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The Albert Hotel Addresses Its Myths

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

IN the last decade, apartment buildings have been putting together increasingly ambitious histories, some extensively researched and hard-bound with photographs.

But it is difficult to find anything as accomplished as the one prepared by the architectural historian Anthony W. Robins for the Hotel Albert, the 1882 apartment house at University Place and 11th Street.

Arlene Goldman, a business consultant, has lived in the Albert since 1987, and when she moved into the gangly complex, which went up in four sections, she heard the usual entertaining but unsubstantiated stories, ranging from how it was named (after the painter Albert Pinkham Ryder) to its stint as a cradle of rock (the Lovin' Spoonful composed "Do You Believe in Magic" in the basement).

Over time she has collected photos, brochures and postcards, aided by the enterprising superintendent, Liam McCormack, who haunted eBay. But it was not until 2009 when, as president of the co-op board, she retained Mr. Robins to do more than the usual one-pager that most buildings find adequate.

Mr. Robins indeed went beyond — more than 100 pages beyond — mining newly available digital sources and old-fashioned ones like deeds and building permits. Ms. Goldman has posted the history on the building's Web site, thehotelalbert.com, along with separate sections on the old restaurant, Albert ephemera, photographs, first-person accounts and links to prominent people who stayed there, from Hart Crane and Anais Nin to Moby Grape and Howlin' Wolf.

The Albert was originally built as an apartment house, the first section by Albert S. Rosenbaum, an investor. He retained the architect Henry J. Hardenbergh, already an apartment house specialist, his Dakota then under way. You can see elements of the Dakota in the Albert, the spiky ironwork grates over the false balconies, the light-colored Nova Scotia stone, the lumpy modeling of the uneven facade, like a duvet thrown carelessly over a bed.

The earliest tenants were of the professional and managerial class, like John A. Owens, a Nassau Street lawyer.

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His neighbors must have looked askance when, in 1884, Mr. Owens spent a night in jail after he was caught skipping out on a month's worth of meals in the building's restaurant. Another was Wentworth S. Butler, who served for decades as the head of the New York Society Library, which was then on University Place near 12th Street; University Place was at one time a stronghold of the social elite. The building became a hotel in 1887.

Mr. Robins has found old lunch menus — in 1906, Fried Smelts with Tartar Sauce and Fricaseed Rockaway Oysters on Toast — and researched the source of Albert Pinkham Ryder's painting "Death on a Pale Horse." The painter conceived the haunting, ghostly work after a waiter who had often served him at the hotel lost his savings at the track and shot himself. Ryder had urged him not to bet on the horses.

He found no evidence that the building was named after the painter, although his brother William was the manager for several years. The Albert's Albert was Albert Rosenbaum, not Albert Ryder.

As with the rest of the Village, the Albert got a tinge of bohemianism after World War I. Hart Crane wrote part of his 1930 poem "The Bridge" while there, and Thomas Wolfe used it as inspiration for the Hotel Leopold in his 1935 novel

NOW AND THEN

The Hotel Albert circa 1907 and today. At University Place and East 11th Street, it was designed by Henry J. Hardenbergh and completed in 1882. Today the building houses apartments; its board recently commissioned an ambitious history.

"Of Time and the River." Wolfe was not on the Hardenbergh bandwagon, considering the 1882 building covered with "clumsy and meaningless adornment."

The Albert had tumbled by the 1960s, when it became a crash pad for rock musicians, checking in the Electric Flag, Canned Heat, Cream, Paul Butterfield and the Blues Project. Mr. Robins quotes an account by Michelle Phillips, who during a nasty winter at the Albert composed "California Dreamin'" with John Phillips. The song was soon made famous by their group the Mamas & the Papas. Ms. Phillips recalled the hotel "as a fleabag"; Maureen Orth, a writer for The Village Voice, said that "on a

good day the hallways smell somewhere between old socks and vomit."

The basement birth of the Spoonful song could not be confirmed, Mr. Robins said.

The Elghanayan family cleared out the Albert in the 1970s and reconstructed the inside, returning it to apartment use. Ms. Goldman says that the co-op's extensive effort came about because "one day we said why don't we figure out what's myth and what's real."

Mr. Robins says his report would have been much more modest without the new generation of digital resources, like the ProQuest digitization of The New York Times, Columbia University's



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similar project for The Real Estate Record and Guide, and sources that keep evolving, like googlebooks, where the results for any particular search increase monthly, sometimes weekly.

It is a new world of history now, with easily available resources that allow nonprofessionals to do in minutes what once took experts days. And at one time most local history efforts had to hew to national events and themes, like architectural style, because researching local sources was so difficult. Now, instead of a forced attempt to paint the big picture, we have rich and nuanced works like the Albert's; not macrohistory, but microhistory.