any attempts by its workers to unionize. This took several city council members aback, as it presented a clear challenge to the image of New York City as a "union town." It also brought members of the RWDSU and the Teamsters to join local activist groups on the steps of City Hall to protest the HQ2 plan during the January hearings.[11]

An even more significant issue serving to mobilize the diverse coalition of grassroots groups in opposition to the HQ2 plan was Amazon's history of providing products and services, including cloud computing and facial recognition technology, to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. The issue was first highlighted as politically significant at a meeting of some 150 activists, Queens residents, local businesses, and citywide community-based organizations, initiated by ALIGN just days after the HQ2 announcement. It emerged much more spectacularly in the first Amazon city council hearing (December 12), when Amazon's Vice President of Public Policy implicitly admitted that Amazon had provided ICE with services and products,

by simply stating that "We believe the government should have the best available technology."[12]

The comment was immediately captured, edited, and re-exported via social media by MPower Change, an online "Muslim grassroots movement" co-founded by Linda Sarsour, and ALIGN. In another video that had gone viral, Mayor Bill de Blasio was asked directly on camera whether he had known previously about Amazon's relationship with ICE—to which he gave an awkward non-response. In Queens, where an estimated 1.1 million immigrants live, an estimated 138 languages are spoken, and raids by ICE agents have become a regularity under the current presidential administration, these revelations were more ammunition for the fight against HQ2. Local immigrant-serving groups such as Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) and Make the Road New York mobilized grassroots opposition to HQ2 on the basis of Amazon's relationship with ICE, among other issues.[13]

NO NEGOTIATIONS

For a core group of activist organizations fighting against HQ2, Amazon's well-established track record made any cooperation or negotiation with the company a non-starter. This position was expressed most clearly by the grassroots activist group Queens Neighborhoods United in a statement issued in December 2019. The statement included four "Principles of Engagement":[14]

1) We will not meet or communicate with Amazon or any of its representatives.
2) We will not meet or communicate with any politicians who have previously endorsed AmazonHQ2 or have connections to the Real Estate Industry. This includes

every politician who signed the statement, dated October 16, 2017, endorsing AmazonHQ2.

3) We will oppose AmazonHQ2 in its entirety—with or without public subsidies—and reject any discussion about concessions or negotiation.

4) We respect the diversity of tactics used in the fight against Amazon HQ2.

Facing intense political pressure (and potential primary challengers) from the left, both Van Bramer and Gianaris also adopted a position of no negotiation with Amazon. Both incumbents had witnessed the shocking unseating of long-time congressperson and Democratic Party boss Joseph Crowley by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) just months earlier, and were loathe to test their political fortunes against these same groups (including members of the Queens Democratic Socialists of America, the group most responsible for AOC's stunning victory) in future electoral contests. Initially staked out just after the announcement, their position of no negotiation with Amazon was put to the test less than a month later, when Governor Cuomo announced the formation of the 45-member Community Advisory Committee (CAC). This group of local and citywide "community stakeholders" was charged with "helping ensure that community priorities and needs are considered throughout the process."[15]

Amid the discussions over the value, purpose and legitimacy of the CAC, questions of who actually represented the "community" and what "community priorities and needs" really meant quickly arose. Two local stakeholder institutions that have long represented the poor and underserved in the area—LaGuardia Community College and NYCHA's Queensbridge Houses—emerged as

key players in this debate. Both institutions had representation on the CAC. President Mellow of LaGuardia Community College was appointed co-chair of the Workforce Development Committee, a position she shared with Bishop Michael Taylor, CEO and President of Urban Upbound. April Simpson, President of the Queensbridge Houses Tenant Association, was also a key member of the CAC. President Mellow welcomed the CAC as a way of building "a robust workforce development process that creates the human infrastructure necessary to maintain a vital and equitable workforce for our community," while Bishop Taylor gushed about how "the arrival of Amazon will revitalize neighborhood businesses and jumpstart young entrepreneurial minds in our communities."[16]

As representatives of underserved and disadvantaged members of the Long Island City "community", Mellow, Taylor, and Simpson constituted the organizational infrastructure that would be required to form an effective "pipeline" connecting the minority and low-income residents of Queens-bridge and students at LaGuardia with local tech employers, chief among them Amazon. Under President Mellow, LaGuardia Community College had embraced the notion that a major function of the institution is workforce development and that the future of employment for first-generation community college students is in the tech sector. LaGuardia was also no stranger to corporate partnerships and workforce training initiatives. Long before Amazon, it partnered with Goldman Sachs on a small business center, the Weill Cornell Medicine for a program in medical billing, and Google for a certificate program to train IT support workers. Within a day of the surprise HQ2 announcement, the LaGuardia

home page displayed a banner welcoming Amazon to Long Island City.

Similarly, Urban Upbound, which provides employment services for public housing and low-income residents, figured prominently in the public debate over whether the Amazon plan would bring concrete benefits to residents of Queensbridge Houses. Beyond serving as co-chair of the Workforce Development Subcommittee of the CAC, Taylor issued press statements and organized a pro-Amazon rally at Queensbridge Houses, where he denounced the "people from Connecticut, from other boroughs, from other places … knocking on doors telling people because of Amazon, because of this, you're going to lose your apartment."[17]

The third key member of the CAC was April Simpson, President of the Queensbridge Houses Residents Association. She too chided the hard opposition to Amazon HQ2, likening them to "sneaky thieves in the night" infiltrating Queensbridge Houses and other NYCHA developments in an effort to spread misinformation about the Amazon plan and the role of the CAC. Days after the Amazon withdrawal, Simpson excoriated Van Bramer and Gianaris, calling them "grandstanding politicians" and holding them responsible for New York missing "a generational opportunity to cement its place as the tech hub of the future."[18] Several months later, she continued to lament Amazon's departure on the editorial pages of the *Daily News*, claiming that she and other community leaders "had a seat at the table" with Amazon and had been making progress towards concrete benefits when the company, in the face of opposition from political opportunists, pulled the plug on the plan.[19]

With such high-profile leaders of community institutions such as LaGuardia Community College, Urban Upbound,

and the Queensbridge Houses Residents Association serving on the CAC, the refusal of Van Bramer and Gianaris to join the committee was all the more consequential. Facing constant pressure from grassroots organizers to remain committed to their initial position of no compromise, Van Bramer and Gianaris issued a joint statement in which they described the CAC as "a thinly veiled attempt to present the Amazon development as a fait accompli." Without the participation of local elected officials at both the city and state levels, the CAC's community bona fides were directly called into question.

Of the two local elected officials to refuse to participate in the CAC, it was Gianaris whose decision was most impactful. As the deputy majority leader of the New York State Senate representing the site of the future Amazon HQ2, Gianaris was a logical choice to serve on the PACB, the obscure state board whose approval was necessary for the plan to move forward. As one of the three voting members of the PACB, Gianaris would wield veto power over the plan. Ultimately, however, the threat of a Gianaris veto sinking HQ2 never materialized; on February 14, 2019, Amazon abruptly announced that it would be canceling its plans to establish its second headquarters in Long Island City.

AFTER AMAZON: LESSONS FROM THE STRUGGLE

With Amazon's thinly worded withdrawal from the HQ2 plan, proponents and opponents alike were left wondering what killed the deal. How and why did the world's most powerful corporation fall flat in its New York City debut, and what might this portend for corporate urban futures more generally? While the answer to the former question will have to await future historians, the latter question is

worth considering and there are certainly important lessons to be learned from the Amazon HQ2 experience in Long Island City.

First, it is clear that Amazon will seek to bend state and municipal governments to its will. The nearly two-year-long HQ2 "competition" enabled Amazon to play cities against each other, reinforcing the notion that cities need the company—and not the other way around. When Amazon did "select" Long Island City, it did so on the condition—and presumably under the expectation—that it would enjoy an expedited planning and approval process that would bypass local layers of scrutiny and negotiation. When challenged on this (and several other points of its plan), rather than yield to local representatives, Amazon chose instead to replace them with an unelected "Community Advisory Committee."

Second, the scale and scope of Amazon's operations—which make it an economic behemoth the likes of which have not been seen since the age of the great trusts—are also, paradoxically, the source of its political vulnerability at the local level. Having inserted itself into our daily lives through its cloud computing, online shopping platform, vast logistics network, and much, much more (including Whole Foods and *The Washington Post*), Amazon has become the invisible backbone to our everyday economic lives. Yet this very ubiquity has made it an expansive target for the opposition. The inescapability of Amazon has made it an almost impossible-to-miss target, allowing for links to be forged across different groups, campaigns, and areas of concern. In New York City, the Amazon announcement immediately set off a chain reaction among scores of labor and community groups, immigrant rights organizations, and academics at the local and extra-local levels. This

concatenation of opposition forces targeted Amazon at various sites through New York City, from its fulfillment center on Staten Island, to its first "brick-and-mortar" store in Manhattan, to its Whole Foods stores, to the very site of the proposed HQ2 in Long Island City. Over a three-month period, from the announcement to the withdrawal, the opposition to Amazon HQ2 presented itself vocally and visibly at every turn.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in dealing with an adversary of such size, power, and inflexibility as Amazon, it is vital that the opposition contain a kernel that is committed to no compromise and no negotiation. This is particularly important given Amazon's efforts to manufacture community and consent through bodies such as the CAC, where the price of participation is the legitimization of the process and the acceptance of the (likely preordained) outcome. Significantly, however, in order for this position to stand a chance of success, it must be supported by a credible political threat that would bring with it serious political consequences. In the case of New York City, the volatile political landscape of Western Queens and the rise of an insurgent left following the shock victory of AOC presented just such a possibility. While we will never know if Gianaris would have vetoed the plan or not— and there is no guarantee that a position of no compromise will always succeed—in the absence of such a position, failure is a near certainty.

POSTSCRIPT

In December 2019, less than a year after its surprise withdrawal from HQ2 in Long Island City, Amazon quietly announced that it had signed a lease for 335,000 square feet of office space in the new Hudson Yards development

on Manhattan's Far Westside. While far smaller than HQ2, the space is intended for at least 1,500 employees from its consumer and advertising groups and represents a sizeable increase in Amazon's corporate presence in New York City. It also comes with no city or state tax breaks—a point that was lost on neither Gianaris nor AOC, both of whom were quick to embrace the announcement as a vindication of their staunch opposition to HQ2. Upon learning of the lease, Gianaris stated, "Amazon is coming to New York, just as they always planned. Fortunately, we dodged a $3 billion bullet by not agreeing to their subsidy shakedown earlier this year." In a similar vein, AOC quickly took to Twitter: "Won't you look at that: Amazon is coming to NYC anyway —*without* requiring the public to finance shady deals, helipad handouts for Jeff Bezos, & corporate giveaways."[20]

Beyond vindication for two of HQ2's most reviled political critics, Amazon's expansion into the Hudson Yards may signal an important shift in the perceived balance of power between cities and tech giants such as Amazon. Whereas the Hunger Games-like competition for HQ2 and the winner-take-all urbanism it represents posit a world in which cities must hand over their keys to court big tech "saviors" such as Amazon, the HQ2 experience (and its aftermath) in New York City suggests the opposite: that it is the big tech corporations that are dependent on cities with their deep talent pools, world-class amenities, and industry ecosystems. None of this is of course a foregone conclusion; what is ultimately necessary is the political will to call the bluff of corporations such as Amazon—and their enablers at the state and local levels.

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