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Exhibit Offers a Peek Inside the Lives of Outsiders



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

A tube designed by Julianne Swartz, above, allows people on the sidewalk to see and converse with residents inside the Sunshine Hotel.

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At the Sunshine Hotel, a Bowery flophouse that opened in the early 1920's when a night's shelter cost pennies, resistance to change is practically an article of faith.

Only a few dozen men stay at the hotel, between Prince and Stanton Streets, down from about 200 just 10 years ago, when the nightly rate rose to its current level of \$10. But from year to year - or even decade to decade - much else remains the same.

For instance, its sign, which consists of bright yellow letters that suit the hotel's name, was hung above the front door in the 1980's, and replaced a similar sign put up a generation earlier. The residential rooms on the second and third floors are still about 4 feet by 6 feet and feature chicken-wire ceilings, just as they have for decades. The halls, layered with countless coats of paint and redolent of tobacco, have a dusty, timeless feel. And some men who live along those

halls still occasionally take a drink, just like thousands of their predecessors.

So, last month, when a 29-foot section of bright yellow PVC pipe appeared at the front of the building, snaking from a spot next to the front door and into a corner of the second floor lobby, it was cause for plenty of comment.

"Nobody really knew what it was at first," said Earl Simpson, 67, a resident. "They thought it was some kind of weird periscope."

They were right, sort of. The tube, which was commissioned by The New Museum of Contemporary Art as part of an outdoor exhibition on and near the Bowery, allows people on which people who are far apart can have an intimate conversation," said Julianne Swartz, 37, from Williamsburg, the artist who designed and built the tube, which allows people who might otherwise never speak, to communicate.

Anton Bari, a member of the family that has owned the hotel and the restaurant sup-

ply store on the ground floor of the building for 20 years, said at first he was leery of the tube idea. but was persuaded by Ms. Swartz and staff members at the museum.

"It's just a neighborly thing to do," he said, explaining why he agreed to the project. "They're dynamite people."

While some in the hotel pay little attention to the tube, others say they have grown fond of it. One resident, Nelson Castro, has been entrusted with the job of capping and uncapping both ends of the installation at night and in the mornings.

Last Thursday afternoon, some residents lingered in the Sunshine's lobby, where Michael Horan, 53, was using the tube to talk to Kenny Everton, 47, who had recently moved out of the hotel. Downstairs, Mr. Everton said that the tube had provided a new experience for some hotel residents, a few of whom rarely leave the premises.

"It lifts their spirits a little bit," he said. "It gives them a chance to interact with the community." A short while later,

Loren Schwerd, 33, a sculptor and an art professor from South Carolina, wandered up the Bowery, then paused at the tube's mouth. She spoke a greeting, then listened to the response. Afterward she deconstructed her experience.

"It flip flops the roles and expectations," she said. "I'm looking into their space, but I'm the one who's blushing."

Back upstairs, Bruce Davis, 56, was minding his own business when a young reedy voice came piping through the tube and the lobby, asking, "Anybody up there?" Mr. Davis quickly approached the tube and answered affirmatively.

"Hey, how you doing?" Mr. Davis called. "It sounds like we're right next to each other on the street." After a brief exchange of pleasantries, he said goodbye and returned to his seat.

"I won't get up for just any Tom, Dick or Harry who yells something up," he said. "But when it's a kid I try to answer.