





# CHELSEA

By Steve Cutler

Fionn Campbell at the Chelsea Mercantile



With the explosion of the art scene, new luxury buildings by top architects going up, and exciting plans for the High Line, Chelsea has been changing, but has managed to keep its “old New York” character.

“Chelsea is a unique neighborhood,” according to Fionn Campbell, president of Chelseek.com, “framed by world-class galleries and Chelsea Piers to the west, high-end boutiques like Stella McCartney and Alexander McQueen in the Meatpacking District to the south, and the restaurants in the Flatiron District to the east.”

“It’s not a flashy neighborhood,” adds Campbell. We don’t want to become a mall. We want the stores in close proximity, but not right outside the door.”

Chelsea is all about the housing, which comes in all varieties. There are prewar co-ops, landmark townhouses, condos, and a variety of rentals, from the towers that have sprung up along Sixth Avenue over the last decade to the middle-income apartments built in the 1960s between Seventh and Ninth Avenues.

And there’s the elegant London Terrace, located between Ninth and Tenth Avenues and 23rd and 24th Streets. The largest apartment building in the world, with 1,665 apartments when it was completed in 1930, it remains a prize address to this day, containing a mix of co-op and rental units.

But the new homes in Chelsea are decidedly upscale.

“The product has become more high-end,” observes developer Ken Horn, whose Alchemy Properties has built several boutique condominiums in Chelsea over the past seven years. “When we were selling units six years ago, they were priced at \$600 a square foot. Now buildings are averaging \$1,300 to \$1,400 a foot.”

And the new buyers bring raised expectations. “When we did Chelsea Quarter Condo in 2000,” Horn recalls, “the finishes were simple and nice — loftlike.” But his two new projects, the Oculus and Indigo, both designed by FXFWLE, reflect the new Chelsea customer, who, he says is “looking for Sub-Zeros, Miele’s, and five-fixture bathrooms.”

“And the range of buyers has increased dramatically,” says Horn. “Five or six years ago, it was a younger clientele, between 28 and 35. Now you have families here.”

Indeed, says Campbell, “my business is 90 percent people who moved in as singles and now are moving as a family of four, either combining apartments or looking for larger space.”



Chelsea Market



Frank Gehry's design redefining the High Line



### Recession Proof

The widened range of new buyers in Chelsea has solidified values in the neighborhood, says Horn. "I always looked at the West Village as recession proof because it attracted such a wide type of buyer. Chelsea has become the new West Village."

The Indigo on 21st Street, reports Horn, "sold 50 percent of the units in four weeks." The buyers were a mixed lot. "They were between 20 and 60," he says, "consultants, lawyers, writers, doctors. Of none of our buildings can you say, 'Everyone got a Wall Street bonus and they're out buying.'"

It's not only the boutiques that are selling quickly. The Caledonia, The Related Companies' new luxury condominium rental complex, the first residential tower on the High Line in West Chelsea, sold its 190 condos in just eight months.

### Family Friendly

Architect Aaron Schwarz and his wife settled in Chelsea in 1986, combining two apartments on 22nd Street, to which they have added a third and are now adding a fourth. Schwarz, a principal and director of Perkins Eastman Architects, says Chelsea has always been family friendly.

Because so many of the neighborhood children attend PS 11 on West 21st Street, the families tend to know each

other. "A few years back," he recalls, "one of our neighbors decided they wanted to make Halloween a wonderful time. They called up all the people they knew who had kids and said, 'Can we call your house a safe house for trick or treating?'" A list was distributed and a tradition begun.

The area has become Halloween Central. "Now there's a five or six block area of Chelsea with houses decorated that is packed with kids coming from different neighborhoods. It's become a safe area for kids."

And you can go to neighborhood restaurants "without any pomp and circumstance," says Schwarz, without making reservations. "It feels like a small town. I can still walk into the corner deli and they know my kid from when he was born 16 years ago."

As for the modern new glass-and-steel structures commingling with the historic old buildings in Chelsea, says Schwarz, "New York is about diversity. The building I live in is from 1850. I don't mind living next to a glass house. The richer it is in diversity, the better."

### Not Just a Gym

Chelsea Piers is a 30-acre sports and entertainment complex constructed on four adjoining piers on the Hudson River between 17th and 23rd Streets. Built in the mid 90s,



The Park



Budakkan



Rental buildings on Sixth Avenue

the Piers focused citywide attention on Far West Chelsea for the first time.

The complex includes film and television production facilities, a health club, spa, the city’s largest gymnastics center, two basketball courts, indoor lacrosse and soccer, a rock-climbing wall, dance studios, an AMF Bowling center, golf club with multistory driving range, two full-size ice skating rinks, a marina for mooring private boats, and a batting range. “I use the batting cages to get my aggressions out,” says Alexandra Bellak, a Prudential Douglas Elliman agent living in northern Chelsea.

### The Galleries

With more than 200 art galleries within a radius of a few blocks, West Chelsea has the greatest concentration of contemporary art exhibition spaces in the world. One need never go a day without wine and crudités for all the openings on any given day of the year. And, says, Bellak, “the first Thursday of the month there’s an open house for galleries in the evening.”

New York’s art community began its migration to West Chelsea in 1987 when the Dia Art Foundation opened an exhibition space in a four-story converted warehouse on West 22nd Street.

When she moved from a space in TriBeCa to the mammoth Starrett-Lehigh building at 601 West 26th Street in 1995, recalls artist Margaret Evangeline, “I thought none of my friends would come out there.” She settled there because the light off the river was amazing, the rent low, and the space bountiful. “You could bring a truck up in the elevators if you wanted to,” she says.

At the time the building had just three tenants, many of them artists, sharing each of the full-block, 360,000-square-foot floors. “It was a fabulous way of living,” recalls Evangeline, who recently had shows at Stefen Stux Gallery at 530 West 25th Street and HP Garcia at 580 Eighth Avenue.

“There was a small group of us in the building,” she recalls, including Leslie Tonkonow, who now has a gallery in a Dia-owned space, and Barbara Moore, famous for the bookstore/gallery Bound & Unbound. “We seemed to be growing as a community. We did things together on the weekend, had potluck dinners.”

The building still contains artist workspaces, including Evangeline’s, but is known for its fashion industry tenants, like Martha Stewart and Tommy Hilfinger. From the street, Evangeline says, “When it starts to get dark, there’s so many photography shoots going on, there are lights flashing from every direction.”



Still, Evangeline feels there's never been a better time or place to be an artist. "I feel we're really in a golden age right now, seeing the most amazing things happen. The different viewpoints and things I see every week, the dialogue between the artists . . . It's the most amazing time for the arts in every media."

### The High Line

The West Chelsea enclave that includes the art district and the recently approved High Line park has been rezoned for residential development. Containing some of the last large buildable tracts of land in the city, the neighborhood has been embraced by large-scale developers.

Perhaps inspired by the artistic legacy of the arts community, combined with new buyers' taste for fine design, builders are turning the area into a showcase for great contemporary architecture. New buildings include designs by Robert A.M. Stern, Gwathmey Siegel, Frank Gehry, Annabelle Selldorf, Jean Nouvel, Audrey Matlock, Gary Handel, Lindy Roy, Della Valle Bernheimer, 1100 Architects, and others.

While West Chelsea has yet to attract the kinds of amenities that abound in Chelsea proper, according to Leonard Steinberg, the Prudential Douglas Elliman sales director for Annabelle Selldorf's 200 Eleventh Avenue, "when you have that many wealthy, tasteful, cultured people moving into a neighborhood, the services follow almost automatically."

Indeed, insists Steinberg, "when people say they'd like to live in Chelsea these days, they say, 'as close to the river as possible.'" ■