

## Red Hook, Revisited

IN 2005, SARAH JONES AND R. MACKSWELL SHERMAN MOVED FROM Olympia, Washington, to New York City. The couple launched their own clothing line in 2004, and in Sherman's words, they "blew up in Seattle in less than a year." For any ambitious fashion designer, New York City is the ultimate place to be, and since Jones and Sherman had gotten an invitation they couldn't turn down, they headed east. They relocated their business to a huge shared workspace on the Brooklyn waterfront, in a neighborhood called Red Hook. They'd soon be charmed by the 9,000 square foot space, located in a restored Civil War-era maritime shipping warehouse. Every day they'd look out onto cobblestone streets, glorious sunsets, tugboats and barges shuttling back and forth, and a clear view—the city's best, in fact—of the Statue of Liberty.

If anyone in the 1980s or '90s had told a Red Hook resident that two twenty-something white hipsters from the Pacific Northwest with greasy cropped mullets and oversized glasses would voluntarily relocate to the Beard Street Stores at the end of Van Brunt Street a decade or two later, they would have laughed in disbelief. Residents only knew the warehouses by the water, remnants of Red Hook's heyday as a maritime industrial center, as abandoned properties where trash carried by the wind piled up along barbed wire-topped fences.

Red Hook in the '90s was named the worst neighborhood in the country by *Life* magazine. The "crack capital of America," as *Life* called it, was home to rampant crime and unemployment and one of Brooklyn's largest housing projects, the Red Hook Houses. Despite its location, most residents were landlocked, since only employees of the few remaining industries could access the waterfront. Red Hook's poverty-stricken people of color residents were surrounded by shuttered storefronts and crime. They couldn't imagine their neighborhood would soon become desirable.

But this is not the typical story of New York City gentrification. This is different because Red Hook never went the way of hipster Williamsburg, of the Lower East Side, the Meatpacking District, or Chelsea (the list goes on). Jones and Sherman came in during a wave of

revitalization that was never fully realized; Red Hook feels somewhat like an unfinished project.

THE PENINSULA THAT BULGES OUT FROM THE NORTHWEST SIDE OF Brooklyn was a bustling nineteenth-century port, and New York's harbors rivaled other cities like Boston and Baltimore, some of the country's most populous cities at the time. From here, cargo was shipped to the rest of the East Coast and the world.

Red Hook is always several degrees colder and much more windy and blustery than other parts of Brooklyn because the neighborhood is surrounded by water on three sides: the Gowanus Bay to the south (which encloses the calmer waters of the North Atlantic Ocean), the Buttermilk Channel to the west (which runs between Brooklyn and Governor's Island), and the Gowanus Canal (now a polluted Superfund site) to the east.

A wealthy investor, William Beard, built the Van Brunt, Red Hook, and Beard Street Stores in the mid-1860s, a string of identical five-story brick warehouses with huge iron-shuttered doors like hundreds of eyes. On a man-made harbor where there used to be nothing but marshes and swamps, men hoisted bales of tobacco, sugar, cotton, hemp, cocoa beans, and coffee into storage spaces stretched out along the shores of the Erie Basin.

One illustration from this time shows a dozen or so smokestacks rising into the air from factories along the waterfront. This bustling activity lasted through the 1920s, when Brooklyn remained a major shipping port. In 1922, a massive silo was built so that grain coming through the Erie Canal could be stored for later use, often brewed into beer and distilled into other goods at New York City factories. The Red Hook Houses, the largest Projects in the borough to this day, were built in 1938 under the Works Progress Administration for the exploding ranks of dockworkers. During World War II, Red Hook's ship repair facility was the busiest in the New York port, and Robert Moses, the notorious urban planner, had a huge pool built for residents and their families.

A number of factors led to the demise of Red Hook, eventually leaving structures to disintegrate into the water or be paved over, leaving longshoremen jobless and desperate.

In 1946, Moses led the construction of the Gowanus Expressway, which literally severed Red Hook from the rest of Brooklyn. Only a limited number of roads were left to get in and out of the neighborhood because streets now dead-ended into the highway. The isolation was

exacerbated by the lack of subway service to the area, a reality that persists today.

In the 1960s, with the growth of container shipping, much of the transportation of goods moved to the waterfront areas of New Jersey where there was more open space and cheaper rent. New York's ports could no longer compete.

Unemployment in Red Hook rose to 30% and violence skyrocketed dramatically. Large swaths of Red Hook's former industrial land lay unused. It began to feel like a ghost town and developed a stigma to match. While formerly blighted brownstone communities like Carroll Gardens and Park Slope slowly repopulated in the decades to come, few dared to give Red Hook a chance.

From the 1950s on, immigrants started moving in, and with the new influx of people of color, Red Hook became segregated by race and class. Black and Latino populations concentrated in the public housing projects, and the remaining white homeowners, dockworkers, and limited number of business owners lived closer to the waterfront, "the Back" as it was called.

A few maritime businesses remained: a ship repair facility with a dwindling number of clients, the Domino Sugar refinery, and one small shipping port, the Red Hook Container Terminal.

The crack epidemic hit Red Hook hard. According to current and former residents of Red Hook Houses in a 2006 article in the *New York Times* by Jennifer Bleyer, in the late 1980s and early '90s, "...nightly, shootouts forced people in apartments to jump to the floor to dodge stray gunfire...vials of crack were sold out of an ice cream truck and neighborhood candy stores peddled drug paraphernalia." Tenants of the Houses had no job prospects and their kids had nowhere to play. While black residents had been getting killed for years in unsolved murders, public attention only turned to Red Hook's condition in 1992 when a white elementary school principal, Patrick Daly, was shot and killed in the Red Hook Houses while looking for one of his truant students.

It was only after the neighborhood hit bottom that a white, middle-class developer named Gregory O'Connell invested in Red Hook's real estate—unlikely, since the area doesn't have ornate brownstones but, rather, modest homes with vinyl siding. But he was betting on the commercial spaces and the potential draw of the waterfront.

A retired beat cop originally from a working-class family in Queens, O'Connell developed a philosophy about the way cities should and could work. He came to believe that in the heart of any good community, there

should be a reasonable mix of affordable housing, middle- and upper-class residences, and workspaces for industry and manufacturing. (He's been called a "socialist developer" and a "closet liberal," partly because he, unlike most of his colleagues, drives a silver pickup truck and wears boots and denim overalls, no suits.)

After retiring from the police force, he decided to get into real estate and wanted to buy in a community where he could really make a mark, turn things around, and help preserve blue-collar employment for the poorest sectors. In 1992, New York City's Port Authority finally decided to sell the crumbling and neglected Beard Street warehouse at the end of Van Brunt Street. O'Connell bought the 330,000 square foot space for \$500,000 and rehabilitated it into offices, warehouses, and spaces for manufacturing, having to clean out fifty-year-old garbage and debris. He worked with the Community Board to make sure the areas would not be zoned residential but commercial, because despite the prospects for earnings, he never wanted fancy high-rise condos on the Red Hook waterfront.

O'Connell kept those Civil War structures basically intact on the exterior, leaving five-story brick walls with the occasional star-shaped metal stud and rows of wide iron-arched doors on each floor. Many times he'd get a call about the listings from a potential renter; the other end of the line would go silent when he'd say where the property was located.

It took a while, but eventually artists in search of affordable rent bought in and settled into long-abandoned areas, much like in other parts of New York City. He sold spaces to people by telling them of the city's only full-frontal view of Miss Liberty, of the waterfront seagulls, and hoping they wouldn't mind the lack of train access or the high crime.

One person who became charmed by these contradictions was Robert Kalin, the young red-haired founder of Etsy, a multi-million dollar e-commerce company whose website allows individuals to sell handmade crafts and art. Kalin, who started Etsy at twenty-five with two friends, was the CEO of the famously successful company when he bought a house in Red Hook, his favorite Brooklyn neighborhood. In 2009, Kalin started a non-profit called Parachutes to encourage artisans and crafters to leave their day jobs and make art their full-time gig. Kalin dreamed of creating an incubator for artists to work together closely in order to make a living from selling their crafts.

It was O'Connell who provided heavily discounted space in the Beard Street Stores to make all this happen. What twenty-something green-eyed Kalin and sixty-something gray-haired O'Connell had in

common was not the Internet (O'Connell still doesn't use email), but a shared vision of job creation. Kalin wanted affordable studio space and O'Connell wanted renewed energy in Red Hook.

Kalin began inviting his favorite Etsy sellers to relocate, and Jones and Sherman were part of the first class. Their clothing line, Ruffeo Hearts Little Snotty, or RHLS for short, is an indecisive hipster's dream: small spandex triangles of every color sewn onto hoodies, body suits, and underwear. (A topless Sherman was recently featured in a magazine spread wearing one of his own designs: bright blue bike shorts with rays of lime green, pink, purple and orange shooting out of his crotch like a sunset.)

The Parachuters shared advice, machines, and supplies in a space way larger than anything they could have ever imagined inhabiting, thanks to O'Connell, their unlikely landlord. And they were initially charmed by the historic nineteenth-century structure they inhabited and with the views of a former industrial life they saw from its windows.

Indeed, at the waterfront end of any block, there was always something so untouched that they were inspired to believe that they were the first to see it since it fell to disuse: wooden piles poking out of the water like a bed of nails, rusted boat anchors, huge bolts, a steel beam with a shuttered business's name in cracking paint, or the mangled remains of what appeared to be an old fence. It felt like their businesses were restoring the waterfront to its original use.

Desira Pesta, a clothing designer and Parachutes member, recalls seeing two cars stopped in the middle of the road, the drivers talking through their windows and catching up. No one honked at them. That's when she knew Red Hook was a special place. She wanted it to stay this way, this slower pace of life in the middle of bustling New York City.

Other young newcomers followed and started living alongside the few remaining old-time longshoremen and having rooftop parties with million-dollar views. A small strip of Van Brunt Street west of the housing projects began gentrifying, and a few cutesy shops opened up, including a cupcake bakery, a coffee shop, a specialty whisky store, and an antique store.

In 2006, the *New York Times* ran an article about Red Hook with the headline "An Unlikely Paradise, Right Around the Corner" and *Time Out New York* declared "Red Hook Has Arrived." Rents shot up because of anticipated popularity. Pesta recalled thinking that it was going to be "crazy when all these businesses come in and all these houses get bought up." Capitalizing on this renewed interest, T.H.U.G. Angelz (Those

Humbled Under God), rappers affiliated with the Wu-Tang Clan, released *Welcome to Red Hook Houses*, a 2008 album paying homage to the housing projects' significance in the development of hip-hop.

Some residents and newcomers worried that it would develop too quickly and conspicuously and lose the feel of a small town. It could go the way of other New York neighborhoods, all big-box and chain stores, crowds of tourists, nowhere to park, no green space, no infrastructure to support an overdeveloped neighborhood. But, in Pesta's words, "It never really happened," at least not in that way. Despite the projections, some of the Van Brunt businesses began shuttering (The Hook, La Bouillabaisse, Le'Nells). No brand new high-rise buildings were built anywhere in the neighborhood.

When I walked down the hallway of the Parachutes space in 2010, it felt like a cabinet of curiosities, with some amazing craft of one kind or another being made behind wide windows or wooden stalls. There were cutouts of clothing patterns hanging on a wire rack, messenger bags made out of recycled boat sails, and at least fifty rolls of neon vinyl that the group salvaged from a nearby abandoned belt factory.

What I didn't immediately notice is that the old brick structures have zilch for insulation. Pesta said that the roof leaked constantly, that there were nights straight out of a Marx Brothers episode when all their supplies were soaked and they were running around with buckets. When it wasn't raining, it was freezing inside and they had to work in hats, coats, and gloves. "A comedy of errors," Pesta called it. (Gregory O'Connell Jr., who took over his father's business, told me in an email: "With these buildings, maintenance is an ongoing process...I believe we've succeeded in creating usable space without compromising the building's historic value.")

In fact, the space was unbearable in the summer as well, forcing the Parachuters to work while practically naked. Pesta continued feeling unsafe walking to the bus late at night after work, worrying she'd end up in a crime scene. The space was broken into a number of times. One member couldn't take it anymore and ditched despite the subsidized rent and other perks. Most tolerated it because there was no way they could get such a cheap and large space anywhere else in the city.

But after four years, Sherman and Jones decided that the real problem was *location, location, location*. By the time they—and many of the people they shared the workspace with—eventually moved their business out of Red Hook, they were disenchanted with the neighborhood. Red Hook was totally desolate, they said, it took an

hour to get to anywhere because of the limited transit options, and they could never get potential clients to come out when they told them their workspace was in Red Hook (wait, wasn't this the story ten years ago?). Pesta noted that the road behind the Beard Street Stores, right up the Gowanus Canal, kept slowly falling into the water. "All they had to do was put in some really basic structures and no one has done a thing. It's really sad, a beautiful old building and no one is taking care of it."

RHLS relocated to Greenpoint, a more solidly gentrified North Brooklyn Polish neighborhood, and was more successful in the first month at the Greenpoint space than in the entirety of the time in Red Hook. Publicity stunts, as Sherman calls them, are necessary to be visible and survive in the crowded market of New York City. No one ever paid attention to what they were doing in Red Hook.

And so Parachutes' first test run ended with only a few of the original participants continuing their business in New York City. The rest went home.

O'Connell Jr. tells me they are experiencing the highest vacancy rate of their Red Hook commercial spaces in recent memory. Is this a product of the recession or what a 2007 *New York Magazine* article, "The Embers of Gentrification" by Adam Sternbergh, called "the degentrification of Red Hook"?

One local real estate agent, Tina Fallon, rejects this "dead Hook" idea. Fallon says the "reverse gentrification" articles were written by people who never truly understood the neighborhood. Locals aren't disappointed that Red Hook isn't becoming more like Williamsburg—they knew that would never happen because of the lack of subway access. They've always wanted to preserve a laid-back atmosphere, she says, a working waterfront with local jobs, a more piecemeal development with manufacturers instead of housing on the water's edge, something that's unique in North Brooklyn.

A realtor's recent online posting for a vacant apartment in Red Hook read: "watch the boats go by in this quiet neighborhood that feels like a New England fishing village." From the end of Van Brunt Street, you can see the Staten Island Ferry, the New York Water Taxi, and the *Queen Mary 2* cruise ship. Wandering around Red Hook serves as a potent reminder that New York City is, in fact, a city of islands, especially since there are no tall buildings to shield from the wind that bites at any exposed skin.

But what about the promises of lifting the quality of life for the poor? A majority of Red Hook residents, according to recent census

data, live in the housing projects and in poverty, so that balance hasn't shifted. There is now an IKEA and a Fairway grocery store in Red Hook, which either positively employ locals or offer dead-end low-wage jobs that take away from the character of the area, depending on who you ask. There is also this weird internal tourism: New Yorkers come for the afternoon to get away ("it's like a day trip for those who can't afford to go upstate," says one employee of a fancy retailer on Van Brunt). It has "vacation town cachet" inside city limits, but it still feels adventurous because of the waterfront urban decay and empty lots with trash and overgrown vines. People seem to like it just the way it is.

A developer who has been trying to build a luxury condominium since 2005 accuses O'Connell of land-banking, of buying land and holding onto it until inflation means you can sell it for more than you initially paid. Is O'Connell purposely under-renovating his spaces and waiting for Red Hook to really take off, only to resell? His commitment to the community makes me think not. And anyway, there are no signs that it's poised to take off.

The businesses that have weathered the recession and harsh winds have tremendous local pride even as they've seen neighboring stores go out of business. Every hip place that remains on the main drag of Van Brunt Street has some maritime-themed name: Hope and Anchor (a diner), Erie Basin (a furniture shop), and Dry Dock (an upscale liquor store in a neighborhood that used to only have bulletproof bodegas). There are graffiti stencils of red anchors all over random walls and newspaper boxes.

On the waterfront edge of Louis Valentino Jr. Park, shores constantly licked by gray-green waves, there are dozens of moss-covered concrete cubes left behind from some unknown use. Someone painted them in primary colors to look like children's blocks that spell out R-E-D-H-O-O-K.

There is pride for what it is, not for what newspaper articles thought it was poised to become, and O'Connell and his family are fiercely loved and hated. To some, they are synonymous with the revitalization of the neighborhood; to others, the keepers of broken promises.

During one interview, a disenchanted Jones notices my wistfulness: "I guess isolated, dead, and quiet *is* the charm of Red Hook. Of course it's a magical place and I'd be sad to see it change, but you can't succeed with a business here." Charm isn't enough if you can get people to come but not to stay, if you can't sustain businesses and create jobs and improve the lot for the projects. Is it a moot point how charming it feels if it's not working?