If These Walls Could Talk

BY JAY CHESHES

Over the past century, some of the world’s most iconic artists have called Hotel Chelsea home. Now, after a lengthy renovation, it’s welcoming a new generation of guests.

In 1884, it had been sort of maintained with Scotch tape and paper clips,” says MacPherson, the hotel’s former manager, “like little has changed since work began on one of the most deluxe rooms in the hotel.

The mid-1960s, when his son Stanley, then 29 and working as an accountant, took over. The Chelsea was becoming a veritable “Ellis Island of the avant-garde,” as one journalist described it in 1960. French fashion icon Yves Klein, in town for a show in 1961, rented the Chelsea Hotel’s Menil Room as a response to his critics. Niki de Saint Phalle filled the 10th floor with her whimsical art. Christo swiped the doorknob to his room for an installation at the Leo Castelli Gallery.

BEFORE IT WAS A hotel, the 12-story structure at 222 West 23rd Street was the Chelsea Association Building, one of New York’s first cooperative housing experiments—and one of the largest residential buildings in the city in the 1880s. It was called for a cross-section of professions and incomes among the residential apartments, with 15 sun-drenched artist studios on the top floor (today, some of the most deluxe rooms in the hotel).

In 1905 the social experiment gave way to a hybrid of like excavation,” says hotelier David Bard and his brother-in-law Frank Amigo bought the building out of foreclosure in the 1940s, around the time Jackson Pollock drank himself sick at a luncheon at the Chelsea hosted by Peggy Guggenheim. Bard was joined by partners Julius Krauss and Joseph Gross a few years later and ran the hotel until his death in the mid-1960s, when his son Stanley, then 29 and working as an accountant, took over. The Chelsea was becoming a veritable “Ellis Island of the avant-garde,” as one journalist described it in 1960. French fashion icon Yves Klein, in town for a show in 1961, rented the Chelsea Hotel’s Menil Room as a response to his critics. Niki de Saint Phalle filled the 10th floor with her whimsical art. Christo swiped the doorknob to his room for an installation at the Leo Castelli Gallery.

For 43 years, Stanley Bard curated the eclectic crowd at the Chelsea as if working the door at Studio 54, doling out prime spots to celebrities and rent breaks to struggling artists, who often settled their bills with work that was then hung around the building. “There was a lot of wheeling and dealing,” says Ethan Hawke, who kept an office there for a decade, directing his first feature film, Before Sunrise, in room 606. “If [Stanley] liked you, you got one price; if he was mad at you, you got another price,” Hawke says. “He wanted me there, because the more celebrity sightings there were in the lobby, the higher he could jack the tourists.”

Bard ran the Chelsea with his own set of rules and little official paperwork—long-term tenants worked out handshake deals that allowed them to break through walls, annexing adjacent apartments. “When I became pregnant, I went to Stanley and said, ‘I need more space,’” says artist, curator and event producer Suzanne Barsch, who has lived at the Chelsea since

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there. Jack Kerouac, who lived at the Chelsea while working on On the Road, palled ...
to Marianne Ihlen from resident Leonard Cohen, 1974; Patti Smith on the hotel’s 
feature kitchens; the retro styling of the hotel rooms is a testament to how the building has managed to create a balance between the past and present.

Clockwise from left: Some of the hotel’s new guest rooms; One of the hotel’s new restored wide spiral staircases, hide the hotel’s original dining armchairs by Adrian Pearsall, it still looks much as it did in the late ’60s when Betsey Johnson used to hang out; you can probably buy them out.’

In the late 40s, the hotel was a frequent setting for film. Nico, working on her second album, at a piano on the Chelsea’s famous wide spiral staircase; Rufus Wainwright, a former Chelsea resident, says, “I’d take my toothbrush and go to the Chelsea.”

As the hotel has aged, so too has its clientele. As new owners, developer Joseph Chetrit and partners, 2007 the heirs to his father’s original partners from the 1940s, considering a sale of the property, teamed up with the Chelsea as possible,” MacPherson says. “We tried to, if not maintain, at least to keep the hotel in the same kind of condition, to keep the hotel, you know, as it was. We didn’t want to change too much.”

Six years later, the hotel is still under renovation. “It’s a giant living room for the hotel,” says MacPherson. “We tried to design it in a way that it would be welcoming and comfortable for everyone. The rooms are becoming public space, featuring a grand piano, and original art as far as the eye can see. ‘It’s a giant living room for the hotel,’ says MacPherson.

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to Marianne Ihlen from resident Leonard Cohen, 1974; Patti Smith on the hotel’s balcony, 1971.

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