



The **INTERNATIONAL ANGLE**



Harmonia – a 4-star hotel for the homeless

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Hotel Chandler on 31st street used to cater to upscale New York tourists. But in late 2017, it transformed into an emergency accommodation for homeless people: Harmonia Shelter. One year after operations started, some residents remain hostile about their new neighbour. However, one question remains: Was this change meant to help the poor, or the rich

The warm sunlight shines through classic bay windows, lighting up the sleek room which is at a walking distance from Rockefeller Centre and Times Square in Midtown Manhattan. In Hotel Chandler you find yourself waking up in a king-size bed, surrounded by fluffy duvets and pillows by a luxurious Italian brand. The furniture around is made out of rich and timeless cherry wood. You might relax in front of your HD flat-screen television, watching a current blockbuster while indulging in a sweet or salty treat from the minibar or checking your Instagram feed as you are logged into the complimentary high-speed Wi-Fi. After a long day of sightseeing, you would rejuvenate under the rainfall showerhead in your bright tiled bathroom, for 300 \$ per night.

But this all suddenly came to a stop in November 2016, to the surprise of many. Chic Hotel Chandler closed its doors for wealthy tourists. Two months later, after being refurbished, it was renamed Harmonia Shelter, accommodating up to 170 adult homeless families in its rooms. The shelter, which can house up to 340 people in needy times, has just celebrated its one-year anniversary.

How Chandler became Harmonia

In the case of Harmonia, the saying ‘never judge a book by its cover’ seems accurate: The outside of the building still resembles an expensive hotel, but on the inside, it has become a different world. Where once business people came to have a gin tonic in the evening, now homeless families come in from the cold streets to find some physical and human warmth.

The emergency shelter is run by 50 staff members, including social workers, nurses and security officers. Their main goal? Getting their residents ready for permanent housing, as Nicole Mylan, director of the shelter, points out: “We do everything from counselling, helping people to find jobs and getting our guests into medical care. We help with anything they need to get on the right track”, she says.

Mylan, who has worked in social businesses all of her life and originally started her career in a psychiatric centre, senses that the hunt for permanent housing poses a major challenge for many – especially people diagnosed with mental health issues who would “need assisted living as they can’t just get any apartment. We have people who are already waiting for four years.” Especially for drug users, living on their own is not a realistic option.

Mylan meanwhile admits that “this shelter is very comfortable for our guests. We offer them all services they need in one place. Some people are scared to cook for themselves or of paying their own bills. And drug users just don’t want to buy food, they want to buy drugs.” Drug user or not, the staff of the emergency shelter tries to get every person back on their feet, not excluding anyone. “We work in baby steps with them, little by little”, says Mylan.

First anniversary

A fancy hotel becoming a shelter for people living on the streets doesn’t sound appealing to everyone. In the beginning, many local residents were far from enthusiastic about their new neighbours, Mylan remembers: “I regularly would have people calling and yelling at me. I listened to them, showing that I did care about their needs. They would often complain about small things like more garbage being visible in the streets. I then increased our garbage pick-up from three times a week to five times.”

One year later, the relationship has substantially changed, assures the director: “I go to community meetings and we’ve had our clients volunteer in the neighbourhood. Today I get called by neighbours asking if they can volunteer in return.” The fear of the unknown was probably the biggest issue, Mylan thinks: “Now they see it’s not as scary as they thought.”

“Residents have just given up”

However, some residents still remain sceptic. One of them is Mario Messina, president of the 29 Street Neighbourhood Association. In his view, “it’s not necessarily the situation that got better but us getting tired of complaining. They took the liberty of shoving their will down the throat of everybody else and now, many residents have just given up.”

Messina, who is also chief of a creative business in the neighbourhood, thinks that a shelter placed in the middle of Manhattan is a costly and inefficient solution, likely to lower the value of properties and therefore the wealth of the local population.

Although he states the city council should take care of “these unfortunate people” he too feels sorry for, he senses that Harmonia Shelter has significantly impacted the quality of life and the subjective sense of security of many local residents: “Many of us have seen too many fights in the streets; people screaming, knives, the police having to come... You hear catcalls when girls walk by. People selling drugs and begging for money on the street with crutches they don’t actually need... that’s not the best way of life, you know. It’s not the model of society I would want to achieve.”

All about cash?

The resident association spokesperson also assumes that the owner decided to lease the building to the NGO Services for the Underserved (SUS) to make a bigger profit. “You see this specific ‘friend of a friend’ situation, where a guy wants to make a quick bulk and gives up his hotel that was falling apart to have people fix it up and make great money out of it. They’re earning more money through city department funding now, obviously. It’s not about homeless people being sheltered but New York Real Estate Builders making money. That’s the sad truth.”

While a former member of the hotel’s sales office backs Messina’s view, shelter operator Nicole Mylan underlines that the management company behind the shelter site has transformed other buildings into shelters in the past, another one even being leased to SUS. Still, although they might be involved with the homeless community, the thought of incentives could have been an entrance or motivating factor for the company, she imagines. “It’s possible. It could also be tax breaks. But I don’t know about their motivations, really.” The Real Estate company itself hasn’t reacted to our inquiries about the motivation behind opening Harmonia Shelter.

Nevertheless, Mylan feels optimistic about the future of Harmonia and similar shelters, emphasizing that the public funding is more robust than before, enabling NGOs like SUS to provide additional services. “I think that the city is really recognizing that it’s not just about getting someone into permanent housing, but about preparing them adequately for the services they need. That’s an important step to slowly battle the problem of homelessness.”

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