

A Neighborhood Identity Crisis: Transformation Brings Anxiety in ...

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

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Frances Roberts for The New York Times

Mike Kamber said a planned hotel, shopping and entertainment complex threatened Dumbo's magic and modest rents.

A Neighborhood Identity Crisis

Transformation Brings Anxiety in Brooklyn's Dumbo

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

Sometimes, the walls can talk.

On the west wall of an old factory building on Plymouth Street, in a cobblestoned corner of old Brooklyn waterfront known as Dumbo, someone has spray-painted this observation in red: "Dumbo=Soho '98."

Just below is this exhortation in black: "Revolt."

With or without imminent revolt, this tiny enclave of old iron foundries and sugar refineries that artists and other intrepid bohemians began settling quietly more than 20 years ago is moving quickly from the esthetics of industrial grime to yuppie chic. These days, you can feast on crepes for breakfast, and if you live in the condominiums at 1 Main Street, you can have your dry cleaning picked up by a company that says it does Barbara Walters's laundry. Longtime Dumbo dwellers report seeing newcomers in designer suits strolling through this industrial forest, where not long ago, eviscerated cars were dumped on the street and untamed dogs ran free.

Now Dumbo — the catchy acronym for Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass — faces what could be its most radical makeover yet. At the point at which Main Street hits the East River and stares up at the blue underbelly of the Manhattan Bridge, David C. Walentas, one of Dumbo's largest property owners, has proposed building a fashionable hotel designed by a fashionable French architect, along with a complex of shops, restaurants, movie theaters and a skating rink with glorious river views.

Not surprisingly, some local residents, notably those who have enjoyed the area's modest rents, gritty solitude and tiny sliver of state park right on the river, are not happy about the possible changes. They are especially concerned about increased traffic and losing access to their little park.

But although the scrawls on the Plymouth Street factory wall seem to reflect a prevailing sentiment in this neighborhood, a more complicated mix of emotions lies just below the surface. Opinions about the transformation of Dumbo — those changes that have already occurred and the development recently proposed — depend on where one stands along the waterfront.

For Mike Kamber, 35, a freelance photographer who moved to the heart of Dumbo in 1992, the proposed development is threatening because it could price him out of the loft he has fought for years to keep. He has survived weeks of winter without heat, patching the roof when it rains and fixing the front locks every time they are broken. Although

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JOY GLIDDEN
director of the Dumbo
Arts Center, referring to
David C. Walentas

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Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

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Brooklyn Neighborhood Faces an Identity Crisis

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he enjoys what seems like a heaven-sent deal — \$600-a-month rent for 1,800 square feet of space — he and his fellow tenants have also spent \$80,000 in legal fees fighting their landlord.

For Harold Greene, who works for the city's child welfare agency and lives in the Farragut housing project, a half-dozen blocks from the waterfront, the proposed hotel and shops hold the promise of jobs for project residents. But these residents also fear that rising real estate prices could ultimately force them from their homes.

And for Joy Glidden, a painter who moved seven years ago to Vinegar Hill, a pocket of row houses just east of Dumbo, the latest waterfront plan, though not ideal, could be worse. Mr. Walentas, after all, has been a supporter of the arts — offering space for the exhibits that Ms. Glidden organizes each fall through the Dumbo Arts Center and choosing to renovate historical buildings rather than razing them, as the Jehovah's Witnesses, another major property owner in the area, has done.

Besides, Ms. Glidden says, if the area was developed with a hotel and other commercial facilities, it might not become the site of a garbage transfer station, as various private trash haulers have proposed.

"Frankly," she said, "he's the best of all the evils."

This stretch of Brooklyn waterfront has long represented different things to different people. Today, the forbidding, once-deserted patch known as Dumbo is home to at least 500 artists, estimates Ms. Glidden, who is the director of the Dumbo Arts Center. Small printing plants and carpentry shops occupy the hulking old factory buildings along with the painters and sculptors, and civil servants work in several city agencies that have offices here.

Except for a supermarket and a check-cashing store near Farragut Houses, the neighborhood still has no banks or grocery stores. Restaurants are in short supply: a luncheonette and a pizzeria catering mainly to the workers of Dumbo shut down by early evening, there is a pub on Front Street with a young, artsy clientele, and the projects are served by Chinese takeout places with bul-

letproof windows. A new, much-talked-about addition to Dumbo is Le Gamin, a French creperie.

One sunny, wind-blown morning last week, as she walked along the waterfront, Ms. Glidden received an earful of opinions on the changes blowing through the neighborhood.

Mark Kanter and Heather Hutchison, two painters heading home with their dog, Dizzy, said they were grateful for certain things, like Le Gamin, where they had just enjoyed a delicious breakfast; and feeling safer walking out of the subway at night.

But they said they were appalled by plans to convert the waterfront into a shopping district, using the presence of the artists as cachet.

"You have all these artists living and working here, and you have developers using them as advertising," Mr. Kanter said.

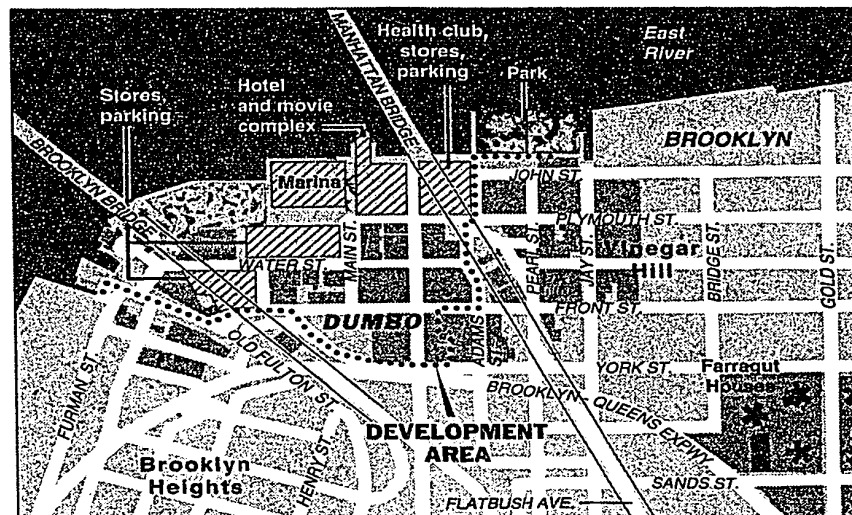
By contrast, Michael Counts, a co-owner of the Gale Gates Gallery, said he was counting on the good intentions of the development team.

"They're very interested in the

As yuppie chic encroaches, a factory flavor gives way.

identity of the neighborhood," said Mr. Counts, who moved his gallery to a Walentas building two years ago after rising rents forced him out of the financial district in Manhattan. "They're not interested in turning it into a South Street Seaport."

Evan Sklar, a freelance photographer who was spending the afternoon at the Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park bouncing his 4-month-old son, Emmitt, on his knee, questioned the wisdom of building a hotel and shopping mall on the waterfront. It was not that he opposed development; he had, after all, recently moved into one of the one-bedroom condominium apartments at One Main Street, and he favors what some Dumbo old-timers dread — carving river-view apartments out of the old factory buildings. But he said he would prefer to see additional amenities, like a



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Residents have mixed feelings about changes in the Dumbo section.

grocery store or a few more nice restaurants.

"There are things that should happen in the neighborhood to make it better," he said. "But it should be done in character."

It was not character that Mr. Greene of Farragut Houses fretted about. Rather, he wondered what opportunities or obstacles the latest proposed development would bring to the people of the projects, whose numbers are almost six times the population of Dumbo: nearly 3,600 compared with 600.

"If we went down there, for restaurants and basic activities, it would be too expensive for most of us," said Mr. Greene, who is the president of the Farragut Tenants Association. "It's not designed around the needs that we have."

The 1,400-unit project is only a few blocks from Mr. Sklar's condominium, but the two men occupy vastly different worlds. A third of Farragut families are on welfare, and the median household income in 1990 was \$12,804, compared with \$42,153 in the waterfront neighborhoods of Vinegar Hill, Dumbo and Fulton Ferry Landing, just to the south.

The proposed waterfront development is only one of many changes taking place around Farragut Houses. The MetroTech office complex was erected in 1996 two blocks to the west, and proposals have been floated for a film studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which abuts the projects on the north. As the neighborhood becomes increasingly coveted real estate, Mr. Greene wondered aloud, will Farragut ultimately be turned over to private develop-

ers?

"This would only sweeten the pot to put us out on the streets," he said. "And that's the fear of Farragut." A housing authority spokesman said there were no such plans.

Mike Kamber, the photographer, fears that the magic of his neighborhood will be exiled as well. To make sure that it does not fade from memory, he has been taking pictures of the waterfront he has known these last seven years: the elderly couple from Vinegar Hill sitting on their plastic-covered couch, the man from Farragut who used to work in one of Dumbo's old factories, the abandoned trolley lines of Dumbo, half covered with snow.

Sure, he says, change is inevitable. But if he wanted to live in a den of upwardly mobile comforts, he would have moved to Park Slope long ago.

"We like the solitude; we like the broken streets," he said wistfully. Then he pointed up ahead. "They planted trees on my street," he said. "That worries me."