

Edifice Complex: City Inn

Written by Terence Cantarella
July 2008

The City Inn hotel at 660 NW 81st St. in West Little River is the kind of place you wouldn't recommend to your worst enemy. Tattooed pimps with gold teeth patrol the surrounding streets on spray-painted bicycles. Drug-ravaged women in stained miniskirts and worn-out pumps drift in and out of the hotel's lobby, stopping occasionally on the curb outside to light a cigarette, thrust out a hip, and nod to passing male motorists.

To most people, the ten-story City Inn is just one of many eyesores along I-95. Nestled against the west side of the expressway, it stands out more than most buildings along that particular stretch of asphalt, thanks to the large soft-drink banner and other ever-changing advertisements that completely cover the north and east sides of the hotel. Cellular companies lease roof space from the inn, and their large white antennae sit prominently atop the building, lending the hotel a hint of technological sophistication. Up close, though, there's nothing sophisticated about it.

"That place is really, *really* bad," says veteran Ofcr. Darrell Nichols of the Miami Police Department, when asked about the hotel. And with that grim assessment, I decide to do what any sensible writer would do: go and get a room.

The scene is just starting to pick up at 6:00 p.m. on a recent Saturday. A rooster and five chickens, loitering in the parking lot, watch as I walk from my car to the entrance. The lobby's windows and doors are darkly tinted. A hand-written note, taped to the glass, says that no visitors will be allowed inside between 5:00 p.m. and 8:00 a.m. Another note warns that video surveillance is in progress. A black girl in a short yellow dress, with blond highlights in her Afro, leans against the wall outside. She makes eye contact and holds it until I understand that she's making a proposition. A smiling transvestite, in a purple skirt and too much makeup, struts by like a vaudeville ballerina.

I had grown my beard and dressed down before arriving, hoping to add a bit of menace to my appearance. It doesn't work. I'm charged \$60 for a room – instead of the \$39.95 as advertised on a banner outside – and sent up to the top floor. The top two floors, I later learn, are reserved for people who look out of place, people like me. "From the eighth floor down is where the prostitutes and people like that stay," says a hotel source who will remain anonymous.

The inn's hallways are poorly lit and the bare concrete floors make it look like a construction site. Two men on the tenth floor, standing next to a bicycle and haggling over its price, stop talking when the elevator doors open.

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Inside room 1002, the toilet is full of feces. I try to flush but it doesn't work, so I remove the tank cover, play around with the fill-valve, and get it functioning. The bathroom door has been kicked in and the lock is gone. The bed sheets are ripped, cigarette burns scar the carpet, I count seven cockroaches on the window ledge, and the empty plastic bag behind the nightstand still smells of marijuana. Someone outside the door is belting out an inebriated rendition of "Your Love Is So Good."

The windows are bolted shut, which is comforting, because I'm suddenly thinking of Joseph Altidor, a hotel guest who was forced to jump off the balcony in 1986. According to a Miami Herald report, two men and a woman followed Altidor down the hallway and forced him into his room, where they robbed and pistol-whipped him. After they took his money and jewelry, told him to go to the balcony and jump or else they'd shoot him. He complied and somehow survived the three-story fall. The robbers got away.

I consider taking a walk, but someone else comes to mind – Isaac Martin. He was shot after he ventured outside the hotel to get a bite to eat with his wife. The couple was visiting from Pennsylvania on a mission for their daughter's church back in 1989. Two men tried to grab Mrs. Martin's purse on a nearby street corner. When her husband intervened, they put a bullet in his head.

The hotel was a Holiday Inn back then, and although the name has changed since 1989, the neighborhood hasn't. In fact this area of West Little River has seen very few positive changes in the past four decades. The hotel went up in 1969, shortly after construction of I-95. Originally a Holiday Inn, it was supposed to attract tired motorists on their way to the Keys, or travelers in need of convenient lodging close to the airport. But the superhighway sucked traffic off of nearby NW 7th Avenue and took a devastating toll on the surrounding middle-class neighborhood. With fewer customers, businesses closed, longtime residents moved out, and the area slowly began to absorb Liberty City's overflowing population from the south.

With the neighborhood in shambles, Holiday Inn Corp. finally sold the hotel for \$3.98 million in the summer of 1986. Thai con man Phongsoon Dejanu bought the place and began operating a Days Inn franchise. But four years later, in 1990, Days Inn Franchising of America sued Dejanu for \$400,000, alleging that the hotel had fallen far below acceptable standards, causing damage to the corporation's reputation. Dejanu, who was convicted of unrelated bank fraud in 2003 in San Francisco, essentially ran the hotel into the ground. His M.O. in California was to obtain loans to purchase buildings and then use the income generated by those properties for personal gain, never repaying the loans or reinvesting in his properties. His 1980's stint at the City Inn may have been an eerie precursor to his antics on the West Coast. Bangkok Metropolitan Bank

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brought foreclosure action against him in late 1990 and sold the hotel to a group of Thai investors, Bright Enterprises Corp., for \$6 million, financing the sale with a \$4.5 million loan.

Bright Enterprises spent \$2 million on renovations and reopened the hotel, once again as a Days Inn, in 1991. Nine years later, though, the bank brought foreclosure action a second time, and in 2000 the place was snatched up by Miami developers Sam and Judah Burstyn for just \$1.7 million. A new sign went up shortly thereafter: Hotel City Inn.

No matter what name has hung outside, though, prostitution, drugs, and crime have always found their way into the hotel. With no residential enclaves nearby, and no one to file complaints, nuisance-abatement laws have had little effect on the place. "It's like out of sight, out of mind," says Officer Nichols. And as I lie on the grimy bed, staring at the plaster peeling from the ceiling and listening to the hum of I-95 below, it seems that the City Inn is West Little River's very own Ground Zero, a ten-story metaphor for the neighborhood's ills.

A records clerk at Miami-Dade Police headquarters turned up so many crime reports from the City Inn address that she said, "You'll have to come back if you want all of them printed out. And it'll probably cost you close to a \$100." At 15 cents per page, that puts the crime-count somewhere near 400 for the past 20 years (some reports are two pages). A search of Herald archives turned up innumerable reports of room break-ins, purse snatchings, armed robberies, car thefts, and assaults.

Most tragic of all, though, was the 2004 murder of 43-year-old prostitute Cheryl Renee Taylor, who lived at the hotel for a month before her death. Jacob Lugo, a client, paid her for her services, then strangled her in room 615 with her own belt and shoe straps. He helped himself to \$400 in valuables before walking out the front door. A month later, police arrested him just six blocks away.

Naturally, I hesitate before heading out to explore the seamy halls of this ill-fated place. At 11:00 p.m. I put my eye to the door's peephole. It's too dirty to see through, so I put my ear to the door. Nothing. I open up and head for the elevator.

Down in the lobby, I find a small, shuffling crowd. Girls with babies, girls in tight miniskirts, girls with tattoos on their necks, a skinny brunette with sunken eyes and a heroin twitch – they're all talking at once and have formed a circle around an ancient luggage trolley. Propped up on the cart is a semiconscious man with dreadlocks. Blood streams down his face from gashes in his forehead and cheeks.

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“His jaw could be broken,” one of the girls says matter-of-factly. “He could have brain damage, for all we know.”

“Don’t go to sleep, bro’,” another young dread keeps repeating. “Whatever you do, do not go to sleep.”

An ambulance and police car arrive. A Haitian security guard, dressed all in black, circulates with a clipboard in his hand. His mission isn’t exactly clear. Two cops come in, stand by the door, and eyeball me. The drugged-out brunette winks at me through the commotion. A paramedic tries to get the bleeding man’s information, but he’s unresponsive and nobody will give up his details. He’s eventually strapped to a stretcher and carried out, his face swollen into large lumps. “Two men beat him up in one of the rooms,” the receptionist explains later. “He walked in one minute, and the next, they carry him down in the elevator covered in blood.”

The crowd eventually disperses, and all that’s left are the faint strains of “Endless Love” playing on a small radio inside the hotel’s abandoned Alibi Club. “Different restaurants have opened there over the years,” says my source. “None of them last very long. As soon as people walk in and see what the City Inn is about, they turn around and leave.” The club is now just a storage room full of discarded furniture and a lone radio playing somewhere in the dark.

Back at the elevators, a large man wearing more rings than I can count asks in a low voice: “You need somethin’? Girls? Weed?” I decline the offer. The doors open to a voluptuous black girl in sparkly gold short-shorts and a tight white halter top. Her friends call her Crystal. She makes an offer, too: “Hey, chico, come see me, baby. Room 701.” She cups her breast and reaches for it with her long tongue.

Current owner Sam Burstyn is well aware of the kind of people the City Inn attracts. “As a hotel, we have transient clientele,” he says during a recent telephone conversation. “When people come to the hotel, I don’t discriminate against anybody. I have no right to do that. I can’t quote that there’s prostitution going on, but if there’s any that I’m aware of, I definitely take care of the problem. I don’t allow that on my properties. If I see any suspicious activities, I take immediate action.”

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Indeed, Florida law requires hotel owners to be responsible for “providing safe and sanitary lodging” for their guests. The Burstyns did install wall-to-wall closed-circuit cameras to increase the safety of their property. Yet the City Inn was cited for 28 violations in 2007 and 11 so far this year by the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation, with 21 of those violations classified as “critical” – including objectionable odors, roaches, and trash on the premises.

The Burstyns are not interested in creating a five-star hotel, though. Their strategy, according to their Website, is “to purchase properties typically in foreclosure and/or a distressed situation in a very fast period of time.... The Hotel Management Division then manages these properties, gaining a tremendous rate of return. The hotels are maintained for years and eventually sold for large profits.”

And large profits may be just around the corner.

Two years ago Miami-Dade County purchased 9.35 acres of land right across the street from the City Inn for \$6.3 million. A new \$10 million police substation will be built on four acres of that land. A library and Community Action Agency office will each get two acres. That project, as well as efforts to address the neighborhood’s problems under the 7th Avenue Corridor Community Redevelopment Plan, will mark a significant turning point for the area, and it may mean the wrecking ball for the hotel.

“Where we’re at right now,” says Sam Burstyn, “is we’re trying to get approval for 356 units for workforce housing – two towers and a parking garage for 560 cars. I believe 7th Avenue is going to be a great corridor for the future. And I hope that once my project is complete, it will get other people to look at 7th Avenue as the beginning of the future in this area.”

He may be right about the future – he usually is. With dozens of projects already under his belt, and more in the works, Burstyn’s developer instincts are sharp. “I’ve been very patient,” he says, “but I knew the rejuvenation was coming. I decided to hold on to the hotel, and I hope that everything will come to fruition.”

My stay at the City Inn, meanwhile, has already come to fruition. I check out early the following morning and decide to drive around the area before heading home. Even at 7:30 a.m., a

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half-dozen girls are still working the streets. Irma, a Latina in cutoff denim shorts, standing on the corner of NW 79th Street and 8th Avenue and drinking from a brown paper bag, won't admit she's a prostitute, but she offers an expert opinion on the City Inn anyway: "They got everything going on over there. It's crazy. I don't feel safe sleeping in there. I feel like anything could go down."

I ask about the johns. "Are they mostly from the neighborhood?"

"No. It's a lot of out-of-towners," she replies. "There are lots of punks [transvestites] out here, too. Did you know that? And they get picked up a lot more than the females. The best-looking girls out here are the punks."

Irma tells me about "the Pink House," a large two-story home nearby that operates as a motel. "It's like \$13 an hour or something like that."

I ask, "What's worse, the Pink house or the City Inn?"

She points to the City Inn and laughs: "This place – by far. At least when you walk into the Pink House, it smells all right."

Irma wants to move on and I thank her for her time. I'm sad to see her go. She's friendly and entertaining, and in another life, without the alcohol, stained teeth, and bruised legs, she would even be pretty.

I circle the City Inn one last time and suddenly see Crystal, the long-tongued girl from the elevator who had invited me to her room. She's wearing her gold short-shorts, strolling along NE 6th Court, and singing to herself. She sees me, too. "Hey, baby!" she shouts, then feigns a disappointed look. "You didn't never come to see me!"

Before merging onto I-95, where the rest of the world is flying by, oblivious to the City Inn and the sad, desperate world below, I look in my rear-view mirror and see Crystal smiling and waving.

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But then I'm on the highway, and she's gone.

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