

Keith Bedford for The New York Times

The Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge, a 91-year-old covered deckhouse barge, has become one of the city's stranger cultural havens.

A Return to Its Maritime Roots

After Years of Damage by Marine Borers, Brooklyn's Floating Museum Reopens

By RANDY KENNEDY

Usually, when a New York museum has to close for renovations, the doors never really close. The Museum of Modern Art bought a temporary home in Queens during its recent rebuilding. The New Museum of Contemporary Art, currently between locations, is bunking with another museum in Chelsea during the move.

But when the tiny Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge in Brooklyn announced three years ago that it needed to make some major

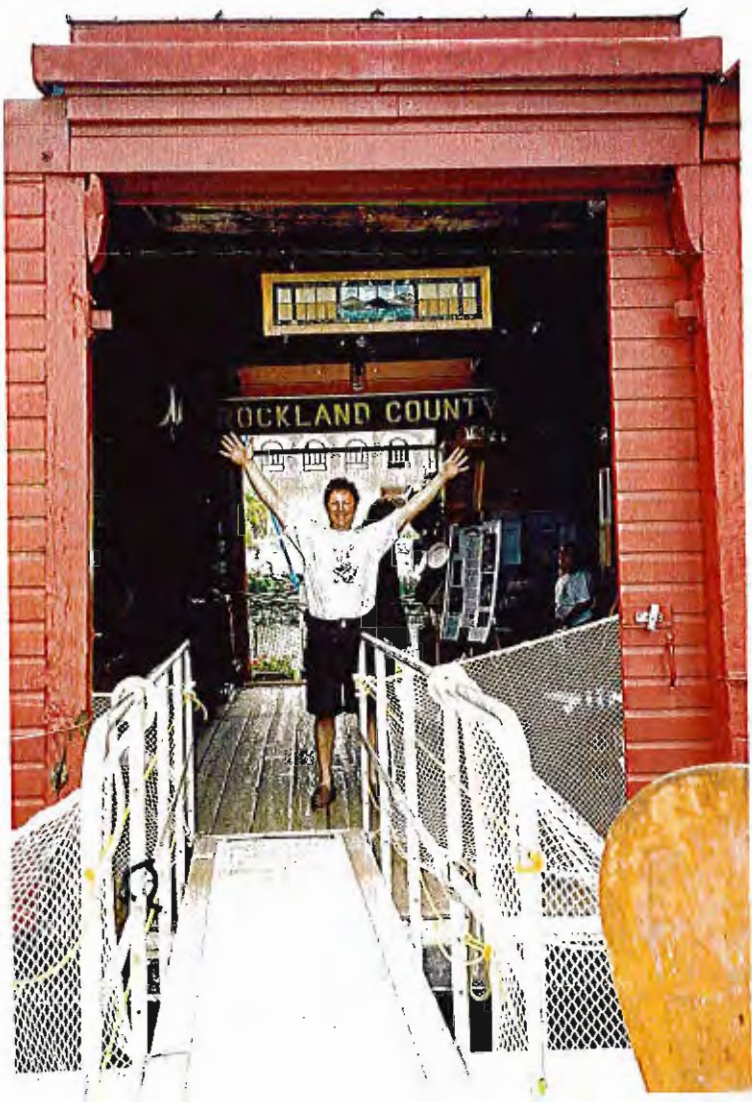
capital improvements, the news was received in its neighborhood, along the mangy Red Hook waterfront, with the trepidation that usually accompanies a renovation sign on the door of a favorite restaurant. (Standard translation: We're never really coming back.)

In the case of the Waterfront Museum, the situation was dire for two reasons. First, the museum's chief exhibit, besides its eccentric owner, David Sharps, and the superior views it offers of the Statue of Liberty, has always been itself: a 91-year-old covered deckhouse barge, built of longleaf yellow pine, that began its life plying New York harbor with cargo like dates, nuts and olive oil and has ended it as one of the

city's stranger cultural havens, a home for performance art, indie music, circus history and maritime lore.

The second reason for worry was why the Waterfront Museum needed renovations. Not because of trustee dissatisfaction or the addition of an espresso bar, but because of something called a gribble and another something thing called a shipworm. The first, a tiny crustacean also known as *Limnoria lignorum*, and the second, which is not a worm at all but a tiny mollusk also known as a teredo or a calcified teredo, have returned in force to New York Har-

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Frank Zimmerman

The rehabilitation for the museum cost more than \$200,000.

Brooklyn's Floating Museum Is Back to Its Maritime Roots

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bor along with cleaner water and have been gnawing away at anything made of wood.

"They were all having a great time in my hull — aunts, uncles, cousins, everyone was there," said Mr. Sharps, a former full-time clown and juggler who began his career working on Carnival cruise ships. "Once you get them, you're pretty much sunk."

But Mr. Sharps would not give up that easily. And early this summer, dispelling rumors that the barge had indeed foundered or had abandoned Red Hook for prettier ports, it returned to its old neighborhood and reopened its doors, to the relief of its fans. "Red Hook is really a small community, almost like a village," said Craig Hammerman, the district manager of Community Board 6. "And ever since that barge dotted our shore it's really been a center for civic life in the community."

During its absence, the barge spent 100 days in a dry dock in Waterford, N.Y., where its hull, in places resembling waterlogged Swiss cheese, was painstakingly restored and covered in a thick plastic to protect it from the marine borers. The rehabilitation cost more than \$200,000, which Mr. Sharps worked for four years to raise through grants, gifts and special events. But then, only two weeks before the barge was to have returned to its old concrete pier at the foot of Conover Street in late 2002, the pier crumbled into the water.

"The old lady was all fixed up and nowhere to go," Mr. Sharps said.

For many months, the barge had to put up at another Red Hook pier in the shadow of a defunct grain elevator, but the location — far from ideal

for public visits — forced Mr. Sharps to cancel many of his music nights and circus events for children. Finally, last month, it reopened at a newly refurbished pier a few hundred feet from its longtime home. "We basically had our doors closed for two years," he said. "People are really happy to see us back."

On a recent weekend visit, the barge, with both its barnlike doors thrown open, was rocking gently in the lapping water. Mr. Sharps, 48, whose face seems to bear the vestiges of years of clown makeup even when he isn't wearing any, proudly showed visitors around, pointing out some of the museum's new exhibits, hung like paintings: two chunks of elaborately chewed wood that once resided at the bottom of the boat.

The museum's permanent collection also includes odds and ends such as braided nautical rope works that were once functional but now dangle from the ceiling like conceptual sculpture; a framed letter from Pète Seeger; a flop-eared rabbit named Dewey who wanders around the barge floor chewing things; a huge, wiry Rube Goldberg machine designed by the sculptor George Rhoads that dominates one end of the barge; a genuine Coney Island beach chair, complete with sun hood, and ancient graffiti scribbled in chalk on the wooden walls by barge workers who apparently once hated a domineering dock worker named Chris the Swede.

"All Swedes use funnels instead of shot glasses," announces the oddly restrained hate mail from the harbor's past.

Mr. Sharps said that if he was lucky, his new hull would extend the life of his little museum for 20 years or more, and it will never have to abandon Red Hook again.

"This is a really powerful spot," he said, pointing out the door and motioning to a visitor to watch as a tern dive-bombed a fish in the harbor and flew away with it. "What other museum can give you something like that?"

The Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge, 290 Conover Street, at Pier 44, Red Hook. Tour and event schedules: (718) 624-4719 or waterfrontmuseum.org.