Final Script

**Podcast Topic:**

How the destruction of the Myrtle Ave El Line set the stage for the development of Metrotech.

**Shelly:** Good morning everyone, my name is Shelly and these are my teammates:

**Lisa**: Lisa.

**Maxcovi**: Maxcovi.

**Diana**: And, Diana; and today we’ll be discussing the topic of Metrotech. The development of Metrotech in Downtown Brooklyn is a big deal, it changed the area completely and we’re going to be focusing on how the destruction of the Myrtle Avenue El Line, that provided transportation to this area from throughout Brooklyn, was able to set the stage for the development of Metrotech. That led to social and economic impacts on the community and it displaced people that were living here once upon a time.

**Lisa:** Hey Lisa here, I’m going to talk a little about the Myrtle Ave El. The Myrtle Ave El opened its service line to the public in 1888. It was using steam engines back then, eventually turning into electric motor cars later in the 1940s. Here’s a map of the El Line stops in 1925. The El lines in Red, are elevated lines. In black are the underground, the dot lines you see are the lines to be constructed. The Myrtle Ave line took passengers from Richmond Hill, Queens to downtown Brooklyn, eventually extending its service because the service were in high demand from its commuters. Because of its motor engines the commutes were faster, it was quicker, the commuters were pleased, and had quicker access to get to local retailers and department stores.

In the 1940s, service was really thriving, the Myrtle Ave El took people over the Brooklyn Bridge, making local stops to downtown retail stores, and was a very vibrant part of the community. Passing landmarks like the church on Myrtle Ave of St. Michaels and St. Edwards to the visible 148th ft tall column monument called “ The Prison Ship Martyrs” which is a memorial site for sailors back in the day. This is located in Fort Greene Park on Myrtle Ave. The Myrtle Ave El is also known for the various Myrtle Trees that lined Myrtle Ave all the way down to Brooklyn's Downtown area. Ok, the 1920s-1930s, was a big boom in the automobile industry. This became a struggle for Myrtle Ave El line because the rise in automobiles, also with the era of the Great Depression, and also a brand new service line called the GG which we now know as the G train came into service making the commute change, setting the stage for the destruction of the Myrtle Ave El. This is when the 1940s came and the NYC Housing Authority started to build housing projects. Black people were starting to move into the community, and white people were starting to move away from the community.

This is what we know today as white flight. The stores in the community was starting to change, they started to leave and the Myrtle Ave El service made it harder to commute to Downtown Brooklyn. In 1944 the MTA stopped all connections going across the Brooklyn Bridge making the commute for travelers very hard to travel home. Downtown Brooklyn Jay St was a major transfer stop for its commuters. When they ended the commute, which was Manhattan, it made it very difficult for people to get back to Brooklyn by way of the Myrtle Ave El. This set up the stage for the destruction of the Myrtle Ave El. My question is who were being kept out? Who were being boxed in? By the 1950s various Els were demolished with trolley car lines following shortly behind a year later. It was in 1969 that the Myrtle Ave El line had its final run. As you can see in this picture. It ended its service and was also approved by the MTA for connecting transfer service on the B54 Bus, which was originally once known as the #15 Trolley line in the 1950s. This was set up as a way for commuters to get to the downtown Brooklyn area by bus, and transfer to Manhattan. Ironically, at the same time there’s a city planner by the name of Robert Moses who dissembled intentions continues to displace communities even today. Max will explain further.

**Maxcovi:** So hearing about the length of the EL line, it connected not one but two boroughs together, both Brooklyn and Queens, it stopped in Brooklyn where the court houses will be walking distance. And the B54, which again replaced the EL line does it too. But what it fails to do is connect two boroughs like the EL. The B54 runs from Jay street to palmetto. In order to continue the EL’s route into Queens one needs to transfer from B54 to the Q55.

The people once have this easy route turn into this complicated new route. On top of that the B54 is known for being one of the slowest and most delayed bus lines in BK but we will get into that later.

According to this map here, getting rid of the EL line and the development of MetroTech did not do much for communities surrounding Myrtle Ave. As you can see there are no subway stops near there, their only source of public transportation Ave buses. And MetroTech being so close to important areas like the Brooklyn Bridge and Borough Hall, the buses in the area will run with many delays due to traffic. This quote from the power

So, destroying the EL then building this community line MetroTech was supposed to build connectivity but in the attempt we got otherwise. Walking around MetroTech after work hours is like walking in a desolated area. But what many people don’t realize is that even in the attempt of building connectivity comes displacement and a perfect example is the famous Robert Moses and the construction of the Cross Bronx.

Robert Moses, the city construction coordinator was the one who proposed the idea of the Cross Bronx Expwy. The plan was to connect the north and south of the Bronx, but in doing so building this connection it destroyed over 5,000 family homes.

Like the increase of automobiles played a role in the destruction of the Myrtle Ave. EL the increase of automobile also played a role in the destruction of many houses standing in the way of the Cross Bronx. Only difference is that this didn’t just isolate commuters, it kicked them out of their homes.

**Shelly:** That’s incredible Max, another thing that was particularly interesting about this research, was discovering the social impacts the destruction of the El line had on the community of Downtown Brooklyn. This community (Downtown Brooklyn) has been the home for a very diverse population for many years.

**Bridge Street Church**

This began with the formation of the (AWME) which stands for the African Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal church in 1816. It was predicated on the idea of promoting diversity and uniting people regardless of their cultural background. The actual building was built in 1846-1847 in Highland, and later moved to 311 Bridge Street which is where the building still stands. It was then called The Bridge Street Church in 1854 which is what many people still refer to it as. However, it is now formally called The Wunsch (wunch) NYU-Poly Tech Student Center Building. This church was instrumental in influencing the type of people who settled in the community. Due to the fact that it was formed by African Americans who were marginalized in white churches and couldn't freely attend them because of segregation laws.

Another reason the Church was Instrumental in the community was because:

* It was a sanctuary for fleeing slaves before and during the Civil War in 1863. The Bridge Street Church was active in the antislavery movement and is known for hosting influential speakers like Fredrick Doulgas, Harriet Tubman and Abraham Lincoln.
* It is historically significant and was granted landmark status in 1981 by the Landmark Society.
* In 1948 the church moved to Bedford Stuyvesant following many of its members to the area due to the rapid commercialization of the area
* In the 1950s to 1960s the church was used for different things, one of them was a postcard factory. Until in 1968, when it was taken over by PolyTechnic Institute of New York. All this time the building had to undergo changes to adhere to the building codes. It was finally incorporated into the MetroTech project in the 1990s.

**The Environmental Impact Statement**

The Environmental Impact Statement actually mapped out all the changes the Downtown Community had to undergo to make MetroTech a reality. First the community had to be declared as an urban renewal site, which wasn’t hard since the El Line was gone and that alone basically doomed the neighborhood. The El serviced many neighboring communities. One could say it was the main vein that supplied people from these neighboring communities with transportation into Downtown Brooklyn. Remember, this was an area famous for its diversity and melting pot of cultures. People came here to work and shop, sightseeing etc. With the El gone, and no significant alternative set up to replace it, the community slowly lost its light and soon, could no longer pull its weight in the economy. That's how it was declared an urban renewal site.

Another change was the Demapping of streets like Myrtle Ave. So first the El was destroyed, next Myrtle Ave was severed to make room for MetroTech. The Impact Statement dictated that the onsite area of Myrtle Ave would have to be widened to make space for metro tech. portions of Lawrence, Bridge Street and Duffield also had to be demapped. There would have to be changes in zoning to accommodate the new buildings in MetroTech. Eminent Domain Laws applied so home and business owners had to surrender their property to the government since the area was to be used it for public use(to try to revitalize the community). The owners had to justly compensated.

**Aerial Maps**

A close look at the NYCDoITT maps of the area where MetroTech now sits will also demonstrate how the area has changed over the years. In 1924, before the destruction of the EL line, the blocks in the area are densely populated with buildings. The El line is visible upon close inspection. There is a sense of connectivity in the neighborhood. Of course the church is still there. Fast forward to the map of 1951 where the map shows a huge portion of the park has been severed to make Tillary Street wider to accommodate more traffic. The Housing Projects have been built and they are visibly separated from the (for lack of a better term) Metrotech Area. The Flatbush Ave Extension acts as a physical barrier separating both areas. Now, in 1996 the map shows the land has been cleared of all buildings, except for the Old Bridge Street Church, to make room for the new buildings. The El line has also been cleared from the map, after its destruction in 1969. The land has many blocks that have become superblocks, occupied by only one or two buildings.

Aerial views of the 2006 and 2012 maps show the Metro Tech Project up and running. Now fully realized. It is still separated from the Housing Projects by the Flatbush Ave Extension. Now it seems like it’s turned its back on the Project houses literally. The businesses in MetroTech use the area closest to the Housing Projects as their service entrance. Not very welcoming. The area is now predominantly commercialized. The church is now in the shadow of much taller buildings. It looks grossly out of place. Kind of like The Little House from the children’s story book. Still standing its ground proudly in a commercialized place where it no longer fits in.

**Diana:** That’s right Shelly. The Old Bridge Street Church is such a symbol to represent that there was something there before. It was part of the neighborhood and the community since before any changes happened to the area whether it be rezoning, the street changes, and definitely the construction of Metrotech. The fact that this building has been able to survive, throughout all these different periods and changes, is almost like a representation of the people that have maybe been displaced, but definitely are still here, and are still the heartbeat of this neighborhood whether in a different form now. Fulton Street is still a shopping area and shopping district that is still a common destination for people from other areas of Brooklyn to come visit.

With that said, there is also another church close to Metrotech, actually within the boundaries of Metrotech on Duffield and Willoughby Streets. It’s called Saint Boniface Church and it was built in 1853. The construction of this church just a few years after the construction of the old bridge church, shows that there was a need for more buildings, a need for a new congregation. It shows that there were enough people to occupy multiple congregations in the area, which displays the viable, and growing nature of the neighborhood that was in existence before Metrotech. According to an article from 2012 in the New York Times, the church was still was bringing in at least 700 people to its doors every single weekend, especially for bigger events, such as Easter.

The church is directly located across the street from one of the sides of One Metrotech place, which is the original, and first building as part of the project of Metrotech. this is the Chase building. Chase was one of the first companies to sign on to the Metrotech project, while it was still in its planning stages. According to a 1985 article in the New York Times, called “Metrotech: A Test for a New Form of Urban Renewal”, the signing on of Chase to this project allowed it to gain greater credibility. This facilitated for other companies to also sign on to have their back offices located there. This was a great alternative to what companies were doing up until that point which was locating their back offices, such as the technology side of things or customer service, they were locating them in Westchester County, Yonkers, and even New Jersey, areas that no longer had a New York City address. This was a way more attractive way to relocate out of Manhattan where space was limited, but also still have accessibility to these offices. Employees could still come back and forth from Brooklyn into Manhattan, and it was just a better option in general.

As positive as that was for some of those companies, the article also mentions how it would be the city’s obligation to follow through on the Environmental Impact Statement, like Shelly mentioned prior. It states that eventually, about 50 properties would have to be acquired and demolished for Metrotech to be built completely, which through aerial maps, as Shelly proved, has already happened. Another really helpful tool and resource that we bumped into was through the Library of Congress. They have the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Brooklyn, well of all the United States, but specifically, this area from 1886 to 1888. “The Sanborn Map Company was a publisher of detailed maps of U.S. cities and towns, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they were originally created to allow insurance companies to assess their total liability in urbanized areas of the United States.” (Wikipedia). Because they detailed this information for this downtown area, it listed every single property that is within the 16 acres now occupied by Metrotech. The documentation of all these properties and buildings, was done in sections, the sections were labeled as plates. The plate numbers that document what is now the Metrotech area are numbers 41, 42, 43 and 45; As you can see clearly delineated in this image. The detailed plates show a zoomed in version, a zoomed in view, of every single property on there; some are in coded yellow, and some are coded in pink. This is to represent yellow for wood, and pink for brick. This shows the standard that they were moving into. All the properties had to be converted into brick to avoid fires from spreading further into other properties. If we count these properties, they actually match the numbers quoted in this article: “The article states as follows: “They contend that Metrotech ‘will basically benefit a private institution' at the expense of 'destroying a viable and growing neighborhood.' There are about 40 existing properties on the 16-acre Metrotech site, containing 114 dwelling units with 220 residents and 57 businesses providing 390 jobs.” to people of the area.

**Maxcovi**: Overall, the research indicates that the act of destroying the El Line, created a domino effect which contributed to the destruction of the existing Downtown Brooklyn community. On that note, my team members and I would like to conclude this presentation. Thank you for listening. We hope the information we provided in this podcast motivates each individual to view the changes that are taking place in cities through a more critical lens.