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Architectural fantasies

Gallery owner brings together artists to create new visions of Red Hook's landscape

By Matthew Sweeney
The Brooklyn Papers

A new exhibit at the Kentler International Drawing Space in Red Hook attempts to inspire imaginative ideas for housing.

"Infill: Housing for Red Hook Brooklyn" takes flights of fancy but returns to the lot lines of the neighborhood, where a high number of vacant lots goes hand in hand with a shortage of housing and combines to create a pressing concern.

The exhibit will be on display until April 30. The Kentler International Drawing Space, at 353 Van Brunt St., is between Wolcott and Dikeman streets.

"They've taken into consideration what is here but also taken into consideration some very exciting building projects," said gallery owner Florence Neal, of the exhibit participants.

"Housing is a real problem. There are a lot of empty lots," she said. "People knock on my door every day looking for something down here. There's talk of rebuilding in Red Hook, and I think it would be better to get some good ideas rather than build the quickest, easiest ugliest thing, which happens sometimes."

So what to fill the empty space with?

"It's not to propose a bunch of solutions for housing. It's about getting people excited about the potential," said Robert James, a local architect.

James came up with a couple of designs for the show and contacted three other architects to come up with their own ideas.

His ideas are comparatively practical, he admitted. He came up with two designs for two-family homes,

one with a vertical and the other with a horizontal layout. James, who moved to Red Hook in 1985, said he has spent too much time living there and is too familiar with the local zoning regulations to come away with a purely imaginative idea for housing.

"I've never been able to produce a poetic vision in Red Hook. I really would like to," James said.

The importance of imaginative thinking about housing is directly related to the number of unutilized spaces waiting to be developed.

"The scary part of this neighborhood is the empty lots. You don't know what's going to happen," he said.

James' designs were based on the assumption of rezoning the neighborhood. The existing zoning is generally agreed to be problematic. Red Hook's residential area is zoned R-5, the same zoning for neighborhoods like Bay Ridge, and requires front yard setbacks and parking.

"The car ruined Red Hook once," he said referring to Robert Moses' Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, which cut the peninsular neighborhood off from the rest of Brooklyn. "Why let it ruin it again?"

"They're rewarding you for putting your car in



Filling in the spaces: Architects Amanda Longo, Bob James, John Davies, Lucia Contro, Gordon Gilbert and Kevin Bonk at the opening of the "Infill" exhibition at Kentler International Drawing Space.

The Brooklyn Papers / Tom Callan

front of your house," James said.

Nearly all Red Hook housing predates the zoning code and is usually wood frame, two- and three-family homes with no front yards, which is closer to the R-6 zoning on the other side of Hamilton Avenue.

John Davies made a greater flight of fancy when he designed his own subterranean home. It's based on his own building, a small, formerly abandoned, warehouse he bought for \$24,000 at a city auction in 1984, and had rezoned for residential use.

Light comes in through a large circular window, fashioned in brick. The light is caught by a curving glass wall that draws it down into the home.

Asked why he came to the neighborhood, Davies and James gave the same answer: the light.

Until recently, Davies own home, on Coffey Street near Conover Street, was surrounded by empty shells. Now, as a sign of the economic good times, the buildings on either side are being renovated and put into manufacturing use. Three lots behind him are still vacant, still owned by the city. The uncertain future of those manufacturing lots, directly in view of his home, is part of this resident's concern over the future of Red Hook.

Lucia Contro was a masters student in architecture, visiting from Venice, when she fell in love with Red

Hook. She did her masters thesis on the neighborhood.

Inspired by the piers and the red-brick walls, Contro and Amanda Longo created a plan for the block where the art gallery is located, bounded by Wolcott, Dikeman, Van Brunt and Richards streets. The urban block is cut through with walkways — horizontal pieces inspired by the piers — connecting artists' studios to stores, to bars, to Laundromats.

It was Longo's idea to design a living space where the residents could go inside the block. The warren-like block is shot through with red-brick walls — the vertical pieces — that can be seen rising slightly above the low story buildings.

The internal space is reflected in a city map from the 1920s. The map, which James found in the New York Public Library, and now graces the postcard for the exhibit, shows two diagonals running through the rectangular city lots, the last remnants of the old dirt roads that pre-existed subdivision. The two streets were old Red Hook Lane and the Chancery Road, James said.

As designed by Contro and Longo, the interconnections of commercial and residential space, alternating solids and voids, would create "human cohesion" and "common space," Contro said.