



# DAILY NEWS

December 14, 2008

# Being creative with space

## Vacant offices in Jamaica are converting to art workshops

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THEY ARE neighboring buildings that share a common fate — both are vacant and ready for the wrecking ball.

But before they are reduced to rubble, the pair of shuttered office buildings on 161st St. in Jamaica will play a key role in a planned downtown renaissance.

The Greater Jamaica Development Corp., which owns the buildings, has partnered with a nonprofit arts organization to transform the dust-collecting old offices into art galleries and workshop spaces.

In doing so, the corporation is hoping to foster a redevelopment trend that played out, most notably, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. There, a wave of artists seeking affordable accommodations turned the area's real estate fortunes and eventually spurred a redevelopment boom.

"We believe that artists will be pioneers in the community — and other good things will follow from that," said Andrew Manshel, senior vice president of the corporation.

The buildings are slated to be razed in about a year. A Queens developer is seeking financing to replace them with an eight-story structure that will feature apart-



In a former office that will be converted to an art gallery and work space, artist William Mwazi (l.) describes his plans for a large charcoal drawing to Mary Reda and Andrew Manshel of the Greater Jamaica Development Corp. Photo by Christie M. Farriella

ments and street-level retail stores, Manshel said.

In the meantime, possibly beginning as early as this week, the buildings will be converted into affordable workshops for 10 artists hand-picked by chashama, a Manhattan-based arts organization. The most expensive workshop will cost only \$150 a month, said chashama General Manager Janusz Jaworski.

"We provide large spaces at small-space prices, so artists who traditionally find themselves working out of their

bedrooms...can now have a studio devoted just to making art," Jaworski said.

He noted that the scale of an artist's work often increases in proportion to the size of their work space.

That is true for William Mwazi, 37, of Forest Hills, an artist who will be working in the space on a two-month project.

Mwazi, who normally works out of his apartment, said the larger space will allow him to expand a project of his that is being exhibited in a Brooklyn gallery.

"It has been really hard to find space, especially with the economic times right now," said Mwazi, whose project applies the concept of hero worship to parents. "Working part-time doesn't give you enough financial freedom to afford studio space."

In the coming year, chashama will add gallery space to the buildings and select another group of artists to work on six-month projects.

The development corporation, which is planning \$100 million in revitalization projects for down-

town Jamaica, will likely find another local space for the artists once the buildings are ready for demolition, Manshel said.

The workshops and gallery space are intended to complement downtown Jamaica's cultural scene, which includes the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning, the African Poetry Theatre and a long history of jazz music.

The development corporation also sponsored summer concerts last year and plans to do the same next year.

"There is a substantial cultural

infrastructure here already — and what we are trying to do is capitalize on that," Manshel said.

Nevertheless, Manshel explained that the "greatest obstacle" to spurring redevelopment in downtown Jamaica is the perception among large companies and investors that the area lacks cultural amenities — and isn't ready for the big time.

"It is essential for us to change that perception," he said. "It is not the reality, but it is the perception in some quarters."

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