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From Weeds and Bricks to Media Hub in Brooklyn

By Julie Satow



A fireplace in the hospital. The building, which closed in the 1960s, and eight others are to be included in construction of a media campus. Ozler Muhammad/The New York Times

Hidden behind weeds and broken bricks, amid the hum of traffic from the nearby Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, lie 20 acres of abandoned grassy hills, crumbling Greek Revival mansions and Second Empire structures that few New Yorkers have ever seen.

There is the home of Dr. E. R. Squibb, who built the first still for making pure anesthetic ether, and a grand naval hospital with antebellum staircases and soaring windows, where Confederate soldiers were reportedly imprisoned during the [Civil War](#). There is a tennis court, barely visible through vines, with a sign warning users to wear proper attire, and a laboratory, an officers' club and even a morgue.

After decades of neglect, this hidden corner of the 300-acre Brooklyn Navy Yard, known as the Naval Annex Historic Campus, may be ready for a long overdue makeover.

The nonprofit [Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation](#) and a private developer, [Douglas C. Steiner](#), have reached an agreement, contingent on city, state and federal financing, to convert the hospital complex into a media, technology and film hub. Mr. Steiner, who owns the adjacent [Steiner Studios](#) movie and television production center, would connect the site to his property to create a 50-acre lot to be called a media campus. The project, which would cost nearly \$400 million and take 12 years to build, would use the nine historical buildings on the site and create five new structures for a total of 328,000 square feet, housing media companies and academic

programs. There would also be 100,000 square feet of new stages for film and TV, including the first underwater stage in the country and the first back lot on the East Coast to feature a New York City streetscape.

The developers estimate that the project will create 2,500 direct jobs, many of which would be high-paying union positions; 1,500 indirect jobs from ancillary services like carpentry and dry cleaning, and 2,600 construction jobs. When completed, the 50-acre media campus would employ some 6,000 New Yorkers, its backers say.

Mr. Steiner, whose Steiner Studios is the Navy Yard's largest tenant, has, since it opened in 2004, committed \$185 million to build and expand it. He has agreed to commit just shy of \$346 million for the hospital complex. He would be responsible for shoring up the historical buildings, erecting the new structures and finding the tenants.

To make the plan viable and to build out the site's infrastructure, including water, sewers and electricity, the developers are seeking \$35 million from New York State and New York City and \$2.5 million from the federal government.

Over the years, the site has been the focus of a series of failed proposals, most recently as a possible location for the city's applied sciences campus, which eventually went to Roosevelt Island. But the developers say they are hopeful that this project will have more traction.

Andrew H. Kimball, president and chief executive of the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation, said: "This is a very unique and special part of the yard, and we have wanted to be careful, as the stewards, that we really have the right plan for it. And this time we feel like we do."

There is growing demand for office space from technology and new media industries here, as well as the entertainment industry — 23 prime-time television shows are based in New York City, compared with 7 in 2002, according to the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment. In addition, Mr. Kimball said, "We have the right geography — this is the only place in the city where you could do a 50-acre media campus of this kind, and we have the right mayor and governor who recognize that this will create the kinds of 21st century jobs that are critical to the city's economy."

The public financing is an important piece of the project: Last month the developers applied to the Empire State Development Corporation's Regional Council for \$17.5 million. It is petitioning the city for an equal amount, and expects feedback on the proposal in the fall.

Mr. Steiner serves on the board of the Regional Council, but has recused himself from the matter; another member of the Council, who insisted on anonymity because of the competitive nature of the process, said there was a good chance the hospital complex would receive the necessary financing.

Julie Wood, a spokeswoman for Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, said, "The Brooklyn Navy Yard is an economic success story if there ever was one, and we are very proud that our investments

there have yielded high-quality jobs in some of our fastest-growing industries, like film and TV production.”

“The medical campus,” she added, “has long represented a prime opportunity for development and we’re very excited about the potential of this project.”

The 60,000-square-foot Greek Revival hospital, built in 1838 from Tuckahoe marble that may, according to the Navy Yard’s museum, have been quarried by prisoners from Sing Sing, would be the campus’s centerpiece. “My dream is to have an anchor tenant like Google or Apple,” said Mr. Steiner, who also envisions turning some of the smaller buildings on the site into writing bungalows that could be leased by production companies, producers and directors.

Mr. Steiner is also proposing several academic buildings at the site. Long Island University’s graduate screenwriting program has a location at Steiner Studios, and Mr. Steiner is currently building a center for the Brooklyn College Graduate School of Cinema.

In addition, Mr. Steiner is hoping to build a Hollywood-style back lot, where filmmakers could recreate quintessential New York locations, like Chinatown in Manhattan or the interior of a subway station, that are otherwise hard to capture on film. The hope is that the back lot would not only spur more film production but also become a draw for tourists.

“There is no reason we couldn’t see this become a stop for the double-decker tourist buses, with tourists coming to take photos and get a glimpse of a star,” Mr. Kimball said.



Oriar Muhammad/The New York Times

The 60,000-square-foot Greek Revival hospital, which was built in 1838, was said to have held captured Confederate soldiers.



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

The naval hospital had antebellum staircases and soaring windows. The complex includes the home of Dr. E. R. Squibb.



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

Douglas C. Steiner, right, owner of Steiner Studios, and Andrew H. Kimball, president of the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation.



SteinerNYC

A rendering of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The section at the top, with trees, includes the hospital.