



Gino Vitale, Brooklyn developer and shrine builder.

Joey Skee (March 30, 2008)



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Brooklyn developer Gino Vitale adapts the centuries old edicole sacre (devotional shrines) to his newly constructed buildings.

The clichéd truism about New York City's continuous change has never been more evident than today. The city is currently undergoing rapid transformation, with development and gentrification altering the urban landscape from the street level to the larger skyline. Brooklyn developer Gino Vitale, 35, is one of those dynamic forces refashioning the city from the ground up, changing the look of the land by capping the roofline of his newly constructed buildings with devotional shrines housing Catholic statuary.

Vitale emigrated with his parents from the Sicilian town of Militello in Catania province in 1977 at age five. He grew up in Manhattan's Lower East Side and Brooklyn's Gravesend, moving to the borough's Carroll Gardens in 2003. In 1998, he founded the Red Hook-based development company Vitale Builders, which currently owns approximately thirty rental properties in the area.

During the past four years, Vitale has included arcuated niches at the top of four renovated or constructed buildings. He installed a statue of the Immaculate Conception at 23 Luquer Street in 2004 and a figure of St. Padre Pio at 126 Coffey Street the following year. Last year, Vitale placed the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the alcove atop 32 Luquer Street. A Hispanic woman who owns 31 Luquer Street was so inspired by Vitale's restoration work and religious practice that she hired him in 2006 to renovate her building with a new brick façade from where stands the statue of Our Lady of Fatima.

When I asked him why he placed religious statues within the façades of his rental properties, he answered, "We come from a religious town. You know, we're religious people. It's like the house is blessed." In Catholicism, these creations are called sacramentals, material objects serving as vehicles for channeling God's presence, i.e., grace, into the mundane world. Each of the statues are blessed by a priest from the local Roman Catholic Church of the Visitation on Verona and Richards Streets.

Edicole sacre, or devotional shrines, are one of the most widespread manifestations of popular Catholicism and vernacular architecture in Italy. Constructed out of stone or plastered masonry, rural edicole are freestanding structures containing a niche in which the image and offerings are housed and are located in the woods, along the roadside, and at crossroads. Town and urban edicole are found on the walls of buildings either at street level or higher up. Urban shrines often consist of recessed niches or box-like structures fastened directly to the wall and often include a protective awning or roof and a ledge where offerings are left. Columns, roofing, and decorative framing made



from marble, plaster, metal, and/or plastic contribute to a particularly Baroque flare in the streets of Naples, Palermo, and Rome.

For Vitale, the statue's presence offers a sort of sacred insurance safeguarding the building in a protective field of the sacramental. Standing on the roof of his multi-unit rental building at 32 Luquer Street, Vitale recounted a story as he pointed across the street:

I'm going to tell you something crazy. You may not believe this. We just finished that building (31 Luquer Street with installed Our Lady of Fatima). Saint there and saint there (Immaculate Conception at 23 Luquer Street). A fire started in this building (25 Luquer Street). Bad fire. All these buildings went up in flames, bad fire. Didn't touch mine. Didn't touch hers.

When I asked what he attributed this to, he replied:

It's strange how the fire started here and this building burnt to a crisp. This one went down, this one went down, and our two didn't get touched. And it's not like it's made out of anything different. It's the same material. Nothing! Nothing! Not even tinder smoke.

People of faith engage the divine through the performance of ritual behavior such as prayer often in relationship to objects such as religious texts and images. Such practices and objects are constantly being adapted, updated, and transformed in an ongoing journey towards salvation. For Gino Vitale and others, the sacred presence is made manifest from the rooftops of his renovated brick buildings in Red Hook, Brooklyn.



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