Hunts Point Comes Home  Todd W. Bresi

Over the past decade, some of New York City’s most devastated neighborhoods have seen a remarkable turnaround. City agencies, working with nonprofit and private developers, have created 19,000 new housing units in properties taken for non-payment of taxes. From Bedford-Stuyvesant to Harlem to Morrisania, nearly all of the burned and abandoned buildings, nearly all of the lots where buildings once stood, have been reclaimed with affordable housing.

But as hundreds of thousands of new residents recoup these neighborhoods, it is evident that the services they need lag far behind. Community groups have scrambled to provide social services, but cuts in parks and transit and sluggish school construction continue to marginalize these residents. Also missing from these re-emerging communities are “life spaces” — the shops and stoops, bars and clubs, gardens and playgrounds that pulse with the spirit of the people.

“The Point,” a cultural center and market in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx, shows how life spaces can be created through a combination of entrepreneurial vision and architectural deftness. From the outside, the Point still looks like the former factory and warehouse. But inside, it is a hopeful, energetic crossroads for artists, aspiring businesspeople and residents.

The Point consists of two main spaces: a central gallery, which is lined by tiny spaces in which entrepreneurs have set up shop, and a black box theater. There is also an office suite, which is leased by a social service agency. The offices provide rental income that keeps the project going and constant foot traffic; the other spaces accommodate a range of activities, both planned and spontaneous. There are afterschool dance, music and art classes, and evening dance, music, comedy and theatrical events.

Consider that in the course of one summer day, the following things happened. A disk jockey came to check the stock of records in his shop and prepare for an upcoming event. A New York Times reporter brought by a group of interns, who were treated to a Southern-style lunch by a caterer who hopes to open a restaurant at The Point. Arthur Aviles, once a member of the Bill T. Jones dance company, came by to offer an impromptu dance in honor of the youth class he would be teaching. A local theatre company rehearsed a play.
"The jury is still out on whether we have a successful social space," says the Point's director, Paul Lipson. We have to have more people dropping in, not just coming to events. That means making sure that whenever people drop by, there is something going on."

Drawing casual visitors is in difficult, acknowledged Lipson and architect Robert Zapporelli, of the Pratt Institute Planning and Architectural Collaborative. They noted the difficulty of giving a former warehouse building a strong street presence — especially given the sparse pedestrian traffic on industrial arterial the Point fronts. And it is a relatively small building, 12,930 square feet, making it difficult to build the retail energy that will draw in shoppers. But there is room for small improvements. The Point expects to turn a garage on the other side of the courtyard into a farmers' market and ice-cream stand.

The design work was funded by the New York State Council on the Arts and the Ferris Booth Fund. The project directors and community members donated some $125,000 in materials and labor; construction was contracted to local businesses to help them get experience on renovation projects. The Corning Corp. donated the glass block that fills the elementary windows, the city's Department of Cultural Affairs is donating material for a dance studio.

Lipson, who formerly worked for a youth services agency in the neighborhood, joined with two of his friends to create the non-profit organization that leased, rehabbed and operates the Point. Lipson's father was born in the neighborhood and he still has some family members living in the area. "If I weren't working here, I would be doing something else. I'm a professional Bronxite."