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March 8, 1987

## THE ARK

At the highest point of Newark's Central Ward--in the parking lot of the Humanity Baptist Church at 235 Bergen Avenue--a ship is being built. Tall as a three-story house, about ninety-eight feet in length, and twenty feet wide, and weighing approximately ninety tons, this large wooden vessel has the unmistakable look of an ark.

The Ark is the work of a woman, Kea Tawana, who is now in her late forties. Kea, as she likes to be called, has put more than a decade of her life into collecting and assembling materials from abandoned buildings. The Ark is made of wood, metal, and equipment coming from more than fifty buildings throughout the city--from houses, banks, factories, commercial facilities and even an orphanage. The construction is that of a sturdy, oversize, nineteenth-century boat. It has been made using simple carpenter's tools according to plans taken from books on naval construction that Kea found in abandoned houses and used-book stores.

Kea has carried uphill and through deserted midnight streets heavy beams, metal storage tanks, and boards. She has used shopping carts to haul these and other materials--about 300 tons worth--to "the shipyard" on a lot next to the church. Newark policemen on night patrol got used to the sight of a person pushing loads of debris through the desolate city; they viewed her, she says, as insane.

Needed materials that she could not find or that were too heavy to carry were procured in other ways. Thus the unused spare electric motor from an elevator, still in perfect condition, oil tanks, generators and engines were delivered to her on trucks in exchange for her labor or for items that she had collected. Often, expensive manufactured products made a quarter of a century ago could be had for free. There was probably enough lying around in Newark's abandoned factories and lots to supply an industrial town of more than one hundred thousand people. Today, as the city has cleaned up many of these sites, it would no longer be possible to collect so much material.

Five years ago, local residents who had become accustomed to buildings being burnt, abandoned and vandalized, started to pay attention to something new and different: the rib cage of the boat beginning its slow rise over the fence on the Camden Street-side of the empty lot. Children passing by would ask Kea with interest, "When are you going to finish it?" They were able to identify with the boat in a way hardly possible with any of the new corporate buildings downtown.

A dozen years ago, when Kea began building a house and a

storage shed for her materials, the surrounding neighborhood was in a state of extreme urban decay. Over the years, things got worse. She saw the building across the street go up in flames and one next to the boat became abandoned. A haunt of drug-dealers, a bar on the corner of Fifteenth and Camden was also burned, much to the relief of Kea and the congregation of the Humanity Baptist Church.

The Ark is located a block away from the New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry. The tension and displacement brought about by the expansion of the College facilities in the late sixties has been identified as a major cause of the 1967 Newark riots. Fifteen years later the large institutions remaining in Newark created a non-profit organization called "New Community Corporation" whose goal was to build housing for lower-middle income families in the Central Ward. New Community bought the land under the boat and last year sent Kea a letter with a heading saying "RE: Boat" demanding that she remove the structure by April 15 of 1986. New Community contracted a demolition company to send a bulldozer to destroy the Ark. Thus the materials once junked in their older form as part of the city's fabric would suffer the second disgrace of being discarded in their reincarnation as a boat.

In order to avoid the wreckers, Kea devised an ingenious system to move the Ark twenty-five feet into the parking lot of the Humanity Baptist Church. After four days of almost non-stop, back-breaking labor, she moved the boat to the lot where it now safely rests and continues to grow. After her effort, Kea went to the hospital to be told that her bones were at their breaking point.

Today the Ark, a monument to the city of Newark, a witness to the destruction of an urban way of life, survives in an uneasy peace in the surroundings. Built without a building permit, according to the City Engineer Alvin Zach, it "has to go"--once again before mid-April. An official of the building inspector's office remarked, "I don't care if it is finished and overlaid with gold; we will tear it up."

Will it ever reach completion? Will its worth be widely recognized, or only by passersby and local residents? Or will it soon become a legend and a memory? Will this symbol of past destruction and new hope be rendered just one additional failure by the City of Newark?