

## **Redeveloping the Ropewalk**

The Ropewalk Building in the Navy Yard has a fascinating history. The quarter mile long, forty-five foot wide building produced most of the cordage for the United States Navy's ships from 1838 until 1970. Designed by the famous architect Alexander Parris, who also designed the Navy Yard and Quincy Market, it is the sole remaining original building of its kind left in the country today. Part of the reason the Ropewalk has not been redeveloped is its unusual configuration and low ceilings.

As one walks through the Ropewalk, it feels like you are walking through an enormous bowling alley made for Zeus and other larger than life mythological characters. From the heavily overbuilt wood flooring and walls to the oversized spools still hanging on racks you can almost hear the buzz of production and voices of the past, only interrupted by the occasional swoop of a nesting pigeon curious to look at the intruders bold enough to enter their domain.

If the Mayor and the BRA have their way, the distant voices of the past will be displaced with the humming sounds of the renaissance of a "creative economy." BRA planners envision the Ropewalk to serve as an incubator for fledging artistic entrepreneurs such as painters, furniture makers, musicians, playwrights, graphic designers, and others. Of course, money is the issue. Private developers and lenders are loathe to undertake the costs and accompanying risk to redevelop a property which will only fetch what artists can afford to pay as rent.

Estimates to restore the Ropewalk from its present charred condition from the fire a few years back, to a condition suitable to build the workspaces for the creative companies and individuals run as high as \$30 million. Another issue is the Ropewalk's historic landmark designation. There will be constraints on how many cuts in the building for access and type of refurbishing that can be undertaken. Other issues abound, like transportation, the status of the nearby derelict power plant building, and marketing of the concept. But it can be done. The Torpedo Factory, an artistic incubator in Alexandria, Virginia, is a stunning success.

Tying the redevelopment of the Ropewalk with the tourist industry serviced by the National Park Service and the recent push to activate the waterfront is a great opportunity for Charlestown. The Ropewalk could be a place where our kids learn to play the guitar, weave a basket, and experience the nobility of art – an appreciation that can only serve them well in our ever increasingly stressful society. The Ropewalk could also be a destination spot, boosting tax revenues and clearing out a big piece of blight on Chelsea Street. BRA planners are confident that if they build it, artists of all types will flock to it. Sure beats the pigeons.

Michael Parker, August, 2005