

Navy Yard companies collaborate to conquer

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Asked recently to build display furniture for a new Manhattan clothing boutique, Susan Woods quickly said yes, even though she knew instantly that much of the work was beyond her capabilities.

Ms. Woods, a furniture designer and fabricator, wasn't crazy: She knew exactly where to turn to fill in the gaps. She called in two of her Brooklyn Navy Yard neighbors. To make the cushion she was designing, she went to Gianni Upholstering. For three tables that needed lacquering, she contacted Euro Antique Restoration.

"We help each other out," says Ms. Woods, who regularly trades projects with her neighbors.

As a place for manufacturing, New York City is usually known for its disadvantages, such as high rents and congested streets. But experts say that one of the city's greatest assets is often overlooked—the sheer number and diversity of small businesses, and the opportunities those numbers create for business owners to band together.

"Collaborating with somebody else lets you meet a client's needs without making a large investment," says Edward Rogoff, professor of management at Baruch College.

In certain manufacturing neighborhoods, like Hunts Point in the Bronx and Long Island City, Queens, there are enough craftspeople, couriers and designers within shouting distance to function almost as extensions of each other's business. Nowhere are those joint efforts easier or more common than behind the high walls of the 300-acre Brooklyn Navy Yard. There, over 200 firms, many of them tiny to small, have forged some uncommonly close and productive bonds.