Introduction

I HAVE ALWAYS been surprised by how quickly buildings in New York change. In order to remain useful they are subjected to waves of modifications that alter their appearances drastically. An example is the former Horn & Hardart’s Times Square Automat profiled in this book. It was built in 1912, fairly recently considering the general time span of American architecture, but today it looks nothing like it did when it opened. Each stage of its life—stages that can be seen as manifestations of larger social and economic changes in the surrounding neighborhood and, by extension, American culture at large—brought another change in its appearance. Looking at it today, one is amazed that it has survived at all. But survive it has, and its existence speaks to a tenaciousness that lurks, paradoxically, beneath the ever changing surface of urban life. One of the core ideas underlying this book is that in New York our buildings reflect who we are as people. New Yorkers, known historically for their toughness and resilience, have built, shaped, and inhabited spaces that have lasted; spaces that, despite having been under nearly continuous threat from forces of economic development, can still speak to us today and tell us something about their histories.

Of course, much architecture has been lost. Almost anyone who has written about New York has pointed out how it lives in a perpetual state of renewal: built, torn down, and rebuilt in an endless cycle. This is not a process exclusive to New York: it has occurred on the South Side of Chicago, in the area surrounding Memphis’s Beale Street, in Miami, and in other cities throughout the United States. But in New York—and particularly Manhattan—the rate of change seems intensified. In some cases whole neighborhoods have been leveled; the Gas House District (east of First Avenue between 14th and 23rd Streets), San Juan Hill (largely destroyed to build Lincoln Center), and portions of the far Lower East Side near the river are just a few of the areas that have been cleared in the name of social or economic progress. Others have disappeared slowly, chipped away in stages by encroaching development. Little Syria, for example, was
once one of Manhattan’s liveliest ethnic enclaves, filling the lower portion of Washington Street; today it has been reduced to a total of two buildings. That these structures (one church and one tenement) even exist is the result of what could be interpreted as forces of chance—the same chances that, for example, have allowed 19th century houses on the northeastern end of Washington Square to remain while destroying others toward the northwestern end.

Like the houses of Washington Square, the buildings discussed in this book have benefited from luck. With the exception of Shang Draper’s former gambling emporium on West 28th Street, none fall within the boundaries of an official landmarked district. Furthermore, they are structures generally associated with the middle and working classes; as such, they exist somewhat at odds with the process of creating landmarks in New York City, which historically has tended to favor sites used by the elite—or otherwise places that stand out for being extraordinary in some way, whether symbolically or purely for their architecture (such as Grand Central Station, even though it, too, has been threatened). This is not surprising: one of the expectations of creating landmarks as a movement is to highlight what has been considered special throughout history and continues to hold remarkable appeal for new generations. But the bulk of Manhattanites have not dwelt in the spacious Old Merchant’s House on East 4th Street or the mansions of Fifth Avenue but rather in tenements along First, Second, and Third; in the teeming immigrant district of the Lower East Side (once the most densely populated section of the city); and in boarding houses sprinkled throughout Harlem, Hell’s Kitchen, and Union Square. Quotidian places, which might allow us to see and appreciate how New Yorkers actually lived, are often overlooked as sites of preservation.\footnote{Manhattanites have often seemed remorseful at having ignored their physical history, having treated it so callously. At the same time they have sought to accept change as an inescapable element of life in the metropolis. In \textit{Downtown: My Manhattan} (2004), Pete Hamill writes poignantly of this experience:}

\textbf{The New York version of nostalgia is not simply about lost buildings or their presence in the youth of the individuals who lived with them. It involves an almost fatalistic acceptance of the permanent presence of loss. Nothing will ever stay the same . . . Irreversible change happens so often in New York that the experience affects character itself.}
But we never make total peace with the destruction of architecture. As evidenced by the popularity of Web sites such as forgotten-ny.com and vanishingnewyork.blogspot.com, our anxiety has grown in recent years, as more and more of the city we know has been replaced with new construction. The elegiac posts on these sites indicate that the process of coming to terms with architectural loss occurs in stages: first shock that something beautiful could have been destroyed; then resignation; and, finally, determination to appreciate the treasures that remain. If, as Hamill suggests, we approach loss with a fatalistic perspective, it is because we understand the irreversibility of destruction. Once a building is gone, it is gone forever. The demolition of the original Pennsylvania Station in the 1960s is still recalled with sadness by many who are old enough to remember it, while others bemoan the loss of the Metropolitan Opera House on 39th and Broadway, which was torn down in 1967, after the new Lincoln Center had replaced it some twenty-five blocks to the north. Other losses abound: Luchow’s, the famous German restaurant on East 14th Street; the Helen Hayes, Morosco, and Bijou theaters in Times Square (destroyed to build what is generally regarded as one of the city’s least attractive buildings, the hulking Marriott Marquis), and so many of the townhouses and railroad flats that once typified the East Side, to name a few.

Still, every so often the past comes back to haunt us, letting us know that it is not to be taken lightly, that it has something to say. In Manhattan there are many striking examples of buildings and neighborhoods where, through adjacent demolitions or the weathering effects of time, layers are stripped away to reveal history. In 1998, when the remnants of the 1918 Central Theater on the southwestern corner of Broadway and 47th Street were torn down to build the W Hotel, the side of a building from the 1860s was exposed, revealing a large painted sign for carriages—a glimpse into the days when Times Square was a center of the horse trade. Of course, once the skyscraper hotel was completed, the old sign again disappeared from view. Another discovery came at a Radio Shack on West 125th Street, near Eighth Avenue. One day the cement below the doorway chipped, uncovering part of a sign for the Baby Grand, a popular Harlem nightclub that lasted from 1947 all the way to 1989. Suddenly a place that had seemed clearly within New York’s past (legendary for performers such as comedian Nipsey Russell and singer Little Jimmy Scott, who often worked there) was pulled into the very real present. At such moments the city offers its own greatest history lesson.
Automats, Taxi Dances, and Vaudeville searches for these “windows”—odd openings where we can view the past, if only for an instant—and then uses them as an entry into a history of place. One reason I have chosen to spotlight buildings of entertainment and leisure (as opposed to those devoted strictly to government or business) is because these are the places that most often disappear after their economic usefulness runs out, casualties of an American popular culture that is always moving to the next trend. For example, of the half-dozen theaters that helped make Union Square the city’s leading entertainment district of the 1870s, not one has survived into the present day (a fact that can be compared to the significant number of 19th-century churches, stores, and bank buildings remaining throughout the city). Thus the discovery of an extant cultural site provides the rare chance to experience a fragment of history within its original environment. It offers the sense of context and scale often lacking in even the most detailed museum installations.

More important, as a starting point for many of the narratives dominating this book, places associated with entertainment culture possess dramatic and sometimes turbulent histories. In his well-researched book, Nightclub City, Burton W. Peretti explores how New York’s social history can be viewed as one long struggle between city establishment and the larger populace. Sites of recreation and entertainment frequently have
become grounds for this ongoing battle, one that has played itself out through the machinations of civic authority versus the inhabitants’ opposing will to fight back, to claim ownership upon a space that for them holds meaning. In some instances (such as those related to the experiences of African Americans in Manhattan) the end result of these battles has been an actual population shift, one which reflects the human drive for physical and emotional security—a place to call home. But even in these situations, New Yorkers have managed to take an active role in the creation of their own spaces. Although the history of a building can be instantly wiped away, through fire or demolition (thus underscoring the role chance plays in shaping the city’s architectural patterns), the human processes informing that history are anything but random.

Looking further at the process through which New Yorkers define public space, we can see how social identity has coalesced around specific sites. Historically, first comes the marking of terrain as a place identified with one segment of New York’s population (through, for example, ethnicity, profession, or economic status); then, in time, a broader network of symbolic meaning develops. In this way, Harlem as a neighborhood into which African Americans began to move shortly after 1900 became the “Harlem” of literature, art, and the Renaissance, a source of racial pride; Tin Pan Alley, a short block of 28th Street housing music publishers during the 1890s, became the “Tin Pan Alley” of popular standards and romantic sentiment. Something similar can be said for Times Square, the Bowery, and Chinatown. The five Manhattan neighborhoods surveyed in this book possess a significance that extends beyond geography, in that each represents a starting point for the different ways in which we have come to view the city and ourselves. Perhaps this is why we lose something, collectively, when pieces of these neighborhoods begin to disappear.

Because of the density of their borough (a condition which results in part from its natural geographical limitations as an island), Manhattanites quickly learn to navigate issues related to space in their personal and business lives. Every square foot serves a purpose, as anyone who has ever dwelt in a Manhattan apartment knows. Movies have been shot on rooftops, nightclubs have opened in tiny basements, and theaters have been demolished when exigencies of space—owing to the combination of auditorium and stage house, theaters take up a lot of it—have necessitated their replacement with something more commercially viable, such as an apartment building. Nothing is allowed to sit unused or unprofitable for
long. Viewed in this light, the many design changes of the Times Square Automat over the decades—green Burger King shingles in the 1970s, giant billboards in the 1990s—are evidence of its struggle for economic relevance in a changing city.

Traditionally design and ornamentation have been used by community figures or business owners when seeking to distinguish their spaces from the many others comprising an average Manhattan block. Often, as in the case of the Star of David that decorates the old Hebrew Actors’ Union building on East 7th Street (see chapter 4), or the spires adorning the facade of the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church (chapter 7), design helps transmit an idea of how the space is used; simultaneously it acts as a commercial signifier and a way to get an edge over competition. Producer Billy Rose, for example, was known for the bombastic extent to which he worked his persona into the designs of his theaters. The electric sign for his Music Hall, which opened on Broadway and 53rd Street in 1934, was reportedly so high that it towered over all its neighbors. His sister, Polly, recalled how “every New Yorker and every tourist who looked up couldn’t miss those blinking electric lights that spelled out just two words: Billy Rose.”

On a more private level, design serves to personalize a space for its inhabitants. New Yorkers have not, as a rule, acted as passive citizens; they have shaped their cultural institutions largely by participating in them. For decades, one design feature of the Atlantic Garden, the Bowery’s most popular German beer hall of the 19th century (see chapter 1), was an inscribed wall motto that read: “Who loves not wine, wife or song, will remain a fool his whole life long.” Other interior elements of the Atlantic Garden, markers of uniqueness such as its “orchestrion,” a wall-sized music box, became sources of pride for customers. Significantly, when the Atlantic Garden came under threat from police for selling beer on Sundays, patrons fought back verbally, heckling the officers in charge of making arrests. As their gathering spot, an emblem of their culture and life, the Atlantic Garden was a place they instinctively defended. Similarly, when Marie Downs, the owner of Harlem’s Lincoln Theater (chapter 7), constructed a new building in 1915, she arranged for the placement of two sculpted busts of Abraham Lincoln outside, above the entrance. This symbolic detail informed African Americans, who were often turned away from other theaters, that they were welcome. Thus design features can reflect the philosophical ideals of a building’s owner and residents. Viewed from a modern perspective, they also offer clues into prior usage.
A number of chapters in *Automats, Taxi Dances, and Vaudeville* use design or ornamentation of a particular space to launch into social history. Of course, the whole idea of space in a city as dynamic as New York is never fixed; it sits within a larger pattern of movement. Starting with its early years as a Dutch settlement in the 1600s, and continuing through to the 1920s and 1930s (when Inwood, its uppermost community, was developed with apartments), Manhattan progressively grew in the one direction of which it was capable: northward. One map, taken from an 1842 travel guide, reveals that Manhattan was at that time mostly uninhabited above 14th Street. By 1860, not even one generation later, Central Park had been laid out as far north as 110th Street, and religious organizations such as Brick Church had relocated to the upper 30s along Fifth Avenue to be near the prosperous families that had moved there. The city’s population had more than doubled, from 312,710 in 1840 to 813,669 twenty years later. Such rapid human growth necessitated constant physical expansion.\(^4\)

During the 19th century Manhattan’s theatrical districts tended to develop near fashionable residential neighborhoods. This pattern may have reflected the ideals of an entertainment business that was still, prior to the 20th-century flourishing of popular culture in the United States, seeking to establish itself in line with elite sensibilities. But the relationship between high society and theatrical commerce was rarely stable. The Bowery Theater, for example, opened in 1826 as a venue for prosperous citizens who lived on and near the theater’s eponymous boulevard. But, within a decade, those same citizens had begun moving northward, driven away by the crowds and congestion that the theater had at least partially engendered. By the 1860s, however, theatrical culture had caught up with the carriage trade in the area surrounding Union Square and 14th Street. Again, elites would move on, northward toward the vicinity of Madison Square (bounded by 23rd and 26th Streets, east of Broadway). While retaining its presence in Union Square, the theatrical district would also expand to the north beginning in the 1860s, settling largely in the West 20s and 30s, along Broadway and Sixth Avenue. Eventually, by the 1890s, Madison Square had ceased to be a desirable site for residences, although theaters such as the Garden (built in 1890) remained there, hosting some of the era’s most popular entertainers.

The rise of Times Square as a commercial district during the early years of the 20th century put an end to this pattern of leapfrogging. For what may be the first time in Manhattan history, a theatrical neighborhood was
established without elite society having first broken into the surrounding territory (as mentioned, Times Square had been occupied largely by carriage manufacturers and stables). The Republic, known today as the New Victory, opened on 42nd Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues in 1900; soon other theaters, among them the Art Nouveau-styled New Amsterdam (1903), had arrived on the block. Around the same time, technological advances such as artificial lighting were opening new possibilities for advertisers seeking exposure for their products, and the buildings of Times Square began to host giant electric signs. With the arrival of movie palaces, cabarets, and nightclubs, Times Square by the 1920s had established its reputation as a place of fantasy and escape, the ideological center of what is today known as “pop culture.” Times Square, as a physical site, became the “Times Square” of urban dreams and legend.

The aura of myth surrounding Times Square points to a reason why I have chosen, in this volume, to write strictly about Manhattan. For much of its history, the island has been a place where important trends in American entertainment have been invented and popularized. Of course, trends have been created in other boroughs, too, but notwithstanding key exceptions (such as those related to sports and amusement parks) they have not borne the same mythological weight as those associated with Manhattan, New York City’s economic center. Billie Holiday, along with her influential approach to jazz singing, was discovered in Manhattan, not in the Bronx; film studios may eventually have been constructed in Queens, but the earliest of them were founded in Manhattan. A similar assertion can be applied to the worlds of theater, vaudeville, and nightlife. Each of the book’s eleven chapters deals with a particular cultural movement; grouped into five sections, the chapters also reflect, in a general sense, Manhattan’s historical progression northward.

Chinatown, Chatham Square, and the Bowery

A center of immigrant culture since the mid-19th century, Chatham Square may be the oldest entertainment district in the city for which physical traces can be seen today—notwithstanding Castle Clinton National Monument at Manhattan’s lower tip in the Battery, used as a concert hall between 1824 and 1855. In chapter 1, “A Round for the Old Atlantic,” we encounter the remains of the Atlantic Garden, which opened in 1858 and became the most famous of the Bowery “beer
gardens,” lasting more than fifty years. Beer gardens were centers of German immigrant life, combining music with other forms of amusement to provide spaces for families to socialize and escape the congestion of tenements. Another hub of immigrant culture is encountered in chapter 2, “Chinatown Theater,” where we visit the former Chinese Opera House, or Chinese Theater, located around the corner from the Bowery on tiny Doyers Street. Opened in 1893, the Chinese Theater was the first of its kind in the United States outside of San Francisco. Both establishments—the Atlantic Garden and the Chinese Theater—were founded to cater to a specific immigrant population. In time, however, they attracted other social groups within the growing metropolis, reflecting in the process a new “New York” culture made up of divergent peoples and backgrounds.

Union Square and the East Village

Beginning in the 1860s, and continuing through to the end of the century, Union Square and 14th Street were host to many different entertainment businesses. As mentioned, none of the theaters of Union Square stands today, but there remains one place associated with the beginning of another great industry: cinema. “A Roof with a View” (chapter 3) returns to the site of what is probably the first motion picture studio in New York (1896), American Mutoscope, housed on top of the Roosevelt Building at Broadway and 13th Street. From this spot, New Yorkers began to use the new medium of film to look at both the outside world and their own expanding city.

Located to the south of Union Square, the neighborhood now known as the East Village became identified during the early 20th century as a locus of Yiddish culture. Second Avenue, one of the East Village’s primary thoroughfares, was dubbed the “Jewish Rialto” for its vibrant collection of theaters, cafes, and social organizations. In “Caretakers of Second Avenue” (chapter 4), we visit what is left of the Hebrew Actors’ Union (HAU), which once presided over the Yiddish theatrical world, setting guidelines for how much actors would be paid and which roles they could play. The first actors’ union in the United States, the HAU grew into a powerful and respected organization; its decline in influence, which began during the mid-20th century, reflected the attenuation of Yiddish culture as a whole.
The Tenderloin

Situated to the west of Fifth Avenue, and running from 23rd Street to the upper 30s, the “Tenderloin” reigned during the 1880s, 1890s, and the first years after 1900 as a destination for those seeking both legal and illicit entertainment. It was the closest Manhattan has ever come to possessing an officially sanctioned “red-light” district, operating with the help of police who benefited from the payment of protection money. In addition, African American residents made one section of the neighborhood—the “Black Chapel,” along Seventh Avenue in the upper 20s and lower 30s—a template for the forms of cultural expression that later gained renown in Harlem. Today what remains of the Tenderloin is losing ground to high-rise development. Chapter 5, “If You Can Make ‘Em Cry,” surveys one portion that has remained largely intact: the block of 28th Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue—once known as Tin Pan Alley, home of the American popular song industry. “Tenderloin Winners and Losers” (chapter 6) looks at a different neighborhood industry—gambling—through the history of a second site on 28th Street, a house once owned by bank robber and criminal Thomas “Shang” Draper. As we will see, the house figures prominently in the battles leading to the Tenderloin’s decline as a center of prostitution and gambling.

Harlem

Here the focus of this volume shifts to Harlem, one section of which (the 130s around Fifth and Lenox Avenues) began housing African American New Yorkers as early as 1902—roughly the same time they started moving out of the Tenderloin. Chapter 7, “A Theater of Our Own,” traces the rise of the first theater in Harlem built specifically for an African American audience, the Lincoln on West 135th Street. The Lincoln was successful partly because its owner, Cuban-born Marie Downs, gave her audiences a voice in the selection of bookings and acts. It also held the distinction of hosting some of the greatest blues, jazz, and theatrical performers of the 1920s. The chapter ends with a re-created 1922 performance at the Lincoln by Mamie Smith, regarded historically as the first woman to make a blues recording. A brief chapter 8, “Rise and Fall of the Original Swing Street,” profiles the block of West 133rd Street known in the late 1920s and early 1930s as a hotbed of jazz music. It was this street which contributed
to the breakdown of racial barriers in the city by adhering to an integrated policy for audiences, at a time when many of the more expensive Harlem nightclubs were designed for white tourists.

_Times Square_

As an entertainment district, Times Square has survived longer than any neighborhood in Manhattan, retaining its popularity into the 21st century. Because of its continuing hold on the cultural imagination, I have chosen to place Times Square last, departing from the book’s south-to-north structural pattern. In “The Strike Invisible” (chapter 9) we encounter the remains of the aforementioned Horn & Hardart’s Automat, which became linked to the struggle for worker unionization during the late 1930s. “Last Dance at the Orpheum” (chapter 10) explores another manifestation of entertainment culture, taxi-dance (or “dime-a-dance”) ballrooms, where men purchased tickets for dances with young female employees. The Orpheum Dance Palace on the corner of 46th Street and Broadway, in business from 1917 to 1964, was one of the most successful of these establishments. Unfortunately it is the one building that has not survived for this book’s publication, a fact which underscores the tenuousness of many of New York’s lesser-known cultural sites. The final chapter, “Nights of Gladness” (chapter 11), revisits Billy Rose’s Diamond Horseshoe, a “theatre-restaurant,” or nightclub combining moderately priced food and entertainment, that bypassed the social elite in favor of middle-class patrons and tourists. The chapter ends by re-creating an evening at the club as experienced by a fictional, Midwestern married couple, and thus reflects the understanding, expressed throughout the book, of New York’s entertainment architecture as a setting for human experience.

It would be dishonest to think of Times Square as a populist utopia, however. Not everyone was included at all times, or accepted. One Eighth Avenue watering hole, now demolished, was rumored to have, as late as the 1970s, practiced a kind of racism that would seem shocking within the context of a modern city. Patrons of color would be admitted and served, the story goes, but later their beer glasses would be smashed against the floor so they could not be used again. Clearly there is danger in romanticizing the past, and merely viewing it nostalgically overlooks the real struggles and prejudices that everyday citizens faced. But if we appreciate the past in a more dynamic light, we can see how repressive mores and
practices have brought out the fighting spirit in New York’s citizens. One pattern I hope to emphasize is how New Yorkers have always found a way to make their voices heard in the battle for security of place. Manhattan’s buildings are very much like those who have inhabited them: they emphasize the feat of survival. Their imbued humanity—their history—makes them more than just collections of mortar, brick, and stone.

Through exploring the stories revealed by this excavation into Manhattan’s cultural history, I hope to unearth some of the mystery lurking around us in places we pass every day, to encourage New Yorkers, both residents and visitors, to view their surroundings in a new light. More than being interesting, or old, the buildings in *Automats, Taxi Dances, and Vaudeville* represent cultural forces that continue to influence the city’s daily life. Every time New Yorkers attend a performance at the Blue Note, Iridium, or one of the city’s other jazz clubs, they tap into a tradition that flourished on Harlem’s 133rd Street; Manhattan actors have the Hebrew Actors’ Union and its turn-of-the-century innovations to thank for the benefits of a fixed, regulated pay scale; “fast food” and take-outs, gobbled by thousands of city workers on their lunch breaks, descend directly from the pioneering ideas of the automat. The effects remain long after their sources have been forgotten.

New York City has been my home since the early 1990s. One by one, I have watched familiar buildings disappear. One of the first destructions I witnessed, in 1992, was of the original Union Square Theater, which had managed to survive in various forms since 1871. Other casualties followed: the beautiful Luchow’s Restaurant and the Palladium (formerly a theater, the Academy of Music), both on 14th Street; the Harris Theater on 42nd Street, destroyed as part of Times Square’s much-touted renewal plan; and small but lovely buildings like the row of three boxy mid-19th-century houses on Eighth Avenue between 21st and 22nd Streets, remnants of a simpler era in architecture and, as such, unique in a plain, straightforward way. They, like so many other structures, were torn down to make room for an apartment building.

But while this was happening I also noticed that other buildings managed to remain, offering clues to the past characters of the neighborhoods surrounding them and preserving a sense of history in a city that was, as the real estate market took an upswing in the late 1990s, rapidly changing. I began making notes, gathering information in files, aware that time and progress were conspiring against these structures. Soon I came to
understand buildings as having lives much like people, imbued with human histories that encompassed birth, growth, tragedy, and, finally, when their usefulness had been outlived, deterioration and death.

Every so often I have a dream that has recurred throughout many years. Although some details change, the basic situation is the same: I am walking in an American city sometime during the middle of the 20th century. I keep searching for a neighborhood that I know, from my previous visits, contains a large number of old theaters. By the time I figure out where the neighborhood is I am forced to remember that many of the theaters have been torn down. The actual number of missing theaters varies from dream to dream (other buildings are missing, too), but always I am able to find one or two that are still there—and feel tremendous relief when I go inside and head to a seat, usually in the balcony where I can get a nice view of the whole building. But always something is different about the interior: either it has been stripped of all architectural detail, just a blank shell, or else the stage seems so far away that I can barely see it. It's as if I'm watching it from the opposite end of a telescope. Everything appears to be growing smaller, shrinking in front of me to a pin-sized speck before evaporating completely.

My dream is essentially true; it represents a search I have been on my entire life, one that continues to plague, frustrate, and sometimes delight me. In a way, Automats, Taxi Dances, and Vaudeville is a physical manifestation of that dream, my attempt to move it out of the realm of fantasy and into real life. Like a genealogist searching for my roots, I am delving into a past that I only know through my reading of history and conversations with those who were there. But sometimes, if I use my imagination, enough physical material is left, even if just a vestige, to enable me to picture how things might have been. My search for these hidden places is a way of capturing a piece of the past and experiencing it in the present. If time is just a continuum, and the present, past, and future all exist together—with the past and future hidden from view—then New York's past is still there, lurking just beyond the range of our vision.

This book is my attempt to bring it out of hiding.