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Mapping a Bird's-Eye View of Foreclosure Misery

Patricia Cohen

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The curator Larissa Harris with the Panorama in a foreclosure exhibit at the Queens Museum.

When it came to representing the sprawling nature of the foreclosure crisis in New York City, the artist Damon Rich figured out that the best thing to do was to shrink it down to size.

And so he used the 9,335-square-foot Panorama of the City of New York, the intricate architectural model built for the 1964 World's Fair, and hundreds of neon-pink triangles to demonstrate just how the city has been marked by economic troubles.

Each plastic triangle represents a block where there have been three or more home foreclosures. Visitors on the balcony walkway that surrounds the Panorama, at the Queens Museum of Art in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, can see in a single glance precisely where subprime lenders wreaked the most havoc.

Hundreds of these pink stigmata cover Bedford-Stuyvesant, Crown Heights, East New York and Canarsie in Brooklyn like an invading army. In Queens most markers are camped out in Ozone Park and Cambria Heights, as well as in parts of Jamaica and Corona. As for Manhattan, there are precisely two.

This mapping of the 45-year-old Panorama is part of a larger exhibition about housing, in which politics intersects with art.

“I hope that my work operates on a principle of opening up a set of issues for exploration,” Mr. Rich said.

Titled “Red Lines Crisis Housing Learning Center,” the show includes photographs, models, drawings and sculptural installations — like a large, three-dimensional wooden graph of interest rates over the past 70 years — that offer an explanation of how the private housing market works, beginning with the federal government’s involvement during the Depression.



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

An item in “Red Lines Crisis Housing Learning Center,” at the Queens Museum of Art.

Mr. Rich said the exhibition provided a “physical experience” that engages people in a way that a book, a Web site or a television show cannot. “In some way, I hope my exhibitions function as strange educational playgrounds for adults,” he said.

As well as an artist, Mr. Rich is an urban designer and waterfront planner for Newark. He originally created a version of the “Red Lines” exhibition for the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he was an artist in residence in 2007. When one of the center’s curators, Larissa Harris, was hired at the Queens Museum, she asked Mr. Rich to recreate the installation there.

The museum’s director, Tom Finkelpearl, suggested that Mr. Rich use the Panorama. When first built, the Panorama was supposed to simulate the sense of a helicopter ride over New York. Where the walkway now stands, helicopter-shaped cars on elevated tracks gave visitors a nine-minute tour.

“This was built as an urban planning tool,” Ms. Harris said of the Panorama. “I feel so proud of this because we are using it that way.”

The Neighborhood Economic Development Advocacy Project collected the foreclosure information, Ms. Harris said, as she slowly circled the Panorama. The Regional Plan Association, an independent planning group, then crunched the numbers using the Geographic Information System — a mapping program — to create maps of every inch of the city indicating where there had been foreclosures of single- to four-family homes in 2008.

Ms. Harris opened a door off the walkway and descended a few steps to a second door that opened onto the Panorama. She bent down and tilted her head so that her eyes were level with the blue floor that represents the waterways surrounding New York. “When you look at it this way, you can imagine you’re on a boat and coming into Staten Island,” she said.

The first challenge was figuring out how to mark the more than 13,000 foreclosures. “We had a brainstorm,” Ms. Harris said. The small plastic dividers put on the top of a delivered pizza to prevent the cheese from sticking to the top of the box would work perfectly. “We bought 2,000 of them and spray-painted them pink,” a color that would not clash with the Panorama, but would still stand out, Ms. Harris said.

Volunteers from the Center for Urban Pedagogy, a nonprofit organization in Brooklyn of which Mr. Rich is the founder, translated the information from the maps to the Panorama. “We got an amazing crop of kids who just love maps,” Ms. Harris said.

Figuring out how to place the markers without damaging the Panorama proved to be another problem. To get to the East New York section, for instance, volunteers would have had to walk through the rest of Brooklyn, the equivalent of a cadre of building-crushing Godzillas. Ultimately, team members discovered that they could sit on thick squares of foam without damaging the Panorama’s wood and plastic models.

“We took off our shoes, put on little slippers and went out with these maps and pieces of foam,” Ms. Harris said.

The Panorama was last significantly updated in 1992, so the group made “educated guesses” when computer maps differed from the Panorama, Ms. Harris said. The museum, whose only recent addition to the Panorama is Citi Field, the new Mets stadium next door, has begun a new update called Adopt-a-Building. That effort asks people, schools and businesses to sponsor or buy a building for the Panorama. (So far, there have been no foreclosures.)

As for the pink triangles, there are 582 in Brooklyn; 551 in Queens; 140 in Staten Island; and 151 in the Bronx, mostly in the Wakefield section. The areas are predominantly African-American and Latino, Ms. Harris said, the same neighborhoods that used to be starved of credit by discriminatory redlining before it became illegal in the 1970s. The smaller numbers in the Bronx, Manhattan and Staten Island, she explained, are due to a combination of income (too rich or too poor) and building type (apartments instead of single- or multifamily homes).

Ms. Harris acknowledged that most of “Red Lines,” which runs through Sept. 27, is political; it emphasizes predatory and racist lending practices. On Wednesday night the museum is hosting a celebration for housing advocates, featuring a lecture by the urban historian Kenneth T. Jackson.

But she argued that mapping the Panorama was not about taking sides. “I don’t see how it gives a political view, mapping the facts,” she said. “I don’t think you can argue with this. That’s why it’s so powerful.”