

EDITORIAL

Plugging the hole on Illegal Hotels

Last week, we were happy to report a breakthrough in the battle by city officials and tenant advocates to stop landlords from turning their buildings into illegal hotels, with the city's first-ever injunction against one such owner.

The nature of the problem, which has been festering for years, is clear: With Manhattan's still-surging real estate market, the money to be made renting residential-building apartments to tourists is too enticing to turn down, luring not only individual landlords but major capital firms and corporations into the fray. With Manhattan apartment vacancy rates of less than 1 percent and an 85 percent occupancy rate for the city's 75,000 hotel rooms, nightly rentals—even at “bargain” rates of \$100–\$150—can be far more profitable for building owners than even market-rate apartments, let alone rent-stabilized units. Consequently, an increasing number of rent-regulated buildings throughout the city are being targeted by corporations and real estate investment firms for conversion to transient hotels, albeit illegally.

Nearly 100 such buildings are on a list compiled by advocacy groups, where tenants report increased crime, luggage and excess noise in their hallways, dilapidated buildings that are not up to hotel code, and worst of all, landlords trying to harass them into leaving. While rent-stabilized buildings and SROs are most vulnerable, market-rate tenants are not immune: As we write this, a caller to our office reports that tenants in a market-rate building on Bank Street have been told their leases will not be renewed because the owner will be renting to tourists.

Building owners who flout the city's 46-year-old zoning laws—while advertising openly on Websites such as Travelocity and Expedia—get away with such flagrant violations because of a muddled patchwork of weak laws that let owners off with minimal fines, which amount to a cost of doing business—or a slap on the wrist.

Last year, a coalition of advocates and legislators created the Illegal Hotels Working Group to address the problem, bringing together the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development, Department of Buildings and the Mayor's Office of Special Enforcement (OSE) to develop a strategy and bolster enforcement. In January, City Councilmember Gale Brewer, State Senator Liz Krueger and State Assemblyman Richard Gottfried promised new legislation with teeth, which would substantially increase D.O.B. fines, tighten the legal definition of “residential” and empower the city to do its own enforcement. Brewer then introduced a bill to the City Council in March, which got little support. Gottfried is circulating a draft of a bill in Albany. And the Working Group is still waiting for Mayor Bloomberg to take the lead in demanding bold new legislation that fixes ambiguities in the law that harm the city's residential housing stock, while developing new models for extended-day housing.

The stock of affordable housing in Manhattan is dwindling, and illegal hotels are only adding to the crisis. Only strong legal and enforcement mechanisms working hand-in-hand will begin to solve the problem. While we applaud the mayor's recent strengthening of the OSE, the need for new legislation is abundantly clear. We urge the City Council and the mayor to act soon. As Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer said last week: “We can't be slow to act in housing matters—it's too important.”

SEND YOUR

Letter to the Editor

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C LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Pedicab presence

To The Editor:

I've taken a Pedicab. Have you? Everybody is talking about them, but it seems very few of us Manhattanites have actually taken one. Somehow they don't seem like they're for us. They're for tourists, right? After all, we have our own cabs—real cabs. TAXI cabs.

I took a pedicab one night around the 5 p.m. rush because there were no real cabs in sight and I had to get across town. I thought the pedicab might be able to weave and wobble through traffic and get me there a little faster. To the peddler's credit, he did get me there a little faster. A little friendlier, too. Surprisingly, through all that huffing and puffing he was somehow able to make nice conversation!

There was something a little disconcerting about the whole experience though. In a real cab, I've never worried that they might just not make it. The only physical effort I've seen expended in this type of endeavor is the application of slight foot pressure to the gas and brake pedals of a car. But this poor guy was applying extreme pressure to bicycle pedals, throwing the entire weight of his body into the effort. As he pedaled furiously across town and up small grades, it finally became apparent that the human body—at least his human body—was capable of far more than I had imagined.

The accomplishment of this physical feat left me with more than a tinge of guilt, though, at tip time. I felt I should give him \$100. I felt uneasy about giving him a 10 percent or even a 50 percent tip. It seemed so small compared to the great physical effort he had put into it. As a white-collar worker who expends no physical energy at work myself, how could I justify a paltry 20 percent tip for putting in more physical labor in a single ride than I'd put in during the entire next month?

Perhaps the recent legislation on pedicabs ought to have not banned electric-assist motors, which would help these “drivers” while going a long way toward assuaging passenger guilt. That would be a win-win situation we could all live with—and still good for the environment. Who can argue with that?

Jonathan Couser

Couser is the founder of the blog Clickyourblock.com

Keep Chelsea affordable

To the Editor,

I read with great interest the interview with Velma Murphy-Hill in the September 7–13 issue of Chelsea Now. I might add, I really appreciate the series of interviews with community folks in Chelsea. It could prove to be a tool to encourage more, much needed, participation on the part all of us to keep our neighborhood the vibrant, diverse community that has made Chelsea so special.

I found Velma's history of her participation in the

Civil Rights struggle most moving and impressive.

Just to add to information about the battle for the inclusion of affordable housing during the recent West Chelsea rezoning: The first meeting of what was to become Afford Chelsea was an unimpressive three grown-ups and one child: Miguel Acevedo, Chelsea activist, Miriam Rabban, then employed at Hudson Guild and who came up with the concept, and me, Gloria Sukenick, longtime housing activist, plus Miguel's young daughter, who slept through much of the meeting.

Ultimately, we reached out to many more Chelsea neighbors and brought the crisis that plagues the whole city—no affordable housing for the many people who make this city work—to the forefront. It could no longer be ignored, not with the huge number of folks turning out at meetings and demonstrations.

The creation of a city that only houses those with very big pockets is where we're headed. We won the promise of 27 percent affordable housing. but that's, so far, what it is—a promise.

Much of the struggle for housing remains. Any volunteers?

Gloria Sukenick

Dealing with 9/11

To The Editor:

I have been disturbed by the many comments that were made in the press leading up to this year's 9/11 anniversary, in which we were told it was time to “get over it.” Like so many others, the course of my life was completely altered when Downtown was

attacked. And, of course, thousands of lives were not only changed but ended. While being able to live fully and joyfully is indeed healthy, I do not believe it would ever be appropriate to walk away from one of the most traumatic days in our nation's history.

I have also been disturbed, however, by the way in which many people have responded by these calls for us to “get over it.” While I agree in principle, but not in practice, with those who responded with name-calling and bitter invectives, there seems to be

a knee-jerk reaction among many to interpret a difference of opinion as a personal insult, and to respond with anger rather than logic.

And then there is Alyson Low's letter of this past week, in which she firmly yet respectfully took issue with your Sept. 14 editorial [“A date that changes with time”]. She did not hurl insults, but rather beautifully explained better that I could that living our lives and mourning our losses are not mutually exclusive.

Thank you, Alyson, for your gracious and compassionate letter.

Rachel Snyder

MIKHAELA REID

