

From flophouse to boutique: A recent history of the Hotel Chelsea

C SECOND IN A SERIES ON THE HOTEL CHELSEA—PAST AND PRESENT

BY ED HAMILTON

The Chelsea Hotel is a much different place now than it was in the mid-1990s, when my girlfriend, Debbie Martin, and I moved in. Back then, the hallways were carpeted with worn linoleum squares in a black-and-white checkerboard pattern and illuminated by long, bare, flickering fluorescent tubes. The transient rooms were furnished with a mixture of cheap, broken-down, 1950s hotel furniture and odd, rickety antiques of an earlier era. Standards of cleanliness were on the order of a Bowery flophouse. (Good luck getting your sheets changed.) The place was, in other words, grimly beautiful: A seedier Bohemian vibe would be hard to imagine.

Gentrification of the Chelsea neighborhood has fueled a slow but sure turnabout. First the management redid the hallways, installing shining globes and inlaid wood floors, repainting the stairwell in (a somewhat ill-advised) pastel green and peach. Then they started in on the rooms, refinishing the original wood floors, stripping away the layers of paint to reveal the ornate, red wood moldings—this was originally a luxury condo building, after all—and installing tasteful modern furniture reminiscent of a boutique hotel. Miraculously, most of the rooms these days even have large, flat-screen TVs—and a price to match. There is a lot more art hanging throughout the hotel, too, much of it quite good, since there's less fear that a drunk or a speed

freak will destroy a painting in a fit of rage or mischief.

Unlike most of the residents, who tend to land here by accident, Debbie and I had long wanted to live in the Chelsea, which we knew to have been home to a long line of our favorite writers and singers, including Thomas Wolfe and Leonard Cohen. So, when we decided to move to New York in the winter of 1995, this was the first place we tried. The magic began on our very first night: In the early morning hours, unable to sleep because of the excitement of our new surroundings, I ventured down the hall to the shared bathroom, only to be startled by a huge, wild-haired, sword-wielding man lurking around the corner. He was practicing for a role in a Shakespeare play, he explained drunkenly, and had hidden behind the wall because he didn't want to frighten me.

That incident pretty much set the tone for the next few years, the last of the bad old days when the halls were ruled by junkies and prostitutes. I remember coming home one time and being greeted by a blonde-wigged old woman, who was screaming that the management had sent the exterminators to gas her—as I was to learn, a fairly common delusion for Chelsea schizophrenics. She had the window open in her room in the middle of February, and it was freezing cold in the hallway. The poor woman screamed long into the night, and the next night as well. No need to throw her out as long as she could pay.

Try as we might to keep the door locked, we couldn't prevent junkies from

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shooting up in our bathroom, leaving their blood and needles behind. (We later discovered it was the former bathroom of beat writer, Times Square hustler and notorious junkie Herbert Huncke, who had died the year before we moved to his floor.) Drunks regularly attempted to get into our room late at night—and often succeeded, their hotel keys fitting our locks. And one time, Dee Dee Ramone, of the punk rock group The Ramones, his tattoo-covered body clad only in jockey shorts, challenged a noisy construction worker to a knife fight in the hallway. (Fortunately,

nothing came of it.)

It may sound like a crazy situation—and it was—but through it all, there remained a pervasive sense of the creativity all around us: Artists were working, producing; I myself was writing at a feverish pace, like never before, drinking beer and cranking out short stories and novels. Who cared if they never got published. I was living the life, and it would go on forever, right? The manic Japanese artist Hiroya lived across the hall from us, and he would daily accost tourists in the lobby and drag them upstairs for a whirlwind hallway showing of his wild, graffiti-inspired paintings. Hiroya's fervent antics exemplified the edgy, avant-garde vibe of the hotel, which was exhilarating, like no place else on earth. At one point, the singer Ryan Adams lived next door to us, working on his first album, it turned out—though his guitar was generally drowned out by someone on the floor above playing The Willie Nelson Christmas Album over and over at full volume.

As with the physical appearance of the hotel, the change in the atmosphere was gradual. As the hotel became more expensive, fewer junkies and schizophrenics could afford it. Though there's a certain romance about living among such people, in practice it's another matter, and I must admit I was glad to see them go. On the other hand, it used to be hilarious to see the horrified reactions of Midwestern tourists when they accidentally checked into this place, thinking it a normal hotel—

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Now That's Amore . . .

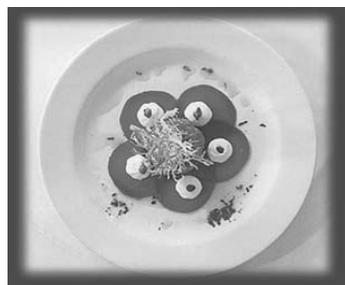


"Fantastic" Northern Italian food provides the grace notes at at this "dark" TriBeCa "cocoon" known for its "gratis grappa cart" and a tuxedoed staff "so attentive they'll catch your napkin before it hits the floor"; in short, expect to "feel like royalty", so long as "money is no object."

-Zagat 2005

"Absolutely fabulous food" and Oscar-worthy performances" from an "extremely attentive" staff light up this "dark" yet "elegant" TriBeCa Italian; yes it can "make an expense account blush," but at least the signature "wicked" postprandial grappa's free.

-Zagat 2006



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Happy Valentines Day To One & All with Love - from Sergio & Timmy



Chelsea Now photo by Lawrence Lerner

The towering neon sign and classic awning on the exterior of the Hotel Chelsea

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especially if they encountered Hiroya! But it has become less and less numerous over the years, as the only thing the Kansans and Nebraskans find shocking now is the price.

Though it's painful to put it this way, 9/11 gave the hotel a respite from the swift advance of gentrification. For a couple of years, virtually no one wanted to visit New York, much less live here. However, as it was for so many other things, 9/11 turned out to be the beginning of the end for the old, seedy incarnation of the hotel. Hiroya, once again, typifies for me this transition.

The events of 9/11 weighed heavily on Hiroya's mind, and it was part of what led him to increase his drug intake. He knew he had to get out of the hotel for his own sanity, and sometime in 2003, he went into a rehab program on Long Island. Always a polarizing figure, when he came back a year later there was, for whatever reason, no longer a room available for him in the Chelsea. Having outlived his era, Hiroya checked into the Gershwin Hotel on 27th Street and died of a drug overdose. As so often happens in drug cases, it was never quite clear whether the death was intentional or accidental.

Debbie and I took a new direction as well. It was partly in response to such tragedies, and to witnessing the passing of the old hotel, that we were inspired in April 2004 to start our blog, Living With Legends: Hotel Chelsea Blog. Though our intent was to document the remnants of the eccentric community of artists that had thrived in the past, paradoxically, the blog helped knit together a new community built on the ashes of the old; it is a community of serious, hardworking artists rather than the shooting stars who tended to dominate the old Chelsea. Many of these people had stayed hidden away in their rooms, hard at work, in the old days; now they were united in a dawning realization that no one could go on like before.

All kinds of rumors were swirling: One month the hotel was to be sold to a condo developer, the next month to a boutique hotel chain. Realizing that many of these artists were not well known because of their more retiring work ethic, we shifted the blog's focus and began publicizing their various projects. We hoped that by placing these projects in the context of the hotel's rich history, the blog would show how the past informs and valorizes the work of these artists, all of whom are driven by the desire to leave something behind to link them to the collective memory of the hotel

before this last vestige of the Bohemia passes into dust.

Undoubtedly, the Chelsea used to boast a more colorful crew. Just the other day, I was talking with a woman who has been here since the 1970s, and she just happened to mention that the Warhol superstars Candy Darling and Holly Woodlawn lived on our wing of the hotel. But I like to believe the characters who are left are better balanced, though of course that term is relative. Eccentricity still abounds, albeit with a slightly more erudite aspect: Walk into the lobby at any time of day or night, and you're liable to overhear a learned discussion on the art of Larry Rivers or Philip Taaffe, examples of whose work adorn the walls surrounding you, or a heated argument over the merits of 1950s sci-fi movies. Have a seat: It's free, and most likely, if you stick around for long enough, you'll become involved in the discourse yourself. Best of all, in contrast to previous years, you're unlikely to be accosted by a crazy person.

Finally, no discussion of the Chelsea would be complete without mentioning Stanley Bard, the dapper, genial, older gentleman who stands behind the hotel's front desk, warmly greeting guests as he has, seemingly forever. Mr. Bard is our hotel manager, the man who created and nurtured the artistic climate of the Chelsea Hotel in his nearly 50 years at the helm.

During that time, he has been extraordinarily generous to creative types, giving them a place in the city when no one else would, and even, legend has it, at times going so far as to accept a painting in lieu of rent. But to call him simply a kindly old man and a patron of the arts does not do him justice. Bard is also a shrewd businessman. For the last half-century, Chelsea was

a depressed neighborhood and the hotel little more than a flophouse. In the early 1960s, there was talk of condemning the place, because it had gotten severely run down. If Bard hadn't been willing to rent to writers and artists, the only other choice would have been junkies and prostitutes—and certainly, he was forced to put up with his share of them as well. At least an artist might get rich and pay him back someday.

But things have changed in the new century. The Chelsea neighborhood is currently among the most desirable in New York, and now that the 72-year-old Mr. Bard can make money from tourists and rich dilettantes, who can blame him? He has a board of directors breathing down his neck as well: The Chelsea Hotel has become such a cash cow that they are no longer intent to leave Bard to his own devices as they once did. Our little artistic retreat has been protected from market forces by Mr. Bard to a great extent over the years, but even more so by the fact that this place has only recently become remotely attractive to the rich.

Through it all, the famous creative energy of the Chelsea has remained undiminished, and in fact appreciation of our special aura has increased dramatically among the wider populace. In years past, when I told people I lived at the Chelsea Hotel, their reaction used to be, "Oh my god, how can you live in that place?" coupled with a sort of horrified shrinking away. Now they ask, "How can I get a place there?"

At the same time, young artists who used to express a desire to move to the Chelsea to live a Spartan existence in service to their art now want to make a million dollars so they can afford a luxury suite here.

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