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Stalled NYC construction sites

repurposed with gardens, temporary stores

By ASSOCIATED PRESS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
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((AP Photo/Richard Drew))

A remnant of the Great Recession is hiding behind a paint-splattered wall in Chinatown, in an empty lot where a building was supposed to rise into the sky.

The plywood barely conceals the mess behind it: a pile of cement blocks and tangled metal and empty bottles of beer. It is, in short, exactly the sort of place that draws the ire of Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer.



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"There's a lot of bad things that happen in stalled construction sites," says Stringer, whose office issued a report earlier this year cataloguing the more than 600 stalled sites that are scattered throughout New York City. "Especially if everybody sort of ignores the site and lets it grow in a very unpleasing way."

Instead of allowing these lots to become eyesores, some developers are coming up with creative ways to use them temporarily until construction can begin. Grow vegetables in milk crates? Sure. Sell doughnuts out of a shipping container? In New York City, where open space is a precious commodity, just about anything goes.

In a lot near the East River, an urban farm sprouted last summer on the spot where the construction of a life science park is in limbo. At roughly 15,000 square feet, it's a patch of green in the shadow of the

tower next door.

"We thought, we have this bald site here, this plot of land in the middle of New York," said Scarlet Shore, executive director of corporate strategy for Alexandria Real Estate Equities, Inc. "Why don't we figure out how to make it productive?"

The original design for the project called for two towers that would house office space for commercial life science companies. Work began on both towers in 2007, and the East Tower was completed. But after Lehman Brothers collapsed in 2008, Alexandria, the developer, decided to halt construction on the West Tower. Now the company is taking a wait-and-see approach amid continued economic uncertainty.

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Soon the place was a maze of milk crates lined with landscaping fabric and soil. Riverpark Farm, which officially opened on Sept. 13, isn't just a bright spot for neighborhood residents in need of greenery. It also supplies fresh produce for Riverpark restaurant, which is located next door in the East Tower.

Zach Pickens, the farm manager, likes to watch people do a double-take when they walk along the low wooden wall that separates the farm from the street.



"They'll look in the first window and they'll be like, 'Oh my gosh, there's plants growing in there,'" he said.

The crops are being covered in plastic as colder weather moves in, but the farm will continue to grow vegetables like spinach, carrots and beets.

The developer charges no rent for the farm project. It's unclear when construction will begin on the West Tower, but when that does happen, the goal is to transport the moveable farm to a new location.

Developers say the beauty of these sites lies in their easy portability. And it doesn't get much more portable than the shops at downtown Brooklyn's DeKalb Market, which have been fashioned out of giant,

colorful shipping containers of the variety carried on cargo ships. The market is situated on a city-owned plot of land that will eventually become a massive mixed-use retail development.

The containers have been transformed into tiny stores that can only squeeze in a few customers at a time, and they're selling everything from wool hats to antique mirrors to hot dogs. The vendors pay rent to Urban Space, a specialty retail market developer that manages the market.



3rd Ward's Shopbox store at DeKalb Market (Liz Clayman)

"In the beginning it was very confusing for people, because they didn't understand whether they were coming to a construction site or

whether they were coming to get food," said Vincent Taylor, manager of Cuzin's Duzin, a doughnut shop at the market. "It's probably the coolest place we've ever worked out of."

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In order to spur more creative development, Stringer wants the city to create new zoning laws that would loosen the current restrictions at construction sites and help developers finance new projects. The fact that these sites are only temporary creates a host of legal hurdles for developers, he says.

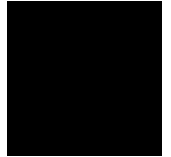
Stringer wants to emulate cities that have led the way in transforming stalled construction sites. In Seattle, city officials are actively working with developers and neighborhoods to adopt new public projects.

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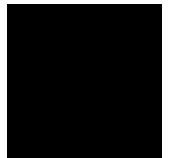
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The city is also trying to make use of the sites in other ways, such as a program introduced by City Council Speaker Christine Quinn that turns them into affordable housing units.

"The bottom line is that even as the economy improves, we're still going to be stuck with some stalled development that doesn't actually work with the community," Stringer said.

Carlos Little, a landscape architect and artist, is running his art studio and a gallery space in a stalled construction site on Leroy Street near the West Side Highway. The building is set to be demolished to make way for a residential building on the lot and a parking lot next door.

Little says it's a mutually beneficial situation, since he is able to keep an eye on the building and notify the owner when there's a burst pipe or a fire hazard. And in turn, he says, the building has become his muse

— a pedestal of sorts for his artwork. He even uses materials from the building itself in his sculptures.

"The point is about today," he said. "Today I'm right here and I can deal with the fact that tomorrow it can go away. It helps maintain the creative cycle of creating something and destroying something."

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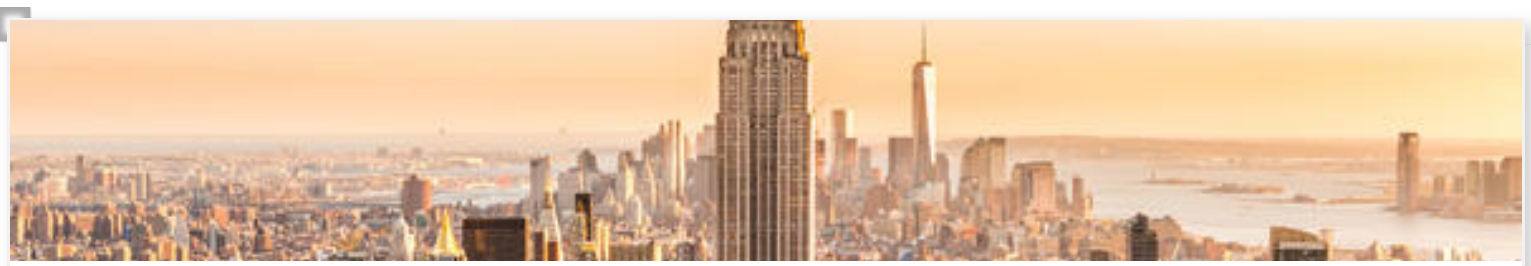
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