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## REAL ESTATE DESK

## In Hell's Kitchen, a Changing Skyline

By DENNIS HEVESI

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WHEN the star-crossed lovers of "West Side Story," Tony and Maria, longingly sang, "There's a place for us," they could hardly have conceived what would become of their gritty neighborhood -- tower after tower of sleek luxury residential buildings casting shadows across their low-lying warren of 19th-century tenements.

Certainly, today's rents of up to \$5,600 a month for a penthouse in those richly appointed high-rise buildings -- even if adjusted downward for decades of inflation -- would have proved prohibitive for late-1950's denizens of a community that is still referred to by some as Hell's Kitchen and by others, more genteelly, as Clinton.

And besides, not one of the glistening facades has a zigzag fire escape bolted to it -- though there are terraces.

Over the last three years, like widespread fingers reaching skyward from West 34th to 59th Streets, close to a dozen residential buildings have opened their doors to new tenants, recently topped off construction or are still filling in their skeletal girders. Others remain, for now, gaping excavations waiting to be steel-fed by looming cranes.

The burst of residential development -- most of it in a westward corridor along 41st, 42nd and 43rd Streets from Eighth Avenue to the Hudson River, with other sites scattered to the north and south -- is rising above a community of stooped and corniced walk-up buildings, their halls lined by railroad flats. The tenements, some dating to the 1850's, are scattered among body shops, car washes, parking lots, warehouses, factories and regiments of tractor-trailers behind razor-wired fences. Not to mention an ample supply of saloons.

And while real estate executives see great potential for further residential development of the area, and city planners envision a westward expansion of office-dominated Midtown into what they consider one of the few remaining underused expanses of Manhattan, there are local officials, longtime residents and community curmudgeons who like things much as they are. They fear for the extinction of another New York neighborhood with its vintage character and colorful, if somewhat seedy, past.

"Fifty-story skyscrapers are out of character, out of line," said John Fisher, president of the Clinton Special District Coalition, a local civic group. "They are not good, just not good."

The forces for change disagree. "This was a rundown area ravaged with prostitution," said Lisa Silverstein, vice president for residential development for Silverstein Properties, which already has one luxury tower well occupied in the community, and another in the works. "This is one of the unsaturated pockets of New York, and things are happening and will continue to happen over

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there in terms of development."

In December, the New York City Planning Department released a document titled, "Far West Midtown: A Framework for Development," a plan that calls for the transformation of the southern portion of Clinton -- from 28th Street to 41st Street and Eighth Avenue to the river -- into office towers, some residential buildings and parks. At the same time, the Jets of the National Football League are pressing a \$1 billion plan for construction of a sports and entertainment complex over the rail yards between 30th and 33rd Streets and 10th to 12th Avenues, a project that could also be a component of the city's bid for the 2012 Olympics.

All of which would be dependent on a \$1.5 billion extension of the crosstown No. 7 subway line, farther west from its Seventh Avenue terminus and south to 34th Street.

"The plan," said Richard Barth, director of the City Planning Department's Manhattan office, "is a recognition that the city needs space to grow, particularly the central Midtown business district. It recognizes that this area offers one of the prime opportunities for the city to meet its economic needs over a 20-, 30-year horizon."

The residential towers along that 42nd Street corridor and sprinkled, mostly, to the north all the way to the 75-story AOL Time Warner residential and office complex now rising at Columbus Circle, along with the city's far west office visions, the sports complex proposal and the possible extension of the No. 7 line, are all proving a bit unnerving for Simone Sindin, the chairwoman of Community Board 4.

"This is scary," said Ms. Sindin, whose board covers Clinton and Chelsea. "This is having your world changed and the rug pulled out from under your feet."

Mr. Fisher of the Clinton coalition insisted: "The city has to realize that maintaining neighborhoods is important. They're claiming that the area below 42nd street is not built out. But there are neighborhoods down there, and businesses that the city needs."

THE block between 41st and 42nd Streets and 11th and 12th Avenues could be seen at the symbolic, if not quite geographic, core of all the change. There stands, at the western end of the block, Riverplace I, a 40-story, 920-apartment luxury rental building with ribbon windows wrapped around its curved corners, offering views of the spikes and spires of Midtown and glorious sunsets.

While Ms. Silverstein's company bought development rights to the entire block 14 years ago, Riverplace I -- with its health club and tennis courts and rents ranging from \$1,600 for a studio to \$5,600 for a penthouse -- opened only a year ago. It is 76 percent occupied.

"We have a mostly young, professional crowd who walk to work in Midtown," Ms. Silverstein said.

At the eastern end of the block, along 11th Avenue, is a parking lot. And attached to the chain-link fence surrounding the parking lot is a large-lettered sign proclaiming, "Future Site of Riverplace II."

If Silverstein Properties realizes its dreams, Riverplace II will be a 53-story tower, sleeker and more expensive than its elder sibling. Its 882 apartments will have "higher ceilings, higher finishes, a lot of marble and limestone and porcelain in terms of the bathrooms; highly amenitized," Ms. Silverstein said. The company plans to seek preliminary construction bids by the end of summer.

"By the time we are all done," Ms. Silverstein said, "we hope to have close to 5,000 people living on that block. And that is because most of the units at Riverplace I are young people sharing the expense of that apartment."

"I think we are the anchor for what's going to proliferate in the area," she said.

Actually, what is already proliferating.

Not even counting dozens of less dominating projects -- midblock buildings required by zoning ordinances to maintain the heights of their longstanding neighbors, renovated tenement buildings with penthouses suddenly plopped on top -- these are just some of the major residential developments currently under way in the community:

\*On the north side of 42nd Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, beside Holy Cross Church, the Ivy Tower has risen.

Two weeks ago, a topping off ceremony was held for the 43-story, 270-unit building developed by Friedman Management on a 22,000-square-foot site that used to be a parking lot. But a courtyard is coming behind the tower -- 4,000 square feet of rock garden, waterfall and abstract sculpture in a midblock belt connecting to the smaller piece of the same complex -- a seven-story, 50-apartment building on 43rd Street. Occupancy in the smaller building is expected to begin in July, and in the tower by November. Studios will start at \$1,800, one-bedrooms at \$2,700 and two-bedrooms at \$4,000.

\*On the northwest corner of 10th Avenue and 41st Street, long the site of four tenements and a parking lot, stands the Victory.

The 45-story building with 417 apartments has a masonry facade with bay windows up to its 26th floor. But from there, said Hal Fetner, president of Sidney Fetner Associates, the developers, "it grows into a glass tower, a progression of less brick and more glass, which forms a V-shape in the corner of the building at 41st and 10th."

The 24-hour doorman building, said Nancy Packes, president of Feathered Nest, the rental broker for the Victory, will have a health club, an indoor half basketball court, a sun deck, a landscaped garden, a golf driving range, a tenant's lounge and "a vending center, so, at night, people can get their munchies, juices and waters." The rental office, Ms. Packes said, is scheduled to open by the end of this month. Studios will start in the high \$1,800's; one-bedrooms around \$2,400, two-bedrooms at about \$3,900.

\*Beside the long-dark Biltmore Theater, on the northeast corner of Eighth Avenue and 47th Street, the Parker family is developing a 51-story, 464-unit residential building with three commercial floors that incorporates unused air rights from the theater and the firehouse at the corner of 48th Street. It replaced six tenement buildings.

The building will be 20 stories taller than zoning formulas would originally have allowed, a bonus granted by the city because the developers are rehabilitating the Biltmore Theater -- home to "Hair" and "Barefoot in the Park" -- which has been dark since it was damaged by fire in 1987.

\*With a ramp wrapping around it and leading into the Lincoln Tunnel, the lot at the southwest corner of Ninth Avenue and 37th Street was a huge pit two months ago. Now, cranes are lowering girders into place.

What is coming is a 14-story, 259-apartment building, developed by the Dermot Meridian Corporation. The building, the first major construction on Ninth Avenue below 42nd Street in the

Clinton area in 30 years, is replacing a Burger King and one of those quadruple-decker parking lots that lift cars, piggyback style, on open steel frames.

\*It won't be open to the public, but on the south side of 43rd Street near 11th Avenue, a 23-story building with 106 apartments began welcoming residents on May 1 -- all of them employees of the Chinese government.

Called the Residence Tower of the Chinese Consulate General, the \$28 million building bears an arched, ribbed roof with a curved facade of frameless glass held in place by cables threaded through pinholes. The 20th and 21st floors, reserved for the ambassador, have stainless steel and granite exteriors. Construction started a year and a half ago, with finishing touches expected by July.

An eight-story factory building had been on the site. "They bought it for \$8 million," said Joseph Maggio, vice president of Princeton General Construction, the builders. "Twenty years ago, it could have sold for a couple hundred thousand."

"I'm very familiar with the area," Mr. Maggio said. "When I was with Colby Construction, we rented a full floor on West 44th Street for \$3.50 a square foot in the early 80's. Now that would be like \$35 a square foot. And this is Hell's Kitchen!"

That moniker, despite all it has come to imply, is of obscure historical origins.

Clinton -- the more official, though less dramatic alternative -- is clearly traceable to two of the community's, indeed New York's, most prominent forefathers: George Clinton, New York's first governor, in 1777, and his nephew, DeWitt, who served as mayor and later governor. The Clintons owned vast farms by the river.

"It wasn't until the 1880's that this was called Hell's Kitchen," said Mary Brendle, the official district historian. But where the name came from remains a mystery.

One tale tells of a midsummer's utterance by a constable on patrol, that the place was "as hot as hell's kitchen."

But it may have been, Ms. Brendle said, The New York Times -- in a Sept. 22, 1881, story headlined, "A Notorious Locality" -- that labeled, or libeled, the neighborhood. Ms. Brendle says the article, describing "a collection of buildings of the same unprepossessing appearance known to the police as 'Hell's Kitchen,'" is the first printed use of the term she has found. The story calls the area "the lowest and filthiest in the city."

To be sure, the neighborhood has had its bad guys. "Through the 1870's, the Gophers gang ruled the whole West Side," Ms. Brendle said. "They stole from the railroad cars, the docks." And there was an 1880's spinoff of the Gophers, the Hell's Kitchen Gang, which that same Times article cited as the city's "most desperate ruffians." (As late as the 1980's, the neighborhood was plagued by a murderous gang, the Westies, linked to the Gambino crime family.)

BUT by and large, with the farms gone and Manhattan's street grid inscribed (under the governance of DeWitt Clinton), the community embraced an expanding populace of blue-collar families dependent on the newly arriving industries -- the breweries, the dairies, the rail yards, the docks, the soap factories and the slaughterhouses -- all within walking distance of their homes.

"Thirty-ninth Street was slaughterhouses," Ms. Brendle said. "They had the cattle pens on the roof, the ramps. They'd bring them across the river on barges, or by train, and drive them through the streets."

By the turn of the last century, the community was also becoming the city's reservoir for servants, cleaning people, hotel and restaurant workers, Broadway ushers, stagehands and set builders. And, as a melting pot of nationalities, it remains so to this day. According to the 2000 census, 45,700 people live in Clinton.

It was in the mid-1800's, with the farmlands fading, that housing for all those workers would shift from three-story wood-frame dwellings to tenements -- considered a significant step up during those times.

And it is those stolid brick structures, rundown though many of them are, that community leaders fear will disappear.

"We are extremely concerned about the expansion of high-rise buildings bordering and struggling to enter the Hell's Kitchen-Clinton neighborhood," said Ms. Sindin, the community board chairwoman.

In 1974, the city created a Special Clinton District, from 41st to 59th Street between Eighth Avenue and the river, in which midblock buildings cannot rise higher than seven stories or 66 feet, whichever is less. On the corners, however, buildings may climb as high as the underlying zoning allows.

"They aren't as tall as the 42nd Street stuff," Ms. Sindin said, "but tall enough to tower over the neighborhood. We've always tried to keep Clinton a low-density village-type area, but so much is coming that it's too much for one afternoon's typing."

What Leni Schwendinger, president of the Hell's Kitchen Neighborhood Association, worries about is the city's long-term vision for the area south of 42nd Street. "We do not look forward to office development," Ms. Schwendinger said. "We do not think that our neighborhood should be an extension of the Midtown business district."

Mr. Fisher of the Clinton coalition said: "All this stuff puts pressure on neighborhood people. Landlords are clearing out tenants. A building on West 51st, 26 tenants got hit with court papers in one day."

"How is the city going to provide for the electricity, the traffic, water, solid waste and sewage?" Mr. Fisher wondered. "It's going to catch up with us."

And there are businesses at risk. "There's photographers, sign makers, small companies that provide services to the office towers in the real Midtown," Mr. Fisher said. "Where do the delivery trucks gas up? When the auto shops are gone, where are you going to put them? In New Jersey?"

Joe Restuccia has been working for years to strike a balance in the community. Mr. Restuccia is director of the Clinton Housing Development Company, a nonprofit group founded in 1973 by neighborhood volunteers to preserve affordable housing in the special preservation district. "The big struggle was to prove that tenements could be renovated instead of demolished," he said. "This was the 70's when the idea was to knock it all down and start all over again."

Housing in the neighborhood is almost entirely tenements -- railroad flats with tubs in the kitchen and toilets in the hall. "The challenge is to take a building like that and modernize it, installing kitchens, private bedrooms, a toilet with a door." Mr. Restuccia said. "This was like a major achievement -- a toilet with a door!"

So far, the company has renovated 72 buildings with 900 apartments using \$78 million in public

and private funds. About 60 percent of the buildings had been held by the city for tax arrears; the rest were renovated by private investment with low-income housing tax credits.

And that is how the Clinton company has worked with some of the developers of those rising towers -- all of whom are building what are called 80-20 projects.

For those projects, either the city or the state issues bonds to finance low-rate mortgages. In exchange, the developers must set aside 20 percent of their apartments for people earning between 40 and 60 percent of the metropolitan area's median income. The affordable apartments must be equally distributed throughout the building and match the distribution of apartment sizes.

In another type of exchange, as with the Victory on 10th Avenue, developers can receive extra square footage or building height if they either construct or renovate affordable apartments on site or off site, over and above the 20 percent already set aside. Just such an exchange is taking place on the east side of Ninth Avenue between 42nd and 43rd Streets.

There, where for decades the Gardini family pharmacy stood, the Brodsky Organization is pouring foundations for an 80-20 building that wraps around a row of four-story midblock tenements.

W HAT we're putting up," said Daniel Brodsky, the company's president, "is a 10-story building on 43rd connected to a 23-story building at the corner of 42nd, for a grand total of 256 apartments." But to maintain the height of the midblock tenements, part of the 43rd Street section of the new building will be only four stories. With occupancy expected in the 10-story section early next year, rents for studios will start at about \$1,700, one-bedrooms at \$2,200 and two-bedrooms at \$3,500.

The low-income apartments, however, will be off-site. And that is where Mr. Restuccia comes in. "They have worked with us to renovate a building at 501 West 52nd Street," Mr. Restuccia said. "It was four tenements with 27 units -- the kind with tubs in the kitchen -- that the city took over for urban renewal in 1969."

The four tenements are being combined into one elevator building with standard apartments. And the 12 long-term tenants relocated during construction will return, with the remaining apartments rented to low-income neighborhood residents.

"The secret of this stuff is that when it works, it really works," Mr. Restuccia said. "When the private developer is interested in engaging with the community in a creative way, the developer gets a benefit, the community gets a benefit and low-income neighborhood residents get a better place to live. This is not about marching with banners; this is sitting at the table and working it out."

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