

The Village Spirit



In New York, an old haunt is always closing. It's a fixture of the news cycle, like the decaying subway system. Word gets out that a business is on the skids, regulars grapple with the loss, reporters note rising rents and everyone moves on.

Recently, a great little jazz club in Greenwich Village closed its doors. The Cornelia Street Café was a popular neighbourhood restaurant for more than 40 years, but I never ate there. Instead, I'd head down to the small, dark basement, which hosted two or three shows a night, and find a candlelit table near the stage. The cover charge was \$10, less than a movie ticket, so I could afford to take chances on musicians I'd never heard before: a bebop saxophonist, young vibraphonist or Syrian clarinetist. It was one of the first clubs I visited after coming to New York in my early 20s, and I'd often stay out late listening to jazz in the Village. As I watched performers improvise just a few feet away, I'd think to myself, 'This is why I moved here'.

The Cornelia Street Café occupied the ground and lower floors of a landmarked building in the Greenwich Village Historic District. Like others on the block, the original structure has been modified over the past century, and the architecture is nothing special. A fire escape zigzags up the front and air conditioners droop from the windows. But when the building was designated in 2010, the brick and limestone facade was protected — the music was not.

New Yorkers are oddly protective of the built environment; thousands of properties have

become cultural or historical landmarks. It is an architecturally conservative city despite its reputation for innovation. In most respects, we gravitate to the new — like the latest cocktail bar — yet we rein in daring modern designs. The Empire State Building, completed almost a century ago, is still the most distinctive spire in the skyline.

Heritage preservation helps maintain a city's character, but I wonder if sometimes our efforts are misplaced. What we hope to hold on to at 29 Cornelia Street, it seems to me, is not the physical structure, but the memory of bohemian Greenwich Village. The painter Alice Neel, poet WH Auden and writer James Agee lived on the block; Sam Shepard premiered early plays at the coffee house next door.

The Cornelia Street Café was part of that lineage, but the neighbourhood's creative spirit had long since moved on; it's not something you can confine to bricks and mortar. Rent isn't cheap in comely historic districts, so broke jazz fans now go to shows in Brooklyn and artists have studios in western Queens. Perhaps one day these draughty warehouses will be deemed culturally significant themselves.

In truth, I hadn't been to the Cornelia Street Café for more than a year when it closed. I can't do the late nights anymore, and only watch live jazz occasionally. My New York evolves all the time: the basement clubs of the Village belong to my younger self, as long-gone as the beatnik coffee houses, but whether or not they survive, the clubs will always be part of my city.

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