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## Real Estate

### Streetscapes/Robert Gair, Dumbo and Brooklyn; Neighborhood's Past Incised in Its Facades

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THE once-desolate Belgian-block paved streets of Dumbo attract many tourists and residents these days, drawn to the Brooklyn neighborhood's mix of up market stores, utilitarian streetscapes, renovated factories and new buildings. For visitors who have the time and inclination to notice, remembrances of the industrial past of the area between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges are incised in the old factories' distinctive concrete facades: "Robert Gair Company," "Gair Building No. 6," "Gair Building."

They are the remaining legible traces of the paper-box empire of the Scottish-born immigrant who created the framework of what is now one of New York's newer destination spots.

After serving in the Civil War, Gair opened a paper factory on Reade Street in Manhattan. In 1879, he developed a technique for the mass production of cardboard boxes that brought him great wealth. Searching in the late 1880's for a new location with better access to shipping, he settled on the little waterfront area north of the new Brooklyn Bridge and completed his first Brooklyn factory, the brick building on the west side of Washington Street, from Water to Plymouth Streets.

A forthright industrial-style structure, it was designed by William Higginson, with the usual brick walls and wooden floor beams. Gair's second building, similar to the first, soon followed on Adams Street near Washington Street. Accounts of Gair and his company portray him as the typical upright industrious man. An ad he placed in The Brooklyn Eagle of 1890 reads "Wanted -- In Office, Bright Boy; good penman; must reside with parents. Apply to Robert Gair, Washington and Water Streets."

Around 1904, Gair met the engineers DeForest H. Dixon and Henry C. Turner, who had just formed the Turner Construction Company and saw possibilities in the use of concrete. They persuaded Gair and Higginson to adopt the new system for what was identified as Gair Building No. 3, at John and Gold Streets. The concrete proved successful, and Gair eventually built a network of at least 10 structures or additions,

including a stable, a powerhouse and a pier, all connected by a network of railway lines, underground tunnels and, at a later point, aerial bridges.

Chronology of the Gair buildings is complicated by vague descriptions, additions to existing structures and an erratic numbering system. But it appears that the final effort is now known as the Clocktower Building, at 1 Main Street, between Water and Plymouth Streets, built in 1914 and called at the time Building No. 7.

With a width of 200 feet, this distinctive 12-story structure topped by a four-story clock tower dominates the area. By this time Gair was really running a real estate operation and took only a small portion of the space. In 1914, *The Real Estate Record & Guide* said that the tower was "adapted to studio work."

Because of their near-white cast, great bulk and simple, utilitarian detailing, Gair's buildings form an obvious interconnected network, made even clearer by the repeated appearance of his name -- the most elegant of which is on two incised plaques that read "Gair Bvilding No. 6" at the northwest corner of Washington and Front Streets, built in the 1910's. Much of the original rail system laid in the streets still survives, and most of the old railway openings into the buildings are clearly visible.

Gair's building on the east side of Washington, from Front to Water, has two large circles high up. One was a clock, and the other was an indicator for the wind direction: the letters N, E and S are barely apparent. Except for those circles, and the ornate clock tower at 1 Main Street, the concrete Gair buildings are severe in style, usually with neo-Classic touches, sometimes with a hint of Art Nouveau.

IN his introduction to H. Allen Smith's "Robert Gair: A Study" (1939), the critic Lewis Mumford noted that "more than any other personality, except that of Roebling, the creator of the Brooklyn Bridge, Robert Gair symbolically dominates the Brooklyn waterfront."

In 1926, the Gair Company announced that it would move to Piermont, N.Y., in Rockland County, and the next year its founder died at age 88. Robert Gair Jr. was head of the realty arm of the company; a 1928 advertisement in *The New York Times* offered "manufacturing space at prewar rates" in the 10 buildings that made up "Gairville" -- a term that may have first been used at about that time.

This section of Brooklyn, already hemmed in by the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges, was virtually cut off after World War II when the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway created a no-man's land between the area and downtown Brooklyn.

By the time the developer David Walentas got there, in 1981, it was low-end manufacturing space renting at \$1 a square foot. Mr. Walentas's son, Jed Walentas, says that his father had been doing loft conversions, and that an artist had said that the next hot neighborhood was Dumbo -- for Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass -- of which the elder Walentas had never heard. But David Walentas ultimately bought most of the original Gair properties, two million square feet, for \$12 million.

The younger Mr. Walentas says that over the years their company, Two Trees Management, has spent \$100 million on the properties, including the condominium conversion of Building No. 7. He says that years of renovations have shown him that Gair gradually improved the quality of the concrete -- it's not as brittle in the later works.

The occupancy of the Gair buildings is mixed, some residential, some office and some light industrial. The younger Mr. Walentas says that the best use for the property is probably residential, but that they plan on keeping the mix. "You get three to four times the number of people in the area with commercial than you do with residential, and that really activates the street life" that now distinguishes Dumbo, he says.

Two Trees is expanding beyond the old Gair building stock, and has recently built a new rental apartment building at Washington and Front Streets. Other developers have been attracted, and some of New York's most adventurous new architecture can be found in the area, including the two new apartment buildings at Main and Front Streets, a big one that might be called neo-Egyptian, and a smaller, highly colored structure that seems modernist Milanese -- a battle of styles in what is otherwise a bastion of utilitarian design. Facing out on the old railroad sidings are shops and showrooms as fancy as any in SoHo.

Mr. Walentas says that, for marketing purposes, Two Trees identifies the buildings by their street addresses, dropping the erratic Gair numbering system. But he says that "in the office we still call them Gair 5, Gair 6, even though most of the world has never heard of him." But the Scottish-born inventor's name remains visible on nearly every block.

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