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Our man walks the walk Downtown

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The Brooklyn Paper

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I took a walk through Downtown last month. This was no normal stroll, but a walking tour of the rapidly changing neighborhood called “Anyplace, Brooklyn.”

Created by Prospect-Lefferts Gardens documentarian Samara Smith, the tour is part art project, part history lesson and part contemporary social criticism. Smith spent two years walking the streets Downtown, researching the project, recording interviews with locals and learning about eminent domain and urban renewal that is changing the place from a low-rise, low-rent area into a Gaphattan-style skyscraper park.

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“I didn’t know what the project would ultimately turn out to be,” Smith said. “I decided it should be an audio walking tour because I wanted people to be able to walk though Downtown in different people’s shoes, to see the space through the eyes



A new audio tour of Downtown Brooklyn takes participants through the Fulton Mall, Duffield Street and the dour Metrotech complex, seen (below) with few pedestrians and (bottom) with underutilized ground-floor retail.



of the people who live, work and shop there and to understand that it is many different things to many different people.”

The tour begins in the public seating area in the intersection of Adams and Willoughby streets and leads quickly to the Fulton Mall.

The narrator pointed out several popular shops including Porta Bella Men’s Wear, a discount store specializing in suits and dress clothes, and Dr. Jay’s, an urban style outlet that carries fancy sneakers and clothes by Ed Hardy and RocaWear.



Shoppers bustled in and out of the stores, hawkers coaxed consumers to buy their wares and workers shuffled to subway stations and bus stops to head home for the evening. Young men huddled in small groups on the sidewalks, sometimes flirting with groups of young ladies, who were doing the same.

Soon the mall was behind me and my audio guide was leading me down a block on Duffield Street, now symbolically named Abolitionist Place because of its connection to the Underground Railroad. Following the instructions of the narrator, I stopped in front of a building owned by Lewis Greenstein, who says his building was once a stop on that fabled railroad. Greenstein told the story of the day in 2004 when he received an eminent domain notice from the city, which wants to take his building, and several others on the block, so a developer can build an underground parking lot for a hotel.

“The powers that be were not listening to us,” Greenstein lamented on the recording. “The little people were being ignored as usual.”

From Greenstein’s building, I headed over to Metrotech, the giant office complex. On the way, I noticed how different the lively Fulton Mall is from the office zone. Pedestrians stared down at the sidewalk as though their greatest fear was making eye contact with someone else. And unlike the shoppers on the mall, these people were only passing through.

The narrator explained that residents worry that new development that’s already being built as part of the city’s Downtown Brooklyn Plan will be too much like Metrotech — cold and uninviting. And that it will have the same effect on the people who walk through the area.

When I reached the edge of the complex, at the corner of Myrtle Avenue and Flatbush Avenue Extension, the narrator intoned a startling fact through my headphones.

“You have just walked under at least 25 Metrotech surveillance cameras in less than three minutes,” the female voice said. “During this entire walking tour you will be recorded by more than 67 Metrotech surveillance cameras.”

I turned left toward Metrotech and heard from George Mays. He works at the Post Office on Jay Street and walks through Metrotech every workday.

“Once you step off of Myrtle to Flatbush, Metrotech hits you in the face,” Mays said. “It’s like they dropped a castle in the middle of nowhere. You get this feeling that you’re not welcome. It’s like you’re walking through a military base, I think that’s the best analogy.”

Only time will tell whether that unwelcome feeling will spread out from Metrotech and throughout the rest of the neighborhood. In the meantime, take the Anyplace, Brooklyn tour to hear from the people still trying to hang on.