

Jane 'living room' is a living hell, neighbors say

BY ROSLYN KRAMER

Everyone on Jane St. west of Washington St. remembers the idyllic, genteel hotel the new management promised two years ago: Chic tourists sleeping off hectic days in small, charming, inexpensive rooms; during waking hours immersing themselves in the background music, eclectic menu and cocktails (eggs over easy, cosmopolitans) and cushy vintage sofas, transforming the huge ground-floor space, grandly dubbed the Ballroom, into the comfy dimensions of a living room.

"We very much see it as a large living room," said Sean MacPherson, a co-owner of the hotel and apparently the most adept at community relations among his co-owners. "I've never had a business where I've had complaints and didn't address it." And in case anyone should doubt the lanky, floppy-haired hotelier, he asked the assembled Jane Streeters, "Watch what I do. I've done this for 30 years; you have to be responsive to your neighbors."

While MacPherson didn't win over the 50 or so Jane St. residents assembled that mid-May night in the lobby of 130 Jane St., criticism was restrained.

But that was then. At a more recent meeting, called to institute an organized response to what neighbors describe as the mayhem emanating from the hotel, a representative of the hotel owners denied that late-night clubgoers puffed cigarettes in the Ballroom. The response was laughter.

"That was the thing that completely undermined their credibility," said Steve Maslow, a resident of 111 Jane St., which along with 99 and 130 Jane St., has formed a new organization — Jane St. Neighbors United — to respond to the quality of life problems emanating from the retooled Jane Hotel. (And if any doubt remained about the smoking, one current hotel tenant had photographed clubgoers puffing away in the early-morning bar scene.)

But most moving to Maslow was a boy who asked that the noise be stopped because he can't sleep, and because of this was unable to concentrate at school. Nor were residents impressed by the orange-jacketed traffic movers: "It looks like we're being invaded," an ungrateful Jane St. resident noted.

Background music wafting through a living room-like atmosphere was "anything but," recalled Rachael Chernoff. "Blasting music, people dancing on tables, packs of people on the street at 4 a.m.," she continued, enumerating the disruptions that have turned residents' lives upside down. "The disrespect for their neighbors and the deceptive way they got their liquor license — saying it was going to be a living room with just background music — that's how they presented it," Chernoff said. "Anyone who lives on the block and has young kids as I do, gets constant noise, and a constant stream of cabs that makes crossing the street dangerous."

For people living in the front part of 130 Jane St., even double-paned windows won't block out the noise. A narrow street that turns along the West Side Highway and connects to Horatio St. a block north, the block

presents other traffic hazards if fire trucks or ambulances are trying to get through the unending stream of taxis.

"We're dealing with issues of noise and mayhem," stated Barry Mallin, attorney for the residents. "Horns, traffic, inebriation, graffiti, a certain amount of vandalism." Required licenses are nonexistent, or can't be found, according to Mallin, including an all-important cabaret license — allowing dancing in the Ballroom — which has yet to materialize.

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neighbors' attorney

"We haven't been able to come up with a cabaret license," said Mallin, and not for want of searching. But the hotel does have liquor licenses for nonexistent bars.

"Someone who has a liquor license should have a certificate of occupancy and be ready for business," Mallin pointed out. Without that basic requirement, a license should be pulled, he said.

Exactly when and how the hotel owners got their liquor licenses mystifies Villagers, including people who should know, like the head of a tenants association across the street from the hotel and the head of the community board, who both only heard that liquor licenses existed long after MacPherson and Co. had bought the waterfront hotel. In short, there is a consensus that the entertainment in the Ballroom is flatly illegal, and as for that tasty light food menu so much a part of the Ballroom's living-room aura, that too has yet to materialize.

MacPherson's partners in the Jane Hotel are Eric Goode, Richard Born and Ira Drukier. MacPherson, along with various combinations of these partners and others, also has an ownership stake in the Maritime Hotel, the Bowery Hotel and the Waverly Inn, as well as other properties in Los Angeles. Tenants — the very few who are left — pay roughly \$700 to \$1,000-plus a month; although old-timers — if any are still around — may pay less. The number of rent-stabilized tenants, as opposed to \$99-a-night transients, who still live in the hotel is not known, at least among tenants; people tend to suddenly disappear.

Many tenants have been evicted, in some cases reportedly after management has refused to accept rent. Voluntary departure may be rewarded with a less-than-slimpy buyout offer, but maybe not. How many tenants are left is unclear, although a handful — five or six — are fighting management's attempts to evict them and are making charges of harassment.

Just as the tenants' situation seemed to be improving, another crisis loomed: The unappointed tenant organizer suddenly decided to take a buyout for an unknown amount; but first, without notifying fellow tenants, and reportedly claiming to be their elected leader, she canceled ongoing hearings of the tenants' case. And then she disappeared along with papers documenting the tenants' case. But the handful of still-active tenants regrouped and have staggered on, virtually lawyerless, learning as they go. As for their treatment by the hotel management, the problems the remaining tenants currently face are cleaner than the rats, mice, bedbugs and perilous chemicals they endured in the past, but still impediments to decent living standards exist.

One mystery is how the new owners managed to get a certificate of non-harassment, necessary to upgrade a single-room occupancy (S.R.O.) building to a commercial hotel, despite tenants having submitted 15 affidavits protesting their treatment and conditions in the hotel.

In contrast to growing protest against hotel policies, MacPherson still has fervent support in some quarters. Sylvia Iglesias, a longtime hotel resident, lauds her treatment by the hotel's management. Furthermore, she feels strongly that MacPherson is bringing the landmarked structure "back to its former glory." She is "offended" by people attacking him, especially, she said, because

"the authorities gave him a certificate of non-harassment" when he bought the hotel. She regards tenant criticism of him as "a kind of character assassination — a movement to destroy an honorable man."

But that doesn't explain why the hotel recently refused David Drumgold's rent checks for eight weeks, then threatened that he would have to pay the entire rent bill at one time or be evicted.

Drumgold's reply: a portfolio documenting tenants' complaints illustrated with photos of cigarette-smoking clubgoers and crowds of revelers pressing to enter the club.

Some of the clubgoers apparently get quite disoriented. When 60 Jane St. residents gathered in the sleek lobby of 99 Jane St., they had an unexpected visitor, apparently an escapee from the Ballroom's perpetual happy hour.

"Where's the party?" the inebriated clubber asked.

Salvatore Rana, longtime president of the board of managers at 99 Jane St., was not amused. He is painfully aware of club violence in neighborhoods like Chelsea and the Meat Market.

"With a club so out of control, are we just waiting for something to happen before something is done?" he wondered. "We had no trouble with the S.R.O. tenants, nor have they caused a drop in property values," he stated. "But now that we have a club out of control we're getting questions."