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A High-Tech Home for Multimillion-Dollar Works of Art

By [DIANE CARDWELL](#)

Over the decades, Red Hook, Brooklyn, has been home to many things: a brawny, corrupt waterfront; free-range prostitution; a sprawling housing project once pocked by drugs and gunfire; artists seeking space and the hunters of cool who inevitably follow them.

Now the neighborhood is about to land one of its odder residents — an enormous, high-tech warehouse with security worthy of James Bond, all to protect the multimillion-dollar artworks, manuscripts, furniture and even rare cars that [Christie's](#), the upscale auction house, plans to store on the docks.

The pearl-gray colossus, one of two former New York Dock Company loft buildings, is not much to look at now, housing piles of dust and detritus as it looms over the weeds and gritty businesses of Imlay Street. But come January, Christie's executives say, the building will boast infrared video cameras, biometric readers and motion-activated monitors, as well as smoke-, heat- and water-detection systems.

Inside, the warehouse will hold the likes of [van Gogh](#), [Monet](#), [Picasso](#) and Brancusi, with each collection potentially worth more than the building itself.

"It's not residential, it's industrial, it's quiet, it can be very secure and we liked the location very near the city," Joe Stasko, the international managing director for Christie's Fine Art Storage Services, said of the property, for which the company has signed a lease for 30 years. "We're looking at this as a long-term investment and as a long-term service that we provide to our clients."

Christie's has operated a fine-art storage business in London for 25 years, but is expanding its facilities to Singapore and New York as demand for holding space has grown among collectors and dealers around the globe. The company is looking to expand further, Mr. Stasko said, and is scouting additional properties in the United States, Europe and Asia.

The Red Hook warehouse, with its concrete-and-steel structure and 250,000 square feet spread over six stories, is ideal for creating customized, air-purified, climate- and humidity-controlled storage units and private viewing galleries, Mr. Stasko said, adding that its location near a cruise ship port makes it a convenient and known taxi destination for clients.

But for all the high-toned gloss of, say, a \$140 million Pollock drip painting or a \$100 million diamond-studded platinum skull coming to an area that once funneled grain, sugar, coffee and cotton to points near and far, the Christie's move to the mangy waterfront does not represent another nail in the coffin of urban industry.

Instead, it comes as an arts-based manufacturing center is emerging just three miles away.

At the [Brooklyn Navy Yard](#), a company called Surroundart is adding a new building, and will ultimately have almost 20 times the space of its original 8,000-square-foot operation. The company, which works with museums, galleries and private collectors, not only stores art but also makes specialized shipping crates for it and offers transportation and consulting services.

"This is 21st-century manufacturing," said Andrew H. Kimball, president of the Navy Yard, where other creative businesses have clustered, drawing workers from the surrounding areas in an artier replay of last century's blue-collar pattern. "It's smart industry that's growing," he added, as developers figure out "how we adaptively reuse big multistory industrial buildings."

In the case of the big multistory industrial buildings at 160 and 62 Imlay Street, the developer Bruce B. Federman originally bought them in 2000 and 2002 for about \$22 million altogether.

One of the largest commercial and industrial landlords in the city, Mr. Federman planned to capitalize on the proximity to Lower Manhattan and spectacular views across New York Harbor by converting the industrial lofts to high-end apartments. He moved first on 160 Imlay, winning a variance in 2003 from the Board of Standards and Appeals to change the use from manufacturing to residential.

Construction, however, was delayed by a lawsuit from the Red Hook-Gowanus Chamber of Commerce, which sought to preserve the site's industrial use.

By the time Mr. Federman won the right to proceed in 2007, he said, the residential market was already questionable, so he postponed the project and turned his attention to 62 Imlay, deciding a long-term commercial tenant would make more sense. Now that he has signed the lease with Christie's, he said, he would consider a similar arrangement for 160, which had already been gutted and shrouded in black netting in anticipation of expensive residences to come.

Instead, the site will play host to whatever expensive objects the well-heeled clients of Christie's decide to store there, along with what Mr. Federman lures to its sibling building. That could be a [charter school](#), back offices and record storage for a law firm or some sort of industrial distribution center, he said.

"I still think it will be a fantastic residential conversion, but with the economic climate being what it is today," Mr. Federman said, "it may make sense to do a Christie's-like commercial deal and treat it as a bond — you, know, put it away for 30 years, let my children see what's happening 30 years from now."

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