

Filling a Void

As Lower Manhattan continues to recover from the September 11 attacks, public and private groups see an enormous opportunity to renew and rebuild • By Kelly Devine Thomas

Along the far wall of Renate Aller's Hudson Street loft are the faces of TriBeCa, among them fellow artists Andrea Belag, Dennis Oppenheim, and Richard Nonas, the playwright Edward Albee, and film director Doug Liman.

Photographed by Aller in their homes in the weeks and months after the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed blocks away, one interior flows into the next in a long band of color. Individuals and couples, some pictured alone, others with pets and children, peer resolutely around corners, out of windows, or straight into the lens focused on them.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

A detail from "Afterwards," Renate Aller's series of photographs of her TriBeCa neighbors, including playwright Edward Albee (second from left) and artist James Gilroy (silhouetted at far right).

Recently exhibited at New York's Goethe Institute, Aller's photographs of her neighbors contrast with war-torn images of downtown Lower Manhattan—that narrow yet diverse stretch of neighborhoods below Canal Street that includes TriBeCa, Chinatown, the Financial District, and Battery Park City—has been slowly recovering from the September 11 terrorist attacks that left a 16-acre void where the World Trade Center once stood. A public platform—an understated, utilitarian wood-and-steel structure designed by prominent New York architects David Rockwell, Elizabeth Diller, Ricardo Scofidio, and Kevin Kennon—allows thousands of visitors to view ground zero each day. People have returned, hotels have reopened, access has improved. And the area's artists, galleries, and arts institutions have found their way back to making, showing, and promoting art. "I'm working twice as hard," says TriBeCa artist George Peck.

The Museum of Jewish Heritage, just a few blocks south of the site, is carrying on with a \$60 million expansion set to open in fall 2003. The nonprofit arts organization Creative Time, in conjunction with the newly opened Ritz-Carlton New York, Battery Park and the Battery Park City Authority, has recently inaugurated "Art on the Plaza" with Jim Campbell's outdoor sculpture *Primal Graphics 2002*, two grids of 386 lightbulbs across which a shadowy human figure appears to move. Future site-specific installations for the public-art series will include works by Yoshitomo Nara, Gary Hume, and Komar & Melamid.

The Skyscraper Museum, a nonprofit institution devoted to the study of high-rise buildings, is also set to join the Ritz-Carlton complex with the opening of a new permanent space there later this year. At the nearby Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, which is showing some 200 Native American photographs through July, a decrease in attendance from area schoolchildren has been offset in recent months by a steady pilgrimage of tourists. "A great deal of healing is taking place physically and emotionally," says David Marwell, director of the Museum of Jewish Heritage, whose attendance dropped dramatically after the events of September 11 but is now on the rise. "That's what we're in the middle of right now."

The prospect of building a better Lower Manhattan has become the bittersweet flip side of the tragedy. The possibilities—what some are calling an unprecedented opportunity to design the 21st-century city—are inspiring divergent visions from artists, designers, architects, politicians, urban planners, developers, business owners, residents, survivors, widows and widowers, and a host of others who want to be part of the redevelopment process. Dozens of ad hoc organizations and committees, like New York New

Visions and Rebuild Downtown Our Town, have been formed over the last few months to discuss everything from changing traffic patterns to constructing a performing-arts center to building a memorial. "Sixteen acres in the heart of the Financial District in Manhattan," says Max Protetch, who recently exhibited designs for the site from more than 50 international architects at his Chelsea gallery. "We wanted to show the powers that be what is possible."

In "A New World Trade Center: Design Proposals," the Protetch exhibition held earlier this year, Jared Della Valle and Andrew Bernheimer emphasized the complex relationships that will bear on the regeneration of Lower Manhattan. Instead of submitting a design, the two New York architects responded with a set of building blocks. Each block was labeled with the name of one of 80 public and private groups the architects believe will have a say in the reshaping of downtown. There were also blocks to represent emotions like anger, guilt, fear, sadness, greed, and hope.

"Everybody who feels like a stakeholder is trying to be a part of the process," says TriBeCa dealer Hal Bromm, president of New York's Historic Districts Council, which is working to protect downtown's landmark districts, including the southernmost region of TriBeCa, which borders the site.

For some 30 years Lower Manhattan has maintained a low-key artistic profile. Artists who live and work in TriBeCa's historic mercantile buildings outnumber a handful of galleries, ranging from the start-up Latin Collector Art Center, which handles Latin American art, and Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, which specializes in Asian art, particularly works by the Chinese avant-garde. Other cutting-edge galleries inhabit the outskirts. In the northwest corner of TriBeCa, 123 Watts, on Watts Street, just below Canal Street near the Hudson River, shows obsessive minimalist work by artists such as Teo Gonzalez and Jean Shin. Maccarone, which recently opened in Chinatown, exhibits site- and

situation-specific works by international artists such as Christian Jankowski, Claudia & Julia Mueller, and Olav Westphalen. A smattering of nonprofit organizations—the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Franklin Furnace, P.S.1's Clocktower Gallery, Art in General, and Apexart Curatorial Program—have heralded the avant-garde, the alternative, and the emerging for decades.

Leo Koenig, whose shows by such artists as Tony Matelli, Lisa Ruyter, and Erik Parker have attracted a loyal following, moved his lower-Broadway gallery to Centre Street, just north of Canal, after the attacks. But most of Lower Manhattan's galleries, artists, and arts organizations have stayed since September 11, relying on the innovative spirit that first brought them to the semidesolate region of the city in the late 1960s and early '70s. Franklin Furnace founder Martha Wilson, whose offices are three blocks from ground zero, spent the first few months after the attacks applying for aid and cleaning the organization's archives—some 25,000 slides, 600 videotapes, 300 negatives, and 750 boxes of documents representing 25 years of alternative art. "It's always an entrepreneurial challenge," says Wilson of the financial hurdles ahead.

So far, it is not clear who has the power to make decisions about the future of Lower Manhattan. The process is certain to include families of the victims who died in the attacks; the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which owns the site; developer Larry Silverstein, who has a 99-year lease on the land; New York governor George Pataki; Mayor Michael Bloomberg; and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, a joint state-city entity charged with overseeing the area's revitalization and controlling the funding. The Museum of Jewish Heritage's Marwell and Liz Thompson, executive director of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, were recently appointed to the corporation's advisory council for arts, education, and tourism.

Even less clear is the role visual thinkers will play in the process. For the time being, they are voicing their opinions as members of advocacy groups or expressing themselves in exhibitions around the city. New York New Visions has produced a map of ground zero, designed by a group of architects headed by Laura Kurgan, with photographs by documentary photographer Margaret Morton, to help tourists navigate the area. The Municipal Art Society, meanwhile, has announced the launch of "Imagine New York: Giving Voice to the People's Visions," a public-outreach project designed to solicit ideas for the World Trade Center site.

Local artists, many of whom witnessed the attacks firsthand, have responded in many ways. Artist Makoto Fujimura opened up his Greenwich Street loft as a temporary gallery for fellow artists, including Denise Green and David Headley, and encouraged those who felt their responses were premature to "show where you are, show the incompleteness." Aller photographed her neighbors. Urban landscape artist Lizbeth Mitty painted the World Trade Center site in brush strokes and bold colors. Painter James Gilroy, who revisited pre-September 11 works he had done of free-falling figures that



COURTESY THE ARTIST

A rendering of Mary Miss's proposal to replace chain-link fencing and concrete barriers around ground zero with blue piping and flowering trees.

bear an uncanny resemblance to what he witnessed that day, returned months later to paint images of ephemeral towers and running, wisplike figures in blues and grays.

Artists Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda helped create—along with architects John Bennett, Gustavo Bonevardi, and Richard Nash Gould and lighting designer Paul Marantz—*Tribute In Light*, a temporary memorial (on view through the 13th of this month) that consists of two beacons of light rising from Lower Manhattan. A proposal by TriBeCa resident and public artist Mary Miss that would replace the chain-link fencing, concrete barriers, and police barricades that currently define the perimeter of ground zero with multiple, circuitous paths of sky blue piping, modular seating, cobalt blue lights, and flowering trees was awaiting approval at press time.

What might these 16 acres look like someday? The architectural imaginings recently aired at the Max Protetch gallery—and on view from the sixth of this month through early June at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C.—included everything from secular cathedrals and new-world peace centers to technology-infused facades. Water, mirrors, shadows, and earth were recurring motifs. Other projects memorialized details: the names of the victims, the times the planes hit and the buildings collapsed, the height of the towers, the shape and reach of their footprints.

Daniel Libeskind proposed pointed towers punctuated with a hanging memorial and a vertical garden. Mel Chin offered a self-sufficient "New World Trade City" suspended on a modular platform 72 feet above the site. Alexander Gorlin saw the archeology of the ruins preserved under a horizontal plane of glass. Eytan Kaufman envisioned an arched building and pedestrian bridge stretching over the Hudson. Steven Holl imagined grand observation decks on his tower—wrapped in a folding street—ascending 1,300 feet. "The will is there to do something fantastic," says Protetch. "That's the easy part. The hard part is figuring out what that would be and how to go about it." ■

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Josée Bienvenu, director of 123 Watts, in front of Teo Gonzalez's *Untitled #136, 2000*.

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