



# DOWNTOWN DIALOGUE

## Welcome to the City's Oldest —And Newest—Hotel District

BY LIZ BERGER

When I visited the gorgeous new Conrad New York a few weeks ago, I was reminded that though I have lived downtown for 30 years, I have only stayed in a Lower Manhattan hotel one night. It was November 1995, our loft had just been painted, and by 10 PM in those days before low VOC and other green inventions, we could no longer bear the off-gassing paint.

Fortunately, the Millenium Hotel across the street had a room available, and we hunkered down for the night in sweet-smelling style. The fumes had dissipated by morning, and it was back to unpacking, rehangng and making our own bed.

We were lucky to find accommodation at that late hour, because back then there were few hotels in Lower Manhattan. How times have changed! Today, there are three times as many hotels and 80 percent more rooms than there were just 10 years ago, with lodging options for both business and leisure travelers seeking modest rooms or luxury suites.

In fact, there haven't been so many choices since the early 19th century. That's no typo: The Lower Manhattan hospitality business is more than 200 years old!

Hotels first opened here in the 1790s, as ships off the Atlantic and boats down the Hudson brought goods of every kind into Lower Manhattan, attracting buyers and sellers and bankers and middlemen, who streamed into town for business as well as pleasure. There were just too many visitors for the traditional boarding houses and taverns to handle, so in 1794 the five-story, 137-room City Hotel went up on Broadway near Trinity Church.

It was New York City's first European-style hotel, with unheard of amenities like dining and dancing salons, an extensive wine cellar, street-level shops, a bar and coffeehouse. Others soon followed, and, by 1818, there were eight hotels in Lower Manhattan, a number that would not be surpassed for 188 years.

Some of these hotels were world-famous. The 300-room Park Hotel, built in 1836 by John Jacob Astor on Broadway across from City Hall Park and later renamed the Astor House, was for a time considered the most prestigious hotel in the country. It was the only place where famed Senator and



orator Daniel Webster would stay in New York City (a three-room suite was kept in reserve for him). And, it was where Abraham Lincoln holed up in 1860 to write and rewrite his famous Cooper Union address, which catapulted him to the presidency.

The Park was also the last major hotel to be built in Lower Manhattan for the next 145 years. Not until the 825-room Vista Hotel opened in 1981—as part of the transformative construction of the first World Trade Center—would Lower Manhattan see another one.

While five more hotels opened in the 1990s, the re-emergence of Lower Manhattan as a fashionable hotel district did not begin until the first decade of the 21st century.

Now there are 18 hotels with 4,092 rooms in the one square mile below Chambers Street, with five more scheduled to open by the end of 2014 and another 10 planned for construction.

Hotels are good for business. They are good for restaurants, for merchants, for museums and other attractions. They make Lower Manhattan a tourism destination, not just one stop on the tour. And, for those of us who live in Lower Manhattan, they are good for extra guests, family, colleagues and the occasional slumber party or special event. Not to mention paint jobs.

*Liz Berger is President of the Downtown Alliance.*