

NEW YORK STATE OF MIND

The newly restored and recently reopened El Quijote restaurant, from inside Hotel Chelsea. The original bar, where Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe were once regulars, remains. Opposite: Janis Joplin outside the hotel, 1969.



If These Walls Could Talk

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.

BY JAY CHESHES

WE'VE DONE everything we can to restore it to the original...kind of like excavation," says hotelier Sean MacPherson, pointing out marquee lights that were unearthed near the red-and-white-striped awning outside New York's fabled Hotel Chelsea (better known as the Chelsea Hotel), which has been under renovation for the past decade and a protected landmark since 1966.

For more than a century, the hotel rooms and residential apartments have been a magnet for painters, actors, dancers, novelists, playwrights and musicians. Former regulars at "New York's most illustrious third-rate hotel," as it was described by *Life* magazine in 1964, relished the notoriety of a place where Leonard Cohen immortalized his one-night stand with Janis Joplin in song ("I remember you well in the Chelsea Hotel"); where Dylan Thomas, at 39, drank himself into an early grave; where would-be Warhol assassin Valerie Solanas passed out her *SCUM Manifesto* in the lobby; where Sid Vicious allegedly stabbed girlfriend Nancy Spungen in 1978.

This summer the Chelsea (its popular shorthand)—backdrop for Andy Warhol's *The Chelsea Girls*, for Joseph O'Neill's bestseller *Netherland*, for Joni Mitchell's "Chelsea Morning" and Bob Dylan's "Sara" ("Stayin' up for days in the Chelsea Hotel")—will begin fully welcoming guests again. In a few weeks the scaffolding that has covered its Queen Anne revival-meets-Victorian gothic facade for the past 11 years will finally come down, revealing red bricks and iron balconies restored to their original 19th-century state. From the outside it might look like little has changed since work began on one of the city's longest and most contentious renovation projects, limping through three sets of developers, countless lawsuits, a stop-work order and a pandemic. Major upgrades, though, are hiding inside.

The famously raffish hotel, largely closed to new guests since 2011 but still occupied by full-time residents, began to soft open in March, renting the first of its 155 updated rooms at discounted rates. "This building really hadn't been restored since it was built



to have slept in her own custom-made coffin, and the writer Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain. Thomas Wolfe lived in room 829 in the late 1930s, spending some of his final days there writing his masterpiece, *You Can't Go Home Again*, published after his death.

By World War II, the Chelsea was struggling. According to Sherill Tippins's 2013 book, *Inside the Dream Palace*, 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 1965. French artist Yves Klein, in town for a show in 1961, wrote *The Chelsea Hotel Manifesto* there as a response to his critics. Niki de Saint Phalle filled the 10th floor with her whimsical work. Christo swiped the doorknob to his room for an installation at the Leo Castelli Gallery.

in 1884; it had been sort of maintained with Scotch tape and paper clips," says MacPherson, the hotelier behind New York's Bowery, Jane and Maritime hotels, who took over the property from other developers in 2016 with his partners on those other hotels, Richard Born and Ira Drukier of BD Hotels.

BEFORE IT WAS the Chelsea 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. Its plans 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 apartment building and hotel. Early guests included French stage sensation Sarah Bernhardt, who is said

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, directed his first feature film, *Chelsea Walls*, there in 2001 and eventually lived there full time. "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 Susanne Bartsch, who has lived at the Chelsea since



CITY SANCTUARY
Clockwise from above: One of the hotel's new guest rooms; a renovated bathroom; the hotel's newly restored wide iron staircase; larger apartments are available for extended stays.



SNEAK PEEK
Clockwise from left: Some of the new guest rooms include full kitchens; the retro styling is meant to capture the spirit of the original hotel; rooms feature 300-thread-count sheets.



the early '80s. "He said, 'The apartment next to you, you can probably buy them out.'" She wound up combining four apartments over the years.

Fashion designer Betsey Johnson, who was briefly married to John Cale of the Velvet Underground, would often flee to the Chelsea when her relationships were on the rocks. "That was my escape," she says, "I'd take my toothbrush and go to the Chelsea." The hotel, under the Bard family, was a frequent refuge for the brokenhearted. After his split from Marilyn Monroe, Arthur Miller spent six years there in suite 614. "The Chelsea in the Sixties seemed to combine two atmospheres: a scary and optimistic chaos which predicted the hip future, and at the same time the feel of a massive, old-fashioned, sheltering family," Miller would later write, looking back.

When Hawke's marriage to Uma Thurman was falling apart in 2003, Bard offered him an apartment rent free for two months. "I had two months to get my marriage back together," he says. "But I knew it was a trick. He was an old-school con man, because once I'd moved in there for free for a few months he could charge me whatever he wanted after that." Hawke wound up staying three years.

In the late '90s Bard's grown children, David Bard and Michele Bard Grabell, began working alongside him, learning the hotel's peculiar ways. "I came in and started renovating rooms," recalls Grabell. "I remember going into one room and I wanted to fix it up, and there was Isabella Rossellini jumping on a lime-green couch doing an interview.... That's where my journey began with understanding what my dad created, how important it was not to just go in like gangbusters and change something that worked."

Stanley's succession plan wouldn't last long. In 2007 the heirs to his father's original partners from the 1940s, considering a sale of the property, teamed up to force the Bards out. In 2011 the Chelsea sold to new owners, developer Joseph Chetrit and partners, for a reported \$78 million. Hotel operations ceased for the first time in 106 years.

UNDER THE BARDS the hotel had developed a reputation for its "momentary meetings of artistic figures," as Rufus Wainwright, a former Chelsea resident, describes the strange juxtapositions that occurred

there. Jack Kerouac, who lived at the Chelsea while working on *On the Road*, palled around with William S. Burroughs and had a tryst there with Gore Vidal. Arthur C. Clarke collaborated with Stanley Kubrick on adapting *2001: A Space Odyssey* for film. Nico crooned the theme song to *Chelsea Girls*, while Bob Dylan got to know fellow Chelsea acolyte Edie Sedgwick—the two even showed up together for a screen test at Warhol's Factory.

Alex Auder, actor and writer, and her half-sister, actor Gaby Hoffmann, were born into that creative maelstrom, daughters of Viva (née Janet Susan Mary Hoffmann), the Warhol superstar. The siblings were raised in room 710, among a wild cast of characters. "I really felt the building was an extension of family on many levels," says Auder, who has written a memoir, *Don't Call Me Home*, about her childhood in the Chelsea, due from Viking Books next year. For her 14th birthday Auder hosted a séance in the building trying to conjure the ghosts of Sid and Nancy. (Vicious died of a heroin overdose after Spungen's murder.) "The Ouija god spoke through the board and spelled out *heroine*—we spelled it wrong," she says.

"I was definitely haunted by dark creative forces, as well as literal dark forces," says Wainwright of the year he spent at the Chelsea, arriving around 2000, working on his second album, *Poses*, at a piano on the fourth floor. "What's nice about my memories of the Chelsea, even though they were very decadent and very dangerous, in a lot of ways, there was still a romanticism there," Wainwright says.

Bartsch has always had mixed feelings, she says, about how "seedy" it's been. "It was a crazy, wild, fun, never-know-what's-next place," she says. "I mean one day I called down for a quart of milk and the bellman brings me a tray of drugs. I'm like, 'What is this?' And he goes, 'The code word [for drugs] is *milk*....' It was pretty insane. Sometimes I go, Did I dream that?"

BEHIND THE construction barriers, the hotel's current owners spent the past six years peeling back layers of history—of plaster, paint and cement. "I really felt from day one that my job is not to destroy the Chelsea [but] to be as gentle and as respectful with the Chelsea as possible," MacPherson says.

Today the lobby, newly restored, is once again filled with work by current and former tenants. A pop-art tableau by the late Japanese painter Hiroya Akihama, inscribed to longtime Chelsea resident Dee Dee Ramone (who died of an overdose in 2002), hangs across from an imposing wood-framed fireplace among works by artists Donald Baechler and Philip Taaffe, a resident until recently. Though new furniture has been added to the lobby, including brutalist armchairs by Adrian Pearsall, it still looks much as it did in the late '60s when Betsey Johnson used to model costumes she'd made in the hotel for the film *Ciao! Manhattan*, starring Edie Sedgwick and other members of Warhol's Factory crowd. "It would be like a gorilla in the lobby that nobody noticed—I'd get no reaction," she says of her impromptu fashion shows.

The former Ladies Tea Room off the lobby, which Bard used as an office, will soon house a new check-in desk under its frescoed ceiling. Beyond it, past new elevators and the iron balustrades of the Chelsea's wide spiral staircase, hide the hotel's original dining

rooms. For a while Mark Rothko had an art studio there. Later the spaces were given over to storage and administrative offices. Now, for the first time in decades, the rooms are becoming public space, featuring a new lobby lounge with a brass-railed bar and a grand piano, and original art as far as the eye can see. "It's a giant living room for the hotel," says MacPherson.

El Quijote, the hotel's Spanish restaurant (1930–2018), reopened in February under new management, Brooklyn's Sunday Hospitality group and its partner here, restaurateur Charles Seich. The space is more intimate these days, though the Don Quixote-themed murals remain as well as the bar where Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe were once regulars. Instead of the old "daily double" steamed lobster special, today there's lobster seared on the plancha and drowned in pimentón butter. "It's fundamentally the same place, just kind of tuned up," says MacPherson. Next door, the Bard Room, a new event space named for Stanley Bard in a former vacuum cleaner repair shop, began hosting parties this spring.

More food and drink outlets are coming from the Sunday Hospitality team. An all-day French American bistro will take over the storefront once occupied by one of Manhattan's only bait and tackle shops. Eventually there will be Japanese food in the basement, under the vaulted ceilings where hot nightspot Serena burned bright after opening with a party for Stella McCartney in 1999, featuring an impromptu performance by her father, Paul. "I was standing three feet from him, and he started singing a Beatles song, and I literally thought I was going to pass out," recalls British expat Serena Bass, who ran the place with her son Sam Shaffer until 2005.

Up on the roof—home to a landscaped garden when the building first opened, then to the sunbathers of the "Chelsea Surf and Beach Club" in the 1960s, and more recently to residents' potted plants—a new structure housing a full-service spa is nearing completion. Also on the roof, a mystical pyramid that was home to a 19-century clinic and to experimental filmmaker Shirley Clarke's workshop in the 1960s, will soon include the hotel's new gym.

Hundreds of artworks, many of them bartered for rent, came with the building when it changed hands. However, some of the most precious pieces, by

Larry Rivers, David Hockney, Tom Wesselmann and others, left with the Bard family and were sold at auction in 2017, shortly after Stanley's death. "We inherited a lot of really bad art, to be honest, but also a lot of interesting semi-obscure, semi-known art," says MacPherson. "Whether you like the art or not, this is the history of the hotel."

During construction, residents persevered among the debris and dust, sometimes fighting evictions or considering buyouts. The Chelsea became a battleground. Dozens of tenants eventually moved out. By this spring, only 44 apartments remained (many of them rent-stabilized)—most had reached settlements securing their place in the building long-term. A new documentary, *Dreaming Walls*, a portrait of the Chelsea by filmmakers Amélie van Elmbt and Maya Duverdier, mixes archival shots with intimate footage of the holdouts living with construction.

As the Chelsea fully reopens this summer, the ratio of hotel guests to residents won't fluctuate much. Unlike some of their predecessors, the hotel's owners have factored existing tenants into their long-range plans. "These are people who've lived here a long time, they view it as their home—I understand that," says Ira Drukier, the partner who has dealt most directly with residents. "I like the mix."

An early proposal to sell condos was scrapped. "I didn't like the idea of having this incredible piece of New York history and then just selling off parts of it," says MacPherson. Guests will be able to choose from a range of room types, from spacious apartments with full kitchens, some available as long-stay hotel rooms, to narrow spaces with barely enough room for a bed.

"We have a few very small rooms. We did that intentionally, just to try and maintain that sort of cafe society mix of all these different walks of life," says MacPherson. "We tried to, if not maintain, at least honor the soul and history of the Chelsea...all of us have worked very hard to get it right." ●



MAKING HISTORY
Clockwise from right: Andy Warhol making a film with Edie Sedgwick at the Chelsea Hotel; hotel stationery addressed to Marianne Ihlen from resident Leonard Cohen, 1974; Patti Smith on the hotel's balcony, 1971.



ANNIE SCHLECHTER/HOTEL CHELSEA

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: © CHRISTIE'S IMAGES/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES; THE ESTATE OF DAVID GAHR/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN PRODNICK/NY DAILY NEWS ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES