by Martha Hostetter
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Â The once-scruffy neighborhood of St. George, just opposite the ferry terminal on Staten Island's north shore, has been experiencing an economic and cultural revival. But while places like Fort Greene in Brooklyn have broad, public-private initiatives pegged to the arts, cultural growth has occurred organically in St. George, without extensive involvement from an economic development corporation or public agency. Local artists and businesses have formed mutually beneficial ties, and residents have become consumers of art.

Economic development of any stripe in St. George is still in the earliest stages. But many are hoping that, when the new St. George Ferry Terminal opens, scheduled for 2005, the neighborhood will become the city's next cultural destination.

From Stately To Downtrodden To Funky

In the Victorian era, St. George was an elegant suburb, designed to lure residents away from the smoke and clatter of Manhattan. Large, stately homes were built with towers and balconies to take advantage of the hilly landscape and harbor views. For much of the twentieth century the community suffered from crime and abandonment, but recent immigrants from the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and Africa have breathed life back into the neighborhood, as have several hundred artists, who were drawn by the neighborhood's cheap housing and proximity to Manhattan. During the 1990s, crime in St. George fell dramatically and the population gained 18 percent.

The Department of Transportation promises that the new, $84 million St. George Ferry Terminal will be a "gateway" to the growing number of cultural and recreational destinations in the area. Each year, more than one million tourists ride the ferry from Manhattan to Staten Island, but few make it off the boat, in part because the current terminal, a dispiriting concrete bunker, provides no clue that a funky neighborhood lies just up the hill. Planners say the new terminal will take advantage of waterfront views and that a scenic walkway, retail stores, performance plaza, and restaurant will encourage tourists and commuters to linger. The Staten Island Yankees' ballpark, opened alongside the terminal in 2001, provides a glimpse of the future redeveloped waterfront.

"Cultural development is a topic that causes excitement in the community; everyone's thinking, can you be next Williamsburg?" says Laura Jean Watters, executive director of the Council on the Arts & Humanities for Staten Island. In addition to providing artists' grants, the council is working to lay the groundwork for arts tourism. Since 1998, the agency has partnered with the Downtown Alliance to operate V.I.S.I.T. (Vital Information for Staten Islanders and Tourists), an information kiosk at the Whitehall Ferry that distributes a cultural tourism brochure and map for a self-guided walking tour of St. George.

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The newly restored WPA murals in Staten Island Borough Hall, just minutes from the ferry, are on the tour. So are the Victorian-era homes in the residential district, which won landmark status in 1994. There's also the 2,800-seat St. George Theater, a Baroque movie house with every architectural flourish imaginable - murals, stained glass, chandeliers, fountains, statues, and pink marble staircases. The theater has housed poetry readings and other gatherings, and community leaders are lobbying to turn it into a performing arts center.

Investing In The Arts

There are also plans to open a National Lighthouse Museum to showcase the island's role in maritime history. For nearly a century, starting in 1862, St. George was the headquarters of the National Lighthouse Board, a place to test and inspect fuels, lamps, and lenses, experiment with new designs, and supply lighthouses around the country. The museum will include many of the original buildings, as well as a lighthouse, lightship, and newly refurbished pier.

While often neglectful of the "forgotten borough," the city has begun to invest in Staten Island. An Alliance for the Arts report that analyzed capital spending on cultural construction projects from 1992 to 2002 found that the lion's share of city funding was spent in Manhattan (49 percent)—more than twice what was spent on cultural infrastructure in Brooklyn (20 percent), three times more than in Queens (13 percent), four times more than in the Bronx (11 percent), and seven times more than in Staten Island (seven percent). But the city recently spent $8 million to upgrade the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, a former community for retired sailors that has been city-owned since 1976. Snug Harbor attracts 300,000 visitors a year to its botanical garden, children's museum, art classes, galleries, and performances. Half of the funds went toward the renovation of the 1892 Music Hall, which opened just a year after Carnegie Hall and is thus the city's second-oldest music venue. In the past, the 750-seat hall has been host mainly to graduation ceremonies and occasional concerts, but its directors now plan to produce a full season of Broadway-style musicals at prices affordable to all Staten Islanders—$25 to $35 a ticket. The first production, of the musical Fiorello!, opened in January.

Local Artists

St. George's greatest strength lies in its local artists, who have proven both creative and entrepreneurial. While they'd appreciate bigger audiences, they're not standing by waiting for tourists to arrive. A voluntary registry maintained by Council on the Arts & Humanities for Staten Island includes more than 300 artists in St. George and nearby New Brighton, and there are signs of their activity in the many signs promoting performances and gallery openings in the neighborhood cafes, barber shops, and stores.

The Twisted Gift/Vlepo Gallery is a window into the local arts scene. Vlepo means "I see" in Greek, a tribute to the heritage of the sisters who run it, Martha and Tanya Trivizas. Tanya

runs the business side, using the gift shop to showcase the work of local potters, jewelry makers, and designers. Martha, a painter, fills the gallery with work she finds through studio tours and word of mouth. “I thought the gift shop could help to subsidize the gallery,” says Tanya. “What’s been surprising is that, since Christmas, the gallery has become even more successful than the shop.”

Dan Icolari, a writer and St. George resident since 1977, hopes to create cultural aficionados among his neighbors. “I’m interested in developing a market for artists who are here and who have been here,” he says. “It’s not like Williamsburg, where someone blows a whistle and artists arrive.”

Together with Steve Mutt, a well-known redware artist, Icolari has played host to the Friends of Fire pottery exhibit in his back garden for the past three summers. “I want to make art immediate and accessible - not to lower standards, but to bring serious work to more people,” Icolari says, mentioning that he once hung paintings by local artists on the trees around his home.

Gentrification Ahead?

Graphic artist Robin Locke Monda has created a satirical poster of what Staten Island would look like if it were left to get-rich-quick developers. On the poster, the island is divided up into areas with signs advertising the “World’s Biggest Dump,” and “Madame Tussaud’s Wax Botanical Garden.”

It’s a warning about the dangers of viewing communities as “destinations,” of putting tourist dollars ahead of people. While it’s too soon to be worrying about this issue in St. George — rents are still cheap, and many storefronts sit empty — there’s now abundant evidence that cultural development often leads to gentrification and displacement, often of the very artists who helped to catalyze economic activity.

Through her work at Council on the Arts & Humanities for Staten Island, Watters is laying plans to avoid this pattern. “Cultural development in St. George is at place where we can put in safeguards for artists and others," such as spaces specifically reserved for artists and cultural empowerment zones. “Ultimately,” she says, “development has to be driven by artists themselves.”