

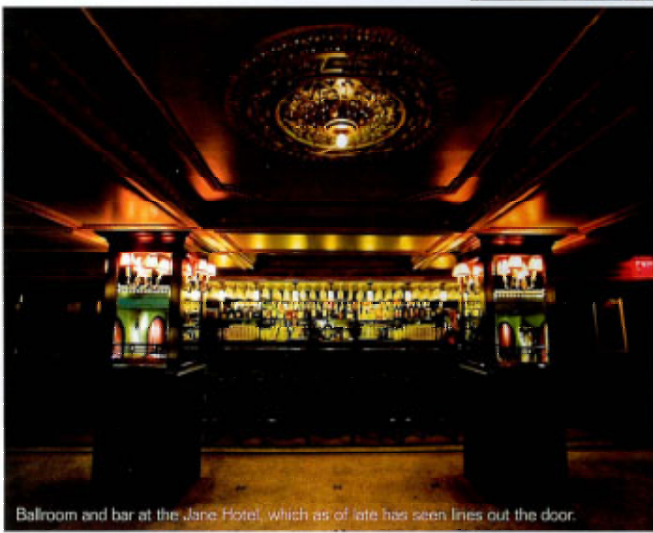
November/December 2009

THE JANE HOTEL

Cheap and Chic: The Jane Hotel

A Fading New York Tradition
comes Alive for New Travelers

BY SPENCER FOXWORTH



Ballroom and bar at the Jane Hotel, which as of late has seen lines out the door.

“Our ideal guest is a 19-year-old runaway,” said Sean MacPherson. The designer and co-owner of the historic and newly-restored Jane Hotel in Manhattan’s West Village, laughed slightly at his hyperbole. But spend a minute in his hotel’s quietly sumptuous lounge and it’s obvious that New York’s legacy of eclectic hotels — those in which a young runaway would feel perfectly at home — holds a special place in MacPherson’s heart.



Sean MacPherson

“So many hotels open up and just become staid old hotels,” said MacPherson, whose other projects with Jane’s co-owner, Eric Goode, include the Maritime Hotel and The Bowery Hotel, also in New York. “I want the Jane Hotel to become culturally relevant. I want it to become a nexus for like-minded travelers. The Chelsea Hotel, with its tremendous history, has become part of the cultural fabric of New York City. My highest hope is that the Jane becomes like that.”

MacPherson is off to a good start.

The Jane Hotel’s common space is its velvet-warm, eclectic lounge, a place whose trend-savvy crowd has been steadily growing. Within this sweeping room, apparently designed by an uninhibited Gilded Age treasure collector, secrets abound. A taxidermy-ed peacock graces a door lintel. Artwork seemingly reclaimed from a Dutch East India Company corporate office hangs from the walls. A bighorn ram looms above the fireplace. An enormous mirror ball, artfully decrepit, gyrates in the room’s center. Candles flicker.

The manually operated elevator shuttles guests up and down the Jane’s six stories, into an environment that feels unchanged since the days when sailors bunked there. Here, branching off narrow corridors so ship-like you can almost feel the deck swaying underfoot are tiny, 50-square-foot-sized rooms smartly reminiscent of ship cabins or train compartments. They’re cheap, around \$99 per night, and closet-tight. If capsule hotels had been invented in Europe at the turn of the previous century, their rooms might look like these.

There’s enough space for luggage (overhead) and a single bed (most of the room). Wall-sized mirrors psychologically, if not actually, expand the interior space; the LCD televisions are flat-screen by necessity. European-style communal bathrooms are down the hall.

“I like to use real materials like wood or stone,” MacPherson said. “We tried not to use sheetrock or paint. The interior of our rooms are all N-grade plywood and handblocked wallpaper. In the ballroom, we used antiques found all over the world. The Jane is a designated landmark building, and I wanted to honor that.”

The Jane Hotel’s original incarnation in 1908 was the improbably named American Seaman’s Friend Society Sailors’ Home and Institute



Above: Fifty square feet never seemed so cozy.

Bottom Left: Communal bathrooms sit at the end of hallways.

(designed by architect William A. Boring, who also designed the immigrant stations at Ellis Island). As a hotel for sailors, the building famously housed survivors of the Titanic. When it finally became available to MacPherson (after passing through years of disrepair), he was ready.

“I live across from the Jane,” he said. “I’ve been going past the building for the last 20 years. When I really looked at the layout, the interior courtyard and tiny rooms, it seemed to me a more appropriate and interesting project to restore it to what it originally was. I like the idea of expressing the New York I was introduced to 20 years ago.”

MacPherson studied philosophy in college before stumbling into hospitality (which he said wasn’t in any way his original intention), so naturally, he simply dove into the project.

“We’d build a room, realize what worked and what didn’t, and then build another room. All the design work I do is intensely organic. I’m trying to get personal and human. We tried to make it feel like someone’s home — maybe not perfectly designed, but perfectly human.”

Perfectly imperfect, the Jane Hotel conveys more character in 50 square feet than many other hotels do in entire floors, and it accomplishes this feat economically in a notoriously expensive neighborhood. “We call it ‘cheap and chic,’” said MacPherson. “It’s not a fleabag dive in Times Square.”

Indeed not. With its unforced bohemianism and unflappable warmth, the Jane Hotel stays true to its original spirit: as a sojourn for plucky travelers.

BD

