

Tenement Life, at \$200-Plus a Night

Randy Settenbrino, hotelier, below right, wanted to “accurately represent the immigrant experience.”



On Orchard Street below Delancey, a block so overcrowded with poor immigrants 100 years ago that its density rivaled that of Bombay, a man in an old-fashioned newsboy cap recently stood on the cobblestones and did something few of his forebears are likely ever to have done: he spoke with brimming heart about the intrinsic beauty of his tenement.

After gaining sole ownership of the leaky multifamily dwelling at 100 Orchard Street in 2000, “I asked myself, What’s the soul of the building and the block like?” said Randy Settenbrino, a Brooklyn-born grandson of Italian-Americans and Russian-Jewish immigrants. “Since this had been the Jewish ghetto, I wanted to accurately represent the immigrant experience with a historical Jewish accent.”

The resulting blend of preservation and design is the nearly completed Blue Moon Hotel, an eight-story, 22-room boutique guest house combining humble period details with modern luxuries like whirlpool baths and a jazz-filled basement lounge. With rooms going for \$200-plus per night and a street-level kosher restaurant and bakery intended to lure local hipsters and Orthodox out-of-towners alike, tenement chic has come to the Lower East Side.

“The first thing I said after buying it was, ‘I want to preserve the building,’” Mr. Settenbrino recalled, stepping inside his hotel to a room where Latino immigrants were laying marble tile. “People said: ‘You’re nuts. It’s a tenement.’”

But Mr. Settenbrino, a realtor and Brooklyn College-trained artist, believes that life’s beauty lies in its imperfections, and he set about applying this philosophy to his new hotel, which is opposite the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

While 100 Orchard was being gutted and reinforced with



Photographs by Yuni Brook/The New York Times

steel to support three new stories of light stone, Mr. Settenbrino rescued, and later re-installed, its original 19th-century oak wainscoting and pine window moldings, intentionally leaving the nail holes unfilled. An ancient wooden door, found lodged beneath the rickety basement staircase, was restored and moved to a prominent spot at the entrance. And all manner of

period bottles, irons and ephemera were salvaged for future display on shelves supported by brackets taken from the tenement’s none-too-glamorous hallway privies. “Even the toilet-tank brackets were beautiful,” Mr. Settenbrino said.

On a rapidly gentrifying street of contrasts, where one can buy kosher pickles out of a barrel or raffish Italian shoes made of ostrich, the Blue Moon bridges two eras. Fire escapes on which immigrants once slept on sweltering summer nights were removed, cut down and reattached as decorative balconies. And inside the sun-filled top floor of the Blue Moon, as Mr. Settenbrino proudly pointed out how the sink cabinets incorporate spindles from the tenement staircase, it was possible to see both where the hotel’s owner came from and where he might be going.

East of the rear suite stretched the Williamsburg Bridge, on the far side of whose span all of Mr. Settenbrino’s grandparents once lived, including his Grandma Ida, whose konkleten — ground meat and potato patties — are on the hotel menu. In the front suite, where Mr. Settenbrino’s family recently celebrated his youngest son’s bris, the balcony doors opened onto a million-dollar view of the Empire State Building.

“It’s an ambitious project,” said this grandson of immigrants, who hopes to open in a few months, “but we seem to be here. We seem to be arriving.” **JOHN FREEMAN GILL**

