



HOLOWKA is trying to save the former Penn power plant on West 31st Street.

DAVE HOLOWKA

BORN Rochester, Monroe County

RESIDES Chelsea

EDUCATION Bachelor's in English literature, University of Rochester; M. Arch., University of Buffalo

ON HIS RÉSUMÉ Holowka retired in 2018. During his career, he worked for such firms as Gerald Allen & Associates as well as the New York Public Library.

DIFFERENT HOODS Holowka has lived in Brooklyn Heights and on the Upper West Side and now in Chelsea since 1999. He recalled that the High Line, before it was repurposed, was once a symbol of blight. "But the same thing could be done for the buildings around Penn Station."

NEXT CHALLENGE He's noticed that at the empty Bayview Correctional Facility, a long-ago lodging for sailors at West 20th Street, workers have been removing terracotta panels depicting ships without notifying state preservation officials, he said. "It doesn't pass the common-sense test."

New kind of neighborhood watch

Chelsea resident with passion for preservation takes on Penn redevelopment plan

BY C. J. HUGHES

Dave Holowka didn't set out to be an activist. In fact, for decades the architect had somewhat of a low-key career, working on school and library projects on behalf of city agencies.

But about a decade ago, Holowka found himself thrust into the lime-light after a fight with his Chelsea neighbor Michael Bolla over a renovation project. Bolla, who owned a townhouse on West 20th Street, had apparently gone against the orders of the Landmarks Preservation Commission and altered his roof in a way that was not consistent with the historic enclave.

On Holowka's then-anonymous blog, ArchiTakes, he posted a series of photos of Bella's rooftop rule-breaking and was so methodical in his critique that Landmarks took the unusual step of forcing Bolla to remove the offending extra feet. But the battle got nasty, with Bolla using the courts to unmask Holowka as the blogger to target

him in a lawsuit. (Bolla, a Sotheby's agent, had no comment.)

Building tours

Embracing his new role as a fighter for vulnerable buildings, Holowka joined Save Chelsea, a grassroots group that had worked to spare row houses. But when officials announced plans to develop 10 towers and 18 million square feet of mostly commercial space in the area around Penn Station, Save Chelsea took aim at a much bigger target.

Holowka is emphasizing the risk posed to prewar buildings without landmark protections if entire blocks in the Penn District are bulldozed. To sound the alarm last summer, he began leading two-hour tours of endangered sites, even if they're not the kind of places that typically make guidebooks.

"If they're torn down and replaced, this would become just another anonymous city neighborhood like Hudson Yards," said Holowka, 68. "But when you see a building being demolished, it's usually too late."

The tours, which each attract a mix of about 50 concerned locals and curiosity-seekers shelling out up to \$20 a piece, stop at 1311 Broadway, the site of a former Gimbels department store. Straddling West 32nd Street is a copper-clad sky bridge that once allowed people to stroll from building to building without ever stepping foot outside.

A wrecking ball could also swing at the Stewart Hotel at 371 Seventh Ave., whose opening party in 1929 was attended by Gov. Franklin Roosevelt but which has grown dingy.

A stone power station built in 1908 by architect Charles McKim, meanwhile, is a midblock monolith with bar-covered windows on West 31st Street that could be mistaken for a parking garage. But it played a key role at the old Penn Station. It's also one of the most-intact remnants of the original Penn, which the city demolished in 1963 to make way for the current version and Madison Square Garden.

Smaller structures make the tour, too, including 402 Eighth Ave., home to the Molly Wee Pub and

Restaurant, a rare vestige of the neighborhood's 19th-century turn as a rowdy, saloon-drenched district called the Tenderloin. "It would be ridiculous to knock it down," he said.

Opponents are attacking the plan on other fronts. In the fall four groups sued the Empire State Development Corp. for favoring Vornado, the developer set to handle most of the redevelopment of the area; one of the groups, ReThink NYC, has members in common with the project-opposing Empire Station Coalition, of which Save Chelsea is also a part. But the suit can in some ways seem superfluous. In November Vornado CEO Steven Roth pumped the brakes when he said development is not possible right now because of "headwinds." As the year dawned, Manhattan's office vacancy rate was a historic 22%, according to Cushman and Wakefield.

"What's needed is a comprehensive plan that preserves historical resources," Holowka said, "but we are completely lacking in that resourcefulness." ■