



A Fragile Utopia: *Studios & Spaces at 111 First Street*

photographs by Edward Fausty

Cover: Antlers, Arturo Virtmanis/Baiba Baiba Studio, 2004

According to Arturo, the *post-it* note was placed on the point to prevent accidental eye injury.

A Fragile Utopia

A story about an address named **111 First Street** is for me irresistible. It is an address that represents all addresses. It is a center point, and like many mythical center points, it is a scene of conflict and of drama, pointing to primal and existential issues of territory.

The project began in 2001 when I started to imagine a time when the artists and small businesses at 111 First Street, formerly the Old Gold cigarette factory in Jersey City, would have to make way for occupants more like those in the surrounding downtown areas of Newport and Exchange Place, with their hotels, condos and corporate headquarters. The thought of this cycle coming to a close without somehow recording it was a painful one.

While not always pretty or comfortable, the lively and unpredictable 111 environment was precious in part for those very reasons; it was a bonafide community center without institutional trappings or bureaucracy, hosting thousands of visitors each year; a cheap place that offered complete freedom to nearly 200 artists, many of whom forsook the normal nine-to-five routine and the usual comforts of home. A living art museum with beautiful, if raw, gallery space, open working studios, and free admission, it was almost too good to be true. This was made more poignant as it disappeared, to the disappointment of residents and supporters who came not just from nearby New Jersey, but far and wide.

This work of snooping and photographing around studios and other parts of the 111 building (with permission, of course) was a way for me to contemplate a unique lifestyle; how creative people on a limited budget make their homes/studios from scratch in an industrial environment; how their work evolves behind the scenes; how the old industrial world looks next to the brave new world of prefab; all this with the spectre of possible eviction lurking.

After a protracted battle with a billionaire landlord, the last remaining artists agreed to vacate the building; but not before helping the community win, for the warehouse district, municipal historic protection and a redevelopment plan ensuring an arts district, while still allowing appropriate development; or so we thought. After our diaspora, the landlord managed to use his money, influence and team of lawyers to overturn much of what had been accomplished by concerned citizens and public officials. And now the survival of a real arts district is in doubt.

This saga is, of course, not unique to our building; battles like this occur in many communities between speculative absentee landowners/developers and the local citizens impacted by their projects. As a close observer of this scene, it is not my intention to indict. Rather, I would like more people to begin to think about these inevitable tensions and to find fair and productive ways of resolving them. Certainly people who own property have rights to develop it, and just as certainly communities have rights to try to manage their own destiny.

The images in this project were all made on medium format color film and then scanned and output, in my studio, onto beautiful Arches rag paper using pigmented digital inkjet technology. The prints come in two sizes: 23" square and the large 42"x48" size. This medium has been so satisfying as a way to appreciate not only the significance of what I witnessed, but its special beauty as well.

Edward Fausty, November 27, 2005

Artwork in the Community Gallery, 2003

This large space was cleared out by tenants in the early 1990's and used with permission of the landlord until 2004 when it began to leak profusely and was deemed off-limits by the landlord.

The community gallery was one of the very finest exhibition spaces I have seen. 5000 square feet of not-too-perfect space, not under institutional control, lit by high west windows and our own flood lights. It was a place where one could completely relax and enjoy art, music, and performances of all kinds.



Windows and Watertank Support, 2002

No two windows alike



Side by Side, 2002

The new Mac-Cali building, a 111 elevator tower, and ground zero glowing in the distance.

Some people could not imagine why others wanted to save buildings like 111 which feel heavy and old next to the luminous gleaming new structures. But with the right kind of renovation, these older buildings show off the care with which they were designed and constructed, as well as their finer materials. It is arguable that they can outlast many newer buildings.



Dog Sleeping, Eric Lowenstein/Sandra Malak Studio, 2004

The elegant dropped bedroom through the fire door was ingeniously and surreptitiously built into the adjacent studio, which was used only for storage by an absent tenant.



Creatures, Bill Rodwell Studio, 2004

Storage cabinets became for me a kind of living museum,
more fascinating because of the other objects left in context.



Madonna and Airplanes, 2004

One could find delightful personal inventions even in public areas. This arrangement was placed outside his studio by Shandor Hassan.



Bathroom Decor, 2005



Demolition of Water Closet, 2005

Many “things” happened under the guise of safety, but only when they were alarmingly disruptive to life in the building. This demolition took place outside my window. To photograph it without creating a stir I used a technique from wildlife photography that conceals the camera.



Marked for Destruction, 2005

As tenants left in hopes of a more normal existence, the newly vacant studios were marked for demolition. I couldn't help remembering the old testament story of the faithful's homes marked in lamb's blood to avoid a visit from the angel of death. Of course in this case the mark was a target.



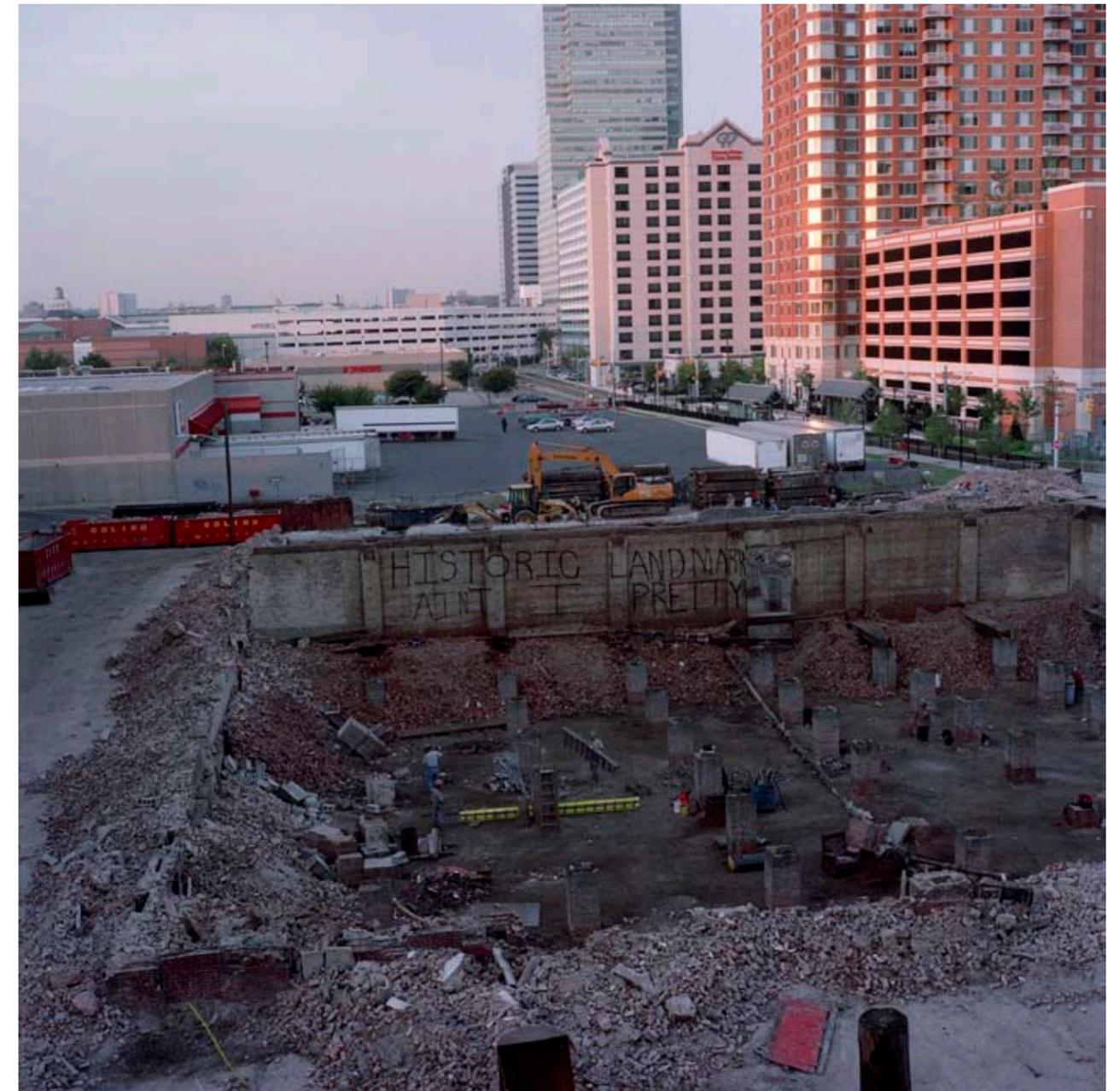
Toilet, Bath, 5th Floor, 2005

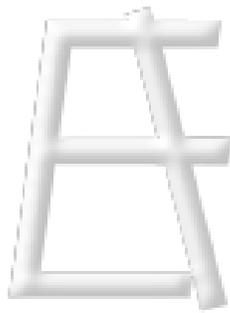
Although interior demolition created horrifying noise, dust and debris, it also resulted in fascinating vistas that tenants in ordinary buildings rarely witness.



Historic Landmark Ain't I Pretty, 2004

This graffiti, on the last remaining wall of 110 First across the street, had special distinction; I heard it was sponsored by the owner's agent, rather than young vagabonds, as a response to efforts by the community to preserve Jersey City's warehouse district. Historic designation, usually seen as an appreciation of the value of property, seemed especially threatening to this landlord and would-be developer of both properties.





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