

SQUARE FEET/Lower East Side

# A Club for Hundreds of Girls Finds a Permanent Home

By LISA CHAMBERLAIN

**I**N 1998, when the Lower Eastside Girls Club of New York was barely two years old, one of the many unpleasant spaces that the struggling nonprofit organization occupied was a basement on Avenue D. Because sewage frequently backed up after it rained, the girls sometimes had to conduct their activities in rubber boots.

And this less-than-desirable site was not the worst. At one point, the entire Girls Club — tap dance shoes, art supplies, enrollment forms — was pushed around in a shopping cart.

For the Girls Club — which provides after-school, weekend and summer programs for neighborhood preteen and teenage girls — survival has hinged on obtaining affordable real estate, and that has been all but impossible. Just as the Girls Club was taking off, so were real estate prices on the Lower East Side. Consequently, the organization's beginnings were not auspicious.

The Girls Club was formed in 1996, 120 years after the Boys' Club of New York, by a group of neighborhood women who lamented the fact that their sons had a place to go after school for sports and other activities, but their daughters had no similar organization.

The founders, who knew one another from a group called Children's Liberation Day Care, had very little money at their disposal. Getting the Girls Club off the ground was a labor of love that has been at times more labor than love, as the organization has bounced from place to place all over the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In all, the Girls Club has had seven office sites in nine years (including the back room of a 99 cent store, right behind the underwear and socks), and it has held program activities, from drumming to fencing to photography, at more than 20 different locations.

"When we launched the Girls Club, we had a virtual ribbon cutting because we had no place to call home," said Lyn Pentecost, the executive director. "We cut a ribbon on an idea."

Since then, the idea has become very ambitious, indeed. From an all-volunteer staff working with approximately 20 girls to a budget of nearly \$1 million for programs serving up to 500 girls a year, the Girls Club is now in the middle of a \$12 million capital campaign to build its own facilities on Avenue D between East Seventh and Eighth Streets — just a stone's throw away from where program leaders once mopped up sewage. The capital campaign will get a major boost next week from Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg when he announces what is expected to be a sizable contribution from the city.

The new facilities, for which ground is expected to be broken by the spring of 2006, are to be built on what are now six contiguous lots owned by the city. With the help of City Councilwoman Margarita Lopez, the Girls Club was awarded conditional control of the site, which is T-shaped and covers more than 15,000 square feet, by the New York Economic Development Corporation in January 2002.

These facilities will consist of a one-story 2,000-square-foot community center on East Eighth Street; a four-story building on Avenue D that will be leased to the Federation of East Village Artists, a nonprofit group that will provide work space for artists; and the main Girls Club building on East Seventh Street, all connected by a courtyard.

The five-story Girls Club will have a commercial kitchen, a cafe, a screening room

**PRESENT SITE**

At 56 First Street, left, between First and Second Avenues, the Girls Club leases the ground floor and basement of the new four-story building.



Rendering by Cutsogeoerge Tooman &amp; Allen Architects

**NEXT SITE**

The new facilities, above, are planned around a building at Seventh Street and Avenue D. The main Girls Club building is at its left, and the four-story building at the right is to be leased to artists.



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Photographs by Frances Roberts for The New York Times

that will seat 75, a gallery space, artist studios, a career center, a technology room, a two-story library and a science and environmental center — all topped off with a roof garden.

What the buildings will not be are cinder-block eyesores of the sort that so often house community centers in low-income areas. Ms. Pentecost and the Girls Club board members believe in the inspirational power of good architecture, and to that end have relied on the generosity of the architect Craig Tooman of Cutsogeorge, Tooman & Allen and the developer Eric Anderson of Urban Green Equities. Both have, until very recently, worked almost entirely pro bono, not just on the Avenue D site, but also on two previous ones that fell through.

In fact, the space that the Girls Club currently calls home, 56 First Street, between First and Second Avenues, is a new four-story building that was designed by Mr. Tooman. And it is Mr. Anderson's residence. (The two met as undergraduates at Columbia University.)

The Girls Club leases the ground floor and basement from Mr. Anderson at below-market rates — \$5,000 a month for about 3,000 square feet. At \$20 a square foot annually, that is considerably less than new construction could command in the area.

Not only is the current space affordable for the Girls Club, it's downright fabulous. The all-glass front lets sunlight into Sweet Things, a gallery and cafe that sells baked goods made by girls. In back are the Girls Club offices, and downstairs are computers and television production equipment, purchased with a grant from Manhattan Neigh-

## SWEET THINGS

In the cafe at the Lower Eastside Girls Club, from left, Erica Santiago, Destiny Negrón and Tamara Oliveras prepare to make cupcakes, as Miladys Ramirez, the manager, looks on.

borhood Network, that the girls use to film, edit and produce their own public access show called Girl TV.

"I call this our practice building," Ms. Pentecost said. Like their current home, the buildings to be erected on Avenue D will feature clean modern architecture, use a good deal of recycled and locally produced material, and employ environmentally friendly heating and cooling systems.

The Girls Club is hoping the new facilities will be designated the first "green" youth center in the country by the United States Green Building Council, a Washington-based association that promotes eco-friendly building technology.

"As a firm, we try to be involved in some sort of architecture of conscience," Mr. Tooman said. "We do a lot of work for wealthy individuals who don't need what the Girls Club needs. And that allows us to do some pro bono work." Mr. Tooman estimated that the firm had donated \$200,000 worth of work over the years to the Girls Club.

The heavy lifting of raising millions of dollars for a new home has not been easy, Ms. Pentecost said, particularly when the Girls Club has to raise basic operating funds at the same time. But she believes the fate of the Girls Club depends on securing its own real estate.

"I've been in community arts and the non-profit world my entire life," Ms. Pentecost said. "Programs come and go. But buildings are like diamonds. It's the only way to become a permanent fixture in the neighborhood." And diamonds are, after all, a girl's best friend.