



# Artbreak Hotel

*Will a little art museum get in the way of a new Trump trophy on Columbus Circle?*

**O**N THE FACE OF IT, a square-off between Donald Trump and an obscure art museum over a prized piece of real estate would seem like a nonevent. Laughable, even, a big joke.

It could get funnier. Donald Trump could lose.

The real estate in question is the old Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art, the funky, Middle Eastern-tinged building on Columbus Circle.

Debuting in 1964, it flopped as a museum and was taken over by the city's cultural-affairs and tourist bureaus. Now it's being sold off by the Economic Development Corporation. The city let it be known earlier this year that there were seven bidders (none were officially identified), and now it's down to two: Trump and the Dahesh Museum, a small, private institution devoted to nineteenth-century European art.

The city's big-time developers practically rioted in the streets to get their hands on the

adjacent Coliseum site, but they've snubbed the Hartford building. As it stands now, the façade obscures the windows with a marble screen, which seriously limits the possibilities for re-use; demolition is an option, but because of zoning restrictions, it could only be replaced with one of the same, relatively small size.

All of that is just fine with the Dahesh Museum, which would be delighted to use the building essentially as is. The museum has been desperate to raise its

profile for years. In the mid-seventies, writer Salim Moussa Achii (nom de plume, Dr. Da-hesh) moved his sizable art collection here from from war-torn Beirut, and finally opened it to the public in a second-floor Fifth Avenue gallery in 1995. It has slowly gained the acceptance, if not necessarily the enthusiasm, of the art world. "They add to the rich tapestry of New York museums in a very appropriate way," says Hugh Hildesley, a Sotheby's vice-president.

The Dahesh Museum's willingness to restore the Hartford building has made it a whole lot of new friends. Brooke Astor wrote a letter to the mayor, praising its cause. Architects like Robert A. M. Stern and Hugh Hardy have also expressed sup-

(continued on page 24)

## SUBJECT

### Oh, Tannenbaum

• You know why "White Christmas" was written by a Jew? Rob Tannenbaum asks. Because he gave up on writing a Hanukkah song when he couldn't find a rhyme for dreidel.

• Tannenbaum, a *Details* writer and an aspiring rock star, didn't face the same difficulties. The title of his new Jewish seasonal ditty, "Hanukkah With Monica," a collaboration with downtown goof-song-writer Sean Altman, has bits of rhyme scheme built right in. The underwear she wore was so erotica, goes the opening couplet. She liked to serve because she was patriotic.

• Never mind that Adam Sandler capitalized on the same gag—monkeying with words to make them rhyme with "Hanukkah" three years ago, with his "Hanukkah Song." Or that both songs feature "gin and tonica" as their holiday punch of choice.

• Altman says he's never heard the Sandler tune. Tannenbaum notes that he hasn't heard it in more than a year. "I don't actually hear that much similarity," says the writer. "But if people want to liken us to a guy who gets \$20 million a picture, I'll find a way to take it as a compliment." —**ETHAN SMITH**

## CAMEO

### What's a Four-Letter Word for Armageddon?

**I**T'S THE TIME OF YEAR WHEN SACRED things reveal themselves in secular, ugly reality. And so it came to pass that last Monday, thousands of New Yorkers seeking their daily dose of holy scripture turned to the back of Section E of the *Times*. And the specter of doom appeared to them: The clue marked 4-Across was for the word at 5-Across. And the angry phone calls poured forth. But the readers forgave. And Monday began

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Tuesday, and the readers returned to Section E. And the clue 58-Across, for which the answer was EMMETT KELLY, read: Born 12/8/1898, lives 90 years to the day before! And only on Wednesday did the truth appear: the clue should have read: Born 12/9. And all was not good. Two errors in two days is surely the sign of the End. Our advice to the crossword editor: Never mind Revelations. Stick with Numbers. And a blue pencil. Amen.

Illustration by Ward Sutton.

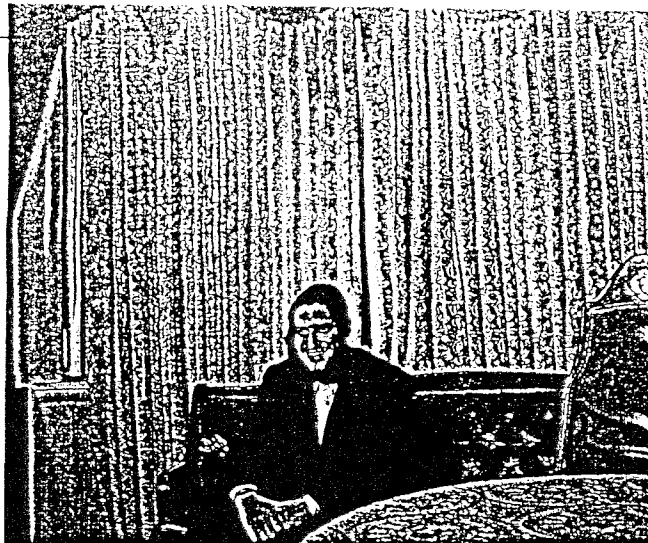
Artbreak continued from page 23 port, though they harbor some ambivalence about the building. Critics have mocked the structure since the day it opened, and even ardent preservationists don't adore it. They value it more as an architectural keepsake, a good-luck charm to ward off the Trumpification of the city. "That building represents a moment in time unlike any other structure in the city," says Hardy carefully. "It's sort of interesting to contemplate."

Trump begs to differ. "It is one of the truly bad buildings. It's really a desecration of a great site." Trump wants to tear down the old building and erect in its place a boutique hotel. "This is just a small project, but it's a diamond," he says.

As usual, no one has any idea what the mayor and his minions are thinking. It's the old black-box method of urban planning. The EDC has scheduled and canceled three separate meetings with community boards to update them on the situation, and the agency spokeswoman will barely even issue a "No comment." West Side pols, who loathe Trump for his vast Riverside South project (recently rechristened Trump Place) and other perceived crimes against good taste and (their) river views, are lined up against him, but their influence on City Hall is close to nil. Ordinarily, Trump might have it wrapped up—his brand-name hotels are a more obvious economic engine than a little-known art museum—but city officials are said to be less than thrilled about the way he ambushed them with his jury-rigged "world's tallest apartment tower" near the UN. The city also apparently liked what it saw of the Dahesh Museum's balance sheet. A decision is due soon.

Whichever way it goes, some veteran observers see no satisfactory outcome. Ada Louise Huxtable; the former New York Times architecture critic, can't see her way clear to endorsing either Dahesh or Trump. "Is the city going to the highest bidder for every little piece of land?" she says. "This is pure chaos." Just the environment Trump thrives in, but maybe not this time.

JOHN GOLDMAN



Eighteen-year-old computer whiz Aron Leifer in his Borough Park home.

## BUSINESS

# Silicon Shtetl

*Never mind that IPO madness—an Orthodox teenager makes real money on the Web.*

**I**F ARON LEIFER HAD ATTENDED an ordinary high school, he might have become one of those techno-kids who cruise the corridors with teacherlike impunity, respected for their skills at keeping the networks and hardware humming. On the side, such kids can earn as much as some teachers do, designing Websites and simple programs, maybe working the graveyard shift for local Internet start-ups.

Aron has gone way beyond that. On his application for a youth-entrepreneurship award from the Citizens Committee of New York, the 18-year-old noted a monthly income of \$25,000. In October, among other jobs, he wrote a Y2K-compliance program for a small telecommunications firm in Minneapolis and flew to Rhode Island to enhance a direct-mail program he'd designed for Bell Atlantic. The next month, he cleared \$40,000. "I bought an Infiniti on Sunday," he says when asked for proof of his earnings. "I could show you that."

At his former yeshiva, Aron didn't know anyone who could use a PC for anything more complicated than writing a let-

ter. Programming classes were out, in part because his Orthodox faith restricts him from public functions at which men and women mix.

But the passionately observant three-times-a-day shul-goer forged ahead on his own and taught himself a half-dozen programming languages. Now he's become the poster child for a new breed of sophisticated teenage capitalists. "They're not cute little kids with lemonade stands," says Michael Clark of the Citizens Committee, which will match Aron and 21 other city teenagers with Fleet Bank mentors at a youth-entrepreneurship celebration on December 14. "You've got to take them seriously."

Among the group of award winners, Aron stands out—not only for the profitability of his business but for the professional way he runs it. To thank one client, Aron sent a Rolls-Royce limo to meet him at the airport. Sounds like a technique lifted from a business magazine—and it probably is. When he was 15 years old, Aron's mother bought him a used IBM, and he knew instantly he wanted to start a

business with it. So he scoured up all the computer and business magazines he could find at the newsstand near his home in Borough Park, paying careful attention to the CEO profiles. "It's like free advice," he says. "They tell you everything they know."

Aron didn't have to learn how to focus; at 14, he dropped all secular studies to ponder the Torah full-time. At 16, he quit that, too, making a deal with his mother, Rose, to study privately two hours a day with a rabbi he'd pay to come to his home office. "He speaks English well; he's good at math," Rose says. "What does he need school for?"

Aron found his way online just a year and a half ago and rapidly established himself as an authority in technical-help forums, responding to programming queries with lengthy, detailed answers—all for free. Some of the grateful recipients of his advice told him he should charge for his services, and by early 1998, Aron says, he was earning about \$3,000 a month on custom programming jobs. Now his company, Multimedia Audiotext, pulls in ten times that by designing Web-integrated database programs for customers, mostly in the telecommunications business, that allow them to sell their services and products online.

At this point, an honor from the Citizens Committee might sound like a mere formality, but Aron is deadly serious about it. He applied for the youth-entrepreneurship program because he was frustrated with the limitations of his boutique operation. He hopes a mentor will help him realize his goal of creating and mass-marketing software to enable small-business owners "to put their companies online in five minutes."

For all the time constraints of his job (a 6 A.M.-to-11 P.M. day with a 45-minute nap and two hours of Torah study in between, is the norm), Aron stresses that his family remains the most important influence in his life. And it's clear from talking to him that the teenager is still shaken by the recent death of his grandmother who nurtured his ambitions. "She bought me my first fax machine," he recalls fondly.

SUSAN BRENN