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Blogging From the Five Boroughs

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## Empty Prison in Chelsea Is Now a Valuable Piece of Real Estate

By *EDNA ISHAYIK*

The views from the roof of 550 West 20th Street are lovely: Hudson River vistas down to the Statue of Liberty and Manhattan's twinkling nighttime lights all around. Until recently, residents of the 82-year-old Art Deco building could watch strollers on the Highline Park and golf balls flying into netting at Chelsea Piers.

But those who lived inside the eight-story building were limited in how much they could enjoy their enviable address. The building was a medium-security women's prison housing inmates convicted of crimes like assault or theft. For a short time each day, the women were permitted to relax and exercise on the caged-in roof. Looking down, they could see the city bustling around them, freedom just out of reach.

Days before Hurricane Sandy struck, the Bayview Correctional Facility, which had operated since 1974, was evacuated and 153 inmates were sent to jails upstate. Fourteen feet of water destroyed boilers, corroded electric equipment and required over \$600,000 in repairs, according to state corrections department officials.

The building is now in working condition, but the inmates are not coming back. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo included the closing of the prison in the 2013-14 state budget, citing a high per-prisoner cost and an excess of prison beds in the state.

But some people are lamenting the loss of the prison, [even in Chelsea](#), where the prison opened when the neighborhood was far from the posh place it is today.

"I consider it a tragedy that the prison is lost," said Pamela Wolff, a member of the local community board. "The amount of recidivism was minimal. For those women, for this community, which for 35 years has been in perfect harmony with the use of that facility, the repercussions will never be measured."

Among other things, the women imprisoned at the jail now find themselves, Ms. Wolff noted, far from their families.

But the state is proceeding with its plans to sell or lease the jail, which was operating at less than half its capacity when it was emptied. The process of deciding the future of a valuable piece of real estate has only begun, but differing visions have already emerged.

Built in 1931 by the same firm that erected the Empire State Building, 550 West 20th Street first served as a lodging house for seafaring merchants. Known as the Seaman's House Y.M.C.A., single occupancy rooms, about the size of a walk-in closet, were available for rent.

"It was a refuge for them in their travel hardships," said Joe Doyle, a Chelsea historian who lives in the neighborhood. "The depression years were ghastly for sailors — they were often looking for work. A big ship would come up to the dock, and they'd be begging the first mate for a job. This gave them a place away from the cold."

Some nights, movies flickered onto a screen set up in the white-tiled gymnasium — entertainment for the guests. In a small chapel off the main lobby, sailors may have said a prayer for safe passage, bathed in the colorful light of biblical scenes frozen in stained glass.

As the shipping industry declined, the Y.M.C.A. fell out of use and about the same time, tougher state drugs laws were increasing the demand for jail cells.

During the building's conversion, gates and locks were added but few changes were made to the tiny spaces where sailors lived. Inmates held in those same chambers were sometimes treated to front-row views of the Fourth of July fireworks over the Hudson River.

An indoor pool on the fourth floor was drained and covered to provide storage space. Though filled with shelves and boxes, the walls of the pool are still adorned with colorful mosaics of fish and crabs.

As news has spread about the state's plan for the site, neighbors worry that the building, which does not have official landmark status, will be torn down.

"There is concern in the community that the property will be sold to the highest bidder," said State Senator Brad Hoylman, whose district includes Chelsea and who has met with representatives of the state agency responsible for selling the building. "But I'm hopeful that the future of the site involves substantial community use."

The local community board has submitted a letter to state officials outlining preferences for historic preservation, affordable housing and community access to the pool and the gym, though in the end it is unclear how much sway the board will have.

"Developers are circling the skies like vultures," said Joe Restuccia, the housing committee chairman on the local community board, who says real estate company representatives have contacted him about the building. "They look at this not as any sort of public resource, but a piece of property and that's it. It's just the next available site."

No decision has been made on the building's fate, said Cassie Harvey, spokeswoman for Empire State Development Corporation, the agency that will oversee the disposition of the building.

"We're on a listening tour, engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the community, elected officials and other stakeholders," she said. "We've asked for their feedback and advice and are taking the time to understand what their priorities are, what their concerns are, and the various reuse possibilities they have in mind."

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