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July 6, 2003, Sunday

REAL ESTATE DESK

Change at Jamaica

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

"THAT'S my favorite part -- the windows," Stacey Simpkins said the other day as she sat on a maple bench in a luminous bay outside a courtroom at the new Queens Family Court in Jamaica. The architects began with the common-sensical notion that a family courthouse ought to be as comfortable as possible for family members like Ms. Simpkins, who spend so many hours waiting. And waiting. And waiting.

The answer offered by Pei Cobb Freed & Partners and Gruzen Samton was to pull the waiting rooms out of the interior and set them into 20 three-story window bays with floor-to-ceiling glass,; 10 looking across Jamaica Avenue to the King Manor Museum and Park and 10 looking across Archer Avenue at the ceaseless flow of the Long Island Rail Road.

The view from the courthouse also offers a window on Jamaica's future: a silvery , structural whale breaching gracefully in the distance over Sutphin Boulevard.

It is the mezzanine bridge connecting the Jamaica Station to the new AirTrain terminal, designed by Robert I. Davidson, chief architect of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which is also rebuilding the L.I.R.R. portion of the station in collaboration with the railroad.

The \$1.9 billion light rail system connects Jamaica to the airport, three miles away, along an elevated viaduct over the median of the Van Wyck Expressway. The system is to open by year's end. On the passenger platform, an "AirTrain to All Terminals" sign is already illuminated.

"This could be a catalyst for new development," said Charles A. Gargano, the vice chairman of the Port Authority and chairman of the Empire State Development Corporation. I don't envision people just passing through."

It remains to be seen whether AirTrain will spark a corporate park and whether that -- together with courthouses, federal offices and laboratories, York College, the planned Jamaica Performing Arts Center and a year-old multiplex and shopping center -- will amount to critical mass.

But clearly, Jamaica is changing.

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"The objective all along is to rebuild it as a regional center," said F. Carlisle Towery, president of the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation. That begins with making the case that Jamaica is an airport village," he said.

LCOR Inc., developers of the new Terminal 4 at Kennedy Airport, are already convinced. In partnership with Greater Jamaica, they are planning a 16-story, 500,000-square-foot office building, Tower 1 One1? of JFK Corporate Square, across Sutphin Boulevard from the AirTrain station.

Fox & Fowle Architects are designing the building, which is expected to cost around \$200 million. The property is to be condemned by the state, in part to exempt it from industrial-only zoning. There would be about 20,000 square feet of retail space and 250 parking spaces above grade.

Tentative leasing agreements have been reached with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and an "aviation tenant" for almost all the office space, said David A. Sigman, senior vice president of LCOR. (The word around Jamaica is that the aviation tenant is JetBlue Airways, but Mr. Sigman would not disclose the identity.) Negotiations over financial incentives should be complete by this fall, he said.

"Kennedy is very space-constrained," he said, and there's not room to do the kind of commercial space you see at other airports. "We saw Jamaica as being a viable place, with this airport village concept."

As it happens, the Port Authority already thinks of the AirTrain station as Kennedy's 10th terminal, said Steven P. Plate, director of the New York airport access program, as if the experience of flight begins on 94th Avenue. "The logic," he said, "is to bring the airport out to the people."

The project includes the AirTrain terminal itself., This is a 240-foot-long, glass-walled passenger platform under a barrel-vaulted skylight with eight openings on each side to match the doors of a four-car train. The platform connects to a granite-clad fourth-floor lobby that has room for at least 12 airline check-in stands.

Arriving Passengers from Kennedy will be able to proceed past a spacious 60-foot-high atrium and on to the mezzanine bridge, from which they can to catch an L.I.R.R. train. Or they can cross the bridge on a moving walkway and head downstairs for buses and the E, J and Z trains. They will also be able to descend through the atrium on glass-enclosed elevators to a pick-up and drop-off area on 94th Avenue.

The AirTrain lobby is part of a seven-story, 230,000-square-foot structure known as the Vertical Circulation Building, clad in faceted reflective glass. A two-story-high control center for the Long Island Rail Road will be housed there, as will L.I.R.R. offices.

THE structure has been designed to accept an additional 10 stories with 20,000 square feet of space each. Roughly the same height as LCOR's planned tower, it could be used by airport-related back offices, other commercial tenants or a 250-room hotel, the alternative preferred by the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation.

By far the most arresting feature of the complex is the 263-foot-long,

72-foot-high arch over the L.I.R.R. platforms, which are being rehabilitated as part of the project.

Mr. Gargano held out as a distant possibility a direct connection at Jamaica between AirTrain and L.I.R.R. tracks. That would permit an uninterrupted trip between Kennedy and the new Pennsylvania Station (known officially as Daniel Patrick Moynihan Station), which is to open in 2008. But Mr. Gargano allowed that daunting technical hurdles would have to be cleared, and even then AirTrain could not run on the Long Island tracks during peak periods.

A seamless train ride would hold appeal for travelers bound to and from Manhattan, but not to the Greater Jamaica group. "We said, 'We'd like a couple of seams in it, please,'" Mr. Towery said. That would underscore Jamaica's role as a destination in its own right, not just a way station.

Several recent projects make that point. Public investment has included the enormous Joseph P. Addabbo Federal Building of 1989, the Civil Court of 1997 and the Food and Drug Administration Laboratory and Offices of 2000. Last year, the Mattone Group opened the 411,000-square-foot Jamaica Center, across Parsons Boulevard from the Addabbo Building, with a 15-screen National Amusements multiplex, a Gap, an Old Navy, a Walgreens and other retailers. The company described the \$82 million project as the largest private investment in Jamaica in more than 30 years.

One of the most elusive development projects until now has involved an antebellum landmark, the First Reformed Church of Jamaica, an abandoned double-towered, red-brick sanctuary nestled between the Addabbo Building and Family Court.

"We've been nursing the thing for 15 years," Mr. Towery said. The development corporation was responsible for the pretty landscaped setting, Jamaica Green, that now surrounds the Romanesque church.

Like the King Manor Museum across Jamaica Avenue, the church speaks to Jamaica's deep historical roots. A plaque at its entrance notes that it was "dedicated to the worship of the triune God October 6th 1859."

The congregation moved out two decades ago. A plan to link the church to the Addabbo Building for use as an auditorium was abandoned by the federal government, Mr. Towery said, and then the city allowed the structure to deteriorate. Some of its stained-glass windows were badly damaged during this period but most survive, though they are now boarded up. They include a window depicting the Good Samaritan, a composition credited to Frederick Stymetz Lamb of the J.&R. Lamb Studios family.

The current plan is to turn the building into the Jamaica Performing Arts Center, a \$10.2 million project of the city's Cultural Affairs and Design and Construction Departments. It is to be managed jointly by the Cultural Collaborative Jamaica, the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning and the Black Spectrum Theater Company. The architects are Wank Adams Slavin Associates.

The space is now almost as bare as it possibly could be, stripped down to

bricks and timbers. As part of the renovation, a 400-seat theater will be constructed within the space under a special wire-frame ceiling known as a tension grid that will allow visitors to see all the way up to the gabled roof. The Good Samaritan window will be moved to a new vestibule at the entrance, where it will be much more prominent.

Construction is expected to begin in October and take about two years, said a spokeswoman for the cultural affairs agency.

The goal, said the architect Stephen E.v. Gottlieb, "is to keep the basic integrity of the interior main space so that you can read the nave to the rafters, while providing for the theater and community uses."

Mr. Towery envisions programs at the performing arts center at which children under court supervision could perform community service. "We hope it will be used by Family Court a lot," he said.

At the opening of the \$104 million court building earlier this year, Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye of the State Court of Appeals acknowledged that families in Queens had been forced for too long to contend with the overcrowded and dilapidated conditions of a building that was never meant to be used as a courthouse, but was originally built as a public library," at 89-14 Parsons Boulevard.

THE 280,000-square-foot replacement, at 151-20 Jamaica Avenue, is divided into a courthouse, with 16 courtrooms and seven hearing rooms, and a curving office building known as the City Agency Facility. The project manager was the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York.

The five-story courthouse is organized around a cylindrical atrium criss-crossed by escalators, within which is a suspended sculpture, "Katul Katul" by Ursula von Rydingsvard, installed under the city's Percent for Art program. At the top of each escalator, visitors can see windows ahead -- park views on one side, track views on the other. It is almost impossible to get lost.

"What the escalators do is provide a continuum of spatial experience so you always see where you are in the building," said Ian Bader of Pei Cobb Freed. "The idea of the courthouse as a labyrinth is one of the most terrifying images one can imagine."

Mr. Bader acknowledged indebtedness to Arthur C. Erickson's 23-year-old Law Courts Building at Robson Square in Vancouver, British Columbia. Courtrooms are set into tiered steps under a sloping glass roof, creating a great sense of openness.

In Queens, first-time visitors make a loop around the base of the rotunda, stopping by the petitions desk, then the assignment part, then the processing desk to pick up court papers. The assignment courtroom has no windows. A skylight would have been possible, Mr. Bader said, but was vetoed because it would have cast the judge in silhouette, creating a formidably distant figure.

In addition to waist-high railings, the rotunda openings on each floor are glazed from floor to ceiling, in part to prevent anyone from being pushed over the side, since rage can burn fiercely among those whose cases are before the court. That enclosure still allows light to flow through.

Given the high-anxiety nature of the activities and proceedings in the building -- particularly those involving children -- every attempt was made to achieve a warm, well-lighted and quiet environment," wrote Jordan Gruzen of Gruzen Samton.

That was why so much attention was paid to the waiting areas. The first dimensional decision was, what is a comfortable distance face-to-face?" Mr. Bader said. "The entire modulation of the facade is based on the spacing of benches."

It turned out that eight feet was a workable distance; close enough to accommodate large amounts of seating but not so close that it would make strangers feel uncomfortable facing one another.

Given the prospect of damage from ballpoint pens, the architects encountered resistance to their proposal to make the benches of wood. But they prevailed.

The waiting areas are divided subtly by glass partitions so that sparring family members can be kept apart and the most troublesome charges can be kept within close distance of a court officer.

Because the waiting room bays project two feet and have windows on the sides, it is possible to stand at the far corner of the building and look through all 10 bays in a row, creating an even greater sense of transparency. One 12-by-12-foot window is filled, like a painting frame, with the crown of a tulip tree that stands at the entrance lane to the farmhouse of Rufus King, an early United States senator and ambassador to Great Britain, who helped frame the Constitution and battled slavery.

"It's not that architecture can solve the problems of the people who come to the building," Mr. Bader said. "But the offering of windows and Rufus King Park, that's really the contribution we could make."

Standing across the street from the courthouse on a recent inspection tour, Mr. Bader spied a middle-aged woman in sunglasses and white jumpsuit, leaning on a handrail at one of the big windows. There was no way to know her inner turmoil, but from this vantage, she looked to be at peace as she gazed over the park. "That's what it's all about," Mr. Bader said. "Just to have done that makes the whole thing worthwhile."

Inscribed on the facade of Queens Family Court are quotations of Justice Thurgood Marshall. "Courtrooms," he said, "are perhaps the most accurate barometer of the extent to which we have succeeded in building a just society."

Upstairs, Ms. Simpkins, who lives in Brooklyn, waited for a case to unfold involving a family member. Daylight reached across an almost unbroken southern horizon and suffused the space around her. She approved. "Nobody," she said, "likes to look at a brick wall."

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