Home or hotel?
Activists slam landlords illegally converting rooms for tourists

Patricia Prickett in her apartment at the Broadway Studio Hotel. A hotel guest room in the same building.
Home is where the hotel is

Landlords slammed for illegal switch

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The Broadway Studios Hotel markets itself to chic European travelers looking for a cheap room in the heart of the Upper West Side.

But the deal comes with a catch: It’s not a licensed hotel at all, but home to a dozen or so full-time, rent-paying tenants, many of whom have lived there in squallor for years while the landlords have tried to get rid of them.

In fact, according to tenant activists, the owner of the building at 230 W. 101st St., Hank Fried, used money from a federal Housing and Urban Development program designed to provide housing for homeless people with AIDS and used it to remake the building into a destination for the international backpack set.

“Look around; all of this is HUD money,” said Eric Abrams, 47, who has lived in the building since 2003, pointing to a cascading fountain in the cobalt lobby and three flat-screen televisions hanging above rows of Internet terminals.

There are more than 200 buildings that have been converted into illegal hotels, said John Raskin, an organizer with Housing Conservation Coordinators. “We have worked hard to ensure the residential quality of life in our neighborhoods, and if we stop enforcing the laws we lose that,” he said.

The mayor’s Office of Special Enforcement took over enforcement of illegal hotels last year from the Department of Buildings and is looking to close a loophole that allows some of them to go unnoticed.

“Illegal hotels damage the character of the neighborhood and take away much-needed affordable housing,” said Jason Post, a spokesman for the mayor. “We can fix it.”

Fried did not return several inquiries for comment.

The West Side SRO project, which is organizing a rally outside Fried’s building Saturday, has a list of landlords and buildings it’s targeting for similar practices. But a lawyer for one of the four West Side buildings that the group is targeting said the accusations are bogus.

“The allegation is baseless. We have a very stable, a very happy group of residents in our buildings,” attorney Davis Satnick said. “Not one of them has every complained about the use of our buildings.”

“The city is trying to force the owners of these SRO hotels to rent to long-term tenants. It’s a way in the city’s mind of alleviating the low-income-housing shortage,” he added.

Rents for tenants at the hotel range from $400 to $500 a month. While a room for the night runs from $158.99 to $220 a night for a private room.

Councilwoman Gale Brewer (D-Manhattan) has introduced legislation that would greatly increase the fines on landlords who convert their buildings into illegal hotels. Now, they face an $800 one-time fine, but Brewer wants to increase that to as much as $10,000 per unit each day.

Eric Abrams says his landlord is trying to force out tenants to make way for tourists renting hotel rooms.

(Photos: Jefferson Siegel)

Rise in conversions

Other Upper West Side residential buildings with units converted to hotel rooms:
- Continentals: 330 W. 95th St.
- Pennington: 316 W. 95th St.
- Mount Royal: 315 W. 94th St.
- Columbus Studios: 106-108 W. 83rd St.
- Imperial Court: 307 W. 79th St.
- Riverside Hotels: 342-350 W. 71st St.
- Dexter House: 345 W. 86th St.
- Royal York: 258 W. 97th St.
- Marrakech: 2688 Broadway

Source: Goodwin & Associated’s West Side SRO Law Project, an affordable housing advocacy group.

Matthew Sweeney contributed to this report.