

# Lot still vacant where Pearl St. artists lost homes

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1's Contemporary Art Center, said that Colette's apartment was a special work of art. She only went there once, when the artist was doing a portrait of her granddaughter, but she was impressed by the ambiance of Colette's space.

"I loved it... Her bed was full of silks and satins, all ready for her to perform," Alanna said. "She created this wonderful fantasy world."

Colette, as she is known in the art world, was one of the tenants who was displaced after 213 Pearl St. was demolished.

When her home was torn down, many of Colette's belongings were still in her apartment. She was forced to leave in August 2007, when the Department of Buildings found it to be tipping to the south and unsafe for occupancy. The remaining tenants, Colette and Jim Teschner, a photo studio manager for Martha Stuart Living and landscape artist, were only able to get back into the apartment one time, a month later, to get their belongings.

Then the landlord, Diane Karch, and her partners sold the building to the Lam Group, which also bought two adjacent lots. The developer planned to build a 660-room Sheraton hotel on the site, but almost a year later the lot is still empty.

John Lam, the chairperson of the Lam Group, said that the project is over budget, and it would cost over \$200 million to build a large hotel. With the credit crunch, Lam has been unable to get a loan to build.

"Today's situation is not good for one big project," Lam said in a phone interview.

Instead, the developer now hopes to build two smaller hotels on its lot, including a 200-room Sheraton. Lam hopes construction on the project will begin at the end of this year or the beginning of next year. A Sheraton spokesperson could not confirm its continued involvement in the project by press time.

A year later, Colette and Teschner are wondering why their homes were demolished so quickly. Teschner and Colette both reluctantly left their homes on August 15, 2007.

They were the last two people in the building because as rent stabilized tenants, they were the only ones legally allowed to stay in the building after it was temporarily vacated in October 2006 because of a crack in the building's façade from nearby construction.

Colette remembers that the night of the final vacate in August 2007, she was woken up by six police officers ringing her bell, who told her to "come down for her street performance." They rung the bell for over an hour non-stop.

"A feeling of overwhelming fear overcame me," Colette said.

Earlier that day, engineers from the Lam Group had come into her place and looked around, and then her landlord wanted to talk to her after that. She said that when she called the landlord back, Karch said it was "too late."

When Colette went back to the site this week, she was shocked that the lot sat empty, save for a pile of bricks and concrete columns. Colette, who believes her apartment should have been preserved, wonders why she and Teschner were not given more time to collect their belongings.

"I am shocked and sad to see the building down and the lot vacant," Colette said. "I can't help but wonder many things: Was it necessary and what was the big hurry for tearing down the building? It is an unresolved mystery."

Some of Colette's apartment was salvaged,



Photo courtesy of Colette

**Artist Colette Justine in her 213 Pearl St. apartment, which was part of her work. She and her neighbor were fighting with their landlord and were forced to leave last summer because of damage to the building. Her home was demolished in November to build a hotel, but a year after being forced out the lot is still vacant.**

but the artist said she was only able to "scritch the surface" during her last re-entry into the building. Colette said that when she was allowed back into her building for one day in September, she grabbed her hats, portraits, clothes, and molds, all part of her artwork, but she had to leave many of her belongings, including her bed, statues, a 8 1/2 ft. cabinet-like light box she created, her wigs and almost everything in her closet.

During this move, Colette and Teschner worked for eight hours, in minimal light provided by city officials, who shined flashlights in the hallways. Colette and Teschner were not allowed to bring items down that were heavier than one person could carry, and they

*'What was the big hurry for tearing down the building? It is an unresolved mystery.'*

threw their belongings onto the sidewalks, in boxes and shopping bags.

"I felt like a thief robbing my own possessions, grabbing whatever," Colette said. "It was very hot outside, which made running up and down those stairs even more exhausting."

Teschner was more prepared for the move, although he still left a great deal of his belongings in his 800 ft. loft. Before he went back, he made a list of what he wanted to take, which included his paintings and slides of his work. There were also personal items that he took with him, such as an antique bowl from Korea that his former partner had given him.

Although he wasn't concerned with big items such as his TV and stereo, Teschner did have to leave personal belongings such as bowls his mother had brought him from Budapest, a dresser bureau and drafting table he had since he was 16 years old.

"I constantly had to make decisions as to what to keep and what to leave behind. It was horrible," Teschner said. "Everything that was materially valuable to me had been put in jeopardy ... my paintings, my archives, my family heirlooms, and many personal treasures with intimate stories and memories associated with them. I felt as if I were leaving souls behind, not just things."

Before they were vacated, Teschner and Colette tried to save their building, meeting with the Lam Group before the developer

bought the property

Teschner said that he and his lawyer along with Colette and hers met with the Lam Group about 6 to 8 months before the demolition, and he told the developer that he wanted to remain at 213. He said that a representative from Lam Group told him that they would be willing to build around the property. He also said that when the developer offered him money, he turned it down, calling it "cab fare out of New York."

"It was my home and studio of 23 years, which I loved. Also, my entire economic life as a single, middle class person was based on the affordability of my rent," Teschner said in an email from his home in France. "Where in New York City could I have gone that could have provided reasonable rent and enough space to live and work as an artist? I had a tremendous amount to lose and I wasn't going to give up easily."

Teschner said that after this meeting, he and his lawyer submitted an offer to the Lam Group, but they never heard from the developer again. He and Colette received a settlement, through their landlord, Diane Karch. Neither the tenants nor Lam would disclose the amount.

"I do not believe that the Lam Group had any interest in saving our building despite their assertions that they were prepared to build their hotel with or without the purchase of 213 Pearl St.," Teschner said.

Lam said he met with the tenants and their lawyers, and they said that they wanted to move out because their apartment building was damaged.

"The building was unsafe. They were happy to move out," Lam said. "They were begging for me to pay them and move out."

One other solution that Teschner attempted was getting the building fixed up. Karch had initially said she would make repairs in the spring or early summer. When the building wasn't fixed in June, Teschner took his landlord to court, and a court order was issued, asking the landlord to repair the building. Teschner said that Karch had also received five D.O.B. violations for failing to repair the building.

Teschner believes that his landlord had no intention of fixing the building and that she was going to let the building go until it was condemned, under which case the rent stabilized tenants would have to leave.

"It seemed quite clear to me that she did not want to fix the building as she wanted to sell it," Teschner said. "Although I am certain she did not want us to be harmed in any way, she played a very dangerous game by not repairing the building while we were living in it."

Karch did not respond to several

phone messages.

The tenants weren't the only ones who fought to preserve this 1831 building. Alan Solomon, a historian, and others tried to get landmark status for 213 Pearl St. because it was the last example of Greek Revival architecture left on the street, which had once been a bustling commercial district. After the Erie Canal was built, dry goods would be shipped from Pearl St. warehouses into cities in the Midwest, including Baltimore and Chicago.

"It was a piece of architectural and cultural history. I was hoping they would come up with another solution to maintain more of the historical context," Solomon said. "The building was more deserving of preservation because of its age, how it stayed in tact."

Solomon is currently working on getting the facade of 213 Pearl St. rebuilt as well as bricks and columns from the building incorporated into the design of the hotel.

Teschner, whose apartment did not have a bathroom when he moved in, also admired the architecture of the building and his own space. In his loft, he had a 17 ft. sloped ceiling, a balcony that overlooked the apartment, and a five by six ft. skylight, and he paid \$651 a month for this loft. Teschner also remembers the wooden staircase that led up to his fifth floor apartment, which he watched being demolished.

A year later, Teschner is living in France, and Colette in Chelsea. Teschner said that he would still be living in New York if his building hadn't been demolished, but he depended on rent stabilization. He said that what he misses most about the space is its close proximity to the East and Hudson Rivers, which he used to paint by after work.

Colette, who said she is trying to move on and draw something positive from the situation, has not yet re-created the environment that existed in her apartment, which she put up after 9/11. She said she has had an offer from a museum in Berlin, Germany, but she turned it down. She said that she hopes to create it somewhere in New York, but she wants it to be permanent, in a museum exhibit or public works project. She said that in the future, she hopes that the city is more supportive of artists like her.

"Successful and recognized self made artists, like myself, who have already made their contribution to the city's culture suddenly find themselves in this horrible situation," Colette said. "They are the heart of the city, and it seems they are not being honored but being forced to leave by not being given the necessary support or respect. It is like a mother devouring her own children."