

RED HOOK

Sailing Into History

EVEN though it is big enough to contain a battleship, Graving Dock No. 1 has long been one of Brooklyn's best-kept secrets. If you drive down Beard Street in Red Hook, all you see is a line of old brick warehouses. But on the other side, hidden away on the waterfront, lies a 710-foot-long concrete and steel basin originally dug out at the end of the Civil War.

Though the dock is on the site of the defunct Todd Shipyards, it is far more than just a historical curiosity. The dock has been an essential part of New York Harbor for 139 years. Ships floated in, a gate was closed, and the water was pumped out, leaving the hulls dry for painting or repair. (Some say the name refers to the resemblance to a grave; others point to the French word "grève," for a flat sandy beach where ships would have been worked on before dry docks were developed.)

The dock has seen boom times when thousands of longshoremen, shipbuilders and sailors roamed the Red Hook streets, and the neighborhood was full of theaters, markets, clothing stores and bars.

And it has seen bad times. During the 1960's, much of the harbor's shipping moved to New Jersey. Hundreds of local workers lost their jobs, many businesses closed and the population dwindled. In the 70's and 80's, drugs and crime further battered a reeling neighborhood. Yet the dock lived on. For the past eight years it was operated by Stevens Technical Services, a company that kept hundreds of skilled maritime workers paid.

Hard times couldn't kill the graving dock, but now prosperity might finally lay it to rest. The old survivor was closed in February, after Stevens's last lease expired. The Swedish home furnishings chain Ikea, which hopes to open a megastore on the waterfront in 2007, plans to fill in most of the dock and build a parking lot. (Joni Mitchell fans take note.) To begin the demolition, Ikea needs to obtain permits from the Army Corps of Engineers and the State Department of Environmental Conservation.

In a move to protect the structure, a coalition of 11 preservation and maritime groups called Save the Graving Dock has come together over the past year. The organization says it does not oppose the store, but it contends that the dock has historic significance and is crucial to the harbor's future, especially since only two other comparable docks exist in the New York region. In January, the Preservation League of New York State included the dock on its "Seven to Save" list of threatened structures.

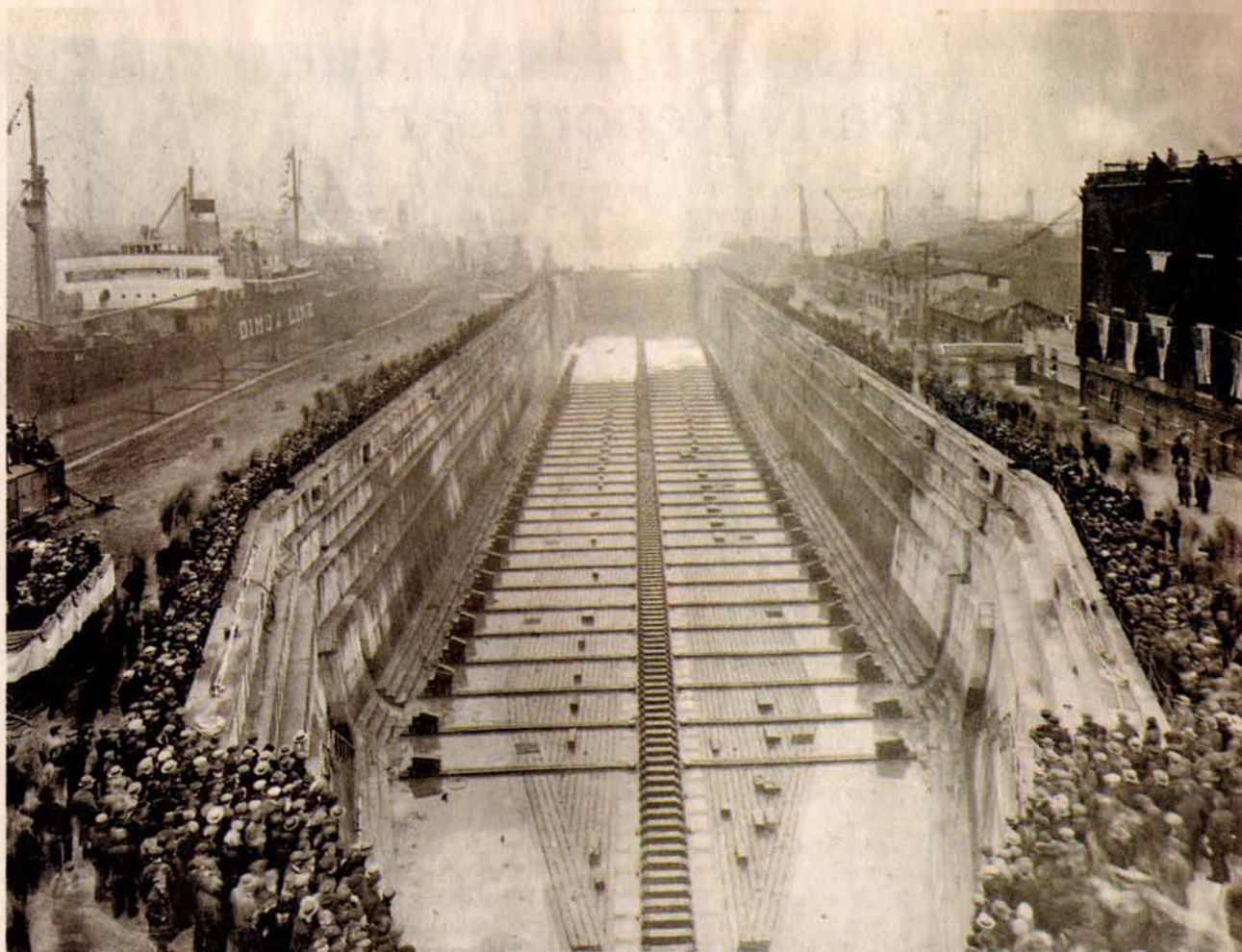
In February, Harold Fredenburgh, an architect commissioned by the Municipal Art Society, publicly presented two alternative designs that would provide the same amount of parking, yet also rescue the dock.

Kent Barwick, the society's president, hoped the company would consider them. "Ikea is from a nation that understands the value of maritime life," Mr. Barwick said, "and they have a reputation as a company that values preservation and the environment. They could still be a hero to Brooklyn."

When asked about the designs last month, Joseph Roth, an Ikea spokesman, described them as "not feasible" because the company's proposal had been approved last October through the city's Uniform Land Use Review Process, and any changes would require a new round of approvals.

Under the company's current plans, Ikea would build a 6.3-acre public waterfront area with trees, an esplanade, seating and access to a long pier, and would preserve four historic loading cranes. It also plans to preserve 20 percent of the graving dock as what it calls a "water feature," and outline the rest on the parking lot with paving or landscaping.

In the eyes of some activists, this would not be sufficient. "We don't think that's an adequate means of historic preservation," Mr. Barwick said. And in the opinion of Lisa Kersavage, a Municipal Art Society staff member, the company's plan for preserving the dock would be "reminiscent of the chalk outline around a corpse." **GABRIEL COHEN**



Brooklyn Historical Society, about 1930

Great ships once sat high and dry in Graving Dock No. 1, now poised to become a parking lot.