

21st-Century Armory

By Rochana Rapkins

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Since the 1990s, New York has seen the startling transformation of some of its most iconic neighborhoods: the rebirth of Times Square, the revival of the theater district and the redevelopment of Lincoln Center.

What is less known is that a slight woman from Toronto with a background in urban planning oversaw all of these projects. From 1987 to 1997, Rebecca Robertson served as president of the 42nd Street Development Corporation, where she led the \$1.8 billion effort to transform the drug-ridden neighborhood into a family friendly arts hub. She went on to develop new Off-Broadway theater and rehearsal spaces for the Shubert Organization. And from 2000 to 2006, she served as executive director of the Lincoln Center Redevelopment Project, which is transforming the famed cultural center into a place where the public will soon be able to shop, picnic and peek into rehearsal rooms.

Robertson describes herself as an “American Aesthetics junkie.” This may have drawn her to the crumbling armory on the corner of Park Avenue and East 66th Street, which is a showpiece for the late 19th-century arts movement.



Photo credit: Our Town

“We are a rescue group,” said Robertson, as she pointed to a pair of large water stains on the wall. Dressed in slim black pants and a long velvet jacket that recalled the smart attire of a 19th-century drill sergeant, she quietly surveyed the space she described as “arguably one of the most important rooms in the world.”

Although it is one of the few surviving Herter Brothers interiors, and the armory has been named one of the “100 Most Endangered Historic Sites in the World” by the World Monuments Fund, the room was being used as a coat check when Robertson assumed the role of CEO and president in January 2006.

The \$300 million restoration she is spearheading will include extensive work on the graceful 15,000 square foot drill hall, as well as the restoration of period rooms designed by the likes of Stanford White and Louis Comfort Tiffany.

Although Robertson is passionate about preserving the past, she is also deeply engaged in the present. Under her direction, the armory worked with the Whitney Museum of American Art to invite 37 artists to install site-specific pieces in the space for the 2008 Whitney Biennial. That same year, the armory staged Bernd Alois Zimmerman's opera *Die Soldaten*, in which audience members sat on a platform that disorientated spectators by moving stealthily toward, and away from, the stage. Last year saw a sprawling installation by Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto.

“It is great to see contemporary work against a historic background,” Robertson said. “Both of them speak to each other and they say so much more.”

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