



The Iconic Chelsea Hotel Shaped by Start as a Utopian Co-op

By David J. Thompson

The iconic Chelsea Hotel, begun in 1884 as one of New York City's first housing cooperatives, is now engaged in a battle for a future. In 2011, the Chelsea Hotel closed to new tenants and guests. First, the hotel owners fought with each other about what to do. Some wanted to demolish the building entirely. Those owners were bought out by a developer who floated the idea of turning the Chelsea Hotel into high-priced cooperatives or condominiums. To accomplish the conversion, the developer attempted to evict the 100 or so remaining tenants. Through years of court battles, the tenants successfully fought to stay.

When completed in 1884, the 12-story cooperative called the Chelsea was the tallest building in New York City. The Chelsea was much the brainchild of French born architect, Philip Hubert (1830-1911).

Now, a new developer has stepped in who has reached an agreement with the tenants association and confirmed that the Chelsea would become a boutique hotel. However, given the original solid brick sound wall construction as a cooperative and the 130-year age of the building, the costs of internal demolition have been steep and slowed down the project. The Chelsea was supposed to reopen in 2015. The website now projects 2016 at which time the hotel would have been closed for more than five years. Because it is one of the oldest remaining buildings in the U.S. that began as a housing cooperative, much cooperative history is at stake.

What is hardly known is that the Chelsea Hotel first began as the embodiment of a utopian cooperative community. The architecture of the building's public spaces was intended to foment art, culture and community. The great painters, writers and musicians of the turn of the century moved in to live and work in the idyllic ambience. It is my belief that the cooperative birthright had a great impact on how and why the Chelsea Hotel became an iconic address.

The Chelsea ran entirely as a cooperative community until 1905. Then, the association, while still being run and lived in by its members, chose to split up the vacant apartments into smaller rentals.

The Chelsea Association Building likely gave up its cooperative ownership of the building in the 1930s.

By the 1950s, the Chelsea Hotel began to operate as it did until it closed in 2011. It long-term leased out most of the upper floor apartments but rented out the remaining rooms as a hotel.

Bob Dylan lived there while writing some of his songs. Dylan Thomas died there while drinking his own obituary; Leonard Cohen wrote a classic song about a memorable evening there. Marilyn Monroe had her picture taken while living there with Arthur Miller. Chelsea resident Andy Warhol made a film there called "*Chelsea Girls*," and Arthur C. Clarke wrote most of "*2001 A Space Odyssey*" in his room at the Chelsea Hotel.

A look at who has lived at the Chelsea and what has been created by the cooperative's earlier members and the hotel's later tenants has had more cultural impact than perhaps any other building in America. Part of that is owed to the Chelsea beginning as a utopian cooperative. **CHB**



David J. Thompson, president of the Twin Pines Cooperative Foundation (www.community.coop), first visited the Chelsea Hotel about 1963 to pay homage to the place where poet Dylan Thomas had died.