

## *The Chelsea Transformation: from Beef to Art*

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MANY of the former meat-packers and day workers at the industrial warehouses that line the blocks from between 10th and 11th Avenues, have sadly observed a drastic change in their district. They say the transformation may not be very noticeable from the outside since the old brick buildings and garages still stand side by side, all uniformly painted off-white and bearing no large commercial signs. The streets are still mostly transited by trucks and yellow cabs and the piers and West Side Highway bustle nearby. But these days, behind the facades, the spacious interiors look cleaner, remodeled and much more aesthetically attractive to visitors. Inside, there are exhibition rooms with ceilings as high as 20 feet and large skylights, white walls and cement floors - surprisingly, as undiversified as their exteriors. This physical and environmental metamorphosis that came to life in a span of 10 years, has been one of the most impressive and uplifting for the West Side of Manhattan in years.

The written history of Chelsea tells us that in 1750 - the year when it began to be recognized by name - the area encompassed Captain Thomas Clarke's farm where he retired to and which he named after the Chelsea Royal Hospital, a soldiers' home in London. Nearly a century later, his grandson, the poet Clement Clarke Moore, developed it as a garden suburb and established patterns for residential building that are still in effect today. So if you were to take a walk around parts of 20th, 21st and 22nd Streets between 8th and 10th Avenues, you'd find plenty of examples of the period's architecture such as Greek-style revival townhouses and brownstones, some with gardens and front yards (which in themselves are historic landmarks these days). Yet despite its proximity to the "garden suburb", the western-most end of the neighborhood developed as a commercial district due to its accessibility to the Hudson River and the highway. By the beginning of the 1800's, the less appealing loft spaces and brick warehouses housed the metal, storage, meat-packing, trucking, railroad and manufacturing industries -a sort industrial complex-- wich evolved as the metropolitan area grew into this century.

Around the time of the great Depression and in the following decades, tge area's appearance gave off signs of neglected as seedy pubs opened their doors while prostitution and petty crimme flourished, making the grime-stained sidewalks synonymous with 14th street. A couple of steak restaurants atarted business and went along with the beef theme. However, business didn't boom and as a result Western Chelsea's rents remained low compared to the surrounding districts.

But these days Chelsea stands as one of New York's prime attractions and an example of successful redevelopment, building recycling and renaissance. Sin the names of the owners and curators in charge of the spaces: ce 1989, numerous art galleries - more than 120 to date - have made a rapid pilgrimage into the once ordinary

neighborhood. Most of them bear Anderson Fine Art, Murray Guy, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, Matthew Marks, Barbara Gladstone, Cheim & Reid, and many others. Their story is fascinating and still in the making, but so far it can be condensed to this: in 1987, the Dia Center for the Arts opened up in a four-story renovated warehouse on West 22nd Street, at a time when the gallery business was centered around SoHo and Midtown East. Dia's large-scale and ongoing installations sampled Pop, Minimal and Conceptual Art by prominent figures such as Joseph Beuys, the installation and performance artist of "Multiples"; Walter de Maria, the creator of long-term installations "The New York Earth Room" and "The Broken Kilometer"; and also the very favorite Andy Warhol. Currently, Dia holds exhibits throughout New York but its headquarters on West 22nd Street is a national and international epicenter of innovation in the fine and interdisciplinary arts, poetry and criticism.

After Dia came Larry Gagosian in 1989, a veteran of the art trade that owned successful galleries in Los Angeles, Midtown East and SoHo. Like his predecessor, he was attracted by the cheap rents and the huge potential of the warehouses' interiors, which were bright and polished on the inside and allowed for the creation of different sized spaces for the display of art. Unfortunately, Gagosian wasn't able to make an easy transition into the industrial zone and felt forced to close its doors to the public within a short time before relocating to SoHo. Little did he know that over the next couple of years a real estate revolution was about to take place, transforming the once desolate area into the mecca of artistic innovation and suddenly making the dirty, rough look its most alluring characteristic. But now he's caught the wave and returned, having just purchased a large

warehouse on the corner of 24th Street and 11th Avenue on July 22nd which will most likely open in the spring of 2000.

Since its inception, Chelsea's emergence was compared to SoHo's glory days in the early 1970's, when Leo Castelli Gallery on 420 Broadway proved that colossal spaces - which until then were only inhabited by artists and not used for the trade of art - were both affordable and more easily adaptable. Yet after witnessing SoHo's quick commercialization and loss of character, New Yorkers had hoped that the former meat-packing district would not evolve into a trendy shopping and fashion district. Sadly, it seems like it's already too late - alongside garage-galleries and "Dave's Quality Veal" a visitor can now spot the offices of many latest fashion designers, photographers, hairstylists, public relation firms, boutiques and restaurants. Day by day the businesses are occupying whatever available space there is above the galleries growing like bad weeds with the help of faithful crowds of consumers.

Who knows, perhaps the art and fequally within the same territory. Or, it's possible that their co-existence will prove a necessary relationship for the popularity of the world of art - especially in New York, where trends define tastes, markets, people, neighborhoods. As the city continues to reinvent its character day by day, we stand in awe and observe how original concepts turn to movements, to news-worthy events, to trends. New Yorkers may admire their city's dynamism or criticize the loss of authentic neighborhoods, but unfortunately, there is little they can do to stop the transformations from taking place. For now the only consolation is that the chances of Chelsea once again becoming the center of beef distribution in New York are very slim.