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Bronx merchants' artsy ambitions

Try to land arts council in hope it will bring foot traffic and buzz; aping Lincoln Center

by Hilary Potkewitz

Business and community leaders in the Bronx neighborhood of Westchester Square are trying to transform their down-at-the-heels town square into a nexus of art and commerce—and not a moment too soon.

A three-alarm fire destroyed six businesses on the square last spring, and a handful of empty storefronts attest to the community's struggles during the recession. Among them is a 5,000-square-foot space on Tremont Avenue that until last year housed a Washington Mutual branch.

So when the Bronx Council on the Arts started jockeying to acquire the building and relocate its headquarters there from nearby Morris Park, local merchants' ears perked up. To some businesspeople, the arrival of a nonprofit arts organization with just 20 employees might not seem like a huge boon to a commercial strip, but the Westchester Square Merchants Association is pulling out all the stops to land an artsy new neighbor.

"We are working on this wholeheartedly," says Greg Perry, owner of Crown Trophy on the square and president of the Merchants Association.

He predicts that the council will bring artists and performances to the space, which will boost foot traffic in the neighborhood. "We're trying to show everyone that we're building a foundation to give people a purpose for coming to the square."

The bank branch has a wall of windows on two sides, ideal for displaying art and other exhibits, notes Bronx Community Board 10 District Manager Kenneth Kearns.

"It occupies a prominent corner and could showcase the work of local artists and draw attention to the community," he says, comparing the space's potential impact to that produced by Lincoln Center on the West Side 40 years ago.

The arts group has already planned its outdoor festival in the area, called Fair at the Square, May 15. Last year's event drew over 500 people. Bronx Council on the Arts Managing Director Deirdre Scott says that based on wider participation in promotions by community partners, she expects this year's fair to draw more than 1,000 people.

Outgrowing its home

The Bronx Council on the Arts has been looking for a new headquarters for some time, having long ago outgrown its current facilities in Morris Park, where it's splintered into several buildings and has only about 2,500 square feet of space.



ROLLING ALONG: The Culture Trolley is one of several initiatives overseen by the arts council.

Photo: Leenda Bonilla

"We are running as fast as we can to try to secure this location," says Ms. Scott. "Our organization is going to be 50 years old in 2012, and we really want to grow a lot of the programs." The move is not a foregone conclusion, however. As a nonprofit, the arts organization doesn't have the deep pockets that the bank building's owner, JPMorgan Chase, would probably prefer. The bank initially wanted to complete a sale of the building by the end of 2009, but the organization appealed to local leaders such as Councilman James Vacca, Congressmen Joseph Crowley and José Serrano, and Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr. for help.

Mr. Vacca helped secure a grant of about \$630,000 from the City Council, enough for the down payment on the property, but that money is in the 2011 budget and won't be accessible until July. Mr. Crowley worked with bank officials to extend their deadline, and the council is in high gear to obtain all the approvals and schematics. The grant still requires City Council approval, though Mr. Vacca has said it's his top budget request for next year.

Acquiring the building is just the first step, however. Ms. Scott estimates that she'll need to invest about \$700,000 in renovations before it's ready for the council to move in. ■