



Susan Doban combines her passion for the waterfront and urban downtowns in her practice

September 21, 2007 - Spotlights

Growing up along the New England coast, architect Susan Doban became fascinated with the multiple uses of the waterfront, and particularly the places where those uses meet each other.

Her interest led her to choose American urban waterfronts as the subject of the Kinne Traveling Fellowship which she received upon earning her Master of Architecture Degree from Columbia University in the early 1980s. The award enabled her to travel to waterfronts in Chicago, Milwaukee, Seattle, and Long Beach, Calif., and explore the spaces where downtown commercial districts meet the working waterfronts of the Great Lakes and West Coast.

Today, as founder and president of Susan Doban Architect, PC, Doban has had the opportunity to combine her passion for the waterfront with her passion for urban downtowns in her architectural practice.

"I spent the early years of my life growing up on the water—across from the landing runway of Boston's Logan Airport," said Doban. "Later I lived near an actual beach. The waterfront and its rhythms and different uses were always in my mind. But, more often than not in urban areas, even those surrounded by water such as New York City, to go about one's daily business and not even sense the closeness of the waterfront."

Doban considers herself fortunate to be involved with two recent projects on the Brooklyn waterfront.

Her firm designed 45 residential units and live-work lofts in a five-story, 230,000 s/f Civil War era coffee and cotton warehouse in Red Hook, which was once a loud and bustling port where thousands of longshoremen crowded onto the piers to unload cargo from ships anchored in New York Harbor.

The design for the Red Hook Stores warehouse preserves and even recycles the building's original material and features multiple uses including a supermarket on the ground floor and a co-generation plant. The firm also designed the site plan for the entire complex, which boasts fabulous views of the Statue of Liberty, the skyline of Manhattan, and sunsets over New York Harbor. The Red Hook project received the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce's Building Brooklyn Award for Design and Economic Impact, and the Municipal Art Society of New York's Masterwork Award for Best Neighborhood Catalyst, an award that recognizes a new or a newly restored building that is spurring revitalization in the surrounding neighborhood.

"There are some major lessons to be learned from successful waterfront's edge development," she pointed out. "Uses which are seemingly at odds with one another, such as a grocery store and a beautiful view, can create linkages between the residential city and the raw edge of the waterfront—all taken in as part of the weekly shopping excursion."

Another project called upon the architectural firm to revitalize 12 blocks of Emmons Avenue along the Sheepshead Bay inlet in Brooklyn, which in the 19th century attracted tourists seeking seaside

hotels, restaurants, casinos, and horse racing.

The project features stainless steel fish medallions, one for each of twelve existing fishing piers, cast in the new ornamental concrete sidewalk, and each depicting a different fish typically found in the waters of Sheepshead Bay, including the Sheepshead, after which the body of water is named. The improvements were designed to enhance the corridor as a recreational destination featuring restaurants, boating excursions and fishing.

The medallions are unique to the locale, and provide an educational opportunity as well for those visiting the area. It is also an expression of Doban's appreciation of the waterfront, who says her favorite medallion is the Sea Robin because of the memories she has finding the rather elaborate and endearingly homely fish at the beach as a child.

"The challenge of relating commercial or residential districts to the waterfront is similar to the challenge we face when one distinct urban area meets another with a separate and unique character," said Doban. "It's important to enable each district to maintain not only its identity and vitality, but to provide linkages, both visual and actual, between them, to weave these components into a whole fabric. Sometimes it's something unexpected, such as a large stainless steel fish or a grocery store on the water, but it gets people to go to a part of the city they otherwise might not visit."

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