

# Brooklyn Daily Eagle

## *Brooklyn Utopias?*

### **Artists Explore a 'Perfect' Borough At the Brooklyn Historical Society**

by Phoebe Neidl ([phoebe@brooklyneagle.net](mailto:phoebe@brooklyneagle.net)), published online 10-06-2009

#### **More Than 30 Contribute to Exhibit**

By Phoebe Neidl  
Brooklyn Daily Eagle

BROOKLYN -- What would an ideal Brooklyn look like? How should we utilize our limited space? For parks? For high-rises? Would those high-rises be luxury condos or affordable housing? How can Brooklyn face the challenge of sustainability?

How is a sense of community being preserved in "this borough of homes and churches," when churches are being torn down and people are getting priced out of their neighborhoods and homes?

It's questions such as these that arise from Brooklyn Utopias? an expansive new art exhibit that opened at the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) last week, with satellite shows at the Old Stone House and Starting Artists, a non-profit youth arts center.

More than 30 artists contributed to the exhibit, curated by artist Katherine Gressel through BHS's Public Perspectives program, which allows individuals and groups from the community to propose and carry out exhibit ideas.

"I got the idea based on all the changes that have taken place over the past few years in Brooklyn," said Gressel, who grew up in Manhattan but now makes her home in Prospect Heights. "I know artists have been responding to these changes, but I thought it would be great to bring those [artists] all together." The idea for the show also "sprung from how Brooklyn is being marketed by developers and real estate agents," explained Gressel.

The exhibit divides the artists' work into five categories: Political Utopias, Responses to Changes in the Built Environment, Dystopia, Preserving Community, and New Urban Planning Visions. Hanging alongside the artwork are relevant images and artifacts from the Brooklyn Historical Society's collection, such as a blueprint for the Riverside Houses, a housing complex built in the late 19th century by social visionary Alfred T. White. White's revolutionary approach to housing helped lift the working class out of dank, disease-ridden tenements and into sunlit apartments with access to healthy, green space.

"Connecting the past with the present is really at the heart of our mission here," says BHS's Janice Monger, adding, "This is definitely the most ambitious Public Perspectives exhibit we've had."

Photographers, painters and conceptual artists descended on BHS's Brooklyn Heights building in the days before the opening, some of them creating their pieces on site, like **Sonya Blesofsky** who meditated on the "fragility of our economic system" by piecing together a delicate, aluminum foil version of the steel trusses that make up the internal structure of buildings – a familiar feature of today's streetscape thanks to a recession marked by deserted construction projects.

Overdevelopment and the feared "Manhattanization" of Brooklyn were recurrent themes, and few things highlight the conflicting visions of Brooklyn's future better than the Barclay's Arena/Atlantic Yards project. Photographer Tracy Collins displays photos of the surrounding Prospect Heights neighborhood taken over the past five years, since the controversial project's inception. Contrasting with the images are quotes that the artist pulled from the developer's promotional literature: "A Garden of Eden grows in Brooklyn" and "Almost everything a well-equipped urban paradise must h

ave” -- a reminder of the hyperbolized and often-failed promises made by real estate developers. Photographer Paul Raphaelson’s images depict the borough’s empty lots and eroded warehouses, which many would consider to be the signs of a blighted area. “They are beautiful to me,” he writes...“and serve a similar purpose as rural wilderness.”

In another installation, artist Nicole Shulman plays with how our built environment interacts with the natural world. Her colorful, surrealist illustrations transform the iconic Brooklyn brownstone into something organic by giving it tree roots. Another of her images immerses the brownstone underwater, a reminder of the threat of global warming.

Eric Corriel’s piece “A History of Cycling in Brooklyn” looks at the relationship between cycling and the borough. Between sunset and sunrise, images of cyclists are being projected on three of BHS’s large windows facing Clinton Street. “It’s a nighttime piece,” Corriel explained. “People will be able to see the images when they are walking by outside...They’re like windows into history.”

“Cycling keeps getting recast in all these different lights,” he says. What started out as a “gigantic craze” and a “leisure activity with no utilitarian application” in the late 19th century has become one of the solutions to designing a more sustainable city. People are invited to log onto [www.brooklyncycling.com](http://www.brooklyncycling.com) where they can share images, video or text that might be incorporated into the piece.

Other participating artists include Lara Allen, Lindsay Blatt, Steven Cogle, Jill Corson, Amanda Curreri, Miranda Hellman, Jess Levey, Jake Messing, Robert Minervini, Michael Rippens, Eugene Tung, Vargas Suarez Universal and Marina Zamalin.

Brooklyn Utopias? will be on display through January 3, 2010. The Brooklyn Historical Society is at 128 Pierrepont St. [www.brooklynhistory.org](http://www.brooklynhistory.org). Starting Artists is at 211 Smith St. [www.startingartists.org](http://www.startingartists.org). The Old Stone House is on Fifth Avenue between Third and Fourth streets. [www.oldstonehouse.org](http://www.oldstonehouse.org). A roundtable discussion on the exhibit will take place at BHS on Sunday, Oct. 25, 2 – 4 p.m.