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SQUARE FEET



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Pier A in the financial district has mostly sat vacant for decades, but is to open as the Pier A Harbor House, a restaurant and event space, next spring.

New Projects on the Horizon at Manhattan's Piers

By C. J. HUGHES

Lining the southern section of the island of Manhattan like bristles on a brush, some decaying piers with their dilapidated buildings remain symbols of failed promises and discarded proposals.

And while some successes involved waterfront developments in public parks, a new wave of commercial projects offering bistros, hotels and apartments is setting a more aggressive course to dust off these shoreline relics.

"We feel like, what took the city so long? Boston and San Francisco embraced retail on their waterfronts a long time ago," said Peter Poulakakos, a local restaurateur who has teamed with the Dermot Company, a residential developer, on two of the planned pier makeovers in Manhattan.

Perhaps the most anticipated project, owing to its history and challenges, is Pier A Harbor House, a restaurant and event space opening next spring at the foot of West Street, in the financial district, in a major public-private deal.

The pier's three-level, 38,000-square-foot Beaux-Arts building originally housed the city's docks department and later served as a place to greet arriving dignitaries, like King George VI during the 1939 World's Fair, according to historical accounts. Later it served as a command post for the city's fire boats.

But after an earlier development plan failed, the clock-topped building has mostly sat vacant for decades, save for pigeons and raccoons.

Mr. Poulakakos, whose restaurants includes Ulysses, the Dead Rabbit and Harry's Cafe and Steak, said the Harbor House was expected to reopen next May. Its first two floors would serve patrons such seaside fare as beer and oysters, while a third floor, with a stage, would be used for events like weddings.

In a 25-year deal valued at \$41 million, Mr. Poulakakos and Dermot will lease the space from the Battery Park City

Authority, the state agency that is responsible for renovating the city-owned Pier A.

The development team is also spending \$20 million to refurbish the interior, adding tufted leather banquettes, a 128-foot-long bar, and a stained-glass ceiling fixture adorned with a large "A," according to renderings.

Much of the renovation is complete. Over the last five years, the authority repaired masonry pilings, added new plumbing and electrical systems and replaced a copper roof, as part of a \$37 million project that included \$30 million in city funds, said Gwen Dawson, the authority vice president overseeing construction.

Separately, Hurricane Sandy set back the project for several months, with about \$4.3 million in damage resulting from five feet of water rushing through parts of the building. Wiring and walls had to be replaced, and the exterior doors are now a more water-impervious mahogany, instead of pine, Ms. Dawson said.

Insurance covered most of the tab, she added.

Drew Spittler, the director of development for Dermot, whose mostly residential development portfolio includes One Hanson Place, a Brooklyn condo conversion, said Pier A had also been outfitted with refrigerators, tables and chairs on wheels so they can be whisked away in the event of a severe storm.

"We are building assuming that a major storm will happen again in the next 25 years," Mr. Spittler said on a recent tour.

This month, the city agreed to add \$5 million to build a new plaza outside Pier A, which had been stalled because of a lack of funds. Because the area teems with tourists, the Pier A business cannot block access to public paths with its dinner tables.

The same development team has had to be even more creative, and spend more money, to redevelop a pier on the

other side of Battery Park, at Manhattan's tip.

That \$100 million project focuses on another historic Beaux-Arts building, the green-shaded Battery Maritime Building, once a major transportation hub, extending into New York Harbor.

Today, the 1909 building, whose architectural details include metalwork in the shape of anchors and life preservers, mostly serves as the terminal for Governors Island ferries.

In the upper stories of the structure, which is next door to the Whitehall Terminal for the Staten Island Ferry, Mr. Poulakakos and Dermot are developing

A cluster of plans with bistros, hotels and apartments.

a 61-room boutique hotel and a restaurant that are scheduled to open in 2015.

Commercial uses for public piers in New York is not new. Chelsea Piers, the giant sports complex on the Hudson River occupying Piers 59 to 61, after all, has hosted weddings, golfers and TV and film productions, since the mid-1990s. Before their renovation, the state-owned properties had faced the threat of demolition.

And at the adjacent Hudson River Park, Pier 40, collects fees for parking, though that revenue is now largely seen as inadequate to cover the huge costs of running the parent park.

Other concessionaires, like kayak rental slots, dot the park, which run from Chambers Street to Midtown.

But the hybrid model seems more viable these days. Pier 15, which opened on the East River by John Street in 2011, offers a checkerboard of lawns and boardwalks on its upper level, which

also provides views of the rigging on Wavertree, a preserved 19th-century sailing ship.

And private cruise boats can anchor along the ground level, where the Watermark Bar features a tequila and cucumber cocktail for \$14.

Similarly, at Pier 57, on the West Side, a \$200 million plan to add sushi bars and shops to a former waterside passenger terminal continues.

But redevelopment schemes for piers are by no means a guaranteed hit. Indeed, the 125,000-square-foot mall that was built at Pier 17 in 1985, at the South Street Seaport on the East River, struggled to catch on for years, through several iterations.

And that pier had pedigree; it was developed by the Rouse Company, which in the 1970s created Boston's popular Faneuil Hall Marketplace.

Issues that dogged Pier 17 when it was built still resonate today, including to what degree private interests should control public seafront.

The Howard Hughes Corporation, which holds Pier 17's lease and has won city permission to build a larger shopping center on it, with more public space, has also unveiled plans for a 50-story hotel-and-apartment tower on an adjacent site, which requires separate approvals.

Some neighbors, though, have said they are opposed to that part of the project, questioning its compatibility with the area's history and aesthetic.

When the residential plan comes up for review next year, it might be a tough sell. An earlier proposal by General Growth Properties, the former leaseholder, to build a 42-story apartment building encountered fierce opposition and was ultimately rejected, noted Anthony Notaro Jr., vice chairman of the local community board.

"These are publicly owned properties, and the public has concerns," he said. "We expect this project will become a major issue."