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Camilo J. Vergara
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Seymour Rosen
Los Angeles, California 90028

Dear Mr Rosen:

I am coming to you with Ark trouble. I am afraid that this time the City of Newark is going to bulldoze Kea's boat. I often ask myself why the city can't live with it. The Ark is getting better-looking all the time and has the makings of a splendid and unique work of folk art. It could employ a few kids, serve as a site to sell locally-made products, and add considerable attraction to the Central Ward at precisely the time when the precipitous loss of restaurants, movie theatres and food stores is widely remarked. Instead of looking at the Ark as an opportunity, bureaucrats refuse to call it a boat. Instead they call it an "illegal structure, unfit for human habitation," apply the zoning code for housing to a structure built to float, and are dead set on destroying it. (What follows, and the separate enclosure, are my personal observations on the Ark.)

The Ark seems to me to be very significant: I see it as a memorial commemorating the enormous human and environmental losses suffered by large American cities since W. W. II. Its location, at a high point in Newark's Central Ward, on the grounds of the Humanity Baptist Church, is perfect for this purpose. The Ark stands in one of the most devastated sections of the city, the site of one of the bloodiest and most destructive race riots the country has experienced. I believe that this boat, with its powerful symbolism of renewal, has healing power.

The Ark is Kea's personal response to the devastation around her. She has used debris from that devastation to construct her boat. The Ark has a simple, basic shape that now has begun to engage in a dialogue with its complicated surroundings: the wasted land, abandoned buildings and new townhouses. Much of Newark is gone, used up, burnt, bulldozed and junked, but the Ark remains and grows.

Every piece of this vessel is a memorial to a house, a street, a public or commercial building. A window ledge, for example, bears a depression wrought by the weight of its former owner. The colored glass from a Victorian house has again become a window, now in Kea's house. Stone slabs for use as ballast came from sidewalks, and chairs are there from a movie theatre closed for a decade. Appropriately, even the broken marble tablet commemorating an Austrian priest who founded an orphanage at the turn of the century is now incorporated into the Ark (the chapel that the tablet once adorned has been demolished).

The design of the Ark is regular, heavy and wide. Neither elegant nor trendy, it is nevertheless inspired. Why a boat? Why there? No answer is readily available. A boat to flee, to begin again somewhere, or to take to the ocean and to stay there? A

small city on the ocean since the old city on the land was disappearing so fast? The members of the all-Black congregation of the Humanity Baptist Church say half jokingly, "The boat is going to take us to Jerusalem." Yet these are not the answers: Kea built her boat big, certainly too big to take down Camden Street to the Passaic River and to the ocean.

Kea did not need anyone's help in building the ark. She has hammered every nail herself and she has in storage enough material to complete the Ark by 1990, before the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America. In 1986 the boat survived a serious threat when the land under it was sold to a corporation that demanded it be moved. Kea did move it, together with her house and storage shed, more than twenty-five feet to the church's parking lot. She did this alone, in the space of four days, using jacks and placing the boat on rollers.

Now, according to Kea, a new and more serious threat has come up; on Wednesday Reverend Brown, the minister of Humanity Baptist Church, under the threat of a law suit gave authorization to the City of Newark to demolish everything. The bulldozer is expected before mid-April.

The Ark, while well-liked by neighborhood residents, is disdained by important Newark officials, perhaps because it tells with such eloquence the tragic story of the city. Now, more than ever, while looking for a new identity, the Newark government does not want to be reminded of past failures. The city has already made two attempts to begin again, its publicists first calling Newark "New Newark" and then "New New Newark," in a twice-failed public relations campaign. Buildings downtown are given such names as Renaissance and Gateway; many of them can be entered directly from the train station through tunnels, without commuters ever having to walk the city streets.

Yet Newark needs the Ark, perhaps the country even needs the Ark. I believe that public recognition will help preserve Kea's work in a city where officials see it as more debris. Charles Moore called the Watts Towers "magic." Like the Towers, the Ark transcends the surroundings in which it is placed, and it goes further--it helps the viewer to understand and make peace with them.

Please call if you have any questions (222-6981). If you would like to visit the Ark I would be happy to accompany you.

Sincerely, *Camilo J. Vergara*

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Encs. Slides and descriptive statement