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# The Struggle to Preserve the Brooklyn Navy Yard

By [MARC SANTORA](#)

FOR three years, some of the most powerful forces in New York real estate — including the federal and city governments, developers, preservationists and community advocates — have fought over the fate of a cluster of historically significant turn-of-the-last-century houses known as [Admiral's Row](#) in the [Brooklyn Navy Yard](#).

Last month, the parties finally arrived at a compromise that seemed to strike a balance between preservation and development, in a \$60 million project that would add a large supermarket to an underserved neighborhood, while also salvaging some buildings of deep architectural and cultural significance.

But it now appears that those historic buildings may be in such precarious condition that they cannot be saved.

“This is one of the worst cases I have ever seen in terms of neglect,” said Alex Herrera, the director of the technical services center at the [New York Landmarks Conservancy](#). “It is a disgrace.”

For more than three decades, Admiral's Row, like much of the nearby industrial waterfront, was largely left to rot. Further complicating matters was the fact that even though much of the 300-acre site was turned over to [New York City](#) in 1966, 10 former officers' homes and a timber shed that was once used to repair masts of large sailing vessels remained under the control of the federal government.

For decades, both sites languished.

The roofs on some of the old naval officers' homes, built from 1864 to 1901, collapsed long ago as weeds and vines took up residence. Meanwhile the storied Navy Yard — where 11,000 Colonial patriots lost their lives aboard British prison ships during the Revolution; where the Union outfitted ships to battle the Confederacy; and where the Navy established its radio command center for the North Atlantic Fleet during World War II — became synonymous with corruption and urban blight.

“The Navy Yards really had a solid 30 years of public neglect,” said Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of [urban policy and planning at New York University](#).

That began to change in 2002 when Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) pledged \$250 million in city money to embark on the largest expansion of the yard since the 1940s.

Andrew H. Kimball, the president of the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation, which manages the yard, said that although his core mission was to bring jobs to the city, the corporation had worked hard to preserve the historical character of the yards.

“I don’t think you will find another industrial park in the country with a full-time archivist,” Mr. Kimball said. Contrasting the project with others in neighboring Dumbo and Williamsburg, where the shell of an industrial building is saved even as it is converted to luxury condominiums, Mr. Kimball said the corporation was interested in living preservation, in which function is maintained along with form.

He pointed to the \$31 million renovation of the 220,000-square-foot U-shaped factory built in 1899 and used as a machine shop in World War II as an example of repurposing a historical structure for a modern use. Unused for more than 50 years, it will become a green manufacturing center, creating hundreds of jobs in a growing industry, he said.

In all, some 40 preservation projects — including the creation of a public museum — costing more than \$200 million are under way or planned. There are now 5,000 people working in the yard, and the corporation’s profit from tenant rent has grown to \$7.7 million last year, from \$700,000 in 2001.

But for all the progress in the yard, Admiral’s Row has continued to crumble.

“This six-acre site has been by far the most complex development site I have had to deal with in my five years here,” Mr. Kimball said.

And now the delicate compromise, having been reached, is under threat. The federal government agreed to sell the city the land to develop as long as it met certain conditions. Because the timber shed and the homes on the site are eligible for placement on the [National Register of Historic Places](#), the government required that the shed and one of the homes be restored and useable. Last month, after protracted debate, negotiators accepted a proposal from PA Developers of [Manhattan](#) to build a supermarket — serving the 15,000 residents who live in three public housing projects

bordering the yards — along with new retail stores and an additional 125,000 square feet of industrial space.

But after the bid was accepted, Kristin Leahy, the cultural resources manager for the National Guard Bureau, the federal agency that controls the site, said engineers had found that the historic structures, particularly the timber shed, might be beyond repair. “We hired these engineers with tools to stabilize the buildings,” she said, “and that is when they came back and said we had a problem.”

One proposal at a subsequent meeting last month was to deconstruct the building and then incorporate the salvaged pieces into a new structure. But Mr. Herrera of the Landmarks Conservancy said that deconstruction was another word for demolition.

“What I don’t like is this attitude of ‘We can’t save it,’ without even really trying,” he said. “What we are really disappointed in is that during this whole process, nothing has been done to protect the buildings.”

Ms. Leahy said she could not explain why federal authorities had let the property basically decay for decades, except to cite confusion over issues of ownership and control.

Another analysis of the site by the National Guard Bureau, which still controls the site, should be complete in coming weeks, she said; all options will then be on the table again.

As Mr. Kimball explained, “This is the last, best hope to do something positive on this site.”