

Chelsea now



Gerald Busby, p. 10

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Yet another subway plan fans fears in Mulry Sq.

BY ALBERT AMATEAU

Villagers are bracing for another construction onslaught from New York City Transit, which intends to build an emergency ventilation plant at Mulry Square to serve the Eighth Ave. and Seventh Ave. subway lines.

The project, with an anticipated four-year construction period from 2009 to 2012, follows a similar NYC Transit ventilation plant construction on W. 13th St. at Sixth Ave., a block away from the Mulry Square site, that took nearly five years, instead of the anticipated three, and was not completed until early this year.

To make matters worse, the site of the

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Ruslan crafts shoes the old-fashioned way

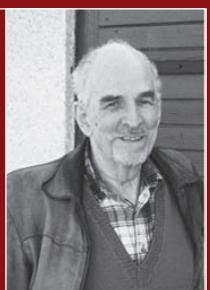
BY TABITHA EARP

At the back of a tiny Chelsea store named Ruslan a few weeks ago, a balding, barrel-chested man in jeans and a sleeveless black T-shirt carefully swayed side-to-side in front of 50-year-old Russian machinery, his rough hands holding an alligator-skinned boot as he delicately finished the edges and securely attached the soles and heels. Around him was a visual cacophony items, including an array of fur hats, boots with protruding snake heads, and purses covered in zebra fur. Just

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Chelsea Now photo by Jefferson Siegel

Members of the Hotel Breslin Tenants Association broadcast their intentions recently at the association's one-year anniversary gathering.

Hotel Breslin tenants fight back as investors move in

C FIRST IN A SERIES

BY CHRIS LOMBARDI

Jewelry designer Margi Foster, a tall former flight attendant with glossy black hair and a ready smile, laughs when she talks about how she found the Hotel Breslin.

Foster, who left American Airlines for nearly 20 years, now works with strands of crystal and stone in her small studio on West 30th Street. When she found out about a room at the residential hotel just a few blocks away, at 1186 Broadway, she jumped at the chance, she told Chelsea Now last Wednesday. "It's been wonderful for me," said Foster, who acknowledged she also liked the mix of her neighbors, many of whom are fellow designers and writers.

But then things started to change.

When the room next door to Foster's came vacant last spring, she told some friends who she hoped might move in. But every time she asked the management, "What's up with 4J?" she was ignored. Weeks went by, and the unit was never rented. Meanwhile, said Foster, ordinary repairs, which had never been a problem at the Breslin, "were happening more and more slowly—if at all."

Then, she said, the manager started bringing men in \$500 suits to look at that apartment. "He would come by with some bankers," said Foster. "I didn't know they were bankers. I just knew they were men in suits, investor-types."

Soon the front desk declared that the Breslin had no apartments or rooms available, despite the increasing number of empty rooms at the hotel. Foster and her neighbors started asking one another, "What do you think is going on?"

The next thing they knew, the Broadway Breslin Tenants Association was in business.

Foster and other members spoke to Chelsea Now at the group's anniversary party last Wednesday, less than a month after many of them testified at a city hearing where they asked a judge not to allow the building to become a luxury hotel. The party was filmed for a documentary-in-progress by filmmaker and Breslin resident Nick Schlyer, who said: "We're under siege, here."

The 103-year old Breslin, which for more than 50 years has hosted a mix of rent-stabilized SRO tenants in its 344 units, is now suddenly awash in controversy. As the building's owners have invited investors and applied to convert the hotel for transient use, many of its rent-stabilized tenants are fighting the changes. In June, both the owners and tenants testified before a city administrative law judge about the "certificate of non-harassment" required by law for such construction.

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Hotel Breslin tenants fight as investors move in

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While both sides await the judge's decision, it seems clear that to all the parties involved, the stakes are way too high to give up easily.

A TIME OF GLAMOUR

On November 13, 1904, the New York Times ran a one-inch news brief: HOTEL BRESLIN OPENS, noting that hotelier James H. Breslin's newest project, built for "about \$1,000,000," was said to have received "thronges of visitors" to its 300-plus rooms and contained a novel "ladies' grill room" in addition to the formal dining room.

The Breslin thus joined the ranks of hundreds of other residential hotels, most gone now: Breslin's own Gilsey House across the street, and Hotel Wolcott on 32nd Street; the Cornish Arms and venerable Hotel Chelsea on 23rd Street; and the Hotel Imperial on 22nd Street, which advertised in 1939: "IF YOU CAN'T move your business closer to your home, YOU CAN move closer to your business in this centrally located hotel."

Over the years, the Breslin was inhabited by a blend of weekly or monthly tenants and sometimes-glamorous transient visitors, its proximity to the old Madison Square Garden luring boxers like Joe Lewis and Gene Tunney. The hotel also hosted public events, some political (including party conventions), some commercial and many historic. In 1926, the genteel but determined "ladies" of the International Women's League for Peace and Freedom stormed the hotel's annual Toy Fair, threatening a boycott unless toy manufacturers stopped producing war toys.

Five years later, Civil War veterans, none younger than 82, gathered in its dining room. And in 1946, the War Department secured 72 rooms as temporary veterans' housing for the 77th Infantry. There were also famous arrests: the 1920s con artist Connie Chadwick lived and was apprehended at the Breslin, and in 1951 W.E.B. du Bois, author of "The Souls of Black Folk" and a co-founder of the NAACP, was arrested at age 83 for promoting his anti-Korean War, and thus "Communist," Peace Information Center.

A TIME FOR ECCENTRICS

In the 1960s and 1970s, as the city's climate changed, so did the hotel. In addition to eccentric hermits like painter Del Art (James DeLoatch), who to this day lives on the 11th floor and who painted a mural for the NAACP in 1963, and Allen Ginsberg's composer-painter friend Harry Smith, the Breslin sheltered some more marginal figures, according to housing attorney Susan Cohen, including, a substantial number of what she called "the transvestites."

"They were very careful, these women," said Cohen, now with Legal Services of New York, of the Breslin's transgender residents.

In 1981, all SRO's in New York came under rent-stabilization, offering even the most marginal tenants protection—in some cases, greater than that afforded by conventional rent-stabilized apartments. If an SRO tenant has lived in the same room for 30 days or longer, whether or not they have a lease or had asked for one, they cannot be evicted without a court order. SRO building owners are specifically prohibited from harassing SRO tenants in order to get them to move, and from doing substantial work on the building without tenants attesting that they have not been so harassed.

But when the economy began to boom in the mid-1980s, landlord Edward Haddad, who had secured a 99-year lease on the Hotel Breslin in the 1950s, began to try to change things. According to Cohen, who was then with MFY Legal Services, "Suddenly he wanted to make apartments," and got started without permits. In 1984, Cohen secured a stop-work order on behalf of the tenants, although not before the workmen had already created a number of apartments, attaching kitchens and bathrooms to some of the larger rooms.

"He also began advertising, and getting a more upscale kind of tenant," said Cohen, which meant people like Foster, or musician and multimedia artist Stephen Colvin, who arrived in 1984.



An old postcard of the glamorous Hotel Breslin. On the back it reads: "The high-class hotel with moderate rates."

'I always thought that, by the time they built all these new high-rises, I'd be rich and be able to afford it.'

Timothy Weston, Hotel Breslin resident

Other changes, said Cohen, included the addition of a tenant TV room, near the lobby. "He put it in because before, the longtime tenants used to sit in chairs and hang out in the lobby, and he didn't want to scare the upscale tenants!"

Most of those newer residents, like Foster and Colvin, now tenant association president, didn't consider themselves particularly upscale. As the raging 1980s economy gave way to the slacker 1990s and rents citywide actually plunged, the boom of the late 1990s failed to gentrify Chelsea/Herald Square much. Marveling that such a bargain as a room for \$900 a month still existed, crafts artist, writers, actors and teachers found their way onto the Hotel Breslin's rent rolls.

Lacrazia Duchain, a glove maker who resides in the Breslin, told Chelsea Now last week that management never expressly told her she was renting an SRO. "I had no idea," she said, since she has a bathroom in her apartment. The number of tenants similarly unaware appears to have increased in recent years, after Breslin advertisements appeared on Japanese-, Chinese- and Korean-language Websites, boasting of the "pink building's" unbeatable rents and three-block walk to Koreatown. The word "SRO" appeared nowhere in the listings.

A TIME FOR FEAR

But in more recent years, the buzz around the blighted Tin Pan Alley began to hum.

New residential towers like Tower 31 and the Epic (both on West 31st Street, near the Breslin) went from drawings to glitzy reality, and the commercial real

estate giant Vornado announced plans to raze the Hotel Pennsylvania and build a multi-use complex big enough to have its own trading floors. "Dynamism Erupts in Herald Square," glowed the New York Sun this past January, stating that "more than 20 office, retail, residential and hotel development projects in the vicinity, combined with the prospect of a dazzling redevelopment of the current site of Madison Square Garden, will remake the neighborhood in the next decade." Investors were reported in the business press to be waiting for Vornado before deciding where to invest, but one likely area was hotels, since the Pennsylvania's 1,000 rooms will not be easy to replace.

The Breslin, an existing hotel in the right place, was therefore precisely the environment for a firm like GFI Real Estate Partners, a division of GFI Capital Resources Group, a capital investment firm whose Website declares that the firm "purchases undervalued and underperforming real estate from different lenders." Currently, at least one of GFI's employees lives in the Breslin and is working with Breslin management as they pursue this conversion. At press time, it is still not clear whether GFI had actually bought the Breslin lease from Haddad, or whether they represent investors who want more proof that the hotel can be converted.

A TIME TO ORGANIZE

As Margi Foster started noticing the "bankers" (including representatives from GFI) on her floor last spring, her neighbor Sharon Gill, a clothing designer, overheard workmen in the building saying that the Breslin was about to be sold. And tenants began to be asked to sign a form that would help Haddad and his investors: a statement that they had not been harassed, so that the Department of Housing and Urban Development would issue the Certificate of No Harassment conversion required for work to proceed.

When Lacrazia Duchain got the form, she called her friend Stephen Colvin and said, "We should have a meeting—at my church!" She meant the famous Marble Collegiate Church at 1 West 29th St. The church agreed to host the meeting, and by all accounts, it was both an electrifying and sobering event.

"That first meeting was pretty scary," said documentary filmmaker Nick Schyler, who had never met any of his neighbors but decided to show up at the July 29, 2006, meeting. Hundreds of tenants surged into the space, some of them crying and most of them angry. "I heard stuff—stuff even I had no idea they were doing," said Foster.

In addition to forming an association, the tenants found two lawyers who would work on their case. One was Susan Cohen, of LSNY, who Colvin called after he learned she had successfully fought Haddad in the 1980s. The other was Molly McDonough, of the Goddard Riverside SRO Law Project, which has been working with West Side SRO tenants since 1981. McDonough told Chelsea Now last week that she has frequently seen building owners try to skirt the rules on SRO conversions, though "for a long time, what we were seeing was smaller buildings." The size alone of the Breslin, with its 11 floors and 344 rooms, set it apart.

Cohen and McDonough began to collect tenant histories to explore the possibility of harassment by Haddad and GFI. And the tenants began to do their own investigation, by approaching older, reserved tenants and getting the many tenants with limited English proficiency to write their stories down in their own language. Meanwhile Haddad, his building manager, Robert Carolann, and GFI Associate Adam Cassidy, prepared their own packets to go to HPD.

In the fall of 2006, HPD determined that there was "reasonable cause for suspicion" that harassment had occurred at the Breslin, and set a hearing date for the end of May 2007. By the time of the hearing, a year after that first tenant meeting, only 150 rooms were still occupied, but Colvin, Foster, Duchain and the rest were prepared to go the distance.

"I always thought that, by the time they built all these new high-rises, I'd be rich and be able to afford it," artist Timothy Weston told Breslin resident Nick Schyler for his documentary film. "That did not happen. I'm here now, and I'm not prepared to go without a fight."

(Next week: A report on the June hearing, more from GFI and Haddad, and what the future may bring)