On a freezing morning in December, the fate of Kingsbridge Heights, a poverty-stricken Bronx district, is being decided, as so often happens, in Manhattan. On the second floor of New York’s City Hall in the financial district, Bronx council members are negotiating terms with the Bloomberg Administration for redeveloping the Kingsbridge Armory, the largest of its kind in the world, into a shopping mall.

On the steps of City Hall’s South entrance, about 30 activists from the armory’s neighborhoods, but mainly Kingsbridge Heights, implore council members to strike down the project. This is their second day in a row of protesting. The vote would have been taken the previous day but was postponed to give council members more time to negotiate. Now the protesters are growing impatient.

“God, let our leaders hear our prayer,” one woman prays, her eyes shut tightly, grasping the hands of the two people on either side of her. All are now in a prayer circle.
“You know we don’t need another mall,” she continues. “We need a place where we can empower our future generation.” The speaker is black and looks like she’s in her 40s. Those around her nod their heads in silence. Like the neighborhood itself, the majority of protesters are black and Hispanic. A few are white: Father Thomas Lynch, the reverend of Our Lady of Angels church, and the group’s organizers, Ava Farkas and Abby Bellows.

After the speaker finishes, the others intone: “God, hear our prayer.”

The protesters are with KARA, an acronym for the Kingsbridge Armory Redevelopment Alliance. A subsidiary of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, which has been active in the neighborhood for 40 years and is often credited with preserving its buildings from the arson that ravaged the South Bronx during the 1970s, KARA was founded five years ago to ensure any development of the Kingsbridge Armory benefitted the community. They have been present at every public hearing during the Uniform Land Use Review Process (ULERP), the mandatory process by which the city approves land development projects.

After passing through the advisory stages and approval by the City Planning Commission, the “Shops at the Armory” proposal, to be funded in part with tax money, is now being evaluated by the city council’s land use sub-committee. A vote by the full city council is expected in days.
KARA and its allies do not oppose developing the armory. After all, they spearheaded the idea of developing it in the first place, says Farkas. Since the armory stands in their community and its developer is to receive $17.8 million in sales and real estate tax exemptions, as well as $50 million in city and state tax credits, KARA is demanding that the plan produce guaranteed community benefits. Above all, they want Related Companies, the developer, to guarantee retail workers in the armory a living wage: $10 an hour with benefits, $11.50 without. The city’s agreement with Related stipulated that the armory would be sold to the developer for $5 million, less than one-sixth of what it cost the city to replace the Armory’s roof two years ago.

Earlier that morning the council’s majority leader, Joel Rivera, told the protesters that the Bronx delegation is united against the plan if Related does not agree to the living wage. Rivera also told them that the entire council would vote with the Bronx, ensuring their victory. The activists had cheered when they heard the news, but they continue to chant lest the members lose their nerve staring down one of the country’s largest urban developers, and its ally, Bloomberg.

“2, 4, 6, 8, Related must negotiate!” KARA members shout. “I want to wish you a living wage,” they sing to “Feliz Navidad,” the popular Hispanic Christmas tune. “I want to wish you a living wage, from the bottom of my heart.”
The Bronx has come to City Hall. For the first time since Bloomberg came to office in 2002, the borough is united against one of his development plans.

Inside City Hall, journalists, political aides, and Kingsbridge Heights’ community members mill around the corridors, anxious for word on the council’s negotiations with the Bloomberg administration. Their chatter stirs echoes around the building’s American Georgian-style rotunda. Almost inconspicuous among the buzzing Bronxites, John Bogovic, a 53-year-old Croatian immigrant and owner of one of the 45 grocery stores around the Armory, sits by himself next to the council chamber.

Bogovic immigrated to the Bronx from Yugoslavia in 1969, when he was 16. They came, in his words, “to find a better life.” When he arrived, he did not speak any English. He had to beg the owner of the Associated grocery store next door to his building for a job. The owner eventually relented, allowing Bogovic to work for free. Bogovic now owns that same store, except today it’s a C Town grocery store. He also owns the whole one-story building the store occupies. Three businesses lease from him.

He never moved back to Croatia.

Five feet 9 inches tall and 157 pounds, Bogovic is trim and fit. He greets you with a firm handshake. His small green eyes are sharp and discerning, looking at you, not through you. He squints when he thinks. His face is square, lean and clean-shaven;
his skin is crisp and tight. His fair brown hair, cut short, is parted from his left
temple to the side and is turning gray. He laughs easily and with abandon. You feel
he would help you if he could.

Nearly everyone in Kingsbridge Heights knows him as a community philanthropist.
From donating 30 turkeys each year to the Lady of Angels church across the street
to volunteering at the Kingsbridge Heights Community Center, Bogovic has invested
himself in the neighborhood since he arrived.

Bogovic is practically the only person not chanting outside or rushing from
conversation to conversation. He looks self-possessed, but he is nervous. Abby
Bellows comes over now and then to chat, as do other KARA protesters. Many know
him because they shop at his store. He attended the KARA rallies – he even spoke at
one of them. Kingsbridge Heights was his first home in the United States, and he has
worked there his entire life. He wants the armory to be developed and have it
elevate the community’s quality of life.

But Bogovic is not only worried about his community’s fate: he is worried about his
own as well. He has been thinking about this day since he read in the Norwood
News last summer about Related’s plan to put a mega-supermarket inside the
armory. He called his competitors in the neighborhood right away: “Have you read
this article? This could put us all out of business.”
Bogovic drove down from the Bronx to see for himself how the council members would vote. Perhaps he could try to speak with them one last time. All grocers weather hard times. As with all retailers, they are at the mercy of circumstances beyond their control. Bogovic, by his own account, has been lucky: he can count the number of times he has worried about his store on one hand. Today’s threat is like no other he has faced. Much more is at stake than just his store. Today’s vote may shatter Bogovic’s hard-earned American Dream.

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John Bogovic was born on October 14, 1953, in the coastal town of Rijeka, Croatia, in communist Yugoslavia. The youngest of three sons born to Anton and Ljubica Bogovic, he grew up in Sveti Anton, a tiny village on the Adriatic island of Krk. Bogovic’s brothers, Joseph and Anton Jr., were 12 and 10 years old, respectively, when he was born.

His earliest memory is of his house, located halfway between the Adriatic Sea and Sveti Anton, which were a mile apart. The house had three floors and lacked heat and running water. Each floor was made with wooden planks six inches wide and laid a quarter inch apart. Neither the windows nor the roof were secure, so on breezy days gusts would rush through the entire house.
They collected water from a well nearby and transported it to the house with buckets. During the hot summer months, water became scarce. They depended on rainfall. Winters on the Adriatic Sea were cold. In the mornings, they would wash themselves using water stored overnight in a small wooden basin. Sometimes their water basin froze during the night. On those mornings, they had to break the ice with their hands before splashing it over their bodies.

Bogovic’s parents were farmers. They had no income; they subsisted entirely on food farmed from their crops and their animals. His mother, who was much larger than his father, was the family disciplinarian. His father, quiet and jovial, loved to dance and cherished good singing.

His hands were calloused from a lifetime of farm work. He could barely open them wide. He once raised his work-beaten hands to Bogovic and said, “Son, if you don’t work hard in school, this is what you’re going to be doing.”

Their happiness was undeterred by the objects and comforts they lacked. To this day, Bogovic wonders what his parents’ secret was for resisting unhappiness: “What did they have to be happy about? Nothing. But they were.”

In the 1950s, Sveti Anton had a population of about two-dozen peasant families, according to Bogovic. He describes his neighbors as simple, religious people who looked after one another.
“Everyone was equally poor,” says Bogovic, “so there was no need to keep up with the Joneses.”

Neighbors often stopped on their way back to the village from the sea and asked for water from the Bogovic well. His parents never refused. Sometimes Bogovic’s father, who was well known as a skilled barber, would cut hair if asked to.

Bogovic remembers his father once telling him, “Son, we may be poor, but we have a good reputation. And a good reputation is more important than money.”

The Bogovics’ most valuable possessions were their animals, on which they depended for their survival. They had sheep, two to three cows, a bunch of chickens and one pig – never more than one. When it got cold, Bogovic’s father would slaughter a pig. The pig’s meat would have to last them for many months. Their goats gave them milk and cheese. They grew closer to the animals with each successive generation. If they were good-natured, sometimes they would keep them.

In Tito’s Yugoslavia, few who were not members of the communist party had money. “It was classist, despite it being communist,” remembers Bogovic. “The rest of us who had farm jobs grew up with nothing.”
Bogovic says that his uncle had a government job and was in a higher class than he was. His mother’s brother was an attorney in Zagreb, Croatia’s capital, and was likewise in a higher class. His cousins would visit them during the summers. They would spend their days at the beach, swimming in nice bathing suits and cultivating deep tans. Meanwhile, Bogovic took care of his family’s animals and worked.

Religious observance was banned. Nevertheless, Krk residents were able to maintain their Catholic vows because they lived in a small village on an island off the mainland. Supervision was less strict. His parents, who were devout Catholics, went to church at midnight, as did his schoolteachers. When Bogovic saw his teachers at Mass, he never went up to them or commented on it later. It was their open secret.

Bogovic’s parents forbade his older brothers from joining the party because they would be forced to forsake their religious beliefs and would be conscripted into the Yugoslav army. Instead, they both worked at a factory in Rijeka that manufactured cigarette papers. Bogovic remembers his brother Anton’s wedding as the first time he was able to eat as much cake as he wanted. He was 10 years old. The entire village celebrated for days.

In the mid-1960s, Joseph, Bogovic’s older brother, immigrated to Germany, where he worked as a roofer. After turning 14, Bogovic moved to Rijeka and enrolled at a trade school to be come an electrician. He lived with Anton Jr. who was still working at the factory.
In 1967, Bogovic’s father moved to the Bronx. His sister had married an American and offered to sponsor him. Feeling that he had worked his whole life and had nothing to show for it, according to Bogovic, his father took the opportunity. He worked two jobs: one as a porter in the building he lived in, the other as a custodian at New York University. He was one of thousands of Croatians who fled for America after Tito came to power.

The first evidence of Croatian settlers in the United States dates to the 16th Century, according to the Encyclopedia of Chicago. The largest numbers immigrated during the great migration of Eastern European peasants from 1880 to 1914. Croatians were fleeing because of poor economic circumstances, writes Edward Ifković, an academic who holds a doctorate in English Literature and has written extensively about the Yugoslav experience in the United States. According to Ifković, these Croatians were mostly unskilled and illiterate laborers who returned home as soon as they made enough money.

Approximately half a million Croatians lived in the United States by the 1930s – one-tenth of the country’s population of five million – according Croatian historian Ivan Mladineo. But several historians dispute this number, arguing no accurate data exists that can point to the Croatian population in the United States in the first half of the 20th Century. Just under half a million American citizens currently identify as
being Croatian or of Croatian descent, according to the 2007 U.S. Census Community Survey.

The largest Croatian settlements were in Pennsylvania, California, and in various cities throughout the Midwest, mainly Chicago. Ifkovic writes that the Refugee Relief Act of 1953, the Refugee Escape Act of 1960, and the demise of the quota system in 1965 facilitated a new wave of emigration – this time by educated Croats fleeing Tito’s regime and poverty. In Bogovic’s own words, his father “left because he had a horrible life. Why does anybody ever leave?”

After a year and half of working two jobs and living in the Bronx, Anton Bogovic sent for his youngest son and his wife. He was also able to secure papers for Anton Jr., but his middle son did not want to leave Rijeka. He had fallen in love. He married shortly after Bogovic and his mother moved away. Anton Jr. never left Croatia.

On the day Bogovic and his mother left Croatia, 50 of their friends, family, and neighbors came to their home in Sveti Anton to say goodbye. He did not know at the time, but he was headed for the one place in America destined for as much upheaval and uncertainty as Yugoslavia: the Bronx.

Once a middle class haven for Jews and Irish in World War II and the 1950s, the Bronx saw its ethno-economic demographic shift seismically with the age of prosperity in the city. Wealth and highways transplanted whites into Northern
suburbs like Yonkers, Westchester and White Plains. Blacks with money from Harlem, and Hispanics, mainly from Puerto Rico, replaced them.

The next 30 years would be a time of rapid decline for the borough. A wave of arson, sparked by corrupt landlords, poor tenants and aimless youth, and tolerated by the city, ravaged the South Bronx. At the borough’s nadir, in 1977, President Jimmy Carter was famously photographed touring the rubble of burned out buildings on Charlotte Street. That photo, says Lloyd Ulan, 72, the Bronx Borough Historian, would cement the borough’s universal reputation for unchecked urban poverty.

“The history of the Bronx is really the history of the nation in microcosm,” says Ulan. “Every important movement in the history of the U.S. also occurred in the Bronx. If there’s a uniqueness in the Bronx, you would have to ask why? What made the Bronx the exception to the rule?”

Bogovic’s first home in the Bronx was in Kingsbridge Heights. Sometimes confused with the neighborhood below, Kingsbridge Heights lies to the east of Kingsbridge, across the Major Deegan Expressway, on a ridge that runs parallel with the Jerome Reservoir. Its exact demarcations, however, vary depending on whom you ask. “No one knows exact boundaries inside the Bronx,” says Ulan. “The population changed over in the early and latter parts of the century, and its institutional memory changed as a result. So if you ask two neighbors what the boundaries for Kingsbridge Heights are, you’ll get two separate conceptions.”
The Bogovics’ first home was a two-room basement dwelling at 2857 Sedgwick Ave., a six-story brick building in Kingsbridge Heights. Their home was actually converted from a large storage room. It had two windows, which looked out into dark stairwell alley. Its walls were lined with pipe that carried the building’s toilet water to the sewer. One pipe was next to the head of Bogovic’s bed. When someone flushed while he was lying in bed, he heard the fluid swish past his ears.

“I wanted to go home in the worst way,” Bogovic says of his first home-sick months in Kingsbridge Heights. Sedgwick Avenue and its seemingly endless row of Art Deco buildings were completely foreign to Bogovic.

It was not a “Yugoslavian” neighborhood by any stretch, says Ultan. A small population of Serbs had worked in an iron foundry in the area since 1880, but few Croatians lived there. As with other Yugoslavians, the few thousand Croatians living in New York City in the 1960s were dispersed. Their densest populations were, and remain, in Queens.

“When Irish, Italians, Germans, Eastern European Jews came in, there were loads of them around,” says Ultan, explaining one of the many obstacles Bogovic and his family faced as new immigrants to the Bronx. “When the Yugoslavs came in, there were, let’s see, one, two, three, four, so where do you find solace? He’s basically lonely.”
Another obstacle Bogovic faced was the language barrier; he spoke very little English when he arrived. The first school he attended was DeWitt Clinton High School in Bedford. The school was 95 percent black and 5 percent white at the time, according to Bogovic. He was beat up two times a week. He lasted three months.

“I would come home with a bloody nose,” Bogovic remembers. “Once, the only jacket I had was covered with blood. When my father saw it, he started crying: ‘What did I do bringing you here?’”

Bogovic transferred to Sacred Heart, a private school in Yonkers. His parents could not afford the tuition, so he had to get a job. He did not look far for one.

Two addresses up Sedgwick Avenue from the Bogovics was an Associated supermarket. At first, the store’s co-owner, Simon Brown, turned him away. Bogovic was persistent. Eventually he came up with a proposition for Brown: employ him at whatever rate Brown thought he deserved. “If you think I deserve nothing, pay me nothing. If you think I deserve five bucks, pay me five bucks.” Brown agreed.

Bogovic started off unloading deliveries and then quickly moved up to aisle work. Brown began asking him to come in on weekends. Soon he was a supervisor and making enough money to put himself through college. He saved every penny left over.
Life was better for Bogovic in the early 1970s. He was not lonely anymore. He had made friends with other Croatians through a youth group based in Astoria, Queens. They called themselves “Nashe More” – Croatian for “Our Sea,” as in, the Adriatic Sea. “We got involved in politics and church matters,” Bogovic says, “but mainly we planned trips, went skiing, had picnics. We went to the Niagara Falls, White Face Mountain, Rocky Horse Ranch, places like those.”

Bogovic learned to love his new home through Nashe More. He began dating another member of the group, Mary, the sister of his friend, Stanley. They would go on dates to the Botanical Gardens when the flowers blossomed. When he could afford to, Bogovic took Mary to City Island for dinner. The boats and water reminded him of Croatia. As did she: Mary was from Linardici, a village on Krk, eight miles from his own. Her complexion was Mediterranean olive; her hair was long and brown.

Bogovic liked working at the grocery store. The Associated supermarket, a microcosm of the neighborhood, was full of new Americans like him. His best friend at work was Gee Eng, who had immigrated from China as a boy. His father owned the laundromat next door to the Associated. Like Bogovic, they lived nearby, in a house on Kingsbridge Terrace, two blocks from the store.
Eng eventually left the store to study engineering at MIT. Bogovic continued to work full-time even though he was also studying accounting and economics at Lehman College. When the other owner, Nathan Strauss, retired in 1975, Bogovic was promoted to manager. He was 22.

Promotion in hand, Bogovic bought a house in Yonkers and proposed to Mary. “I was never coached in proposals, I didn’t get down on one knee,” he remembers. He said, “I have a new house, I have a good job. I love you a lot and I want to marry you.”

Mary, a biochemist, told him she would think about it and would have an answer for him the next time they met. On their next date, she said she could not marry him. She offered no explanation. Bogovic told her he understood, but he did not. He was hurt and stopped calling her.

 Shortly after Mary’s refusal Bogovic was asked to be in a friend’s wedding party. Mary’s brother, Stanley, was also at the wedding. Bogovic met a girl at the reception and spent the entire night dancing with her. Stanley noticed. At the next Nashe More meeting at the Bohemian Hall in Queens, Mary waited for Bogovic. She asked him to drive her home, a short ride from the hall. They did not talk in the car. When Bogovic pulled up to her house Mary asked him if he was going to throw it all away, referring to the girl at the wedding. Bogovic was incredulous. “Am I? What about you?” he asked. She started to cry and ran into the house. They would not speak again for five years.
When they finally did, Bogovic had achieved something that would have been unobtainable in Yugoslavia. He had bought the Associated supermarket with Eng. What’s more, Bogovic had accomplished this feat after living in the Bronx for only 10 ½ years.

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To take a modern snapshot of Kingsbridge Heights and its district, Community District 7, aim your lens no farther than the Kingsbridge Armory.

The armory, an historical monolith and community albatross, has stood in Kingsbridge Heights since 1917. It has been used as a barracks and training facility for the National Guard, a show-dog circuit arena, a movie studio, and a homeless shelter. Unused for the past 10 years, it remains an emblem for its impoverished community, trapped in a futile cycle of disrepair.

Covering a full block from West Kingsbridge Road and 195th Street to Reservoir Avenue and Jerome Avenue, the massive nine-story, red brick building contains an 180,000-square-foot drill hall and an 800-seat auditorium. Along Kingsbridge Road, a thick parapet lines its perimeter. Halfway between Reservoir and Jerome avenues, two twin towers jut out like missile silos from the parapet’s brick wall. Drive by on
Kingsbridge Road and glance quickly at the armory’s southern façade; you would think it was a castle.

By contrast, the modern-day view across from the armory on Kingsbridge Road could not be less medieval or regal: bodegas, cheap retail outfits, “mom-and-pop” eateries, and a sprinkling of Chinese and Fried Chicken restaurants stand asymmetrically side-by-side like a crooked row of teeth.

The stores represent the culinary tastes and shopping needs of the neighborhood’s inhabitants. Of the 154,411 residents in District 7, the Kingsbridge Heights community district, roughly 60 percent are Hispanic and 20 percent are black.

The neighborhood’s racial makeup evolved steadily in the last quarter of the 20th Century. Bronx author Gil Fagiani, a native of Kingsbridge Heights, wrote this of the area when he returned in 1985: “New immigrants from Korea, the Dominican Republic, Thailand, Yugoslavia, Albania, Italy and the West Indies have poured into the Kingsbridge neighborhood in recent years. It bristles with the hues of many skin colors and the musicality of many tongues. They dream in common, though, of a better place to live and raise their children.”

Commercially, the Kingsbridge Armory is positioned between two shopping meccas: the Fordham Road BID, the third largest commercial BID in the city, and a Super Target complex recently built on West 225th Street, immediately west of the Major
Deegan Expressway. According to the president of the Bronx Chamber of Commerce, Lenny Caro, most district residents do their retail shopping between those two locations. For groceries, they have access to roughly 45 grocery stores within a 2-mile radius of the armory, says Morton Sloan, the owner of the Morton Williams chain of supermarkets, headquartered across from the armory on Jerome Avenue.

Apart from the shops catering to the new demographic mix, Kingsbridge Heights remains relatively unchanged since Bogovic arrived in 1969. “The housing stock, which was built in the 1920s and 1930s, is basically the same,” says Ultan. “Most institutions, churches, schools, are still here. The only thing changed is the ethnic demographic.”

Yet, some things have changed. The neighborhood’s urban pathologies – unemployment, school overpopulation and obesity and diabetes (to name a few) – have not only gone unchanged, they have worsened.

The 2000 U.S. Census reported that the Bronx had a 9 percent unemployment rate. The current rate is 14 percent, six points higher than the city average, making it the highest unemployment rate since 1990. Worse yet, not only are jobs hard to come by, they are meager. Forty-two percent of Bronx workers have low-wage jobs, earning less than $11.50 an hour and under $18,000 a year; the Bronx low-wage rate is almost double the national average.
Every school in Community Board 7 operates at 100 percent capacity, some even at 200 percent capacity, according to the district’s 2010 needs portfolio.

Thirty percent of Bronx adults are obese, according to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. In Bronx Community District 7 alone, the rate could be as high as 34 percent. While that figure is only 5 percentage points higher than the national average, 62 percent of the Bronx’s population is either obese or overweight, as compared to 42 percent in Manhattan. Diabetes, likewise, is most common in adults who live at or below the poverty line and who lack a high school degree. The Bronx comfortably leads the city and the nation in both categories. Over 12 percent of its adults are diabetic.

“No one issue is isolated from the others, they are all of the same cloth,” says Pastor Katrina Foster of Fordham Evangelical Lutheran Church, located a little more than one subway stop south from the Armory on the elevated MTA 4 line. Foster is a member of KARA and the task force that vetted the armory’s original development proposals three years ago. “The pressing needs of this community are education, family disintegration and hopelessness, which is harder to quantify. All of those needs weave into STDs and teenage pregnancy rates.”

Foster is among the dozens of activists, community representatives and politicians who view the armory as a means to break Kingsbridge Heights’ decades-long cycle of poverty.
The debate over what to do with the armory is seemingly as old as the structure itself. Citing Kingsbridge’s overpopulated schools, some proposed developing the Armory as an education facility; others, pointing to the district’s chronic unemployment, advocated a mixed-use training facility where residents could gain employable skills; still others demanded better shops and stores that sold healthy, organic foods and combated the district’s astronomic obesity rates. All seemed to agree that the armory could help cure many of the district’s maladies, but exactly which malady was deemed most pressing varied subjectively.

Some of the proposals, like the school plan, were not feasible because the armory’s status as a city landmark prevents its exterior from being altered, says Desiree Pilgrim-Hunter, an executive board member of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC). Schools require windows, but to insert them in the armory would break federal law.

According to numerous sources, the NWBCCC is as well versed in the armory as it is in the community. Bishop Patrick Ahern and Anne Devanney, a community organizer, formed the NWBCCC in 1975 to stem the Northwest Bronx’s deterioration. Ignored by the city, they organized patrol parties to supervise unscrupulous landlords. Ultan credits them with preventing arsons from ravaging the neighborhood. In 1977, they picketed Eastern Savings and Loan, a community bank, for investing in Florida properties over local properties. In 1985, they took on the crack epidemic. Their motto was: “Don't move, improve.”
“They are the real giants of the neighborhood,” Bogovic says of NWBCCC’s founders.

“Without them, this place would have turned into how the South Bronx was.”

When Devanney died in 2000, Jordan Moss, editor of the Norwood News, wrote that she had made it impossible for politicians to divide and conquer the Northwest Bronx by appealing to some communities and ignoring others. “She found common cause across neighborhood and racial boundaries,” he wrote.

Fed up with the armory’s wasted opportunity to produce benefits for its community, the NWBCC formed KARA in 2005. The main benefit they wanted to secure was a living wage, says Ava Farkas, KARA’s head organizer. In 2007, the city’s Economic Development Corporation issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the armory from developers.

Mayor Bloomberg backed a $310 million plan by Related Companies, the largest real estate developer in the United States, to retrofit the armory with big-box retail stores, community space, a cinema and a 60,000-square-foot supermarket. Related Companies contended the mall would create 2,200 jobs and draw more customers to the area.

When Bogovic read about Related’s supermarket plan in the Norwood News, he immediately became worried. The sticking point between KARA and Related was
the living wage, but his problem with the deal was that the city wanted to help Related put him out of business.

“Those guys are very tough guys,” Sloan says of Related Companies. “Very rich and very tough, and they play hard. In other words, the rules are meant for them. They will do anything to win.”

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In the fall of 2009, Bogovic was awoken at 2 a.m. at his home in Westchester by the alarm in his bedroom that monitors his store. A robbery was taking place. He rushed over to his computer monitors, but the screens were black. The phone lines had been cut.

Bogovic put on his Kevlar vest and pocketed his licensed Browning 9 mm. The drive took 15 minutes. He and the police got to the store at the same time. They entered through the store’s auxiliary door on Sedgwick Avenue. No one was in the hallway that stretches the length of the store and leads to the second floor office. He went into the store and turned on the lights. Empty.

His next stop was the office. Inside he found the safe’s hinges drilled off. The safe’s door was still shut and its contents – cash and cigarettes – were intact. Bogovic inspected the rest of his property. Four holes had been drilled through the roof, in various seemingly arbitrary locations.
“They were most likely in the store when we arrived and didn’t have time to take anything,” Bogovic says.

Bogovic is no stranger to burglaries and robberies. He has been robbed at gunpoint 10 times; most of these robberies occurred between 1975 and 1985 when crime was endemic in the city. In the 1980s, big supermarkets like A&P and Safeway left the neighborhood and the borough altogether due to crime, according to Bogovic and Sloan.

“That’s what I told the people who came to the hearing on the armory,” Bogovic says. In June, he gave a brief speech in front of the community board and 200 people at a public hearing. The board’s vote, which is only advisory, is the first stage in the ULERP process. This vote serves as a recommendation. “Anyone could speak who wanted to. I’m a terrible public speaker – I hate it. I just told them what it was like to do business here during the ’70s and ’80s, carrying a gun and wearing a bulletproof vest to work. You have no idea what I went through. We literally put our lives on the line.”

Bogovic ended his speech by asking the community board if they thought it was a good idea for the large corporate companies to return: “What do we do if crime gets worse? Will they just leave again?” In a vote a few weeks later, the board approved Related’s plan.
Gee Eng, Bogovic’s friend and one-time business partner, was also at the hearing. He chose not to speak; he was there to support Bogovic, who had approached him in 1980 to buy the store with him. By his late 20s, Bogovic says he knew the business better than his boss, Simon Brown.

Bogovic has a simple philosophy for success as a grocer: “I try to do three simple things: offer good service, supply good products at an affordable price and have a clean store to shop in.”

In the age of the Wal-Mart business model, where brand products sell themselves, Bogovic might appear anachronistic. Eng agreed with Bogovic that the two of them could increase the store’s value. Eng put up the other half of the money. They bought the Associated on Sedgwick Avenue for $140,000 and its inventory for $60,000 on June 24, 1980. They changed its cooperative title from Associated to a C Town; they made the store bigger, expanding it to its current 10,000 square feet.

Bogovic saw Mary again in 1983. They found themselves thrown together with mutual Croatian friends at a dance hall in Manhattan. They were the only ones without partners. He asked her to dance. As they danced, he told her that he was sorry for what he did at the wedding five years earlier and that he missed her. They began to date. Shortly after, she told him if he did not marry her, she would never see him again.
“I said yes, definitely, yes,” recalls Bogovic. “Probably the best decision I ever made. She is a fantastic mother and friend, and you know, as you get old, it’s very important that you like the person you’re with.”

Bogovic and Mary started a family – they have a son and daughter, both in their 20s – and the store itself became a family of sorts for its staff. Bogovic hired kids from the neighborhood whose parents he liked and trusted. He would get to know them as they shopped, and if he liked them, he would offer them a job when they turned 16. Whole families have worked for him.

Bogovic says he starts his employees off at minimum wage and promotes them as they gain experience. He is not unionized, but he buys medical coverage for any employee who lacks it. Every employee interviewed confirmed this.

He often hires immigrants because he relates to them. He was once like them; hungry.

“My father worked for him first,” says Gregory Gutierrez, 22, a three-year employee at C Town. “When I moved up from the Dominican to join [my father], he introduced me to John.”
Gutierrez’s first job in the United States was as a prep cook in a Manhattan restaurant. Bogovic practically hit himself when he found out Gutierrez was employed elsewhere; he wished he had offered him a job at his store. Luckily, Gutierrez quit after three months because the hours conflicted with his college studies. Bogovic did not waste any time in asking him if he wanted to join Gutierrez’s father in working for him.

“It’s wonderful working for John. I couldn’t ask for a better boss,” says Gutierrez. “He understands that my priority is school.” Bogovic tells Gutierrez that he does not always want to see him working at C Town. “He tells me, ‘I want to see you go to college, I want to see you graduate, I want you to get a good job.’”

Bogovic hired Yavia, another C Town employee, after Yavia’s brother recommended him. He then hired Yavia’s father as a delivery person. Two Kosovo Albanian sisters work as cashiers. “It’s a like a family here,” says Gutierrez, “we depend on each other.”

Those who have not worked for him perhaps know him from his charitable work. Every year Bogovic donates 30 turkeys to Our Lady of Angels Church, which is located across the street from his first Bronx apartment. “I find him to be a holy person. He is altruistic. He doesn’t look for attention,” says Rev. Thomas Lynch, Our Lady of Angels’ priest. “Some businesses might promote what they do for the
church. One of the marvelous characteristics about John is that he’ll tell you how grateful he is to do it.”

Lynch says Bogovic was well known in the community long before Lynch arrived three years ago: “He’s a classic American immigrant story. He comes [here] and faith, family and work are part and parcel to who he is.”

In recognition of Bogovic’s years of volunteer work within the community, Lynch surprised him one Sunday Mass last fall with a plaque. The entire congregation stood and clapped for him.

“He’s like a 1940s grocery store owner,” Ron Reggio, 70, one of Bogovic’s longtime food suppliers, said of him. “He’s a community man. I’m not complimenting him. The truth is, he can’t fish.”

Several of Bogovic’s employees say C Town’s ethos could not be duplicated in a corporate retail store, like the one planned for the armory. Gutierrez thinks that corporations are only concerned with productivity. “They don’t look at what people need and what people are going through. That is very important to me because I’m a college student. I need time.”

Fernando Tirado, Community Board 7’s district manager, counters that the Related plan would help break the cycle of poverty: “If you have new businesses, you have
competition, it provides opportunity for the consumer, saving them money, giving
them purchasing power, giving them options. When you stymie competition and you
create these local monopolies, there is no incentive for them to provide better
services for the customers."

At the same time, Tirado says, people are clamoring for affordable housing, schools
and social services. Nobody wants a mall in their backyard, but Tirado believes that
a mall can generate the income to help pay for these services. This money is made
not only through taxes but by drawing people with higher incomes to the
neighborhood. “There's a difference between gentrification and urban renewal,” he
says. “To think that a neighborhood can provide a quality of life that will allow
people to go to college, get skills, and pay rent and still make $30,000 a year is
unrealistic. You need to have income dispersion. And in some cases, you need to
have people who pay higher rent so you can have a more stable neighborhood.”

For C Town, and the 45 other neighborhood grocery stores around the armory, a
government-subsidized mega-supermarket in the armory seems unfair. Related
declined repeated requests for comment.
The local stores only have local recognition. What’s more, not only can juggernauts offer competitive prices because of their corporate size, they also have tax support. How can these local merchants, who employ local residents, possibly compete?

If they did, they would not have much threshold for failure. According to Sloan, most local merchants can lose no more than 20 percent of their business before having to shut down. “Listen, the supermarket business has incredibly fixed costs,” he said. “Deliverables, salaries, unions, utilities – all that is fixed. Most of these guys wouldn’t last more than two months with a brand-name store here. It would change the whole neighborhood marketplace.”

Members of Community Board 7 advocate a change in the type of food offered in the marketplace. Seventy percent of items sold at the bodegas along Kingsbridge Road are candy, cigarettes, alcohol and soda pop, says Fernando Tirado, citing a recent study by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

Tirado and others on the board say they asked Related to consider bringing in an organic food supermarket so that the neighborhood had better access to nutritional products. Bogovic counters that he has tried to sell organic products but they did not sell. “I care about my customers’ health, but I cannot tell them what to buy. I can’t say, ‘Don’t buy Pepsi, buy juice!’” he says.
“I can appreciate that,” says Ozzie Brown, the chair of the land use committee at Community Board 7, “because the bottom line for him is that he wants to stay in business. But I do know that this community has a plethora of health maladies. And we need to program the community so we can bring about the necessary shift to change their habits.”

Foster of Fordham Road and Bettina Damiani at Good Jobs New York believe the shops are about greed and little else. Kingsbridge Heights is one subway stop from Fordham Road and its plethora of stores; the last thing the neighborhood needs, Foster says, is “more Footlockers.”

Tirado does not want merchants like Bogovic to be put out of business by any armory development. On the other hand, he does not view the use of tax dollars in developing the armory as a waste: “Is it beneficial to have supermarkets that are going to continue to sell lower quality food at higher prices to poor people in the community? Or is it a good use of tax dollars to encourage a developer to sell healthier products at a cheaper price to help their health condition?”

Bogovic does not deny that he puts his business interests first. Despite the city’s and Related’s protests to the contrary, he simply cannot see himself competing with a tax-subsidized, supermarket giant.

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As summer turned to fall, Related’s armory plan went through each stage of ULERP: the Bronx Borough President, the City Planning Commission and finally the City Council.

Persuaded by KARA and his conscience, Rubin Diaz Jr., the Bronx Borough president, voted against the proposal. Afterwards, he unified the Bronx delegation, according to his spokesperson, John Desio, Bronx council member Oliver Cabrera, and members of Community Board 7.

“The chemistry of the Bronx delegation has changed,” says Cabrera, citing the borough’s newfound unity in political matters. “There’s solidarity. I might even call it a better day.”

On Dec. 14, 2009, the city council voted 45 to 1 against Related’s plan. Bloomberg vetoed the decision, but the council overrode him. Bogovic was sitting in a chair at home when he heard the news on NPR. He jumped out of his seat and almost hit the ceiling with his head.

“I was so surprised,” says Bogovic. “I had been worried for so long, I thought for sure they were going to side with Related.”

Farkas and her allies at KARA also were elated. No one quite believed they would win because Bloomberg had never lost in the City Council before. The Bronx
members had tried to negotiate with Bloomberg’s aides, even proposing to pay for the living wage by establishing a fund with the $5 million Related was paying for the armory. Bloomberg rejected the idea. According to Cabrera, who was present during negotiations, Bloomberg did not want to set a precedent for having a mandated living wage in the city.

On March 22, Diaz Jr. will announce that a new task force to vet fresh ideas for the armory will be created, says Desio. In spite of this news, the Real Estate Board of New York (REBNY) claims Kingsbridge Heights may have difficulty courting a new developer. “We’ll see how easy it is to find another $300 million investment,” says Michael Slattery, a senior vice-president of REBNY. “I don’t think it’s likely. It’s still a stiff environment for investment, and they turned away a well-capitalized developer with experience in the Bronx.”

The reaction in Kingsbridge to the proposal’s failure has been mixed, says Tirado. While KARA and Bogovic dispute his opinion, Tirado counters he has received dozens of complaint letters from people who said they would have worked in the armory shops. “No one conducted a census. You’re not asking the person who is unemployed whether or not they’d rather have a job paying minimum wage. You’re making a decision for them.”

Bogovic felt the opposite. “My grandpa used to say, better an empty bag than a devil in the bag,” he says.
Driving past the armory after the vote, he felt bittersweet about its remaining empty. Bitter, because he wants it to be developed and benefit the community; sweet, because his business, whose sales are down 4 percent since January, is still standing – for better or worse.

“I don’t want you to give me too much credit,” Bogovic says. “I got lucky. If I had stayed in Yugoslavia, I may still be poor. But like my Dominican friends who came here with nothing and now have good businesses, all I can say is: only in America. Definitely only in America.”