

POWER OF ART

Galleries bring empty storefronts to life

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When a dental office left 161st Street in Jamaica, its storefront remained empty for two years, gathering dust, but no interest from buyers. Then an art exhibit called, "Road Kill Taxidermy," opened in the space – and fewer than six months later, an architect signed a deal to move in.

The property is one of 40 empty storefronts that the non-profit arts organization Chashama – loosely translated, "to have vision," in Farsi – has converted to temporary art galleries in Queens and around the city.



Chashama acts as a liaison between artists who need inexpensive gallery space and landlords who want to dress up empty storefronts. Dozens of emerging artists submit proposals to Chashama, in hopes of getting inexpensive exposure.

"It's good feedback," said Eric Ajama, an artist from West Africa whose first exhibition was held in the former dental office. "People say that they felt inspired and they want to do the same. It's good to inspire people."

The group also has been working with a grass-roots organization called Reconstruct Art in Jamaica to provide school training and workshops for young adults to learn about arts community jobs. Students who take the courses curate some of Chashama's storefront art galleries.

"You don't have to have a million dollars to open up an art gallery and own a space," said Joel Robinson, a student of Chashama's arts and entrepreneurship workshops. "There are tactics and techniques that can be learned to be able to help others."

"There are always reasons why there's empty space," said Anita Durst, founder of Chashama and a fourth-generation scion of the New York commercial real estate titans, the Durst family. "We fix the spaces, we paint them, we clean them and we bring life to them and then that brings life to the neighborhood."

The benefits go beyond the aesthetic. In addition to cosmetic renovations, landlords might qualify for tax write-offs for charitable donations or breaks on zoning regulations that limit how high they can build. Moreover, the activity spurred by the galleries can sometimes help the neighborhood.

"Having artists, or just having people on the street, having the lights on, having people coming and going is a really good thing for development," said Reuel Daniels of the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation, which owns Chashama's Queens storefronts, including the one that housed "Road Kill Taxidermy." "It makes people feel safe. It makes people feel like this is a space they could move or relocate their business to."

Anita Durst initially founded Chashama in 1995 as a theater group. She learned to organize public performances in vacant spaces from her mentor and inspiration for Chashama's name, Iranian-born director Reza Abdoh. Durst said Chashama branched out into visual art when The Durst Organization offered the group several prime location spaces on 42nd Street beginning in 1997.

In the last two years, Chashama has established galleries and arts education not only in Jamaica, but also Harlem and Brooklyn Army Terminal, partially through a \$50,000 stimulus fund grant from the National Endowment of the Arts.

"There are so many galleries and there are so many places where artists go to sell their art," Durst said. "But, we're about artists learning . . . learning the process of making a show in a big space and the business of art, too."

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