



Next Door, New York

As a new photography book shows, it's the visual presence of little shops that makes the big city what it is.



ABOVE: Still in business, the Stage Restaurant in the East Village is right next door to an old theater—hence the name.

THE OLD CANARD ABOUT New Yorkers is that we're far too busy rushing around to stop and appreciate the soaring city we inhabit. This has always struck me as inaccurate—the typical New York native is a font of urban wisdom—but also beside the point. While the city is defined by its ambitious skyline, those of us who call the place home know that the true measure of the city can be found at street level. I love the Empire State Building, don't get me wrong, but I've never been to the top, and you won't find me there any time soon. Katz's and Zabar's, on

the other hand? Those are landmarks.

If my romantic vision of the city is marked by towering cold cuts rather than buildings, you'll have to forgive me; back in the sepia days of yore, my great grandfather operated one of New York's finest kosher emporia, so delicatessen runs in my blood (just ask my cardiologist). I often think of the old store's jam-packed display windows, a horror vacui of jarred pickles, tinned condiments, smoked fish, and hanging sausage. That little bit of vernacular design genius was the very essence of New York, though it would now be illegal:

Modern health inspectors insist that all hanging meat be refrigerated.

This may be progress, but I'm not sure we're entirely the better for it. As James and Karla Murray note in their wonderful book, *Store Front: The Disappearing Face of New York*, published earlier this year by Gingko Press, enforcement of the health code put the beloved East Village Ukrainian meat purveyor E. Kurowycky & Sons out of business after a half-century of operation. Once the sausages came down, so did sales. Or so they claim, anyway. Perhaps their demise was inevitable, given the new demographics of the neighborhood. At least the Murrays got there before the place was shuttered, and they have captured for us, as some small consolation, a visual record of Kurowycky's windows, festooned with loops of meat.

Kurowycky is one of many now-defunct shops in *Store Front*, though the majority of the stores pictured in the book remain open—for now. In their documentary zeal, the Murrays have covered all five of the city's boroughs, photographing the shops that make New York *New York*. Some of these are iconic, like the sea-blue letters of the Lemon Ice King of Corona—just looking at the place cools you down. Others are less familiar, but in aggregate their faded and blocky type give color to the city. Each store gets a single shot, taken in flat light. (Imagine Bernd and Hilla Becher working under the direction of Jane Jacobs.) The book is presented as something of an elegy, but the visual energy of the storefronts and the sheer humanity of the proprietors give it a distinct force of life that makes it something more than a nostalgia trip.

Though it is a celebration of urban typography, *Store Front* also suggests the limits of design. It would be nice to think that distinctive signage is a key to survival, and it may well have helped the Kurowyckys. But if

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there’s any one thing to be gleaned from the book, it’s this: *Buy the building*. Whether it’s Luigi’s Pizza in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, or Russ & Daughters on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, real estate is the key to longevity in business. As Herbert Glaser Jr., who lives above the Upper East Side bakeshop his grandfather started 105 years ago, told the Murrays, “Thank God he bought it. That’s why we’re still here.”

Few storekeepers are so lucky, of course. The city is now pockmarked with vacant storefronts, a byproduct of its preposterously accelerated boom-bust cycle. On a recent trip to the Upper West Side, not far from the old family store, I came across a prime corner lot on Broadway, abandoned and boarded up. A neighborhood institution, the discount retailer Fowad, had occupied this blank space for decades. While many locals considered its quasi-graffiti signage an eyesore, with some justification, I always thought it had a kind of urban character. Certainly, it was better than the now-bankrupt chain bank that replaced it after the rent went up.

A rent hike prompted Florent Morellet to close his legendary downtown bistro, Florent, a fixture with creative types as much for its congenial atmosphere and knowing design—orchestrated by Morellet and Tibor Kalman—as for its *frites*. They left the former R&L Restaurant pretty much as they found it, including the steel letters over the awning, and that’s how it remains today, a ghost of its former self. This past summer, another beloved Village diner, Joe Jr.’s, closed up shop.

I often hear it said that such turnover is good for the city; that New York is all about the next new thing; that replacement of the old is an inevitable part of the city’s life, and



ABOVE: Harlem’s M&G Diner (top) was on 125th Street, but recently closed. Long Island Restaurant, in business since 1951, has been shuttered for the past year.

necessary, if it’s not to become a kind of moribund urban museum like Florence or Venice. This seems to me a misreading of the situation—not to mention heartless. New York is not a zero-sum city. It is a place of accretion; more is always better. The day Yonah Schimmel (established 1910) stops slinging its leaden knishes or the waiters at Nam Wah (1920) stop rolling out dim sum will be a sad one for every real New Yorker.

The sheer fortitude of those holdouts offers some hope, and it is reinforced by walking

around any few blocks of the city. For all the endangered shops and history lost, the sheer scale of New York ensures that there will always be individuality here, that the small businesses can survive. For the enterprising among us, an empty storefront will always be an opportunity. Bring on the sausage. 🍔

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