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Art on the Hudson: New Use for an Old Factory Lifts a City's Hopes

By **ANDREW C. REVKIN**

BEACON, N.Y., March 12 -- From the Depression through the booming 1980's, crowds of men and women wearing blue coveralls thronged each day to the sprawling factory on the riverfront here. Around the clock, they printed, cut and folded colorful cartons for Ritz crackers, Milk-Bone dog biscuits, Oreo cookies and other products of what once was the National Biscuit Company.

The presses rumbled so loudly, former workers recall, that a teen-age worker named Sally, with a nice soprano voice, used to sing her lungs out at one bench but could be heard only by the three women standing next to her.

In a couple of years, crowds will return to the glass-roofed brick building after its decade of dormancy. But this time, they will most likely be wearing stylish black. The industrial clang of old will be replaced by studied silence as visitors shuffle past sculptures of glowing fluorescent tubes and rust-orange slabs of steel, 450-foot-long pieces of Andy Warhol Pop Art and century-old Hudson River landscapes.

On March 8, the Dia Center for the Arts, a private group that exhibits art in converted Manhattan warehouses, in the high desert of New Mexico, at a firehouse in the Hamptons and at other unorthodox sites around the country, announced plans to create a giant new museum in the old factory building -- with nearly twice the gallery space of the Museum of Modern Art. The site is 50 miles north of New York City on the east bank of the Hudson River, a few steps from the Metro-North stop.

The changes in the factory reflect the changing fortunes of Beacon and the Hudson River Valley. Prosperity used to come from riverside docks, railroad lines and the harnessed energy of tumbling tributaries. Now, local officials and business owners hope it will return in the form of tourism.

For Beacon, the museum should provide the final impetus for renewal, said Clara Lou Gould, the Mayor of this city of 13,000 people, which has no hotels and only one bed-and-breakfast.

The city, with a racially diverse mixture of middle-class and poor families, has long labored to emerge from a postindustrial slumber that has left the river end of Main Street largely boarded up. A recent wave of renovations of Victorian homes has helped. Then, several years ago, came "Nobody's Fool," a Paul Newman film that injected money and revived interest a bit.

But nothing has happened on a scale like this, Ms. Gould said. The art center predicts that the museum will draw 60,000 to 70,000 visitors a year once it opens in the spring of 2001. "It's kind of mind-boggling," she said.

The factory's previous owner, the International Paper Company, had been trying to sell it for several years, with an asking price of about \$2 million. Ms. Gould said there had been inquiries from a fish-farming company and other businesses, but nothing seemed promising until a year ago, when the Dia center first

considered the site as a home for most of its extensive art collection. In the collection are many unwieldy works, including a series of steel shapes by Richard Serra weighing a total of 750 tons.

Michael Govan, the director of the art center, recalled how he followed the factory watchman into the main printing hall, with its football-field breadth and acres of glass skylights facing north -- designed so the printers had the best light.

"When I walked in that door," Mr. Govan said, "my initial reaction was, if I were going to build a museum from scratch, I would build it just like this. Concrete and steel. Wood floors. Space between columns. Perfect light. A Metro-North train stop."

Dia's staff had been considering other buildings as far afield as North Adams, Mass., but nothing compared to this, he said, adding, "The whole thing was clear in one fell swoop."

But there were also buckets and drums brimming with water dripping from the roof, warped floorboards, broken windows, and walls shedding so many flakes of paint that they resemble a Jackson Pollock. Nonetheless, within a few days, Mr. Govan began praising the site to trustees and Dia's stable of artists. In the final deal, the building is being donated by the paper company. Most of the estimated \$20 million cost of transforming the 70-year-old structure into a museum will be paid through donations, with about \$2.8 million coming from state and local economic development and arts programs, Mr. Govan said.

Uphill from the factory at the east end of town, where antiques shops and bakeries have sprouted over the last few years, the museum was just about the only topic of conversation.

A few residents bemoaned the loss of about \$25,000 a year in property taxes from the 26-acre factory tract once it is owned by a nonprofit group. But many merchants echoed the views of Mayor Gould about the economic benefits.

Sheila Wicklow, a co-owner of the Little Pie Shop and the president of the Beacon Business Association, said the Dia center had shown a commitment to public schools in Manhattan. "Now, schools here will have this in their own backyard," she said.

At Beacon's other art institution, the Tallix Foundry, the staff said the museum would perfectly complement its work. As he wove his way through a crazy assemblage of giant and tiny bronzes of horses, heroes, frogs, eagles and abstractions, Peter S. Homestead, the president of Tallix, said museum visitors would also want to see the foundry.

"There, they can go and see the pieces hanging on the wall," he said. "Here, they can see them being made. It's a perfect fit."

For the moment, at least, the 540-foot-long printing plant, with stalks of milkweed sprouting from its foundation, remains a ghostly vestige of the past. It fell on hard times in the mid-1980's, when Nabisco merged with the R.J. Reynolds tobacco conglomerate to become RJR Nabisco and began trimming costs and sold the plant, former employees said. In 1991, the large bronze main doors closed forever. A few years later, the doors themselves were stolen.

Now, rail tracks come to a dead end at an empty loading dock. Clocks on different floors are stopped at different hours. In the high-ceilinged basement, echoes bounce cathedral-like through a forest of more than 100 soaring concrete columns. "This is where they used to teach you how to drive a forklift," said Arcangelo Formichelli, the factory's 63-year-old watchman, who ran printing presses there from 1957 to 1990.

Upstairs, he walked across the broad wooden floor of the cutting and creasing room, then pointed to the spot where women once put the little red strings on the boxes of Animal Crackers shaped like circus railroad cars. Near the workers' entrance, he paused by a row of lockers covered in peeling paint, saying, "This one was mine."

He said it was tough to watch a building that was so important to the community slide into disrepair. "This place bought me two houses and helped me raise six kids," he said.

He professed no familiarity with modern art, certainly not with the works of some of the artists in the Dia collection, like the earth-filled rooms of Walter De Maria.

But that did not matter, he said. "One way or the other," Mr. Formichelli said, "it'll be great to see this building open up again."