

HOME FRONT

FAREWELL HOTEL

FOR SOME, CHANGE IS A BLESSING.
FOR OTHERS, A CURSE.

BY ROBERT KLARA



ON TUESDAY, JULY 7, 1998, a flatbed truck loaded with planks and crossbars rattled to a halt in front of 101 East 26th Street. By Wednesday afternoon, a team of workers had finished ringed the 99-year-old Hotel Elton with heavy timber scaffolding. Exactly twenty-seven days later, the building was gone.

The neglected, forsaken Elton had stood right across the street from where I worked. Its peeling façade filled my window with shades of brown that took on sickly greenish hues as the sun crept across the Manhattan sky. True, if I craned my neck I could, from my desk, see the very top of the Empire State Building's television antenna eight blocks to the north, peeking up from behind a forest of vents and ducts atop neighboring buildings on Park Avenue South. I would often impress people by telling them that I, just turned 30, had an office with a view of the Empire State Building. But in truth, my only real view was that of the Elton.

The day after the demolition began, I decided to bring my camera into the office and record the whole thing. Some of my colleagues questioned why I was bothering. The place was, after all, both aesthetically offensive and terribly depressing: with towels serving as cheap window curtains and a few prostitutes its only recent visitors, the Hotel Elton was not exactly groomed for the Relais & Chateaux guide.

My desire to chronicle this

demise lay in an abbreviation. SRO, which stood for Single-Room Occupancy Hotel, had scuttled from the municipal rulebooks decades ago. In New York City, where housing is expensive and rotten buildings more numerous than pigeons, everybody knows what an SRO is. An SRO is city-speak not only for a bad place to live near, but also for the worst place to live in. An SRO is the home you have before you have no home at all. The non-moneied in New York City fear ending up in a place like the Elton. And here it was, about to be ripped open like a tin can and have its secrets spilled onto the sidewalk. Wanting to watch made me feel both fascinated and ashamed;

fascination was the greater impulse.

★★★



ROBERT KLARA writes frequently for ATTACHÉ. He resides on the Upper East Side, where he lives in a building about as old as the Elton.

When the Elton was built in 1906, it was a proud hotel. Its neighbors to the north—the Belmont, the Vanderbilt, the Commodore—were palatial by comparison, but the Elton was modestly regal within its smaller dimensions. Five stories of brick on a

corner lot, a balustrade crowning a heavily corniced roofing, columned porticos gracing its two entrances, the Elton offered its guests 20 rooms per floor and a bar and barber shop in the basement. Ladies had their own parlor upstairs. A café, a dining room, and a sitting room could be found on the main floor, behind a curving plate-glass window that exhibited the fine smokes from the hotel's own cigar shop.

The Elton also offered its

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patrons something far more valuable than a good cigar and a tasty pork chop: a good location. Madison Square Park, just steps west of the Elton, was then the city's most fashionable district, where those of proper society sipped their tea in upscale brownstones. The brand-new subway had a stop just two blocks north on 28th Street, while across the avenue from the Elton rose the Spanish-Venetian colossus of the original Madison Square Garden, a 341-foot-tall tower modeled after Seville's Giralda. It was inside that first Garden's cavernous hall that William Jennings

Four years later, the city moved to foreclose on the hotel for unpaid water and sewer bills totaling \$13,429, and two years after that, another fire ripped through the floors. The Elton made the daily papers again in 1995 for its atrocious conditions, which included airless, infested rooms. At the time, a night in the marble hotels uptown would cost you hundreds a night; a room at the Elton could be yours for \$13. By the time I became acquainted with the Elton, the Buildings Department had 24 open violations against it. These included everything from an unsafe boiler

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Bryan accepted the nomination for president, that Jack Dempsey knocked out Bill Brennan, and that a whole show was devoted to a curious new invention called the automobile.

But the Elton's genteel heyday didn't last. Society moved uptown, leaving the hotel marooned in a neighborhood of publishing houses. The wrecking ball gave a final kiss to the old Madison Square Garden in 1925.

When the Great Depression struck New York City four years later, many of its hotels were forced to break up the spacious suites that New Yorkers could no longer afford into single rooms. More of that happened during the early days of World War II, when thousands of workers surged into the city to take defense jobs. But after the war, as the suburbs vacuumed out the middle class and the city started to have problems, SROs became dumping grounds—for the sick, the destitute, and the mentally ill.

In 1981, a fire on the fourth floor drew a three-alarm to the Elton. Newspapers carried a photo of a fireman rescuing one resident dangling from a window sill. Inspectors later discovered that the sprinkler system had been shut off because it had leaked into the nearby subway tunnel.

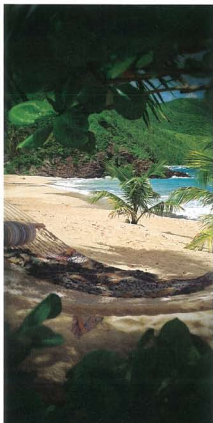
er to an elevator with a malady the writer slips never revealed.

But I didn't have to research all this in order to know it. Ugly splashes over half the Elton's windows bore testimony to many more than two fires, and those windows, from my view, were always dark. Behind some, the pale orange flicker of butane lighters danced below the glass bulbs of crack pipes. Behind others, emaciated men appeared like phantoms to stare at the traffic below for hours.

One man, who lived in a room directly across from my office window, had a large television and a VCR on which he would play the same adult video day after day. Over in our business offices, it became a challenge to conduct our editorial meetings with that kind of feature playing in the background. When, occasionally, a visitor would grow suddenly wide-eyed at the goings on across the street, we'd find ourselves shrugging, explaining in what had become a default response: "Oh, that's just the Elton."

★★★

The new owners must have moved the residents out in a single night, late, because one morning they were all gone. As some



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ANSWER #2

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THE
TURN
TOWARDS
Adventure

SWEEPSTAKES

CLUE #3

WORD JUMBLE: What is
found onboard a US Airways
flight to/from Europe?

VYNEO SCALS

U.S. AIRWAYS

FIND THE
ANSWER
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[INFORMED SOURCES]

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workmen finished hammering up the scaffolding on the street, others threaded their way up the dingy stairs to fix sheeting over the windows to keep the shards of flying glass inside.

When the Elton began to come down, it was not unlike the peeling away of some great, decrepit onion. Wielding long pry-bars, the men swarmed over the building like ants, each undertaking a small task of dismantling, that in the aggregate, would equal a whole demolition. It was orchestrated, almost delicate.

Two days after the scaffolding went up, old mattresses emerged in piles on the sidewalk. The morning after that I watched as plumbing fixtures flew out of all the windows. My diary entry for July

bare, broken corridors, a hodgepodge of colors of painted plaster and peeling wall-paper blinking beneath the unfamiliar glare of the sun. Down and farther down the walls came until, by August 3, the demolition team reached the street, and the Elton was no more.

Today, a luxury boutique hotel stands on the site where the Elton once resided. This new hotel is called the Giraffe. The Piano Suite costs \$2,500 for one night. On weekday evenings, cheese and wine are served in the lobby.

It has since occurred to me that what I documented was merely the end of a

WHAT I DOCUMENTED was the inevitable end
of a common process: build, use, demolish.
It was a clear reminder of impermanence.

14 reads only "fire escapes off."

By July 20, the Elton's profile had started a noticeable shrinkage: The roof went first, then the once-magnificent copper cornice, then the parapet behind it. From my third-story vantage point, I could see directly across into the faces of workers who had no idea they were being watched. I caught some of them in the middle of singular moments: picking up a woman's lacy undergarments in a pause of contemplation, or paging through a book before sending it, pages flapping, to the garbage pile below. One morning I watched a worker with a high-pressure hose (used to keep the dust down) doing his colleagues the surprise favor of washing them down.

Four days later, the final offensive began. Now Elton's outer walls were removed, exposing the smallness of its rooms. Into the yawning dumpsters on the street the workmen tossed the detritus of daily living, things of every imaginable ilk: milk crates, posters, shelves, a stroller, rolls of insulation, a radiator, and two bicycles. By July 31, the Elton was a honeycomb of

common process: build, use, demolish. And this process is proof that New York is a city that will never be completed.

But if the Elton's loss was inevitable, it was not meaningless. Its walls might have been peeling and sagging, but for those who lived there, it was ultimately only a roof that mattered. The building's demolition is also a reminder of impermanence, which is why, as I watched that demolition day after day, I fought off an irrepressible sadness: The value of any home must be measured in part by its ability to stand as testimony to the lives lived within, long after those lives are over. And the Elton was finally denied its chance to do that.

The hotel's stairs once supported the slipped feet of Victorians ascending to their rooms, and decades later, the torn sneakers of an addict stumbling away from his—but the stairs and feet had an important role in the Elton, just as the Elton had in the city. And I have to hope that maybe, standing across the street, recording the end with my diary and camera, I did too. ★