



Testimony of the Municipal Art Society
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
By Lisa Kersavage, Director of Advocacy
DUMBO Historic District, Borough of Brooklyn
October 30, 2007

The Municipal Art Society is a private, non-profit membership organization whose mission is to promote a more livable city. Since 1893, the Society has worked to advocate excellence in urban design and planning, contemporary architecture, historic preservation and public art.

I am Lisa Kersavage, speaking on behalf of the Municipal Art Society. DUMBO is special for its exceptional industrial architecture, its association with the rise of Brooklyn as a major American industrial center, and its mesmerizing streetscapes. The neighborhood has been on the National Register of Historic Place since 2000 and it is most worthy of historic district designation. DUMBO featured prominently in MAS' nomination of Brooklyn's industrial heritage to the National Trust's list of the nation's 11 Most Endangered Places. Designation of DUMBO moves us closer to removing Brooklyn from that list.

The industrial buildings in DUMBO were designed by various architects, ranging from little-known figures to designers of major local importance. The earlier buildings in the district are representative of the slow-burning construction popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, terra-cotta floor arches and steel frames began to appear and, more significantly, factories of reinforced concrete were erected. These were among the earliest large-scale reinforced-concrete factory buildings in America. Today, these buildings define the industrial waterfront of Brooklyn's downtown.

By the turn of the century some of the biggest industrial firms in America operated in DUMBO. These included Arbuckles sugar refinery, E.W. Bliss, a machinery manufacturer, Brillo, makers of steel wool products, and most famously, the Robert Gair Company, a paper box manufacturer of such wealth and repute that, according to a 1914 article in the *New York Times*, a young Brooklyn draftsman so wanted a job there that he anonymously sent a box of poisoned candy to Mr. Gair. His idea was to win the good graces of Gair – and hopefully a job – by separately sending a signed letter warning him of the attempt on his life by a socialist who thought the industrialist “was too rich.” Gair turned the letter and the candy over to the police. The young man was arrested and Gairville, and DUMBO, continued to prosper until the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway was built in the 1950s.

The city has many photogenic poses, but none are quite as endearing as the Belgian-block streetscapes of DUMBO – a point the film industry has understood for some time. While standing next to the imposing anchorage of the Manhattan Bridge it is difficult to imagine another place where one can so appreciate the elegance and might of the city's historic industrial architecture and infrastructure.

Remarkably, the roughly one hundred buildings in the district retain a relatively high degree of period integrity, which is surprising considering the changing needs of the industrial users over more than one hundred years and the conversion of many buildings to non-industrial uses. Unfortunately, in recent years, too many buildings have been demolished or inappropriately altered as the neighborhood faces intense development pressures.

We enthusiastically support the designation of the DUMBO historic district, and applaud the commission's recent and significant steps to protect the Brooklyn waterfront's industrial heritage. The Municipal Art Society urges the commission to act quickly to give DUMBO the protection that it has long deserved.