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On the Waterfront, Minus the Stevedores

By C. J. HUGHES

IN the landscape of modern New York, there is much that might bemuse a time traveler visiting from the past.

People these days sit and eat lunch in streets. Words scrawled floor-to-ceiling on the walls of subway cars are ads, not graffiti. And the waterfront is a premier address, no longer avoided as smelly and seedy, as it was when freight was unloaded there.

Surprise might be particularly keen in Lower Manhattan along the Hudson.

For decades, the 30-block ribbon from Washington Street to the West Side Highway was mostly a mishmash of warehouses, abandoned train lines and factories. The handful of residents on its stone-lined streets included the tenants of flophouses, which had been built as hotels for sailors decamping from newly docked ships.

Few traces remain of ocean voyagers, or industry. In the seeming blink of an eye, the area has become a mostly residential enclave, with the Hudson River Park offering a verdant front yard in the place of vanished piers.

Warehouse-to-apartment tales are well known in New York; think SoHo, or Williamsburg in Brooklyn. But on this part of the waterfront, where the bulk of new housing has been added in the last few years, the reinvention has been unusually swift. For people who knew the area before, the change has been stark.

In the 1970s Nancy Hechinger, a poet and a teacher, lived at Westbeth, a five-building subsidized artist colony carved out of former telephone company labs at Bethune Street.

At the time, the West Side Highway was elevated; the sidewalks, cast in shadows, were somewhat desolate, and drug-dealing was not uncommon, said Ms. Hechinger, who as a result generally didn't venture out of Westbeth.

There weren't many reasons to amble around anyway. One of the few businesses was a garage, at Washington and West 12th Streets, where Ms. Hechinger went to

get her white Impala fixed.

In 2004 — after a hiatus of more than 30 years, most of it spent in California — she returned to find her old neighborhood almost unrecognizable.

The elevated roadway had been replaced by a busy surface road, while the oil-stained mechanic's shop had become Barbuto, a popular restaurant. Also, there were a lot more people walking around at night, and the threatening atmosphere had dissipated.

Conversions had become common. The apartment she bought in 2004 for \$1.8 million, a 1,500-square-foot two-bedroom in a stucco-sided former warehouse, was a case in point. The place has views of the river, which recently was dotted with colorful kayaks. “I have this horizontal feeling of the world in a very vertical city,” Ms. Hechinger said, “and horizontal is calming.”

That view has been compressed by [Superior Ink](#), a 17-story condominium that went up in 2009 on the corner. Other large new buildings have also popped up along the highway in recent years, despite the efforts of some longtime residents. Even so, their resistance eventually bore fruit, as zoning now mostly restricts very tall buildings.

In Ms. Hechinger's opinion, such a not-in-my-backyard mind-set is hypocritical. “I don't want to be like, ‘I've got mine, so you can't live here,’ ” she said.

Moreover, said Joanne Wilson, another resident, new buildings can help revitalize the area because they draw people who spend money locally. Though she mainly works as an investor in new tech ventures, Ms. Wilson switched gears in 2009 to co-develop a five-unit condo on a former parking lot on West 12th Street, where she lives in a four-bedroom duplex.

“People are eating out and shopping and buying art,” she said. “The waterfront will continue to evolve, which will be a positive thing for everybody.”

WHAT YOU'LL FIND

Squeezed between Washington Street and the highway, which is also called West Street, the area has about 10,000 residents.

Though it overlaps in some spots with the meatpacking district, the West Village and TriBeCa, it can feel quite different from those established areas. Shops and

restaurants are limited, residents point out, and the noise from rumbling trucks can take getting used to. Also, unlike most Manhattan streets, the divided highway with limited legal crossing points is nearly impossible to cross by jaywalking.

If the ongoing condo colonization had pioneers, they might be the neatly arrayed white trio designed by Richard Meier on West Street, around Perry and Charles Streets, in the early 2000s. Popular, if controversial for adding a glassy style to this brick-centric area, the towers also marked a sort of homecoming for Mr. Meier, who handled Westbeth's renovation. Buildings like 423 West Street, the stalled 10-story Hudson Blue condo project, echo the towers' look.

Newer condos, among them [250 West Street](#), at Hubert Street, have older buildings as a shell; another such conversion is the [Spice Warehouse](#) at 481 Washington Street, a 12-unit building that has sold all but two of its apartments since May, said Pamela Huson, the Prudential Douglas Elliman broker who is marketing it.

Nearby is the construction site for a sanitation garage that will ultimately rise 120 feet.

The West Village Houses, a 420-unit complex clustered on Washington Street, make up much of the older stock. Built with public Mitchell-Lama financing in the early 1970s, the low-slung structures were in keeping with the small-scale look favored by Jane Jacobs, the urban activist, who for many years lived on Hudson Street. The complex left the program in 2005 and is now mostly resident-owned.

But One Morton Square, a full-block high-rise rental-and-condo development with long bands of windows, built by J. D. Carlisle in 2004, is more emblematic of what has gone up recently.

Neighbors concerned about a new project of similar scale, at 150 Charles Street, sued in August to stop construction, which is proceeding for now, pending a ruling. The [Witkoff Group](#), the condo's developer, was supposed to have retained an older facade — that of the Whitehall Storage building, the neighbors say. But not much of it remains.

“It's not in the spirit of what the developers agreed to do,” said David Gruber, who heads Manhattan Community Board 2, and who is not a plaintiff. Witkoff did not respond to a request for comment.

Although opponents of overdevelopment did get the city to rezone the area from Gansevoort to Morton Street in 2005, 150 Charles was an exception.

WHAT YOU'LL PAY

Housing is pricey. Early this month, there were 56 properties for sale at a median price of \$3.98 million, according to [Streeteasy.com](#).

The most expensive was an eight-bedroom condo at Superior Ink, at \$33.95 million; the cheapest was a studio in a tenement-like co-op on West 10th Street, at \$399,000.

Price-wise, the area seems insulated from market fluctuations. In 2011, there were 119 sales at a median of \$2.01 million, Streeteasy shows. In 2007, in contrast, 131 sales took place, but the median was \$1.75 million, which means prices climbed 15 percent.

WHAT TO DO

For all the gleaming new high-rises, retail spaces can be decrepit. A boarded-up diner on West Street, near Clarkson Street, has smashed windows; a shuttered gas station at West and Canal Streets is weedy.

But linguine can be enjoyed at the white-tablecloth Antica Venezia, which occupies the former Holland Hotel at West 10th. A block north there's the Rusty Knot, a bar styled like a midcentury suburban basement.

Joggers and cyclists descend on the park, which winds five miles from Chambers to West 59th Street. A shaded sitting area, with metal tables on crushed stone, provides views of the Lackawanna Terminal in Hoboken. Clean lawn-topped piers face decayed centuries-old pilings.

And next fall, on a long-empty parcel near Hubert Street, the park will add a restaurant, says Ed Donlon, a spokesman for [Hudson River Park Trust](#).

THE SCHOOLS

Public School 41, on West 11th, teaches prekindergarten through fifth grade. Last year on state exams, 89 percent of third-graders met standards in English, 82 percent in math. Citywide, those percentages were 48 and 55 percent.

Simon Baruch, on West 21st Street, enrolls 1,000 middle-school students.

One option for high school is the [Humanities Preparatory Academy](#), on West 18th,

with 200 students. SAT averages last year were 451 in reading, 420 in math and 437 in writing, versus 437, 460 and 432 citywide.

THE COMMUTE

For some, the closest subway stop is just outside the neighborhood, at West 14th Street and Eighth Avenue, which offers L, A, C and E trains. Others trek to the 1 line, which stops at Christopher, West Houston, Canal and Franklin Streets; the 2 and 3 express trains stop at West 14th and at Chambers Street.

THE HISTORY

The [High Line](#) park, which begins just north of the area, is built on an elevated railroad bed that used to continue south to West Houston Street. Most of the southerly section has been razed, but a 235-foot remnant exists, at Westbeth, high above Washington Street.