

The New York Times

Shops Emerge From Ruins of Jackson Heights Fire

July 8, 2010

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A little more than four months ago, a faulty boiler in a furniture store ignited a fire that raged for hours in Jackson Heights, Queens, destroying eight mom-and-pop shops in a squat landmark building at the corner of 37th Avenue and 84th Street. By the time firefighters tamed the flames, all that was left was charred wood and fallen bricks.

Salvage workers recovered a box with 18 hundred-dollar bills in it from the register of a party favors store, and they rejoiced. At least something had been saved, one of them said at the time. But it turns out the bills were fake, good luck charms that the store's owner, Maria Solano, had been handing to her customers since the dawn of the new year, she said.

"I had to start all over again, from scratch," Ms. Solano, 54, said last Thursday from her party store, Lalita. She reopened it in May in a space no bigger than a sports car, in a store that also houses a travel agency, a hair salon, a clothing shop and a spa.

Four of the businesses ravaged by the fire on Feb. 13 have reopened, which is a measure of victory for their owners and for a community that rallied behind them. Neighbors held fund-raising parties for those who were left unemployed, and Daniel Dromm, the local City Council member, organized workshops and held a meeting with the city's **Department of Small Business**

Services to help the business owners get back on their feet.

Still, the going has been tough, in part because it has been hard for small businesses to survive in a gentrifying neighborhood like Jackson Heights, where the price of commercial space has shot up in recent years, forcing many old-timers to close shop. (In an interesting twist, one of the burned-out businesses, Colony Wine and Liquor, will reopen next month in the space that had housed Cavalier Restaurant and Lounge, a neighborhood institution, for more than 50 years. The restaurant shut down in February because of a sudden spike in rent.)

A block from the fire scene, at the corner of 37th Avenue and 86th Street, the furniture store where the flames ignited reopened under a new name. Across the street, José Díaz, 28, reopened Willo Barber Shop last month in a formerly vacant store. "My clients are starting to come back, but it's still slow," Mr. Díaz said.

Meanwhile, the lot where the fire broke out remains vacant, a hole in the ground still littered by debris. On June 3, the property's owner, Yin Hu of Wenzhou Realty LLC in Flushing, filed for a permit to build a six-story building with 45 apartments, commercial space and a community room at the site, but the Department of Buildings turned down the application, raising several zoning objections. Ryan Fitzgibbon, a spokeswoman for the department, said the main issue was that the proposed building exceeded the floor-to-area ratio allowed for the area, or the dimensions permitted under local zoning laws.

Residents expect that Mr. Hu will reapply. Opponents of putting a big building in the heart of Jackson Heights' historic district, on a strip mostly occupied by single-story brick structures built in the 1800s, are circulating a petition in case he does. The petition says that "moving

forward with the owner's plans would have a damaging effect on the historic aesthetic of the neighborhood, deprive many dwellings of sunlight, increase traffic, decrease parking and exacerbate overcrowding in schools and local playgrounds."

Councilman Dromm said that Jackson Heights had "many unmet needs, like a youth center." He said he had reached out to Mr. Hu to see if a compromise could be reached on the scale of his plans, but "he really doesn't seem to want to cooperate." Mr. Hu did not return messages left for him at his office.

Katie Musselwhite-Goldsmith, a mother of two young children whose apartment overlooks the fire scene, has helped organize the petition. She said that more than 300 people have signed it and she expects that many more will do it in the coming days as copies have been spread across several local businesses, including a dry cleaner, a coffee shop and a wine store.

"Our neighborhood is overcrowded as it is. There are waiting lists for kindergarten classes, and we have very little green space," Ms. Musselwhite-Goldsmith said. "We don't need a big building in our midst."