



MICHAEL NAGLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Mayra Cimet reattaching a piece of tarp to a dome aboard the Waterpod, a barge docked on the waterfront at Joralemon Street in Brooklyn this week.

## Life, Art and Chickens, Afloat in the Harbor

### Hard Work Is a Constant Companion in a Self-Sustaining Community on a Barge

By MELENA RYZIK

ABOARD THE WATERPOD, in New York Harbor — “One, two, three: Heave! One, two, three: Heave!” Perched nearly 20 feet high at the top of a metal dome on this listing barge, Alison Ward, was supervising as a half-dozen volunteers struggled to pull a heavy vinyl cover over the structure. It was just past 10 a.m. on a blazing Sunday in July, and the public

was due to start coming aboard soon — too soon, Ms. Ward felt.

“How long until we’re descended upon?” she called to her crew. For a draining hour she and the others had worked the tarp, stitched together from discarded billboards, up and over the structure, which for the moment resembled a Buckminster Fuller-designed jungle gym.

It was an all-hands endeavor: barefoot helpers climbed all over the dome like circus folk, shouldering the folded material, which had been removed for repairs, over the frames. It was exhausting, sweaty work, not what anyone here had signed up to do, but in the manner of shipboard life from time immemorial, it had to get done.

For the last two months artists have been

floating around New York City on the Waterpod, a 3,000-square-foot experiment in community living and artistry. Founded by Mary Mattingly, whose medium is mainly photography, it was envisioned as a self-sustaining living space, an eco- and art-friendly sphere that could be recreated in the future, when land resources might be scarce. Preparing for

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# Life and Art, Afloat on a Barge in New York Harbor, With Work a Constant

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the project, Ms. Mattingly thought about hardship and utopia. And so the Waterpod — at least that part of it that is not a commercial shipping barge, whose rental was backed by dozens of public and private groups — was built from donations and recyclables. Its systems run on solar power; its crew grows its own greens, collects its own rainwater. These things cared for each day, the notion was that the crew could work on more creative pursuits.

In practice, however, the Waterpod has turned out to be more an experiment in sociability and isolation, aesthetic vision and mass utility, organization and freedom, and, mostly, endurance.

"Frankly, I don't think any of us, when we started, knew how much work it would be," Ms. Ward, 37, said. "Building it was hard, but I thought once we got it up and running, we would be able to, you know, make art." This was an assessment that Ms. Mattingly, 30, echoed and one that has not yet come to pass. "It has challenged everyone," Ms. Ward said, "on all levels — levels of comfort, levels of intellect."

Both Ms. Ward and Ms. Mattingly gave up their apartments and have been living aboard the Waterpod full time since it was launched on June 12, the only two people to do so. Otherwise the crew has included a rotating cast of artists and hangers-on, some with relevant experience in gardening or carpentry or maritime life, experience that both women said they did not have before starting the project.

Over two live-in visits a month apart, this reporter became one of the crew, pitching in on the dome cover-raising and daily tasks like feeding the chickens — four hens produce breakfast, lunch and dinner — and tending the vegetable gardens that line the boat's rails. Though it remains docked in one location for two weeks at a time — the Pod, as its residents call it, is currently tied up at Pier 5 in the East River, below Brooklyn Heights — its mooring lines and gangplanks need frequent attention, as do the systems that make it livable. (The less said about maintaining the dry-composting toilet, the better.) "There's a never-ending list of things to do: It's a ship. It's a farm. It's an art residence. It's an installation," Ms. Ward said.

"It's not a Burning Man camp," said John McGarvey, 43, the Waterpod's executive director and a veteran of that annual Nevada festival. Perhaps not, but it does attract some of the same spirit: people like Dallas Pesola, who gave his age as "ageless" and arrived that July morning to help put up the dome cover wearing a captain's hat, a sarong and no shirt, brandishing a bunch of plastic swords taken from the party where he'd just stayed up all night.

Mr. Pesola and a friend, Elisa Blynn, 37, an artist and performer from the East Village, did much of the heavy lifting on the day's projects. But then Ms. Blynn decided to spray paint a wavy silver border around one of the garden beds. Cool? Debatable. Common? You bet.

"People get on board, and they just start painting," said Ian Daniel, the Waterpod's residency curator, responsible for scheduling official artist visits and coordinating events. "I can't even pinpoint how it happens." He added: "Mary's aesthetic is this futuristic, apocalyptic what-if, but people come on board and want to be a part of it. It seems like free living, like on a commune." (Mr. Daniel, 27, should know; he lived on one, in Oregon, where he learned how to practice sustainable agriculture.)

Eve K. Tremblay, a Canadian-born artist who was based in Ber-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL NAGLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Visitors enjoying an eco-friendly, artistic environment with the crew members aboard the barge Waterpod on the Brooklyn waterfront over the weekend.



The band I'll Be John Brown performing at a party on the Waterpod last weekend.



PHOTOGRAPHS ABOVE AND LEFT, BY YANA PASKOVA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Left, Mary Mattingly, with the vegetable garden; and, right, the barge at Governors Island in July.

lin until she came to work and live on the Pod this year, was not happy with the result of all this go-with-the-flowness. "It's looking a bit too hippy right now," she said, adding: "I'm a bit of a critical voice on this project. There is very little time to read or do art. It takes a lot of work to do sustainability. And sometimes it

feels like Frankenstein, like we've created this organism that has a life of its own."

A few weeks later Ms. Tremblay moved out. Mr. Daniel cut down on his day job as a waiter at the boutique Standard Hotel and took her place on the barge. Though he had trouble sleeping on board and shared the disdain

for the Burning Man vibe — he had gently suggested to some of the group that perhaps they should, you know, wear shirts — he was excited about the prospect of organizing and promoting shows. Soon the silver paint Ms. Blynn had applied was gone.

Public enthusiasm for the project has been voracious. Situ-

## ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Images from the Waterpod Project:  
[nytimes.com/design](http://nytimes.com/design)

ated at the intersection of recession escapism, do-it-yourself culture and ecomania, the Pod neatly sums up many current lifestyle trends — the compost container gets a lot of "this is how we should do it at home" comments from visitors.

"It's navigating our relationship with the environment in a capacity that doesn't occur when you live in the city," said Matthew Aaron Goodman, 34, a novelist from Brooklyn who visited the Waterpod when it was docked at Governors Island in July. "The advancement of technology has limited our ability to know what we can do with our own capacity. Something like this reminds us."

He turned to his wife, Nadia Murray Goodman, 34, a teacher. "We need to reassess what we're doing with our lives," he said. "We should be taking junk boats around the world."

That kind of support helps balance the constant stream of nosy poking around — what several Pod lovers called "the zoo animal aspect." The lack of onboard privacy, coupled with the isolation from the outside world (only Ms. Mattingly has an Internet connection) has been one of the greatest challenges, residents said.

"You're cut off from most media, and you're focused on survival aspects," said Ms. Mattingly, who has left the Pod only three times since it was launched. (Ms. Ward still goes to her studio in Lower Manhattan four times a week.) "We want to have those two hours a day where no one is coming into your room asking silly questions."

Two months in, the residents of the Waterpod are finally making those kind of allowances for themselves. They have begun to understand how to manage the onboard systems and structure their days, and the curatorial program has gone from didactic (lec-

tures about local oysters) to hip, with a performance by the electro duo Yacht. The rewards of life on board have also slowly become evident: diving off the raft and into the cool waters of the harbor; picking fresh lettuces, nasturtium flowers and herbs off the bow for a lunchtime salad; showing off the stunning skyline views to visiting friends.

And every night, after the public leaves, can feel like a covert but elegant dinner party, with candles and thoughtfully prepared food, conversation flowing under the dome as urban life zooms by, the coda to an exhausting but fulfilling day.

"That's what I like about living

**'It's a ship. It's a farm. It's an art residence. It's an installation.'**

on the Pod," Ms. Ward said, "every moment is accounted for, every action." She added, "It's a constantly shifting thing, and that's what art always is."

For her part Ms. Mattingly, who said she felt they'd reached a turning point, added that she planned to extend the project through October and hoped someone would take it over after that.

In the meantime there are some moments of peace. Just off the coast of Brooklyn on Sunday the sky was overcast and the barge quiet, with no public events scheduled and few visitors aboard, Mayra Cimet, an eager 22-year-old student, worked on a rope installation with no purpose beyond the aesthetic. David Smith, a visiting artist, discussed his work with Ms. Mattingly. Mr. Daniel showed a new volunteer the gray-water system. Ms. Ward cooked. The chickens clucked, the boat rocked. The Waterpod was, for better or worse, its own little universe.