

THE FANTASY OF THE NEW YORK NIGHTCLUB:
A STUDY OF AN URBAN PUBLIC SPACE

by

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Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degrees of

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will take you on an exploration of the hidden nightclubs of New York City and on a journey into their fantasy worlds. With the recent trend of privatization of public space, there is an alarming need to encourage public spaces that bring together the city as a whole. With urban conditions such as density, congestion, crime, and pollution increasing, there is an increasing urgency for escape. For a public space to meet the demands of today's urban residents, it must provide an outlet for escape by orchestrating a fantasy for its users. By examining the history of nightclubs and their changing role during different eras, I will establish that the role of the nightclub is to serve the public in a manner similar to the role of public space. Furthermore, I present two case studies which prove that nightclubs are fulfilling the need for city-wide public space and examine how they fulfill this need. I believe that the New York nightclub is a contemporary public place because it meets the requirements traditionally set out for such places. Since it is a good working public space, it merits further study.

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Chapter One:

Introduction

Imagine a place where you can seemingly transverse the Atlantic and find yourself suddenly surrounded by the sights and sounds of Paris, Rome, Venice or Madrid; or cross the Pacific and be surrounded by Buddhas, Kimonos, and Oriental architecture. Alternatively, you could make the always popular choice of the nightly journey to our Southern continent counterpart, with all the passion and the song of the Latin world. But rather than changing your climate or your country, you might instead prefer to change your place in time, and be immediately transported back to the 70s, the 50s, the 40s or the 20s, or even back to the Victorian era.

You might also enjoy a brief excursion into the animal kingdom. And for the truly adventuresome, there's the opportunity to travel to the future, perhaps even to another planet. Such fantasies are being orchestrated every single night, and have been for most of this century. But this description is not about the varied and wondrous offerings of a suburban theme park, or the controlled fantasy environments offered on a grandiose scale by Disneyland or Universal Studios. Instead, this description is about a distinctly urban phenomenon: the fantasies offered by night clubs in general, and New York night clubs in particular.

It is an essential element of the urban environment that it offer its residents an escape from the city within the boundaries of the urban confines. Many urban residents don't have cars, especially New York City residents. Many who do have cars don't have the money to travel outside the city. And even

those who do have the money might not have the time. Urban life tends to imply long work hours and high stress levels. And then again even for those with the car the money and the time, leaving the city by automobile is often an inefficient usage of one's time. Rather than travel three hours in bumper to bumper traffic to Jones Beach, an urban resident will often choose to find his escape within the city: by going to Central Park, Yankee Stadium, a Broadway show or the like. Indeed, a city may often choose to define itself based on the quality and quantity of these outlets for escape, such as its parks, its sports arenas, its theaters, etc. In this sense the city can be compared to a person, or, say, some character in a novel. If this character chooses to define herself, she will choose to do so according to her best characteristics. Thus, advertisements for New York City boast of its high level of cultural offerings, not that it has a stock market. The stock market may afford these offerings and people may come to the city to work on Wall Street. But people choose to hang out in the city because of the pleasures it offers.

The nightclub is one example of an urban destination for escape. Indeed, if people are in search of pleasure, the nightclubs are supplying. New York City's major industry of culture and entertainment has a vast array of offerings to choose from, nightclubs being one of them. Each entertainment destination serves as a public place, bringing together people from all over the city and often people from outside the city as well. Urban dwellers can go to these places to temporarily escape the reality of their lives and be entertained by a fantasy. Thus, at a time when for many reality has become oppressive and the need to escape is tremendous, the most popular public spaces will be those that offer the most engaging, most all-consuming fantasies. In this sense, a public space is a place where people all come together because they have all come there to get away. Any entertainment establishment can offer a fantasy that the public may

come and partake in. But, the nightclub is unique in that it offers a fantasy in which the entertainment occurs through public interaction. The fantasy offered by nightclubs has changed considerably over the years, yet nightclubs have continued to attract thousands of city residents nightly. It is the long lasting, sustained popularity of the nightclub that merits its study as an essential element of the city.

With the exception of a short lapse in the 1950s, nightclubs have enjoyed a growing and sustained popularity since the teens. They have become an increasingly important element of urban recreation. The question is, what accounts for the growing and sustained popularity of these community oriented recreational places? This thesis will explore that question. It will examine the fantasy of the nightclub; what purpose it now serves and what purpose it theoretically could serve within the urban community.

There has been little or no study of the nightclub as an important element of city life. Yet, the nightclub serves millions of people a year. It brings together people from all different backgrounds, all different races and ethnicities from all different parts of New York City. In essence, the nightclub works as an interactive public space. In addition, the nightclub serves to highlight the importance of fantasy in the creation of working public spaces. In this thesis it is my goal to prove that nightclubs are a significant part of urban public life in New York City. This thesis will provide an overview of the nightclub concept and set up a framework for further study.

DEFINITION OF A NIGHTCLUB:

The definition of a nightclub changes according to time and place. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the term "nightclub" shall embody as broad a definition as possible. It must have a liquor license or a cabaret license. It may or may not have live entertainment. It need not necessarily have a dance floor. Its size may vary from the tiniest of rooms to a multi-level warehouse. The one characteristic variable that must be true for all "nightclubs" is that the establishments themselves have chosen to be referred to by that name. In turn, all places that call themselves as such, as it turns out, do offer their patrons a fantasy.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FANTASY:

WHAT? WHERE? HOW? WHY?

WHAT IS THE FANTASY:

The fantasy offered by nightclubs is a place where you can go to escape reality -- pretend that you are someone else, somewhere else, or in some other time period. There are four categories of night club fantasies:

- ◆ **geographic travel** -- The physical reconstruction of the architecture, the built environment, perhaps even the foliage of a chosen location, designed so as to be representative of a different climate or a different country with a different culture.

- ◆ **time travel** -- The most popular "time travel" is into the past. This fantasy involves the physical reconstruction of the interior design schemes prevalent during a certain time period. The interior environment is designed to recreate as nearly as possible the atmosphere and the images that would have been experienced in that particular space any number of decades ago. Time Travel to the future is far more interesting from a design standpoint. Here, the architect and the interior designer envision a hypothetical future and then invite the general public to come and experience what a night club may be like or what a city may be like 50 or more years into the future.

- ◆ **home** -- In this instance, the club is designed to appear as if someone lived there and had invited you all to a party at his/her home. A smaller club might just recreate the living room, or both the living room and dining room. A larger club will undoubtedly make the bedroom a featured attraction.

- ◆ **psychedelic** -- This is often referred to as the total environment nightclub. Here the objective is to over-stimulate the senses. The emphasis is on intense visual images, intense lighting, high quality, high volume sound effects. Clubs adopting this theme are the first to utilize the newest advances in technology and provide the best analogy to the highly technical, synthesized world around us. The implied "fantasy" of this club is that you are in an altered psychological state as would be induced by LSD, or some other psychedelic drug.

Many nightclubs do not stick solely to one theme, but combine themes for a more intense fantasy experience.

WHERE DOES THE FANTASY TAKE PLACE:

In New York City, today's most popular nightclubs tend to be located in the East and West 40s and 50s or in the Village. There are historical reasons for the popularity of these locations. There is also the issue of neighborhood identity and usage, which will be discussed in depth in Chapter Three, in relation to the history of nightclubs. However, the most important aspect of the location of the nightclub is that the nature of its location is necessarily urban, and necessarily an outgrowth of the urban architectural design of Manhattan.

The great cities of Europe derive much of their charm and acclaim from their ability to provide the pedestrian with a sense of discovery and surprise. For example, the winding street on which you turn a corner and find a beautiful vista; or the small passageway between two buildings that leads to a spectacular interior courtyard. There is something unusual about these hidden spaces, or hidden pockets, if you will. And it is the act of discovery of these pockets that is a necessary part of urban life.

In New York City, Greenwich Village is full of such European concealed charms. But it would seem that by the nature of the grid system, much of Manhattan is lacking in such exterior pockets. You might find an outdoor waterfall between two office buildings. But by the geometric symmetry of the street systems, most fantasy-like architecture, such as a small park, is out in the open. For a pocket to be hidden and require pedestrian 'discovery', it must be indoors. In a similar sense, historically, the interior space of early churches provided such indoor fantasy vehicles.

This is how Rem Koolhaas describes the grid system in his book Delirious New York:

The Grid is, above all, a conceptual speculation. In spite of its apparent neutrality, it implies an intellectual program for the island; in its indifference to topography, to what exists, it claims the superiority of mental construction over reality.

Through the plotting of its streets and blocks it announces that the subjugation, if not obliteration, of nature is its true ambition. All blocks are the same; their equivalence invalidates, at once, all the systems of articulation and differentiation that have guided the design of traditional cities. The Grid makes the history of architecture and all previous lessons of urbanism irrelevant. It forces Manhattan's builders to develop a new system of formal values, to invent strategies for the distinction of one block from another.¹

The grid design is so understandable. There is an unfulfilled need for mystery within the grid. Along with a lack of enigma, there comes a severe lack of differentiation. Koolhaas comments on this architectural challenge of distinguishing one block from another within the grid system. Clearly one option for the architect who is put off by the constraints of the street system is to leave the exterior as nondescript as possible and instead create a unique environment on the interior that in turn serves to define the street simply by its presence on the street. That is, it would define the street in the way that a small garden at the end of a cul de sac might. A person at the foot of such a street might not be able to see the small garden up ahead, around the bend. But, if this person knows that the garden is up ahead, he may choose to think of the roadway he is on as the street that leads to the garden. In this sense, the hidden garden has served to give definition to the street. There is also the issue that since the reality of the topography of the city has been stripped from it by the

¹ Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978, p. 15.

Grid, there is the desire to recreate some sort of alternative reality within the structures of the grid system. Koolhaas writes of other constraints imposed by the grid system:

With its imposition, Manhattan is forever immunized against any (further) totalitarian intervention. In the single block -- the largest possible area that can fall under architectural control -- it develops a maximum unit of urbanistic Ego.

Since there is no hope that larger parts of the island can ever be dominated by a single client or architect, each intention -- each architectural ideology -- has to be realized fully within the limitations of the block.²

The grid system creates a maximum amount of space within which the urban designer must work, namely one square block. Koolhaas asserts that each architectural ideology must be realized within the limitations of a single block. Thus, for those blocks that have been unable to fully realize an architectural ideology, there is the option of creating a public environment in the interior space that is capable of translating a certain tenet.

Since Manhattan is finite and the number of its blocks forever fixed, the city cannot grow in any conventional manner. Its planning therefore can never describe a specific built configuration that is to remain static through the ages; it can only predict that whatever happens, it will have to happen somewhere within the 2028 blocks of the Grid.

It follows that one form of human occupancy can only be established at the expense of another. The city becomes a mosaic

² Ibid., p.15.

of episodes, each with its own particular lifespan, that contest each other through the medium of the Grid.³

Finally, Koolhaas describes the ultimate limitations of the Grid; that is, the limits of the geometrical graph with its 2028 block system within the borders of Manhattan Island. In turn, Koolhaas describes the grid system as necessitating that one must destroy in order to recreate. I would argue that because of this aspect of the nature of the Grid, much creation has had to take place within the interior in order to avoid destruction of the exterior. There is a certain uniqueness that the Manhattan architects cannot attain within the confines of the symmetrical street system.

James Wines, in a July 1990 *Harper's* article also makes note of the Grid's limitations:

The rigid design of the grid forces the public into a particular course of action. There is no choice; there is only direction.⁴

However, the nightclub brings a sense of mystery and of choice back into the streets. In essence, the nightclub animates the grid. Thus the New York nightclub fulfills the need for choice in one's particular course of action by offering the act of discovery of these concealed corridors. The nightclub quite literally fills the city's empty pockets, whether it be vacant warehouses, abandoned residential townhouses, or the space of an empty garage.

³ Ibid, p.15-16

⁴ Hitt, Fleming, Plater-Zyberk, Sennett, Wines, and Zimmerman, "Whatever Became of the Public Square? New Designs for a Great Good Place" *Harper's Magazine*, July, 1990, p. 52.

Of course, nightclubs are not the only entity created as a challenge to the predictable nature of the grid. As mentioned earlier, it is possible for a small park to inspire the act of discovery as long as it is at least somewhat hidden within the interior space of the grid system. William H. Whyte found such a working public space when he studied Paley Park, a vest-pocket park located on East Fifty-third Street. Whyte writes about how it is that people would happen upon this space:

Many people will do a double take as they pass by, pause, move a few steps, then, with a slight acceleration, go up the steps. . . . The steps at Paley are so low and easy that one is almost pulled to them. . . . You can stand and watch, move up a foot, another, and then, without having made a conscious decision, find yourself in the park.⁵

Paley Park is noteworthy for the fact that it has filled one of the city's empty pockets with a burst of nature and fantasy for public use. Yet, the most significant aspect of Paley Park is the location of the empty pocket it now fills. It occupies the same space that once comprised one of the city's most popular places for discovery, the illustrious Stork Club. Yet, Paley Park does not completely succeed in providing mystery to the urban design of the street because it is not truly hidden. Instead, it has been forced to conform to the geometric constraints of the grid. However, Paley Park does succeed in that it diverts people's attention and ultimately draws them away from the programmed direction of the grid -- as Tony Hiss puts it in his book The Experience of Place: "In Manhattan, the right angle street grid, which keeps people's eyes focused straight ahead . . . " Paley Park lures them into the

⁵ William H. Whyte, The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces, The Conservation Foundation, Washington, 1980.

interior space. It could be said that the grid's agenda is to keep people moving -- the only escape is to be drawn into the interior.

Koolhaas states in the introduction to his book:

This book intends to establish Manhattan as the product of an unformulated theory, *Manhattanism*, whose program -- to exist in a world totally fabricated by man, i.e. to live *inside* fantasy was so ambitious that to be realized, it could never be openly stated.⁶

Although it is unlikely that Koolhaas was thinking of nightclubs when he wrote this, it is clear that nightclubs are an ideal example of his Manhattanism theory. Indeed, he even italicizes the word "inside," where nightclubs go to the interior to create an all consuming fantasy. And yet the fantasy they create is hidden, "never openly stated."

Koolhaas also writes about the beneficial elements of high density:

Manhattanism is the one urbanistic ideology that has fed, from its conception, on the splendors and miseries of the metropolitan condition -- hyper-density -- without once losing faith in it as the basis for a desirable modern culture. *Manhattan's architecture is a paradigm for the exploitation of congestion. . .* Manhattan has consistently inspired in its beholders ecstasy about architecture.⁷

⁶ Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978 p. 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Nightclubs are, by definition, an exploitation of congestion. They bring mass density to a street, inside and out. A single nightclub may be patronized by up to 5,000 people in one night. Meanwhile for the thousands of people who are inside the nightclub, there are hundreds who fill the street outside -- waiting in line or turned away at the door. And, indeed, the architecture of the nightclub inspires a collective ecstasy within this density.

HOW THE FANTASY IS CREATED:

The nightclub provides fantasy by the conscious awareness that it is in the fantasy business. That is, on the business side, many modern day night clubs have launched extensive marketing campaigns promoting themselves as fantasy makers. Recent nightclub advertisements have asserted "Come experience the fantasy of _____," or , "Take a journey into the past at _____." Of course, the nightclub literally provides fantasy by its interior design. There are several prototypical design schemes for nightclubs. These will be examined and discussed with respect to the particular nightclubs that exemplify each given design scheme. There are, in fact, six major elements that contribute to the creation of the fantasy. Each element will be examined in depth in Chapter Three. These elements include:

- ◆ Location
- ◆ The Night Time
- ◆ Design
- ◆ Activities
- ◆ Clientele
- ◆ The Myth

WHY: WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THE POPULARITY OF THE NIGHTCLUB:

Perhaps the most interesting question is, Why do people go to nightclubs? Fantasy is the single most powerful shared element of this phenomenon. Why does the fantasy appeal to people? Or more specifically, what accounts for the popularity of fantasy development?

Fantasy development has been a prevalent part of the American experience since before the turn-of-the-century. In 1893, the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago invited Americans to come and collectively experience the fantasy of the city of the future. More than forty years later, the 1939 World's Fair in New York City provided a similar fantasy experience. One featured exhibit, entitled "Democracity," offered viewers this vision of the "World of Tomorrow:"

A masterpiece of architectural modeling and multi-media drama, . . . Democracity featured an urban core with tall widely spaced buildings; separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic; carefully delineated industrial and residential zones; and a generous greenbelt of farms and parks. As visitors slowly revolved around the model on moving platforms -- the sensation was meant to be 'like flying in space' -- symphonic music and inspirational rhetoric surged around them. Above, on the inner surface of the dome, hidden projectors flashed images of workers who would make this future world.⁸

⁸ Joseph Corn and Brian Horrigan, "The Community of Tomorrow," Yesterday's Tomorrows, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1984, p. 45-46.

This exhibit in particular bears mentioning because in some ways it offered its visitors a socially interactive fantasy entertainment experience analogous to that of the modern day night club. The patron was confronted with the sounds of music and the sights of flashing projections, meant to stimulate the senses, occurring within a controlled environment with the interior architecture of a carefully designed theme setting.

The fair also featured exhibits with titles such as "Futurama," -- the biggest hit of the fair -- along with "Town of Tomorrow," "Drug Store of Tomorrow," and "Rocketport," where visitors vicariously blasted off amidst flashing lights, sirens, smoke, and muffled explosions.

Both fairs were clearly a precursor to the future Disney World. Disney's success in America has been phenomenal. In 1991, Disney World drew 13.3 million people a year. "As a shrine, [Disney World] is surpassed only by Kyoto, Mecca and the Vatican," writes Priscilla Painton in *Time Magazine's* May 27, 1991 cover story, "Fantasy's Reality."⁹ The fact that comparison is made between our country's modern day creation of a grandiose fantasy land to the world's holiest shrines is very telling as to the importance that our society has placed on the fantasy experience.

As further evidence of this significance one need look no further than to Universal Studios, Disney's nearby counterpart in LA and Orlando. Universal Studios began having regular tours of their LA studios back in 1964. But the offer of a simple viewing of the film-making process apparently was not enough to fulfill people's insatiable desire to have a more interactive experience with fantasy. And thus, Universal Studios soon grew into a theme park of sorts, each year offering more elaborate interactive fantasy rides and exhibits. And, just this past year, Universal Studios opened another kind of fantasy: City Walk in LA.

⁹Priscilla Painton, "Fantasy's Reality," *Time*, May 27, 1991, p. 52.

Here the visitor is under the illusion that he/she is experiencing the great sights and sounds of the street life of LA. Instead, he or she has simply entered a controlled environment which offers comfort, security, and the fantasy of a Los Angeles street.

From turn-of-the-century Coney Island to today's Las Vegas, the fantasy theme in America has been increasingly popular and in demand. Thus, in order to answer the question why do people go to nightclubs, we can do so by examining why it is that people frequent these more well-known fantasy theme environments.

"The growth of our economy is no longer driven by the desires of consumers to accumulate goods. It is driven by the consumer's quest for vivid experiences," writes James Olgivy in an article entitled "The Experience Industry." Olgivy continues, "The experience industry . . . allows escape through entertainment." The experience industry, according to Olgivy is what the information revolution has brought us. "Once an economy is productive enough to satisfy most people's basic needs, then people spend an increasing proportion of their incomes on satisfying their inner needs." And the way people satisfy these inner needs is by indulging in the most "vivid, vicarious experiences," in other words, fantasies. In description of how the experience industry will provide such fantasies, Olgivy writes, "Not a computer in every home but an increasingly wide range of experiences, some of which may be facilitated by computers." ¹⁰

According to a *Los Angeles Times* article, City Walk's offering of a fantasy street in L.A. is likely to be a big success: "MCA is confident that when given the chance, Angelenos will flock to City Walk because the company's market

¹⁰ James Olgivy, "The Experience Industry," *American Demographics*, December, 1986, p.27.

research indicates that for many people, reality has become too much of a hassle."¹¹

The Mall of America is another example. Here fantasy is offered on many levels, and the importance of the nightclub as fantasy provider is well represented. The Mall offers a large scale illusion and nightclubs are one of the major elements of this fantasy:

"The mall's seven-acre camp Snoopy . . . sits in a central courtyard and rises from the ground level to the fourth floor, stocked with 400 trees, 30,000 plants, a mountain and a four story waterfall. Upstairs, around the height of the highest peak on Camp Snoopy's roller coaster, are dozens of restaurants, both fast and fancy, as well as an assortment of nightclubs and a 14-screen movie house."¹²

The nightclub experience has also been compared to a drug effect. The latter is also an experience commodity. According to Olgivy, "The demand for experiences is insatiable, it's the marketer's task to sell them."¹³ Whether its drugs or a shopping mall, the fantasy experience offers an escape from harsh urban realities. As the *Los Angeles Times* article on City Walk puts it: "Tired of feeling guilty about the homeless? Weary of fighting traffic or worrying about crime?"¹⁴ If the answer is yes to the preceding questions, and for most urban residents it is, then fantasy escapism is for you!

¹¹ Amy Wallace, "Like It's So L.A.! Not Really," *Los Angeles Times*, February 29, 1992, p. A1

¹² Neal Karlen, "The Mall That Ate Minnesota," *The New York Times*, July 30, 1992.

¹³ James Olgivy, "The Experience Industry," *American Demographics*, December, 1986, p. 27.

¹⁴ Amy Wallace, "Like It's So L.A.! Not Really," *Los Angeles Times*, February 29, 1992, p. A1.

**THE NIGHTCLUB AS A PUBLIC PLACE OF SOCIAL INTERACTION:
[AND REDEFINING THE DEFINITION OF PUBLIC SPACE]**

At one time, the term "public space" meant a place that was open to everyone. The idea of defining a private establishment that charged admission and excluded certain people from entering as a "public space" would have been thought absurd. But over the past several decades, our public space has been undergoing privatization. When an atrium inside a glass skyscraper office tower, with seating, a beverage counter and a piano player inside and a man wearing a tuxedo standing beside the door bears a small bronze plaque designating it as "public space," it is clearly time for a redefinition of said terminology.

"A new phenomena is the fact that environments made privately but for use by the public are increasingly permitted to restrain public use or access."¹⁵

Thus, in order to define what is meant by "public space," it is necessary to address the most basic element, and to define what is meant by the "public." The social theorist Hannah Arendt provides the following definition in the book, The Public Face of Architecture:

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. . . The end of the

¹⁵ Irwan Altman and Ervin Zube, Editors, Public Places and Spaces, Plenum Press, New York, 1989, p. 23.

common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is admitted to present itself in only one perspective.¹⁶

According to Arendt, the public is represented by those who have something or things in common. The urban sociologist Richard Sennett elaborates on this point. He describes the modern day meaning of the word "public" as a region of social life separate from family and close friends, and makes the point that this circle of acquaintances is made up of a diverse group of people.¹⁷

With this definition of the word public, Sennett gives the following definition of "public space," as transcribed in an article in *Harper's Magazine* entitled, "Whatever Became of the Public Square."

Today, the problem of public space is its *usefulness* to us in modern social life. In my view, the use of public space ought to be to make people aware of the economic, racial, and ethnic realities, by concentrating and mixing these realities together. The modern United States is a society of social amnesia, of denial, of difference, of escape from facing reality. It's in a public space that this social amnesia might be called to account. . . . A public space is anywhere that people who otherwise would be isolated from one another have to deal with one another: The cafeteria of a factory whose workers are racially mixed is more a public space than a shopping mall.¹⁸

Sennett believes that a public space should not only bring people together, but once in this space, strangers should interact verbally. His definition of

¹⁶ Nathan Glazer and Mark Lilla, *The Public Face of Architecture*, Free Press, New York, 1987, p. 7

¹⁷ Referenced Daniel Cohen, *Defining the American Public Realm: An Escape From Tradition*, MIT MCP Thesis.

¹⁸ Hitt, Fleming, Plater-Zyberk, Sennett, Wines, and Zimmerman, "Whatever Became of the Public Square? New Designs for a Great Good Place" *Harper's Magazine*, July, 1990, p. 57.

"public space" also necessitates that the people brought together must be from diverse backgrounds. It is interesting to note that when Sennett searched for a historical example of traditional public space, he came up with the coffeehouses of eighteenth-century London and Paris. "Both Paris and London in the eighteenth century had a very curious public life in and around the coffeehouses. Nearly anybody could come to these places, and did. The coffeehouses were places of exchange . . . Those public interactions served a certain purpose, they were functional," notes Sennett.¹⁹

Of course, the coffeehouses Sennett speaks of did not in actuality serve everyone. There was a very large underclass in London and Paris at this time. And the coffeehouses were only open to the privileged minority who could afford them. However, these places did succeed in bringing together people with different backgrounds and ideologies from within this select group. And people came to the coffeehouses to interact with friends and strangers, so they did act as public spaces.

The book, Public Life in Urban Places offers a definition of the traditional public space that is similar to Sennett's:

Public places offer many opportunities for informal and unplanned meetings of friends, neighbors, workmates, and acquaintances of all kinds. Depending on the types of public spaces that exist in a city or town, public life is facilitated or inhibited. . . . [Public places] offer such brief encounters to their users [multiple casual meeting in the course of each day]. Sometimes, such a chance coming-together of persons otherwise not connected will, in time, extend beyond brief exchanges of pleasantries and lead to a more permanent social relationship.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 57

²⁰ Suzanne Crowhurst and Henry Lennard, Public Life in Urban Places, Grondolier Press, Southhampton, N.Y., 1984, p. 6.

These definitions describe the ideal of what experts believe a public space is or should be. But one important unanswered question is what the "public" wants out of its public space. This idea is perhaps best expressed by City Walk's chief project designer, Richard Orne. "People want to have a communal experience in a place that they feel safe and comfortable. Who care's if it's artificially created if it does that and answers that need?"²¹

This artificial creation of a public space is, of course, the idea behind the modern shopping mall. But it is also the idea behind the modern nightclub. The nightclub adequately fulfills the criteria set out by Sennett, Arendt, et al, for the classification of public space. It offers the opportunity for informal, unplanned meetings, and verbal interaction. Inside the nightclub people are brought together from different economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds; people who would otherwise be isolated from one another are forced into an encounter. If Richard Sennett can define a factory cafeteria as public space based on the racial make-up of its visitors, then he would certainly agree that most modern nightclubs merit the same definition.

THE MODERN DAY PUBLIC PLACE AS A FANTASY SPACE

The future public space will be an environment which incorporates the latest advances in technology that allow for an interactive setting that can be altered by each individual user according to his or her tastes. According to

²¹ Amy Wallace, "Like It's So L.A.! Not Really," *Los Angeles Times*, February 29, 1992, p. A22.

James Wines: "Thus the only way to establish working public spaces is to sponsor total idiosyncrasy -- conditions of infinite choice. And you can't design them. . . It is possible, however, to propose a conceptual matrix that encourages spontaneous choices. "²²

Ronald Lee Fleming offers this idea of how to create the working public space of the future:

Silence can be broken, and a certain kind of public life can be nurtured through triangulation: setting up some third element -- an activity, a work of art -- that ignites a conversation between people. Let's say you consciously decide to create this public space and you want to create reasons for being in the space, so you might decide to bring in an organ grinder and monkey, one of the original models for triangulation. The point of having an organ grinder was to create a situation in which one person watches the monkey and says to somebody else, a stranger, "Look, that monkey has measles," or whatever. An interaction between strangers creates an effect of animation, which is one stimulus for public life.²³

Thus, Fleming believes that there must be something going on, some activity within the space that inspires some commonalty amongst the many people who are in that space because they are having the shared experience of watching said activity. Clearly, it is not enough simply to create a public space and hope people will come. Furthermore, as Fleming argues, it is not simply enough for people to simply come to the place. For a public space to work, it must inspire human contact and connectedness. It must encourage interact and

²² Hitt, Fleming, Plater-Zyberk, Sennett, Wines, and Zimmerman, "Whatever Became of the Public Square? New Designs for a Great Good Place" *Harper's Magazine*, July, 1990, p. 52.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

an eventual bond between people who would otherwise never have had occasion to meet.

James Wines offers an example for what he sees as the potential for animated public spaces:

Just what will animate public life is interesting. In Rome the public spaces jump. Certain places thrive and then dry up, and it turns out that this is because the tourists are driving away the natives. The Romans are constantly reorienting themselves, if only for a season. So it's the tourists who fuel the public life. In Venice, I remember, the preferred square was so remote that you could get there only after a long boat ride. There is no public life on St. Mark's Square, because no respectable Venetian would be caught dead there.²⁴

The fact that the new public space of choice is always changing can serve to fulfill two goals set out for a working public space. First of all, it can inspire interaction amongst strangers. Let's take the example Wines gives us of certain public squares thriving and then failing, eventually moving to new locations having been driven away by the tourists. As people move from one public square to another, they will begin to see familiar faces in these new locations. This may very well inspire a conversation such as: "Hey, didn't I see you at xyz square last week." The second purpose that this changing of the location of public meeting places fulfills is that it keeps the fantasy of the space alive. In order for a fantasy to remain alive it must constantly be renewed otherwise it is no longer a fantasy. Thus, the fantasy of nature within an urban setting that is created by many public squares is heightened by a change of landscape due to a change of location.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 53.

Wines' example of Italian public life bears striking comparisons to the nightclub night life of New York City. It is rare that a nightclub remains popular with native New Yorkers for more than a year. At that point it is turned over to the tourists who are then allowed to experience for a high price the place where the "in" New Yorkers used to hang out. Similarly, the more remote and clandestine a location of the club, the higher is its preferred status. And the nightclub of choice at any given point in time is always changing. So when we talk about creating a public space for the future, one which offers infinite choice to the user, and foster interaction among strangers through technological animation, we can see that the nightclub is one ideal option for fulfilling the need for such a space. In essence, the nightclub has made itself a public space by setting out to fulfill a series of goals, such as providing shared experiences and social interaction, that unintentionally coincide with many of the goals that urban planners set out to fulfill when they are creating a public space. However, in order to understand why the nightclub is a working public space of the future, we must first look towards its past.

Chapter Two:

THE HISTORY OF THE NIGHTCLUB

The popularity of the nightclub is predicated by the nightclub's ability to provide an escape from the urban environment. Since its inception, the design of the nightclub has alternated between the cozy atmosphere of the living room you wish you had, and the large dance hall or mega discotheque that overpowers the senses. Whatever its design scheme, the night club has never failed to offer its patrons the fantasy of being in a different time, a different place, a different country, or an entirely other world.

"A great deal of New York night life is purely escape from New York," writes Stephen Graham in his book entitled New York Nights. He describes the New York night club as follows: "You take a step to one side, pass a doorway and you are in a totally different world. . . The night club disenchants New York. You pass the portals of a guarded house, leave the throngs in the Avenue, and straight way you are transported to another clime."²⁵ According to Graham, when you enter a nightclub, you leave the concerns and the stress of urban life behind. "In their place is dreamland or Nirvana."²⁶ The night clubs Graham writes about are not the high tech, futuristic, psychedelic nightclubs of today. Rather they are the night clubs that were born out of prohibition. Clubs that achieved their allure as much from their being inherently forbidden as from their interior design, atmosphere and clientele. These were the original night

²⁵ Stephen Graham, New York Nights, George H. Doran Company, New York, p. 23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

clubs; the ones that gave the "nightclub" its name and gave birth to an urban phenomenon.

The name "night club" was first invented to get around London's early closing for liquor-dispensing resorts that were not clubs. In America, prohibition necessitated a legal front for the many illegal establishments that served liquor. Establishing one's place as a "night club" helped create such a front. It was not long before New York was filled with self-styled night clubs with elaborate furniture of "guest cards." In 1934, the name was extended to designate all late night entertainment establishments serving liquor, now legally.²⁷

OUR FOREFATHERS AND THE NIGHTCLUB

Although the term "night club" did not come into fashion until the prohibition, the concept and indeed the American establishment itself dates nearly as far back as the Declaration of Independence.. In the winter of 1784-85, the "Sans Souci Club" was opened in Boston. The establishment's name literally translated means "without worries." The Sans Souci Club not only permitted but encouraged card playing and dancing. The club created quite an uproar among the resident Puritans. In fact, it lead to two large-scale reported scandals. The first involved a newspaper advertisement of a "new farce" entitled "Sans Souci alias 'Free and Easy: Or an Evening's Peak in a Polite Circle, an entirely new entertainment in three acts." Readers were apparently outraged by this advertisement and its implications concerning their Puritan community. The publishers of the newspaper in which this appeared, *The Centinel*, were threatened with personal violence. This led to an intense debate amongst the

²⁷ H.I. Brock, "Running the Gamut of the Night Clubs," *The New York Times*, November 18, 1934, Sect. VI, p. 8.

editors of the newspaper as to the freedom of the press. Shortly thereafter, John Hancock announced he would be resigning as Governor of Massachusetts. A highly publicized [in the newspapers], highly abusive campaign for governor between Hancock supporter Thomas Cushing and those opposed to Hancock, represented by James Bowdoin ensued. The controversy over the club was one of the hot issues debated by these two candidates in what marked one of the great early political fights in America.

A 1927 article in *The New York Times* relayed the story of Sans Souci, recalling this history of what in the 20s represented a recently popular trend of so-called "night clubs." The article noted: "This anecdote teaches us that night clubs rest on no frivolous social instance, but on the perennial political consciousness and the conscience of mankind."²⁸

THE PROHIBITION ERA: CABARETS AND SPEAKEASIES

However, the night clubs that were started during the prohibition era made no such claim to such political or democratic high ideals. Shortly after the end of prohibition, Stanley Walker, City Editor of the *New York Herald Tribune* published a book entitled The Night Club Era. In his book, Walker recalls: "The new night life came rapidly after prohibition. The night club was being born."²⁹ According to Walker, the credit for the original "night club," that is, this new terminology that was then given to the innovative idea of incorporating the old high-class cabaret restaurant into a late night entertainment establishment with a restricted, exclusive membership, goes to a man named Jules Ansaldi. The first

²⁸ "Early Boston Degeneracy," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1927, p. 28.

²⁹ Stanley Walker, The Night Club Era, Frederick A. Stokes Company, New York, 1933, p. 78.

cabaret in America dates as far back as 1911, "when the Brothers Bustansby astounded everybody by giving dancing with supper."³⁰

The history of the night club's predecessor, the cabaret, is told in Lisa Appignanesi's *The Cabaret*. The first cabaret opened in Paris in 1881, in the underdeveloped, slumlike neighborhood of Montmartre. At a time of economic prosperity, a subversive poet-painter named Rodulphe Salis founded the Chat Noir for outspoken poets, composers, and artists to share their work. It was officially started as a "club," and it developed into a nightly celebration of young talent and political and social criticism. Once it began serving liquor, a true nightclub was born.

But no sooner had the cabaret/night club notion spread to America, then prohibition came, sounding an apparent death toll for New York night life. Places such as Bustanoby's, Delmonico's, and Maxim's were wiped out. But in their place a new class of clandestine night clubs was born.

During the early years of prohibition, the new night clubs, such as Ansaldi's, were in their prime. "They were brash, prosperous, American. The managers of these places were of a different breed. . . . They were foreigners who knew little about cooking and didn't bother to learn, for their customers didn't care. The new children of the night wanted a gay show, swift dance music, and no curfew," writes Stanley. "Moreover, they were able to pay for what they got."³¹

This last point makes note of an important distinction of the "night club era" during prohibition, that is, it was geared mostly to the wealthy. There was a high premium placed on this illicit pursuit. The new "clubs" implied

³⁰ Ibid., p.77

³¹ Ibid.

The Speakeasies:



Texas Guinan was thought of as the queen of speakeasies, shown above after a raid. Below, an illustration of a speakeasy.

membership, and that in turn, implied membership fees -- priced high enough to cover the high risk of the speakeasy business.

During prohibition, there were so-called "good" night clubs, where the proprietors would refuse to serve liquor. However, there were undoubtedly many patrons to these establishments who brought their own flasks. Nonetheless, New York Police Commissioner Whalen, the hard-line enforcer of the prohibition, made a speech in January of 1930 proclaiming that "good" night clubs were a distinct asset to the city. "They are visited by the best elements of New York residents and out-of-town visitors. They provide a 'place to go' where people may be merry . . ." ³² said the commissioner in a speech encouraging Philadelphia to open a few night clubs of their own.

A few months later, in March of 1930, H. I. Brock wrote an article for *The New York Times* entitled "Night Life: New York's Vast Monopoly." In the article, Brock makes the rather radical claim that since the prohibition-inspired wane on night time activities, New York is the only city left in America with a night life. He describes the legal night time pursuits as well as the trendy illegal speakeasies. Concerning the latter, Brock writes: " As New Yorkers know, the mid-section of the town, east and west of Fifth Avenue in the Forties and Fifties harbors hundreds of these places, more or less dead lighted from the front but often comfortable within and not a few of them luxuriously appointed." ³³ Brock estimates that 150,000 people are entertained during the week at the "better sort" of night clubs.

The night club became a "club" out of necessity. But the idea of "membership" within these speakeasies fostered a sense of belonging amongst the clubs' varied crowds. "The night club had a curious and diverse appeal,"

³² "Whalen Calls 'Good' Night Clubs Asset to City," *The New York Times*, January 24, 1930, p. 1.

³³ H.I. Brock, "Night Life: New York's Vast Monopoly," *The New York Times*, March, 1930.

writes Walker.³⁴ His book does not paint the most flattering picture of these illegal establishments, where an evening out on the town often might end in the midst of drunken rowdiness. Yet, he does make a point to convey the raw excitement that these exclusive places had to offer. "While they lasted the clubs contributed more than anything else to the madhouse that was New York," notes Walker. ³⁵ He describes some of the most popular clubs and club proprietors of the prohibition. The most notable of those he gives mention to include: The Club Durante, Club Richman, The Lido, The Beaux Arts Restaurant, Texas Guinan, The Montmartre, Small's, Helen Morgan, The Little Club, The Jungle Room, The Hollywood, as well as a dozen or so other equally alluring, equally exclusive establishments.

The legendary Jimmy Durante was a well-known veteran of these night clubs, (especially his own, Club Durante). As a major player in this social business, he became so in awe of the night clubs' dominance over New York City nightlife that in 1931 he wrote a book entitled Night Clubs. In his book, Durante tries to explain the overwhelming popularity of these new establishments: "When the sun goes down and the moon comes up, people like to make whoopee. They want to forget that they've had a rough day, that the mortgage is due and some time pretty soon they'll be laid out in rosewood boxes with silver handles. . . That is why night clubs were started."³⁶

The majority of the prohibition night clubs were located in the east and west forties and fifties: the most outlandish of which could be found on Broadway. According to Stanley Walker, Coney Island, "the saddest of all so-called amusement centers" has in essence been moved to Broadway.

³⁴ Stanley Walker, The Night Club Era, Frederick A. Stokes Company, New York, 1933, p. 84

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

³⁶ Jimmy Durante and Jack Kofoed, Night Clubs, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1931.

Harlem also experienced a heyday in the Prohibition Era. The area featured decadent illegal clubs that catered to an exclusively white clientele despite its location in a predominantly black neighborhood. The eventually legalized "Cotton Club," was probably the most popular and well-known Harlem speakeasy. However, by the 1940s, Harlem could no longer compete with the midtown nightclubs: the 40s and 50s had become the nightclub center.

Thus, it was the area bordered by 57th Street to the North and 42nd Street to the South, from the 5th Avenue region heading West which served as the incubator of the nightclub concept, dozens of these new "hot" spots cropping up and propagating in the hidden interiors throughout the West Side region. The more exciting, the more "in" the place, the more unassuming was its exterior design

THE NIGHTCLUB AFTER THE REPEAL

At the time of his writing, Walker believed that the repeal signaled the end of the night club era. Without the illegality, it appeared as if their might no longer be such secretive establishments, the location of which was known only by a select crowd, through word-of-mouth. A place where you needed to "belong" [which at that time often meant knowing a secret password or some such] in order to get in. And, in turn, by the sheer act of being there, you felt like you "belonged". At the time, it appeared that the future of night life might be doomed to be a more public, more boring state of affairs.

However, two months after the repeal, a *New York Times* reporter, H.I. Brock, noted: "Our late speakeasies have become night clubs to hold on to the

lure of exclusiveness in face of the night life which the hotels are offering to all comers with decent clothes and the price of a drink." ³⁷

Brock noted: "Some of the new hotel establishments have undertaken . . . to recreate as nearly as possible the affect of the speakeasy -- its cozy seclusiveness or hearty, jolly intimacy, even its hide-and-seek entrance."³⁸

In a *New York Times* article written later that year, Brock describes the new "night clubs proper or de luxe,": "Their characteristic is the effect, or pretense of being select, exclusive, intimate, small at least in contrast to the generous spaces of the hotel ballroom restaurants. Generally they are places that we used to know under the dry dispensation as night clubs and also as speakeasies." ³⁹

Brock also remarked that the "New Yorkers who felt themselves insiders really preferred places where the crowd was not so mixed with out-of-town."⁴⁰

It is interesting to note that the exclusivity, the certain sense of concealment that marked the speakeasy era became a permanent part of the New York night club phenomena. Something about the "sense of belonging" fit well with the New Yorker sensibility. Especially the New Yorkers abhorrence for partying with "tourists" or even the "bridge and tunnel crowd." Moreover, it was the night life that was conceived and built upon during the prohibition that created the model for future generations.

In general, the prohibition night clubs were small and intimate. This was in large part out of necessity due to their illegal nature. It was the end of prohibition that marked the birth of the large scale, gigantic night clubs.

³⁷H.I. Brock, "Now Our Night Life Glows Anew," *The New York Times*, February 11, 1934, Sect. XI, p. 10.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹H.I. Brock, "Running the Gamut of the Night Clubs," *The New York Times*, November 18, 1934, Sect. VI, p. 8.

⁴⁰Ibid.

H.I. Brock goes on to discuss elements of the "illusion" created by these new post-prohibition night clubs:

The scale varies, the setting may be all chromium plate and mirrors, or murals, classical or modern, mere nudes or comic strip caricatures. A foreign or rustic flavor may be concocted Viennese, Russian, Spanish or the tang of a Basque fishing village with the harbor and the shipping and the shops about the market place. Then the upstairs windows in the scenery, looking down on the tables and the dance floor, may be arranged for acts at which the patrons can pretend to play Peeping Tom. Probably the waiters are rigged up as sailors in striped jerseys and berets tipped with red.⁴¹

And of another club, Brock writes: "Shadow effects are produced to be observed through red and green glasses so that you will think that every single thing in the shower that the lady takes off is flying right at your head. . . . Movies are presented ranging from the Fall of Babylon to Mickey Mouse."⁴² [This sounds like a frighteningly similar predecessor to the total-environment nightclubs which came to popularity in the 60's and the high-tech clubs of today.]

Finally, Brock describes another "big-tent entertainment" establishment:

"Simulating the old days in the Golden West, with a cowboy in a ten-gallon hat on duty at the trundle piano. The aim is a more or less denatured reproduction of the sawdust floor informality of the days when the distaff side's representation in public drinking places was not so complete a cross-section of women as the chromium plated cocktail bars of the New Deal can

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 17.

⁴²Ibid.

show. It's a way for the girls of today to go slumming, as it were, in man's preserves of the last century." ⁴³

The cabaret element of the speakeasies, along with their self-declared exclusivity would be incorporated with the large scale designs of the dance halls and hotel restaurants and lounges to define the notion of the night club for the next several decades.

To many, it was these three decades, following the end of prohibition, before the entrenchment of television that the night club experienced its true heyday. An astonishing number of night clubs came into being during those years. These clubs offered singers, comedians, dancers, jazz, cocktail pianists, harpists, classical guitarists, revues, mimes, dancers, ventriloquists, puppeteers, monologuists, and harmonica players. They included the great ballrooms and dance halls (The Savoy, Roseland), glitzy pre-Las Vegas palaces (The Latin Quarter, the Copacabana, Tha Havana-Madrid, La Conga), ethnic music halls (Sammy's Bowery, Follies, Lorelei), posh hotel rooms (the Persian Room in the Plaza, the Cotillion Room in the Pierre), jazz clubs (Minton's, Jimmy Ryan's, Kelly's Stable, the Downbeat, the Famous Door, Hickory House, Nick's, Eddie Condon's), and supper clubs (the Ruban Bleu; Blue Angel; the Cafe Societys, Downtown and Uptown; In Boboli; the Little Club; Bon Soir; Spivy's Roof; One Fifth Avenue; the Downstairs; the Village Vanguard). The supper clubs were the dandies of the New York night life: intimate, rarefied, even precious, they were frequented by the gentry, the nouveau riche, show-biz people, and the remnants of European royalty still afloat in the city then. ⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ "Profiles," *The New Yorker*, April 6, 1992, p. 38.

THE BOOM OF THE BIG NIGHTCLUB

The more mammoth night clubs did not really come into their own until the onset of World War II. This was due to both economic and social reasons. A May 10, 1943 *Life Magazine* article entitled "Night clubs are enjoying their greatest boom in history," notes: "The nightclub boom is fed by a national surplus of cash which cannot be spent on consumer goods and thus flows into entertainment . . . It reflects the wartime need for escape."⁴⁵

As Gavin makes the point in his book, Intimate Nights,

To most of 1940s America, nightlife in New York City was synonymous with grandeur . . . The formula for success: make it big, loud, lavish and, if possible, Latin. Dozens of rooms brought all four qualities splashily to life, among them Havana Madrid, La Martinique, Casa Manana, Club Gaucho, Riombamba, La Conga, El Chico, El Borracho, Don Julio and, of course, the Latin Quarter. Their glorification of South American life, a ubiquitous '40s craze, was partly an offshoot of President Roosevelt's efforts to keep Latin America as an ally. But other foreign lands held an escapist fascination in those stormy years, hence the Persian Room, the Hawaiian Room, Room of the Hotel Lexington, Casino Russe, Fefe's, Monte Carlo, Bal Tabarin, Zimmermans's Hungaria, and a host of similar clubs.⁴⁶

The nightclub had always provided an escape from reality. However this period, around the time of World War II, marked the first time that night clubs made a conscious effort to provide a large-scale fantasy environment. It was then that the nightclubs officially entered the fantasy business.

⁴⁵"Night clubs are enjoying their greatest boom in history," *Life Magazine*, May 10, 1943, p. 68.

⁴⁶ James Gavin, Intimate Nights: The Golden Age of New York Cabaret, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1991, p. 47.

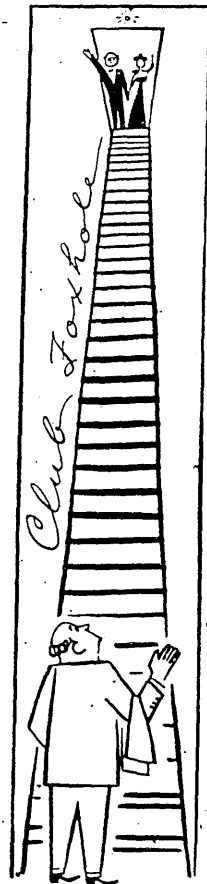
Anatomy of Merriment

By Doug Anderson and Ben Mehlitzky

Nights are longer; so are the walls of clarinets, the delays of waiters and the size of checks in New York's cabarets; also the stay-out capacity of their guests. This survey displays a few of the familiar facets of cafe society.



FLANKING STRATEGY—The bar affords an agreeable vantage whence to watch the floor show, by-passing details such as minimum and cover charges.



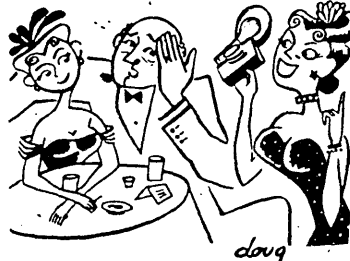
HAZARD—Merrymakers, down in Greenwich Village, must be as agile as Alpine goats to descend the stairs of a typical cellar honky-tonk.



TOILER—Pity the lot of the honest, hard-working sales-manager, fated to play host to out-of-town customers in whoopiest mood.



THE SHOW GOES ON—Wasted is the talent of this charmer. But she will have revenge, for after the cooling comes the billing.



TENSE MOMENT—Elderly benefactor, on a clandestine evening, is confronted with a camera, hence possible pictorial evidence.

Gavin notes one example of such large-scale fantasy creation: "For the finale of the extravaganza staged at the enormous International Casino a bit north of Times Square, girls atop miniature airplanes descended from the ceiling, a train charged on-stage as planes rolled out onto runways alongside the wings, and two staircases dropped from the roof bearing tap-dancing chorines in one piece costumes that might have gotten them thrown off the beach."⁴⁷

But by the 1940s, the popularity cycle between small scale and grandiose had begun; the more intimate rooms were making a comeback. Le Ruban Bleu is a good example of these newly popular smaller establishments. In a 1944 *New Yorker* article, Rogers Whitaker writes of Le Ruban Bleu: "Someday, years after most of us nightowls have gone to our reward, a committee of antiquarians will place a commemorative plaque beside the entrance of No. 4 East Fifty-sixth Street. This plaque will say something about Le Ruban Bleu and a few of its alumni --" ⁴⁸

Le Ruban Bleu was created by a man named Herbert Jacoby as a replica of a club by the same name that he'd opened in Paris before fleeing to America at the onset of World War II. Because of its Parisian atmosphere, the club became an instant success amongst the numerous Europeans who had been displaced by the war and were temporarily calling New York their home. Gavin writes that: "From the beginning the Ruban had an air of a private club, perhaps an illicit one... A staircase inside Theodore's [the downstairs' restaurant] brought you up to a landing with men's and ladies' rooms, a banquette, and a doorway leading into the club. The room itself, a square, low ceilinged box, seated about 125 at banquettes and tiny tables."⁴⁹

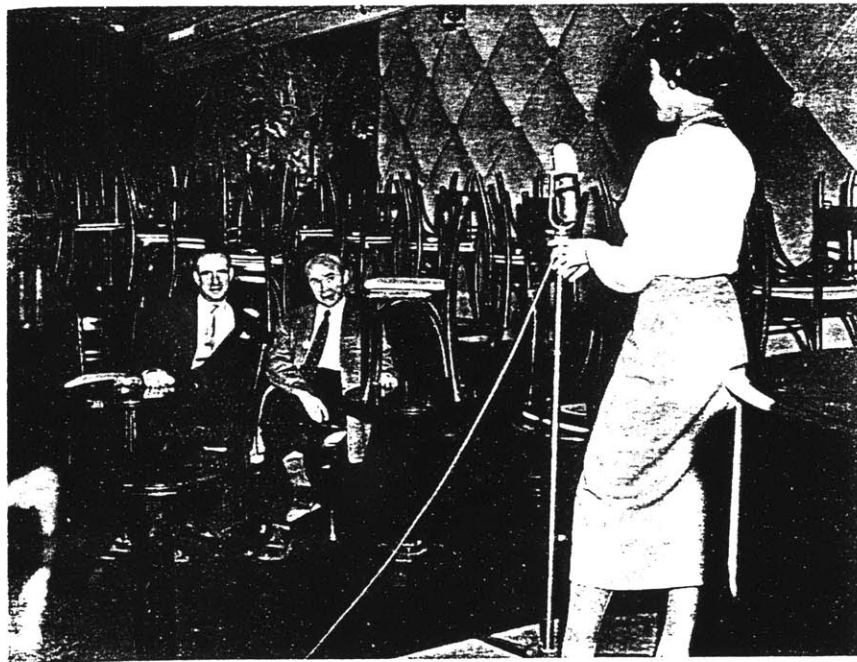
⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Rogers Whitaker, *New Yorker*, November 2, 1944, p. 103.

⁴⁹ James Gavin, *Intimate Nights The Golden Age of New York Cabaret*, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1991, p. 27-28.



The interior of The Blue Angel



Herbert Jacoby's next nightclub venture was the Blue Angel. He opened the Blue Angel as a joint venture with Max Gordon, owner of the Village Vanguard. Using the word "blue" in the name was one of the few similarities between Jacoby's two establishments. "Most of the time the Ruban's warm, inviting atmosphere put everybody at ease," writes James Gavin in Intimate Nights, "whereas the Blue Angel's formality almost challenged guests to rise to their surroundings."⁵⁰

Gavin describes the interior of the Blue Angel as follows:

The all-black decor was considered the height of 40s and 50s New York chic, and the cocktail lounge looked like an extension of the night itself. The bar was black, as were the booths and banquettes on the right. The walls were upholstered in black patent leather with white trim, and nearly everyone wore dark evening clothes." There was also a back room at the Blue Angel. "In contrast with the austere bar, the back room contained a bright red carpet, padded gray valour walls pegged with pink rosettes and pink leather banquettes along the right and left."⁵¹

The Blue Angel was located at 152 East 55th Street, near to the El Morocco, its antithesis in design scheme and atmosphere. The El Morocco, located at 307 East 54th Street, was situated in a four-story townhouse with a total of 14,000 sq. ft., including a 4,000 sq. ft. basement.⁵² El Morocco first opened as a speakeasy in 1931. In drastic contrast to its neighbor, the Blue Angel, the memorable interior design of El Morocco included zebra-striped banquettes and white rubber palms with plastic banana leaves that hang overhead beneath an imposing royal blue star-strewn sky.⁵³

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 57

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 57

⁵² Joe Edwards, "Hazeltine acquires N.Y.'s El Morocco," *Nation's Restaurant News*, May 12, 1986, p. 3.

⁵³ "Old Morocco," *Time*, December 25, 1964, p. 35.

However, there were some similarities between the two clubs. The Blue Angel had a rather high minimum charge. This meant that similar to El Morocco, or to say The Stork Club, the Blue Angel was catering to a wealthier clientele. However, the make-up of that clientele was distinctly different. Jacoby was openly homosexual. Thus, Blue Angel was one of the first chic mainstream nightclubs to permit homosexuals. Gavin writes that the Blue Angel had a "high quota of homosexual customers."⁵⁴ Also, both Le Ruban Bleu and the Blue Angel had a progressive policy towards blacks, and were known for treating their black performers far better than most clubs, especially those in the East 50s, did at that time.

However, it is Cafe Society, and its founder, a man named Barney Josephson that gets credit for making the greatest strides towards integration at that time. In 1938, Josephson opened his club "where blacks and whites worked together behind the footlights and sat together out front." A former shoe salesman and son of Latvian Jewish immigrants, Josephson borrowed money to start Cafe Society in a Greenwich Village basement room in 1938. He later branched out to Park Avenue. Josephson had long been a big jazz fan. However, the segregation that occurred in the Harlem saloons angered him. "The only way they'd let Duke Ellington's mother in was if she was playing in the band," Josephson recalled in a 1984 interview with Reuters news service. Josephson was credited with launching the careers of such black singers as Billie Holliday, Hazel Scott, Lena Horne and Sarah Vaughan. Horne once said that Josephson not only gave her a career but self-respect; Holliday owed to Josephson one of

⁵⁴ James Gavin, Intimate Nights The Golden Age of New York Cabaret, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1991, p. 59.

her signature songs, "Strange Fruit," the eerie anti-lynching ballad that the nightclub owner discovered and asked her to sing.⁵⁵

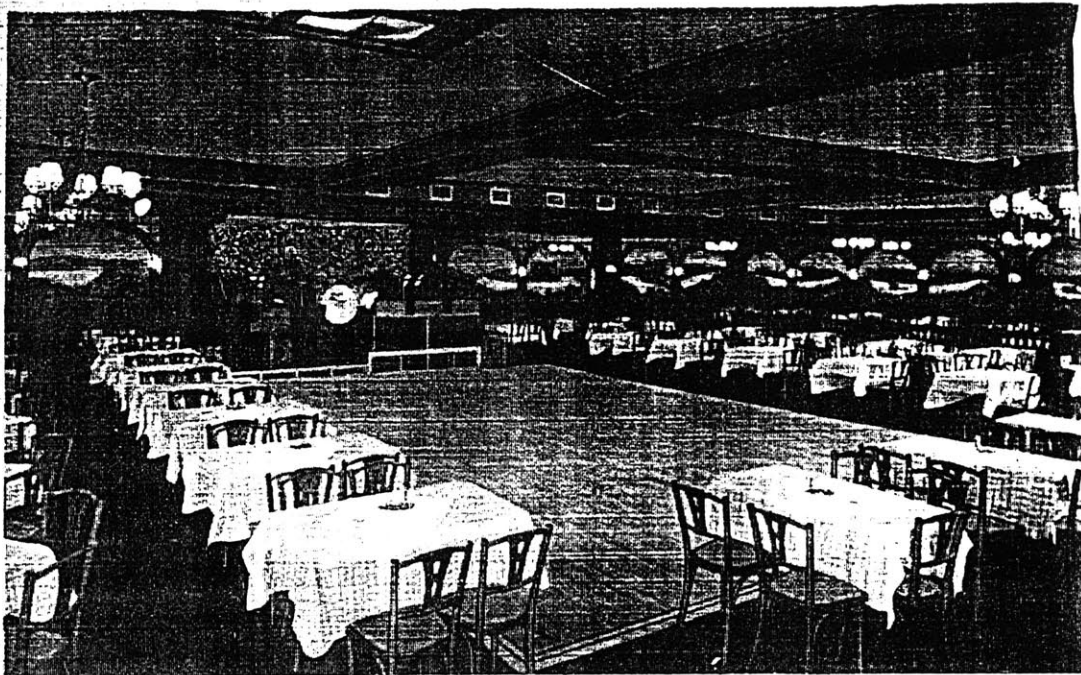
It is important to note that most of the night clubs of the 40s and 50s were centered around performances. Yet as James Gavin notes in Intimate Nights: "In those peak years . . . performers, investors and audiences had no desire to head home after the final curtain."⁵⁶ Thus, the popularity of these clubs was based not only on the quality of the performers and acts performed, but also on the club's ability to create an environment that was inviting, interactive and in many cases an atmosphere that was all-consuming.

While the midtown speakeasies prospered as nightclubs of the 30s and 40s, the Greenwich Village night spots also came into their own during this period. In a Jan. 12, 1941 *New York Times* article, Jane Cobb writes: "Practically all night clubs can be divided into roughly three categories -- the East Side, the West Side, and the Greenwich Village. They are separate in character, and allowing for some overlapping, in clientele." Of the West Side clubs, Cobb comments, "the decorations are always spectacular . . . everybody is frankly out just to have a good time." Of the Greenwich Village clubs she remarks: "They are cheap, informal and they foster an honest cheerfulness." However, her assessment of the East Side clubs is far less flattering. "In an East Side establishment the management makes only a passing gesture toward entertaining the customers. It is understood that the customers just come in to look at one another."⁵⁷ When she makes this generalization about the East Side

⁵⁵ Burt A. Folkart, "Barney Josephson; led nightclub integration," *The New York Times*, October 1, 1988, Part 1, p. 24.

⁵⁶ James Gavin, Intimate Nights: The Golden Age of New York Cabaret, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1991, p. 7.

⁵⁷ Jane Cobb, "The 1,001 Night Clubs," *The New York Times*, January 12, 1941, Sect 8, p. 12.



THE LORELEI • 231-35 East 86th Street, Bet. 2nd and 3rd Aves., New York

The Lorelei catered to the Upper East Side Crowd.

Nightclubs Defined by Region



"The East Side establishments make only a passing gesture toward entertaining; the customers just come in to look at one another."

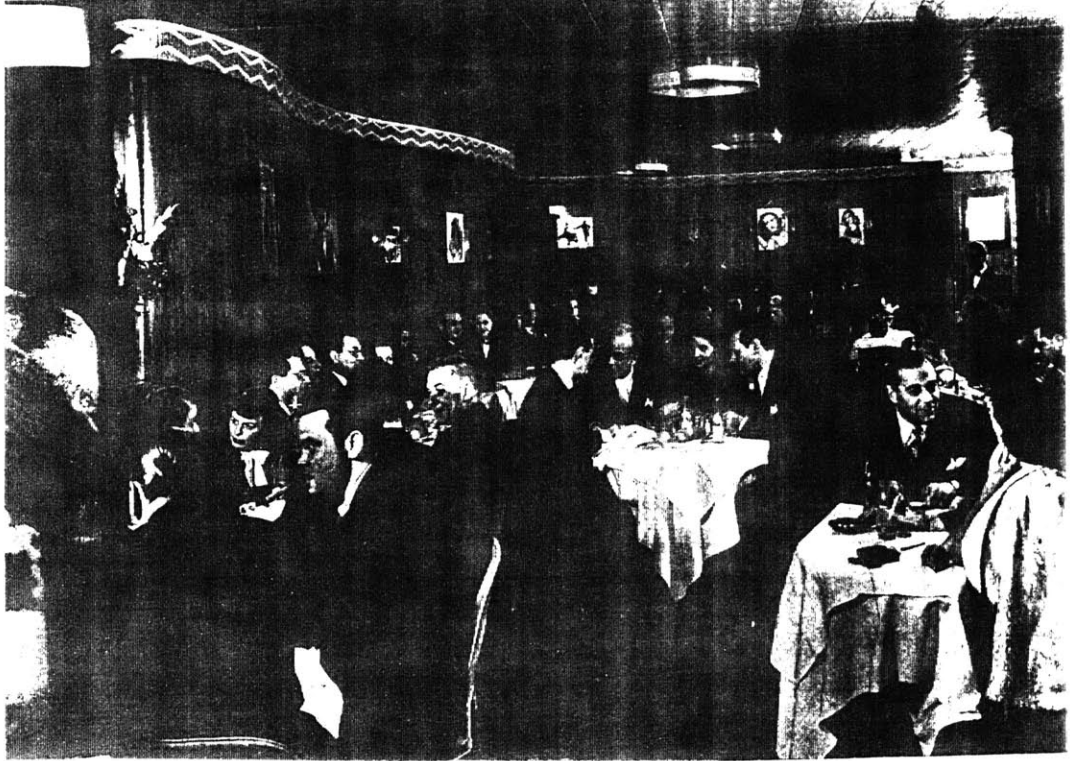


"In the West Side night clubs everybody is frank and everybody has a sense of humor and proceeds to amuse."

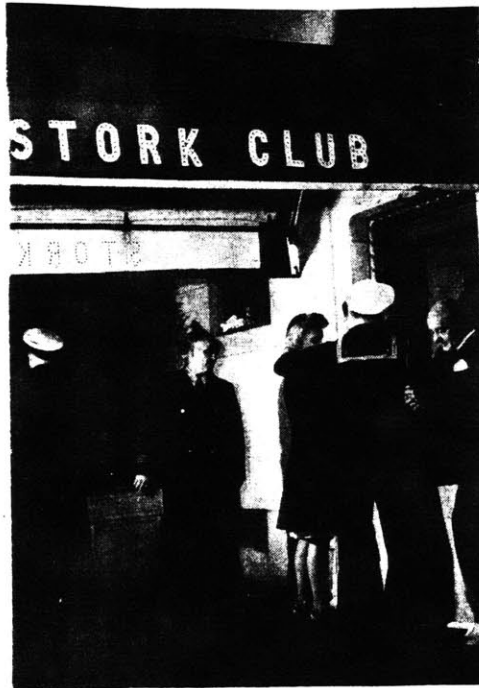


"The little Greenwich Village clubs are cheap and informal and they foster an honest cheerfulness."

The New York Times Magazine, January 12, 1941



The Illustrious Stork Club



clubs, she is no doubt basing it on a select group of the most exclusive supper clubs of the day, most notably, the Stork Club.

The Stork Club was a phenomena in and of itself. On its glamorous side, it was exclusive and almost impossible to get into. If you were "in" at the time, you had to go to and be seen at the Stork Club. And if you weren't you probably couldn't. The goings on at the Stork Club were so intertwined with the gossip of the society circle as a whole, that Billingsley began publishing a newsletter. One Navy man actually wrote to *The New Yorker* praising Billingsley's newsletter as the only publication that the servicemen received that made them feel that they had any connection with the world back home.⁵⁸

POST WAR AND THE BIRTH OF TELEVISION

The truly snobbish night clubs could be counted on one hand. The other thousand or so, were open to a very diverse clientele. Alexander Feinberg writes in a 1945 *New York Times* article: "No longer are the clubs the exclusive province of the rich, whether idle or occupied. The butcher, the baker, the war munitions maker, and their wives; the white collar worker and the soldier and sailor, as well as the banker, the broker, and the business man are ... companions [for the] evening."⁵⁹

The night clubs thrived during the war. But when the war ended, the trend of the night clubs changed. According to Gavin, "The intimate-nightclub

⁵⁸ "The Army Life: Word From Mr. Billingsley," *The New Yorker*, March 6, 1943, p. 56.

⁵⁹ Alexander Feinberg,, "The Why of Night Clubs," *The New York Times*, May 20, 1945, p. 22.

business truly took off at the end of World War II when thousands of men returned home to build new lives from scratch." And if part of that rebuilding process involved establishing themselves in a new social life, there was plenty of money around to be spent for that purpose. In June 1945 America possessed \$140 billion in liquid assets, and New York itself had become the world's wealthiest and most powerful city.⁶⁰ That year, the annual number of night club patrons was estimated at 2.5 million. The approximately 1,100 night clubs in New York City alone were said to do a gross business of from \$50 to \$60 million annually.⁶¹ Yet, as Gavin notes, "After the initial six months of celebration a calm fell over the country. The trumpet voices of newsreel announcers had faded; people yearned to plant new roots, to reestablish a sense of permanence."⁶² There was the sense among the country that people no longer were intrigued by "big things." They'd lived through the "big" war. They'd traveled abroad, or their husbands or relatives had. They'd been saturated by the monstrous war and the gigantic homecoming. The grand, extravagant night clubs still retained some of their popularity. But an increasing number of people were opting instead for a more personal surroundings in which to spend their nights.

In 1947, ex-vaudevillian Billy Reed opened a small nightclub at 70 East 55th Street called Little Club. According to the *New Yorker* the Little Club was "one of those places so narrow that two people can't sit face to face but have to squeeze in alongside each other on banquettes against the wall."⁶³ What is most noteworthy about this new club, however, is not the fact that its infinitesimal

⁶⁰ James Gavin, *Intimate Nights: The Golden Age of New York Cabaret*, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1991, p. 71.

⁶¹ Alexander Feinberg, "The Why of Night Clubs," *The New York Times*, May 20, 1945, p. 22.

⁶² James Gavin, *Intimate Nights: The Golden Age of New York Cabaret*, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1991, p. 71.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

size represented the extreme of the new trend of nightclubs, but rather its chosen name. The name "Little Club" was also given to one of the most popular clubs during prohibition. Thus, it does a good job of showing where nightclubs were in the cycle in the 1950s. They had come back full circle to "Little Club"s. But the cycle is destined to continue. And during the 50s, the invention of television and its entree into the home of the average American, began to erode the nightclub patronage. People were beginning to believe that they could get plenty of fantasy entertainment right in their own living room, from their television set. There was no longer the same incentive to venture out to the nightclub. Thus, the nightclub had to reinvent itself; return to larger scale and offer a fantasy much greater than any television could. And, among other new innovative places, in 1966 we get Cheetah, the first liquorless, showless nightclub.

SKYSCRAPERS AND TELEVISIONS:

Technological advances threaten the nightclub.

At the start of the 1950s, two modern day advances threatened the popularity of the nightclub; the television and the skyscraper. The latter quite literally cast a dark shadow on what was once the heart of nightclub night life. In 1953, plans were announced for the demolition of 30 "outmoded" buildings along fifty-second street near Sixth Avenue, the strip that was then commonly known as "Swing Row." Numerous trendy night spots were razed. Most notable of these included, Club Nocturne, Club Del Rio, Famous Door, the Three Deuces and the Club Samoa. A thirty-five story office building was built in their place,

forever changing the character of that "Swing-ing Street." ⁶⁴ In a 1950 *New York Times* article entitled "The Twilight of a Zany Street," Gilbert Millstein writes: "Having survived, and even encouraged, thirty-two speakeasies, jazz actors of endless variety, burlesque and a general casting away of inhibitions, 52nd Street is now decaying noisily in the face of imminent demolition and respectability." The *New York Times* reporter took inventory of the establishments located on 52nd Street at that time: "There are eight night clubs on the street now, five French restaurants, one Swiss, two Italian, one Russian, two American, and two one-arm and non-descript, and "21," which is as much a way of life as a restaurant. There are also three honest saloons, two of which minister mostly to musicians; a liquor store, a golf school, place called Poodles Inc., which sells those dogs, a cobbler, two grocery stores, men's tailors, women's tailors, the Swiss Travel Bureau, photographers, an advertising art agency, the Drama Book Shop and a boarded-up building. The fashionable De Pinna store does business at the Fifth Avenue end and Nedick's equally fashionable frankfurter stand is at the other end. . . ." ⁶⁵

Thus, five of the eight clubs remaining on the street at that time were doomed to imminent demolition. The story reads all the more tragic when one considers stories of the street when it was in its heyday several years prior. One anecdote creates a particularly good rendition of what the street was like, and how it came to live up to its illustrious title. A man named Jimmy Ryan opened a club named Dixieland in 1940. There he featured many well-known instrumentalists, such as Georg Brunis. One night, Brunis found himself so inspired by "High Society," a New Orleans parade tune he was playing, that he

⁶⁴ Lee E. Cooper, "Offices to Usurp Swing Row Sites," *The New York Times*, August 2, 1953, Sect. 8, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Gilbert Millstein, "The Twilight of a Zany Street," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 1, 1950, p. 12.

rose from his chair, waved to the band. Leaving only the piano and oversized instruments behind, he led the band out on to 52nd street, where they marched to their parade music, picking up pedestrians in the process, and stopping traffic all the way along 52nd Street.

However, according to Millstein times had changed and although Dixie land was still around in 1950, there were only two places left on the row that were still truly grand and thriving. "There are two unquestionable pillars of respectability on the street. These are Leon & Eddie's and "21," neither of which even faintly resembles the other, except that both are in business and own the buildings in which they operate," Millstein points out, an important distinction at a time of mass demolition and construction. He describes Leon & Eddie's as "a large gaudy night club to which thousands of people from out of town repair yearly in the mistaken belief that it represents real New York night life."⁶⁶

Conversely, he provides the following description of the "21," which although altered, is still thriving in 1994. :

Jack & Charlie's "21" is an altogether different proposition. It cultivates a proud, quiet reserve with what amounts to passion. Its standards may be said to be a sort of lamination of those imposed by the late Ward McAllister, Lucie Beebe, wealthy Yale undergraduates who belong to Skull and Bones, Hollywood on good behavior, horsey people from Virginia, smooth-grained account executives from the big advertising agencies, and the less rafish (and better-heeled) creative minds from magazines, news papers, radio and television. The impression is created with the very facade of "21", which is mostly rococo wrought-iron gates and New Orleans balcony. Spaced at intervals along the balcony and an unused outside stairway are twenty-eight hitching posts in the shape of little Negro boys dressed in the racing silks of

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

such famous stables as Greentree, William Woodward and Calumet Farm. There are also two small slave-boy hitching posts.⁶⁷

Millstein comments on the details of the 21 Club. He writes, "All these lend immeasurable tone to the place." Indeed a tone that reflects the political atmosphere of the time and leaves little doubt as to the restrictive segregatory admission policies of the club.

It is worth noting however, the more humble background of "21," since the establishment's progression is an apt representation of the transformation of the street which gave birth to it.

"There is an inclination to forget that "21" once was nothing more than a pleasant speakeasy,"⁶⁸ writes Millstein. "21" wasn't even the first on the block. The first was opened in 1926 by a man named Jean Billis. Leon & Eddie's was the second. "21" was a far third, not opening until January 27, 1930. Billis recalled in a *New York Times* article that he had been raided with great fidelity every two or three months, by arrangement with the federal agents. However, "21" went to great lengths to evade the dry agents, and were successful. No one ever got anything on "21."

The place devised an extraordinary system -- it is still in working order -- which included four push buttons in the vestibule. There were four so that the doorman would be sure to reach one no matter how muscular the agents became. When the alarm rang, all drinks in the place were picked up and placed on the bar. Another button was pushed and the whole bar tipped

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid.

back into a wall recess. Everything went down a chute into the sewers.⁶⁹

One of the original owners of the "21" Club, a man named Peter Kriendler, is still alive today. He recalls fondly the 21 Club's days as a speakeasy. He says it was nearly 70 years ago now that he first became one of the owners of the newly opened "21" Club. "It was exiting. Everything was always moving. It was fine back then," Kriendler says. According to Kriendler there would be 50 to 100 people there each night. Kriendler is quite proud of the fact that his establishment was never once caught by the feds for illegally serving liquor. "We had a gate at the entrance to the wine cellar. It was a foot thick made out of brick. That's how we fooled them," he says.

Kriendler says the club was extremely popular right from its opening. "We never advertised. People just knew about it. And if they could afford to go, they came. And, if I knew them, I let them in," recalls Kriendler, who adds that he was there every single night. . According to Kriendler, the place was a lot smaller back then. It was housed in only one building, with only two rooms, an upstairs and a downstairs. The rooms measured about 15 feet by 25 feet each, Kriendler estimates.

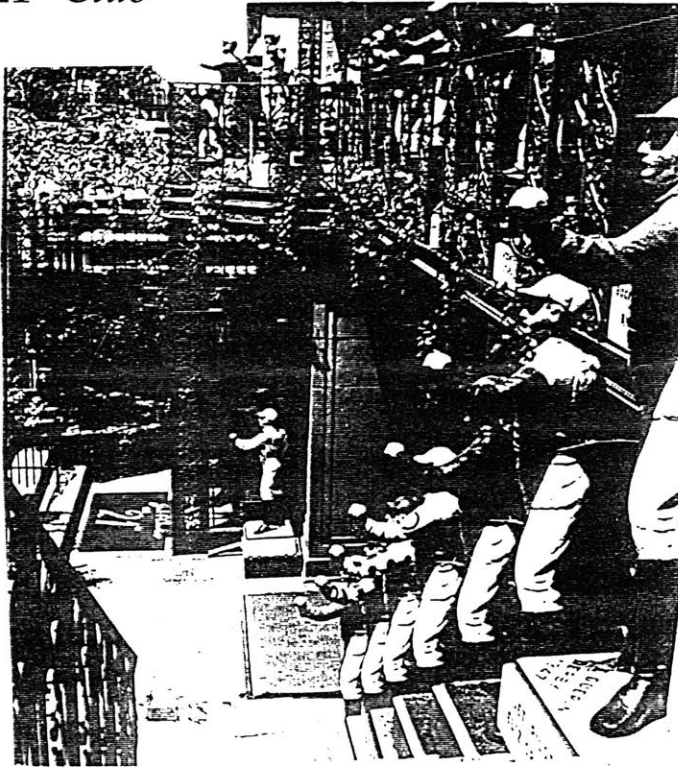
The end of Prohibition was the "best thing that ever happened," Kriendler insists. He recalls that a lot more people came to the 21 Club after the repeal and that he has never missed Prohibition. "Thank God it's behind us," he exclaims. According to Kriendler, after the repeal the 21 Club transformed from an exclusive speakeasy to an exclusive restaurant and has remained as such. He does note however, that 52nd Street is not what it once was.⁷⁰

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰ Based on personal telephone interview with Peter Kriendler conducted by the author, Joanna Stone on June 6, 1994.



*The Entrance to
the "21" Club*



*Jack & Charlie's
"21"*

Similarly, with great nostalgia, *New York Times* reporter Millstein concluded: "Fifty-second street reflected the galloping changes in American folkways. Very likely there will never be another street like it."⁷¹ A decade later, a 1962 *New York Times* article entitled, "Skyscrapers Overwhelm 52d St., Once a Home of Jazz and Bars," declared: "Manhattan's building boom has obliterated one of its most colorful stretches of pavement -- Swing Street."⁷²

Meanwhile, while the street became more commercialized, offering more monotonous entertainment, the patrons were being slowly lulled away by a new form of entertainment, namely the television.

A June 27, 1951 *New York Times* article notes: "Established evening habits of the American people are undergoing drastic revision in the wake of television's upsurge. . . Business at night clubs, bars and restaurants has shown a general decline."⁷³

The irony is that when television first entered the home, it was uniformly embraced by the nightclubs, seen almost as the equivalent of having a nightclub publicist in every household.

Television did not become affordable to the general public until after World War II. In 1946, there were only about 7,000 homes with television sets. By 1950 that number had increased phenomenally to 4.4 million and continued to escalate at a rate of 20,000 per day for the rest of the decade.⁷⁴ At that time, Americans began spending more time in front of the television set than on the job. Originally, television networks searched for ways to fill their airspace.

⁷¹ Gilbert Millstein, "The Twilight of a Zany Street," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 1, 1950, p. 12.

⁷² Thomas W. Ennis, "Skyscrapers Overwhelm 52d St., Once a Home of Jazz and Bars," *The New York Times*, October 14, 1962, Sect 8, p. 1.

⁷³ Gould, Jack, "TV Makes Inroads," *The New York Times*, June 27, 1951, page 1.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Featuring the popular New York nightclubs became a regular part of television programming. Initially, this was like free advertising for the nightclubs, informing all Americans about the various hot New York night spots, such as the Blue Angel, Le Ruban Bleu, Bon Soir, and numerous other. At first, seeing the night clubs on television, inspired people to go out and experience the real thing. Eventually, people became satisfied with simply watching the night club's acts and goings-on in the privacy of their own homes. As the 1951 *New York Times* article notes: "If television was once the boon to [night clubs], today it is the bane. . . Night clubs ... sing a sad business refrain." ⁷⁵

Television did help to create a solid base of tourist demand, more analogous to that of the demand for Disneyland or Mall of America. The demand was so great that Gray Line Bus Tours started a special night clubs package tour.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

TOTAL ENVIRONMENT:

The Birth of the Modern Day Nightclub

By 1960, the number of households with television sets surpassed 60 million.⁷⁶ At this time, two distinct trends in nightclubs began to lure people back out of their homes and into the communal space of the club.

The first was to create what can be classified as the time travel fantasy. Rather than simply incorporate speakeasy characteristics into modern nightclubs, new clubs were being established across the country that attempted as nearly as possible to recreate the speakeasy experience in its entirety. In a 1961 *New York Times* article with the heading: "Exclusive cabarets With Speakeasy Air Have 125,000 Members in U.S.," Milton Esterow describes these new establishments as "a Disneyland for adults."⁷⁷

Esterow writes about the experience offered by these new "clubs,": "Outside a door on the fourth floor of a five-story brownstone on the East Side is a sign reading: "All hardware must be checked here." The visitor turns an old phone, which prompts a pretty girl to peer through a slot in the door. She inquires: "Who sent you?" You can say Joe or Moe or Hubert and she'll still lead you into a large room with wall to wall sawdust. There are pictures of Jimmy Walker and Man O' War. On checkered tablecloths you'll drink beer or forty-year-old cognac out of mugs brought by waitresses attired in tights and mesh stockings, listen to a piano player to a jazz trio play the songs of those roaring Twenties. It's not a speakeasy -- only a very reasonable facsimile."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Milton Esterow, "Key Clubs Growing," *The New York Times*, March 17, 1961, p. 27.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

These new clubs were innovative for their premium on offering a unique fantasy experience that television couldn't match. Then, in 1966, one nightclub, Cheetah, tried something truly revolutionary, a nightclub with no performance. The only entertainment offered was a collective fantasy for all patrons to indulge in. With fake fur upholstered walls, highlighted by aluminum, the grandiose three-story club offered underground movies on one floor, and ironically, the competitors, television sets, scattered about.

At the time of the club's opening, reporters interviewed the patrons. "It's like a beautiful, luxurious amusement park with dancing in it," Roberta Schwebell, an actress and model, told *The New York Times*.

That same year, *The Saturday Evening Post* ran a feature article for which they gave the cover billing: "Night Spots That Make You Feel Like LSD." The title alone, perfectly describes the new trend in nightclubs; one that has brought us to the state of modern-day nightclubs of today, and one that will continue to the next phase; the incorporation of virtual reality into the nightclub environment.

The article chronicles this new era of nightclubs ushered in by Cheetah. "Cheetah is a 'total-environment' nightclub," writes Thomas Meehan, who apparently did ample fieldwork for this article. "A new style, nonalcoholic dance hall *cum* pleasure-dome, where -- in kaleidoscopic combinations that vary from club to club -- flashing lights, movies, slides, closed circuit TV, colored smoke and deafening rock n' roll are frantically combined to simulate the feelings one supposedly has after taking a psychedelic drug, like LSD." Meehan goes on to describe one nightclub publicity flyer: "Come to Rock Flow and blast your hang-ups away! Cheaper than analysis! Safer than LSD! A Rock Flow is a controlled environment, a time-space, a magic universe theater that bombards you with so many flippy exploding beautiful things to see hear touch taste sense

that you have to go with it, you have to have a blast! ... Come be young, chase polka dots, live fairy tales, dance laugh, explode, look, listen..."⁷⁹

One of Meehan's knowledgeable sources explains the new phenomenon:

'Traditional art forms, like painting, the theater, movies, music, even TV and radio are reacted to passively...Millions of Americans have been going through their lives having nothing but vicarious experiences -- huddled in front of the TV sets watching *What's My Line?* In the total-environment nightclub, one is an active part of the art, one's movements contribute to the over-all artistic effect. Just as in life or in dreams, you are at the center of things, and everything is happening around *you*.'⁸⁰

However, Meehan made note of his observations of the club patrons: "Everyone seemed nonetheless to be having an enormously good time. If there is any one trait that characterizes . . . it's their enthusiasm, their capacity for enjoying themselves. I'd almost never before seen an American nightclub crowd having such a free-and-easy good time as everyone at Cheetah and the Rock Flow was obviously having."⁸¹

Cheetah was but one of the many "total environment" nightclubs ushered in during the mid-sixties. Electric Circus was another, which soon became a regular stop on the Gray Line bus tour.

Although merely a more grandiose version of the "psychedelic" nightclubs that came before it, Studio 54 is often credited with sparking the birth of the modern day nightclub. The 54th Street club was "the innest of the in

⁷⁹ Thomas Meehan, "A Night on the Wiggy Scene," *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 22, 1966, p. 34.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

discotheques," as one newspaper put it. An August 14, 1989 *People Magazine* article describes the club's legend as follows:

Indeed, Studio 54, which [Steve] Rubell and lawyer Ian Schrager founded in 1977 and sold in 1981, seems to belong to a long-ago time, as distant now as such fabled New York nightspots as Delmonico's or El Morocco. At its height in the late 1970s, Rubell's midtown mecca was the bright-lights, big-city epicenter for those who reveled in the glitzy, often cokefueled glow of celebrity. The famous regular . . . and others could prance and preen in the flash of strobes and the din of disco into the early hours. Hanging in the darkness, higher even than many of the dancers, was a huge, luminous man-in-the-moon that would periodically toot cocaine from a delicate spoon.⁸²

Studio 54 was notorious for its highly exclusive door policy. But, the club was also renowned for the diversity of its clientele. The late Truman Capote thought those admitted to the club represented the wonderful variety of the democratic population at-large: "boys with boys, girls with girls, girls with boys, black and whites, capitalists and Marxists, Chinese and everything else, all one big mix." Studio 54 was also acclaimed for the value of its sheer excitement. Thus some of its interior design elements warrant mention. An April 1979 *Newsweek* article offers this description of the interior experience: "At New York's Studio 54, when the twelve landing lights from a Boeing 747 jet sweep their beams across the Mylar drapes and onto the multicolored strobes, revolving globes and cheering, outlandishly costumed dancers, deejay Richie Kaczor smiles in his

⁸² Gross, Ken, Neill, Michael, Little, Benilde, "Steve Rubell, Studio 54's Puckish Ringmaster, Follows His Club Into History," *People*, August 14, 1989, p. 40.

perch above the floor. 'This has got to be like being on Broadway,' he says, 'and getting a standing ovation.'"⁸³

By the time of Studio 54s closing, the club had officially set off the era of the mega club. Nightclub's like Eric Goode's Area, a multi-level club that changed its theme every 6 weeks, or Peter Gaten's Limelight, the large church converted into a nightclub, soon followed. Area was *the* hot spot in the early to mid-1980s. As a 1985 *People* Magazine article put it: "Area has discovered a unique antidote to nightlife sameness: Its four co-owners totally redecorate the place every six weeks, and when Area unveils new themes -- which have included fashion, natural history and sci-fi -- everyone wants to be there."⁸⁴ The life of many nightclubs is a short one because the fantasy eventually gets old and people seek out new nightclubs for new fantasies. Yet, Area was able to maintain its popularity for many years because it kept renewing the fantasy and giving the clubgoing crowd reasons to come back again and again for new and different experiences.

Another long-lived nightclub is Limelight, the 11-year-old nightclub located inside an actual church. The club opened in 1983 inside what was formerly Manhattan's Episcopalian Church of the Holy Communion. Given the historical role of churches as fantasy providers, this club's success is not all that surprising. Both Area and Limelight were especially successful because they were unique among the large-scale clubs that opened in the early 80s.

In general, the popularity of the big clubs was sustained for a while and then the cycle turned back again. The trend following Studio 54 is well summed up in a recent *New York Times* article, February 27, 1994:

⁸³ Peter W. Bernstein, Renee Leggett, Ann M. Morrison, Grant F. Winthrop, "Video Disco," *Newsweek*, October 8, 1979, p. 22.

⁸⁴ Party Page, "Uptown Plays with Downtown as the Founders of Studio 54 Throw Open the New Palladium Nightclub," *People*, June 3, 1985, p. 102.

The gloss and the size of Studio 54 found perhaps its ultimate expression in the mid-1980s at the vast Palladium, where you could spend most of the night trying to find the person you arrived with. So, the pendulum swung away from colossal, futuristic spaces to the intimacy of Nell's, which opened the fall of 1986 and mirrors the more conservative mood of the country. Since then, the megaclub has come back -- Webster Hall and Club USA -- and the cycle spins round once more.⁸⁵

Studio came to symbolize the large megaclub of the late 70s as Nell's came to represent the small, intimate club of the late 80's. Nell's was based on the Victorian Era theme and offered a home-like setting. Ian Schrager, one of the original founders of Studio 54 had this to say about the evolving cycle of the nightclub:

I noticed something at restaurants in the late 1980s. At 11 p.m., the lights would dim, the music would turn up, and the people would start to table-hop. Then a lot of small bars opened up with loud music and no dancing. Now the spaces are getting larger. The same progression took place in the late 60s and culminated in Studio.⁸⁶

And finally in 1989, the club proprietor Rudolf gave his predictions at that time for the future of nightclubs:

As we enter the 90s, we'll be focusing more on the 21st Century and we'll abandon this current moronic fascination with

⁸⁵Marcheses, John, "The Mighty Nell's," *The New York Times*, February 27, 1994, Sect 9, p. 1.

⁸⁶Stevenson, Peter, "Megaclubs for the smoke-free, hip-hoppin' 90s," *The Dallas Morning News*, October 11, 1992, p. 4E.

nostalgia. People are fed up with the false aristocratism of clubs like M.K. and Au Bar. They want places filled with raw energy.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Dottie Enrico, "Clubs; Marketing the Night Life," *New York Newsday*, January 16, 1989, p. CB8.

Chapter Three

EXAMINING THE NIGHTCLUB BY PARTS:

PART ONE:

LOCATION

When considering the location of nightclubs in New York City over the past century, there is one spot that could be viewed as the spine of club locales: 52nd Street. This is where nightclubs first emerged during the prohibition era. After the repeal of Prohibition, the street became known as "Swing-Street," and for a long time represented the center of the city's night time activities.

But 52nd Street was not always an entertainment destination. At the Turn of the Century, it was a prestigious address housing some of the city's most well-known families, such as the Potters, the Rhinelanders, the Wagstaffs, and the Baruchs. It was a quiet, well-groomed street, lined entirely with beautiful five-story Victorian brownstones. But in 1926, the street was rezoned for commercial rentals. By this time, many of the wealthy families began moving further uptown, leaving behind an excess of vacant space. The spaces proved perfect for newly emerging illicit nightclubs in search of discrete locations. In turn, its proximity to the newly built Radio City Music Hall made 52nd Street a natural location for late night and after-hours activities, most notably, speakeasies.

During the prohibition years Harlem also emerged as a popular location for speakeasies. These new nightclubs were of course illegal, and a large part of their allure was derived from their forbidden nature. The speakeasies of Harlem had the additional enticement that their location was in itself forbidden. The

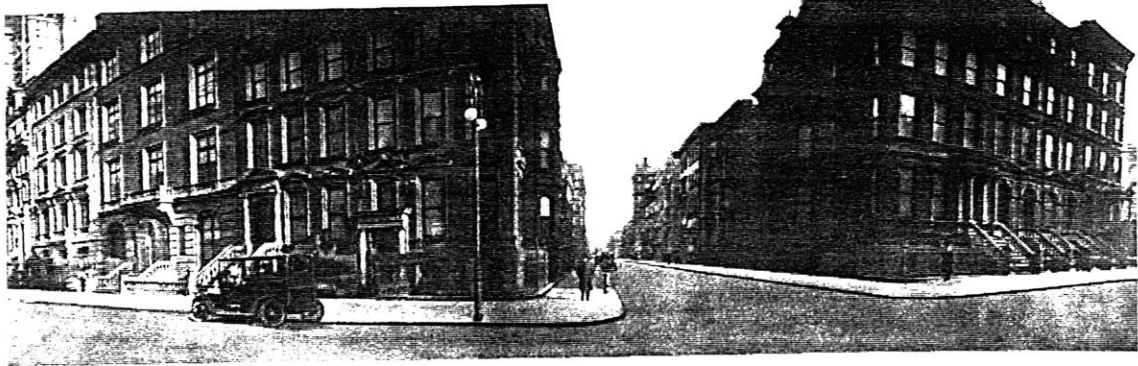
city at that time was extremely segregated. There was some sort of base thrill for many whites in the very idea of venturing into all black neighborhoods. And this, in part, led to the overwhelming success in the 1920s of some legendary clubs such as the Cotton Club.

However, as a 1986 *New York Times* article put it: "In the 30s, Harlem moved downtown, and 52nd became Swing Street."⁸⁸ The two-mile stretch -- from the River House on the East River to the Hudson piers -- has held claim to some of the city's most illustrious and infamous night spots including: Roseland, the Onyx, the Three Deuces, the "21" Club, Versailles, Tatou, and Cheetah, the first total environment nightclub, to name a few. Today, some of these legendary establishments are memorialized by plaques in the sidewalk outside the CBS Building. The "21" restaurant is still in operation, housed in its original location. The "21" stands out as the only survivor left standing after the concrete war on the street. It's brownstone is the only one remaining, an anomaly amongst the towering skyscrapers that line the block between Fifth Avenue and Avenue of the Americas.

However, as the high-rises went up destroying the original character of the street, something interesting happened to 52nd Street and the surrounding neighborhoods. As midtown became commercial by day, it became neutral by night. With most of the residences gone, the area no longer belonged to anyone at night, after the work day had ended. Previously, before the office development began, when the area was filled with charming brownstones, there were residents housed in those brownstones. Ann Pinchot, in a book entitled 52 West, recalls that 52nd Street was ultimately a neighborhood. Bartenders, showgirls and waiters mixed with the residents and they helped one another in

⁸⁸Maureen Dowd, "Wild and Low or Staid and Tall, 52d St. Still Sets Midtown Tone; Tales and Legends of All-Night Clubs," *The New York Times*, April 23, 1986, Sect. B, p. 1.

Swing Street



The transformation of "Swing Street." The 52nd Street area in 1911 above, and still under construction in the 1960s, below.



emergencies. There was also a Chinese laundryman and an Italian fruit seller who were counted on as friends. A horse and cart made its appearance each spring with a load of geraniums and ivy.⁸⁹ In the forties and fifties, some of the late night entertainment was replaced by adult entertainment -- strip joints emerged where jazz clubs had once been. But after most of the residential buildings had been demolished, there was no one group or groups of people left living in these neighborhoods who could in some way define the neighborhood or stake claim to it. Therefore, the new midtown, filled with its monstrous towers of concrete was equally inviting and foreboding to all groups of people. The office buildings that drew people from all over the city by day, were empty by night. With few residential buildings remaining, the area would be deserted at night, were it not for its allure as an entertainment district, with a history of theaters, speakeasies and the like. Thus, the fact that the area belonged to no one at night except the entertainment industry meant that nightclubs in midtown could draw a crowd from all over New York City.

At the same time, there was an increasingly popular slew of nightspots opening in the Village. Many of these were centered on a form of music, namely jazz, and as such appealed to a wide array of people with preferences for given musical performers. However, Greenwich Village is a predominantly residential mixed use area. Its residents were made up mostly of artists, beatniks and eventually hippies. The neighborhood could be defined at night by the population which lived there, which in turn gave definition to its nighttime establishments. However, the stereotype of the neighborhood hosting a bohemian nightlife worked to alienate the area residents by making them in essence a tourist attraction. Lewis Erenberg in an essay entitled "Village Nightlife" writes: "By the mid-1920s the heyday of Village nightlife had passed.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

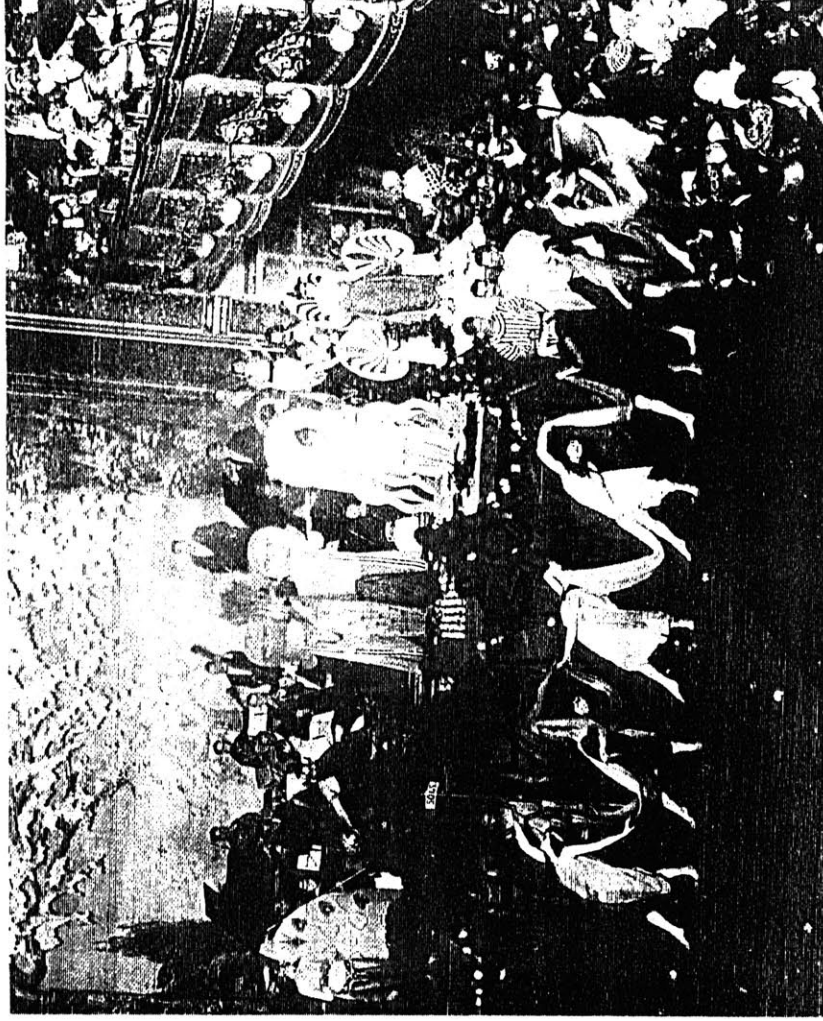
As *Variety* declared, it has become 'the Boobery's Gehenna,' a commercialized amusement zone." ⁹⁰ However, Greenwich Village did serve as a breeding ground for people and places that challenged the social norm, including an underground homosexual nightlife. Homosexual residents and entrepreneurs opened a number of speakeasies in the Village. They also participated in the costume balls held at the popular Village night club Webster Hall. And by the mid-1920s, they presented their own balls at Webster Hall. On this Erenberg writes:

The region's bohemian reputation attracted homosexuals. The search for new forms of sexual expression encourages greater tolerance of all behavior. while the artistic rebellion included acceptance of different modes of dress and self-presentation. The relative openness thus served as a cover for homosexuals who looked 'different.' Hence as part of the 'free love' and free expression aspects of the Village, homosexuals helped create bohemia just as they were created by it. . . By 1930 the Village's reputation as both a heterosexual and homosexual meeting ground was secure. Yet, its heyday had passed. The sightseeing buses and the commercialization of the bohemian image had made the tearooms and clubs less for bohemians and more for visitors seeking their own brand of personal freedom.⁹¹

Yet, the neighborhood did maintain a certain cachet as a progressive area, which in turn served to attract a certain number of so-called progressive nightclubs. Cafe Society was the most notable of these. As Erenberg puts it, "The Village retained enough of a bohemian and radical political reputation to make it home to nightclubs that challenged mainstream entertainment and

⁹⁰ Lewis Erenberg, "Village Nightlife," Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture, Museum of the City of New York, 1993, p. 364.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 365.



A Costume Ball at Webster Hall

politics."⁹² Still, the tourist invasion eventually took its toll. The more avant-garde artists soon moved east and the St. Mark's Street area developed a similar yet distinct identity of its own. And, similarly, the East Village developed a cachet of its own. This cachet soon attracted nightclubs which in turn attracted tourists. This commercialization eventually tore away at the cohesiveness of the neighborhood and its residents. This is how a November 22, 1992 *New York Times* article described the St. Marks in its heyday:

Fame engulfed St. Marks Place in the late 1960s, when it was the vortex of the counterculture movement. That scene remains frozen in the minds of those who were there: the milling convoy of shaggy hippies in psychedelic clothing, smoking pot, tripping on acid, proselytizing a world of peace and love. Tour buses crept down the cramped street past the Electric Circus nightclub, pausing so tourists could snap pictures of the hippies. (Abbie Hoffman, who lived on the block, organized his own tour bus to carry hippies to a shopping mall in Queens to get a look at "straight" people.) . . . In the late 1960s, perhaps the defining enterprise on the block was the psychedelic Electric Circus nightclub, successor to the Balloon Farm and, before that, Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable club.⁹³

Yet, the article continues by noting the eventual deterioration of the neighborhood:

In the 1970s, after the Electric Circus and nearby Fillmore East closed and the flower children drifted away, St. Marks Place fell to drug dealers and a certain degree of abandonment.⁹⁴

⁹²Ibid., p. 366.

⁹³ N.R. Kleinfield, "On the Street of Dreams," *The New York Times*, November 22, 1992, Sect 9, p. 8.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

While Greenwich Village became the home of such nighttime luminaries as the Village Vanguard and the Blue Note, the East Village lay claim to, among other places, the legendary Electric Circus. And as the *Times* article suggests, the Electric Circus gave a symbolic definition to the street. The club in turn derived its own identity from the surrounding neighborhood and its residents. In essence, the nightclubs gravitated towards these residential neighborhoods for their notoriety and remain in the neighborhoods to follow the transformation of the residential make-up of the region.

In contrast to the Village, if one heads uptown from midtown, one finds a more upscale residential area. In particular, the upper East Side has long been held in esteem as the residence of choice for many of the wealthiest of New Yorkers. Not surprisingly, the nightclubs that have opened on the Upper East Side over the years have appeared more like exclusive urban country clubs for the very rich. Indeed, one recent club that opened on East 85th Street even calls itself "Country Club." For the most part, clubs that have been conceived on the Upper East side have been homogeneous establishments catering to one sort of clientele, namely the wealthy upper East Sider. The crowd that goes to these establishments has been only as diverse as the neighborhood itself. At its most heterogeneous, the crowd at a given Upper East Side nightclub is an accurate representation of the racial and ethnic make-up of the very wealthy; Caucasian Americans and Europeans, Arabs, Asians, a few from Latin America, one or two African-Americans, etc.

Meanwhile, other parts of Manhattan turned residential over the past several decades. While the lofts of SoHo and TriBeCa became popular residences for emerging artists, these locations also became popular for nightclubs catering

to these artists. Similarly, as Battery Park City filled its apartment buildings with "Yuppies" working on Wall Street, the surrounding area became a popular location for nightclubs dedicated to the "Yuppie" crowd.

Some very notable nightclubs have been or are still located in the various residential neighborhoods around Manhattan. However, if we are in search of the nucleus of nightclubs, midtown is the place. The 40s and 50s has long represented a location that offers an opportunity for people from all the different residential neighborhoods in New York City -- from very different backgrounds and ways of life -- to come together on a middle ground. It's as if the upper east side socialite and the East Village rebel had quite literally agreed to meet "half-way" -- midtown is literally midway ground where all the elements can come together.

Of course, to attribute the popularity of midtown as the chosen location for nightclubs to the neighborhood's neutrality or even to its series of architectural attributes is to assume free choice for nightclubs. The truth is, a nightclub cannot always locate where it most wants. One limiting condition is cost. This is especially relevant when considering the mega clubs that require tens of thousands of square feet. The Times Square district, of recent, has a distinct advantage in this respect. Over the past decade or so, the Times Square area could be said to have reached an all time low. The city has responded with an elaborate redevelopment plan for the district. In the meantime, the area's high density of pornography and crime has scared off most of the more so-called respectable tenants. Huge buildings remain vacant waiting for the promised boom from redevelopment to kick in. Take for example the story of one landlord's predicament that was relayed in the Sunday, June 5 *Boston Globe*. Joseph B. Rosenblatt, a former board member of the Times Square business district group, owns a 7,000-square-foot building on 43rd Street. The building

A Map of Past and Present Mid-town Hot Spots:



stood vacant for six years after a restaurant moved out. Finally, in desperation, Rosenblatt recently rented the space to a man named Martin Hodas, otherwise known as the "King of the Peeps." Hodas opened an establishment called the Playpen which sells adult videos and sex paraphernalia. Rosenblatt promptly resigned from the Times Square business district group.⁹⁵ Clearly if a landlord such as Rosenblatt is willing to suffer disrepute and rent his place out for porn, he would most likely be thrilled for the chance to rent it to a nightclub, even at a cheaper rate.

But, cost aside, the biggest hurdle when deciding on a location for a new nightclub is zoning. Often even if a given location is zoned for cabaret licenses, a nightclub is likely to face immense neighborhood opposition if it ventures into uncharted territory. In fact, under 1990 zoning regulations, new nightclubs have been for the most part restricted to the far west parts of Manhattan, along the Hudson, or to the midtown and Times Square areas. However, the new law did not stop the residential complaints against those nightclubs that somehow maneuvered or grandfathered their way in to predominantly residential neighborhoods. According to a *New York Times* article written a year ago: "For months angry residents have campaigned for a cabaret bill that would create a 200-foot buffer zone between large clubs and residential buildings and would give the Consumer Affairs Department the power to shut down problem clubs."⁹⁶

However, if a new club chooses to locate in the same building that previously housed some popular nightspot, the new club stands a better chance of avoiding neighborhood opposition. Thus, in examining the history of the

⁹⁵Steve Fainaru, "Peripatetic Porn," *Boston Globe*, June 5, 1994, p 76.

⁹⁶Marvine Howe, "Unexpected Problems Stall Ban to Regulate Nightclubs," *The New York Times*, May 2, 1993, p. 47.

locations of the popular night clubs of today and those of past decades, it becomes apparent that each new generation of nightclubs reemerges in many of the same hot spot locations of the previous generation. Some examples of this include a new nightclub which opened last year called "Ten" which is located in the same space that once housed the legendary Copacabana (The Copa has since reopened at a new location further uptown); the nightclub Tatou which is located where Cafe Versailles once reigned; the new Webster Hall located in the space which prior to a series of transitional uses including housing the popular Ritz nightclub, once housed the original Webster Hall; and, Studio 54 whose building once housed a 1930s club called Casino de Parcee where Billy Rose staged musical revues with beautiful women dressed in large hats and small fig leaves.⁹⁷ Thus, the interior designs and the fantasies offered by the nightclubs may change drastically but many of the locations remain the same.

◆ The Night Time

It is important to note that the night time is an integral element in helping to create the fantasy offered by the nightclub. In a residential neighborhood, dusk represents the time when residents return home for the evening. If the stereotype of neighborhood residents is part of the fantasy being offered, such as has been the case with Greenwich Village, the East Village, and Harlem, the fantasy must occur at night so that residents may participate in the fantasy. For a commercial neighborhood, sunset represents a time of desertion. The neighborhood then becomes a blank canvas open to the creations of the fantasies of all. In Times Square, the nightfall creates further disorientation with dozens

⁹⁷ Marvine Howe, "A Stripped Down Studio 54 for the Post-Disco Era," *The New York Times*, December 19, 1993, Sect 13, p. 8.

of surrounding lighted billboards and neon signs dictating a fantasy of their own. Ultimately, night time is traditionally the time associated with mystical beings and decadent behavior; that is, the stuff nightclub fantasies are made of.

PART TWO:

DESIGN:

The prototypical exterior design of the nightclub is in some ways the most intriguing architectural element. That is because there is usually no distinguishable design whatsoever. The exterior is intended to blend in with the club's surroundings. Although this is not always the case, many nightclubs today have not even so much as a sign with their name on it identifying their space. The rule of thumb dictates that from the outside, there should be little frontage to suggest that a nightclub lies behind the closed door. This adds to the mystery and surprise elements of the experience of the nightclub space. It also adds to the illusion of exclusivity and of the idea of a membership to the "club." As a 1987 *New York Times* article says of one nightclub: "A small black basement fronting on an alley in TriBeCa, the club is so hard to find that only people with prior knowledge of it (and a patient cab driver) seem to end up here."⁹⁸ It is often the case that the only clues offered the passerby as to the exact location of a particular popular nightclub are the velvet ropes and the crowd that forms around them waiting to get inside. This in fact adds to the nightclub experience;

⁹⁸ Lisa Foderara, "Glitz, Funk and Victoriana Enliven New York's Discos," *The New York Times*, March 27, 1987, p. C1.

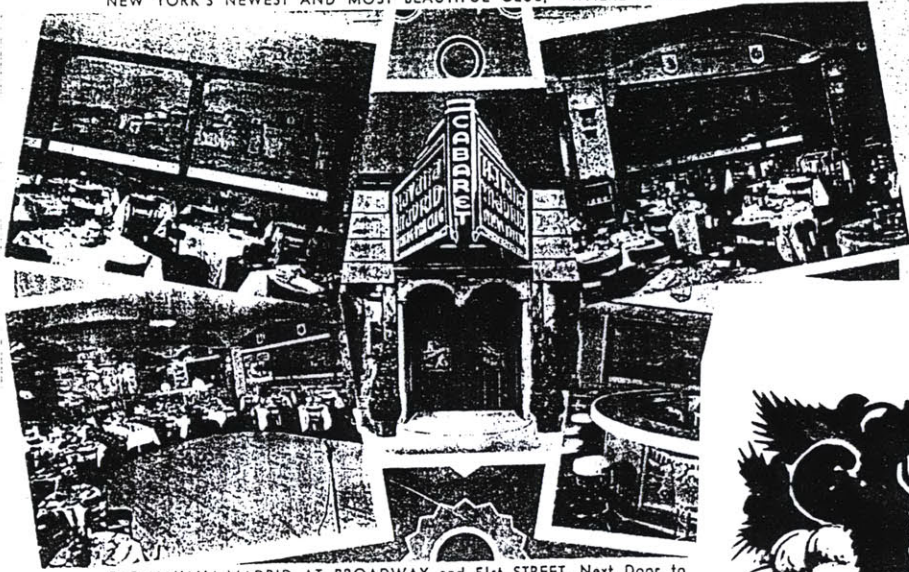
making the detective game hunt to find the nightclub part of the fantasy experience.

The idea of the nightclub being hidden behind unmarked closed doors dates back to the early clubs created during Prohibition. At that time the very nature of these clubs was illegal. Therefore, the speakeasies, as they were often called then, had to establish elaborate systems of membership and intricate modes of concealment. Typically these clubs had hidden doors, passageways, chutes, secret passwords -- the apparent makings of some embellished spy story. Part of the allure of these places was its seeming analogy to being in-the-know on some grand secret. When prohibition was repealed in 1933, there was a certain excitement attached to bringing the secret quite literally out of the closet and showing it off in the face of the public eye. The new extravagant nightclubs had huge awnings and picture windows so that all who passed by could bear witness to the decadent goings-on.

Meanwhile, as the exterior design of the nightclub varied from one extreme to the other, so too did its interior design. The most noticeable difference is simply that of size. Nightclubs evolved from small intimate entities during the prohibition years to gigantic, mammoth spaces during the 40s. The colossal size of these new places served as a tribute to America's involvement in a colossal war. But eventually, the cycle came full circle. With the war behind them, Americans demanded a return to intimacy. But soon the newly invented television offered a rather intimate form of at-home entertainment. For nightclubs to compete, they had to now be huge, lavish, perhaps even excessive.

The continued evolution of the nightclub is about the reinvention of past design elements in a way that suits present day needs. When one considers size as an evolving design element, one can trace the trend from the small rooms which housed the speakeasies and were on average only between 500 and 1000

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Nightclubs with a Latin theme were very popular amongst 1940s clubgoers.



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square feet, and the Stork Club which was nearly ten times that size, with close to 10,000 square feet of usable space. But then of course there was the movement for the return to intimacy and we get the Blue Angel, where the main room measured less than 1000 square feet. But then again the cycle comes full circle, with Studio 54 and then the Palladium measuring in at over 100,000 square feet.⁹⁹

Given the confines of the given sizes of various nightclub spaces, it is interesting to examine what varied and diverse design schemes evolved. Each prototypical design scheme came about to create one of the four categories of fantasy.

PART THREE:

FANTASY DESIGN

As noted in the introduction, there are four categories of nightclub fantasies: home, geographic travel, time travel, and psychedelic.

◆ The Home Fantasy:

The modern-day outgrowth of the home fantasy has also been dubbed the "Living Room as Lounge" design scheme, a recreation of the 1920s speakeasy design. This fantasy received a surge of popularity in the 1980s, starting with Nell's. The "home" theme spread when Howard Stein opened the uptown club Au Bar and Eric and Chris Goode opened M.K.

The creator of M.K., Eric Goode, described his 1988 club as follows: "The idea was to capture the feeling of being in a person's home," Goode explained.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ The Palladium is in fact 104,000 square feet. The rest of these figures are approximate.

¹⁰⁰ Lisa W. Foderaro, "Plush Discos Offer Rock, Rap and Romanticism," *The New York Times*, November 11, 1988, Sect. C, p. 1.

According to Goode, "M.K. is about design and doing something permanent. It's more about beauty than shock value or instant gratification."¹⁰¹ (Unfortunately, the permanence theme didn't hold true since the club closed a couple of years later.) A *New York Times* article written shortly after the club opened, agreed with Goode's assessment of the interior design. "M.K. feels like a private party in a Fifth Avenue town house. It is a party given every night by an invisible but well-heeled and eccentric host whose tastes run from Miro and marble to stuffed Doberman pinschers and giant goldfish."¹⁰²

M.K. was created inside a four story turn-of-the-century bank building. The bank's former walk-in vaults, located in the basement, served as the club's coat check. The top floor was by far the most interesting, with a billiard room, a library and a master bedroom with a luxurious white canopy bed. Nell's, which is still around, although not nearly as popular as it was in the 1980s, is considerably smaller than M.K. was. The club appears like a two story home with a definite 19th-century feel. And Au Bar, also still in existence, is even smaller than Nell's -- only one large room with a small library area and seating area tucked away on the side. Like Nell's, Au Bar has the feel of a 19th-century home. In a sense, however, the "home" created by these nightclubs represented a home from a previous era. Thus, what you have is a combination of fantasies. You are in someone's home, and you have traveled back in time to get there. This fantasy of being in an elegant Victorian or turn-of-the-century home fit in well with the wealthy indulgence of the 1980s. Nell's, M.K., and Au Bar all experienced great success during those years.

¹⁰¹David Hershkovits, "View points: The New York Interview with Eric Goode," *New York Newsday*, November 14, 1988, p. 53.

¹⁰²Lisa W. Foderaro, "Plush Discos Offer Rock, Rap and Romanticism," *The New York Times*, November 11, 1988, Sect. C, p. 1.

◆ **The Time Travel Fantasy**

Yet, the 90s have ushered in an entirely new crop of trendy fantasies. Many purely "time travel" fantasy nightclubs have been opened recently that represent everything from the 1920s to the 1970s and all eras in between. These clubs such as the new breed of retro 70s clubs that seem to be particularly popular as of recent, are simply the reproduction of a nightclub from a different time period. For these nightclubs, the architectural challenge for the interior designer is simply to recreate the design scheme of a nightclub with a similar space from a previous era.

◆ **The Climate Travel Fantasy**

For other nightclubs, the goal is simply to create the illusion of another climate. A good example of the design of the climate travel fantasy can be well represented by the Big Kahuna, a popular nightclub in the 1980s located in the Wall Street area. This is how a March 27, 1987 *New York Times* article described the fantasy:

A more timeworn theme -- carefree island living -- has resurfaced at Big Kahuna, a new club on lower Broadway. . . Sand carpets the floor. A 60 foot sculpted turquoise wave lines one wall, forever on the verge of breaking. Jutting through the foam are sharks' jaws, clenching dismembered legs tethered to surfboards mounted on the ceiling. Hamburgers and hot dogs are served on Frisbees. Bikini-clad women on a raised platform bop to 50s and 60s music, while the walls are alive with video images of surfers. ¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Lisa Foderara, "Glitz, Funk and Victoriana Enliven New York's Discos," *The New York Times*, March 27, 1987, p. C1.

◆ The Psychedelic Fantasy

And, of course, for the psychedelic fantasy, part of the design challenge is create a drug-like experience. According to a 1986 *New York Times* article: "The sights and sounds of Studio 54, like those of the clubs that followed, in many ways paralleled the cocaine experience: entering a world that suddenly blended the esthetics of Fellini and the Fortune 500 - a temporary escape from the past and future into a overwhelming, fantastic, shadowy now. 'It was about fantasy, escapism and overstimulation,' said Howard Stein former owner of the club Xenon, current owner of Au Bar. 'The idea was to stimulate to the point of overkill and pain.'"¹⁰⁴

Overstimulating the senses is part of the creation of the drug-like experience. Yet more is needed to keep people coming back for more. "Rule No. 1 of night life is that it has to be unpredictable," said Rudolf.¹⁰⁵ And he certainly followed this rule when he helped to design The Tunnel, a popular nightclub in the mid-eighties.

The notion of odd juxtapositions certainly fueled the \$5 million transformation of an abandoned 630-foot railroad tunnel into one of New York's hottest nightclubs. The long, narrow 1891 structure -- an industrial kaleidoscope of ducts and girders -- has been softened with red velvet couches and chandeliers. . . With an overall capacity of 2,500, there is plenty of room to dance to the forceful disco beat, and three small rooms off the tunnel provide intimacy and quiet for those who would rather communicate. Probably the most interesting visual element comes at the end of the tunnel, where, beyond the guarded

¹⁰⁴ Peter Kerr, "Late Nights, Bright Lights and Cocaine Are Still Entwined," *The New York Times*, October 11, 1986, Sect. 1, p. 33.

¹⁰⁵ Lisa W. Foderaro, "Glitz, Funk and Victoriana Enliven New York's Discos," *The New York Times*, March 27, 1987, Sect. C, p. 1.

railing, the original train tracks trail off into a sort of existential nothingness, streaked with pink and blue spotlights.¹⁰⁶

The Club Area, of course, embodied Rudolf's number one rule of unpredictability. The club changed its theme regularly, so club-clubgoers were never quite sure what to expect from a visit to Area. Some of the club's theme's included Halloween, an art gallery, an underwater aquarium, and nuclear war.¹⁰⁷

Limelight is an interesting case to study. It offers a total environment fantasy in the sense that the fantasy offered by a church is about the total environment. Limelight maintained most of the church's original stain glass. The club designers made the bell tower accessible to clubgoers via a spiral staircase. And they further heightened the experience with various colored lighting arrangements, loud music, and large movie screens showing such appropriate flicks as "The Ten Commandments."

Indeed, it is in the total environment nightclubs, the clubs that combine futuristic imagery with psychedelic effects, that architects can truly showcase their work. As an example of this, consider the following description of the Electric Circus from a *Life Magazine* "Review" of the nightclub when it first opened in August of 1967:

The new place cost \$300,000 to set up . . . It was worth every penny. At night, far from dangling conversations and the world uptown, customers queue up . . . in front of the [Electric] Circus' subtle blue facade . . . to tune in on the ultimate form of legal entertainment. From the foyer ceiling a huge neon arrow assaults the eyes, throbbing in electronic sympathy with the guitars

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Theme categories are based on articles and recollections of former clubgoers.

upstairs, and drives the Flower People through a black tunnel and before their judge, a changing silver screen, a psychedelic Big Brother large as a billboard.¹⁰⁸

This provocative design scheme covers only the entry sequence, the titillating act of first penetration into this intense fantasy environment. Once inside the Electric Circus there is a seeming overload of the senses, so much to see and so many things to do.

◆ Activities

Hurrying past this, crowds bunch before a narrow door surrounded by mirrors. They hustle and push, and two by two are sucked into the flood and into a never-ceasing explosion of light and sound. Magnified images of children in a park, a giant armadillo or Lyndon Johnson disport themselves on the white plastic scured expanse of the tentlike ceiling. Gigantic light-amoebae rove among the images, pulsating and contracting with the relentless beat of a rock band. . . A young man with the moon and stars painted on his back soars overhead on a silver trapeze, and a ring juggler manipulates colored hoops amid shaggy hippies who unconcernedly perform a pageant tribal dance. And electronic music that Stockhausen will never know flows around the room adding a rave-up rocket launch to the scene. Stroboscopic lights flicker over the dancers breaking up their movements into a jerky parody of an old time Chaplin movie. The love generation dances barefoot on a floor decorated with luminous portraits of the most psychedelic of insects, the butterfly. Nobody has to wear shoes -- in fact it costs 50 cents less to get in without them.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ "Review: Non-Toxic Psychedelia for Squares," *Life Magazine*, August 11, 1967, p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

This description of Electric Circus aptly describes the multi-dimensional elements that go into a "total environment" nightclub. In these modern nightclubs, people are hired to be not part of some performance, but rather part of the interior design. They are told to dress a certain way and whether they are dancing atop a box, inside a cage or swinging from a rope overhead, their role is more analogous to that of enhanced lighting or a holographic image than it is to any staged performance. Thus, it is interesting to note that in creating the design of these so-called total environment nightclubs, a human element is often programmed in to enhance the overall atmosphere of the place.

These, shall we say, "passive performers" serve a role that is reminiscent of the quote from Ronald Lee Fleming about working public places. If you put a monkey and an organ grinder in a public space it might inspire a conversation between strangers about the fact that the monkey has measles.

According to Fleming, one way to expand the potential number of meaningful encounters within a place is to provide it with what he terms "lovable objects," meaning unexpected extras that people can talk to each other about, or explain to strangers, or laugh at, or clamber over, or make a point of looking for every time they visit the area.¹¹⁰

In the same way that Fleming's example of the monkey inspires human connection through conversation, so too does the man in a leotard dancing on top of the bar. Someone might turn to a stranger next to them and say, "Look, his leotard has a hole in it," or whatever. The fact that different people while making their way through the nightclub have happened upon a man in a leotard dancing atop a bar, creates an unusual shared experience for this diverse group of people, an instant bond of sorts. Thus as the nightclub has evolved, it has

¹¹⁰Tony Hiss, The Experience of Place, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1990, p. 94

made a conscious effort to provide social interaction as part of the programmed design scheme.

PART FOUR:

SOCIAL INTERACTION:

◆ The Clientele

Speakeasies by the very nature of their small size necessitated social interaction. However, it was interaction between similar minded people. That is to say that the clientele at the typical speakeasy was a rather homogeneous one. After the repeal, the new night clubs began catering to people with mixed economic backgrounds. However, the clientele was still segregated according to race and ethnicity (not to mention according to sexual orientation). However, there were exceptions to this rule. The nightclubs, the Blue Angel and Le Ruban Bleu were both small in size and yet catered to a more diverse group of people. These clubs encouraged social interaction between heterosexuals and homosexuals, between Americans and foreigners, between the black performers and white patrons. But the first socially integrated nightclub did not come about until 1938 with the opening of Cafe Society. The new progressive club first opened its doors in the relatively progressive neighborhood of Greenwich Village. The new racially and ethnically diverse club proved a huge success and eventually moved uptown to take its place in the ranks with the best of them in midtown Manhattan. This groundbreaking club chose as its new location the staid address of Park Avenue.

Cafe Society forged the path and other integrated nightclubs eventually followed in its footsteps. In the 1950s, one progressive club was opened in what can now be referred to as the neutral location of the West 50s. The Palladium was located on 53rd and Broadway and it competed with the places such as the Roseland Ballroom. However, the Palladium developed its own distinctive Latino flair and diverse clientele that set it apart from other clubs of that era. A recent *Boston Globe* article described the Palladium as follows [Note: this 1950s Palladium should not be confused with the Palladium nightclub located on East 14th Street that opened in the 1980s.]:

For an America still inventing itself, it was an innocent, true moment of discovery. Segregated all day by wealth, language, religion, education, history and race, the city came together at the Palladium by night and danced.¹¹¹

The Palladium catered to a clientele that was well represented by people from all segments of society. There were "blacks from Harlem, Latinos from el barrio," there were working class whites and white-collar whites. According to Max Salzar, one of the country's most respected Latin-music historians, "What social scientists have been discussing and trying to do in their studies, the mambo did on the Palladium dance floor. The music appealed to everybody. When they were on that floor, a lot of the stereotypes that kept those people from even saying hello to each other disappeared and you had people embracing each other both figuratively and literally."¹¹²

¹¹¹ Fernando Gonzalez, "Mambo Kingdom; Remembering the real nightclub behind the story," *The Boston Globe*, March 8, 1992, p. B33.

¹¹² Ibid.

The Palladium was a large club with a small bar and a large dance floor. There were tables that surrounded the dance floor that were usually occupied by celebrities such as Marlon Brando, Eartha Kin, Aga Khan, Sammy Davis.

According to one woman, Milly Donay who graduated from dancing at the Palladium to being a professional dancer: "They [the celebrities] came slumming. The place was classy but inexpensive. The majority of the people was working class."¹¹³

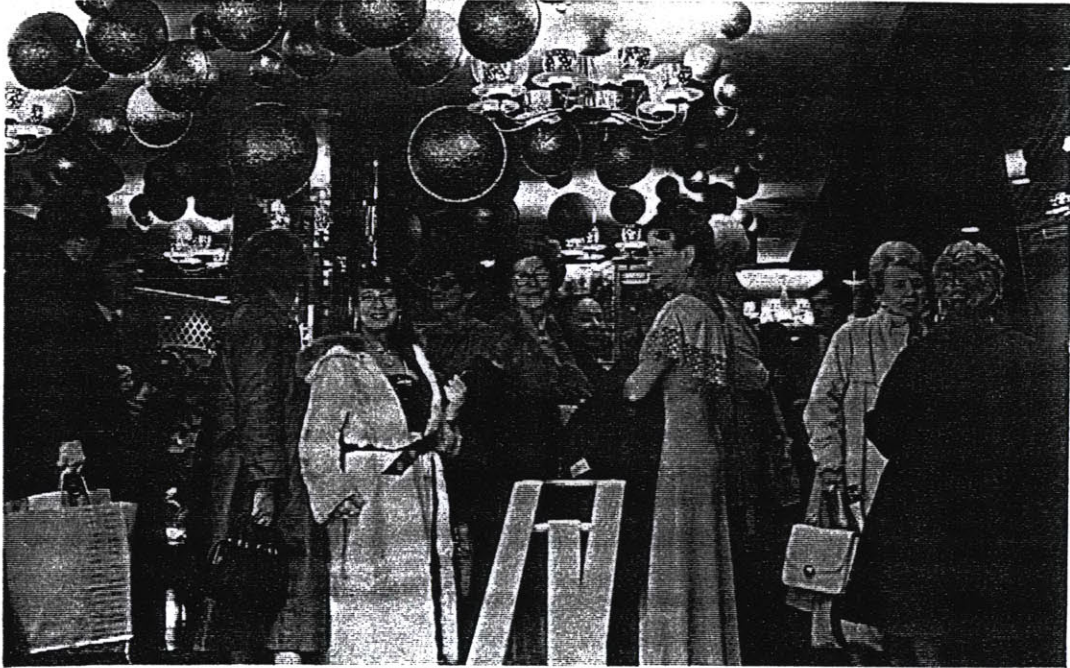
The club was oriented around the dance floor. Indeed, across the dance floor atop the stage hung a sign which read "Home of the mambo." Dancing has long been one of the major elements that make up most nightclubs. And, there is the inherent function of social interaction within the activity of dancing.

As Jana Eisenberg, editorial assistant for New York Newsday wrote in a March 26, 1993 Viewpoints article:

Dancing may not seem like to antidote to today's social ills. But dancing combats some of the major deterrents to world serenity. Consider: Dancing does not pollute the environment nor randomly kill innocent bystanders. It enhances concentration, creativity and courtesy, qualities that are in short supply. The sexes and races can and do meet in the middle -- of the dance floor -- and learn the rewards of cooperation, the thrill of shared achievement and, on occasion, the satisfaction of compromise for a mutual goal. Dancing is not only disease-free, it's a physical expression in which two people can touch in a safe, friendly and rhythmic way.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴Jana Eisenberg, "Places that will simply floor you," *New York Newsday*, March 26, 1993, p. 69.



The Legendary Roseland came to represent the height of the "dance era" of nightclubs.

Indeed, if in the 50s, the mambo brought different groups of people together for intimate contact, so too does today's so-called techno forms of music and dance bring people from varied backgrounds together for close connections.

A 1992 *New York Newsday* article entitled "Dance of the Technocrats: A new generation of clubgoers gets hooked on 'Nintendo with a beat'" chronicles the causes and effects of the newest dance trends. It describes the scene at a then recent night at Limelight: "On the dance floor in the main room, more than 500 people writhed to techno, an aggressive synthesizer-and-sampler driven music: Nintendo you can dance to."¹¹⁵

Thus the dance floor of the modern day nightclub brings people from all races ethnicities and social classes together for intimate contact. The connection come more from the fact that the immense crowds that fill the dance floor push people together physically, rather than from certain dance movements that require physical contact. Thus, in a quite literal sense, the nightclub dance floor pushes people together who might not normally ever meet. To this extent, the nightclub represents a truly integrated social space. However, if there is a conscious segregation common to most contemporary NY nightclubs it is not across ethnic or racial lines. Instead, it is a segregation that separates the New Yorker from the out of townner. For a long time there has been a sort of love-hate relationship between the New Yorker and the tourist. Although the New Yorker would welcome meeting the occasional foreigner who has come upon the New Yorker's favorite establishment upon his or her brief trip to Manhattan. However, the New Yorker desperately wants to believe that he/she has his/her finger on the pulse of Manhattan. The New Yorker would sooner go into hibernation than find himself a regular at a so-called tourist attraction.

¹¹⁵ Martin Johnson, "Dance of the Technocrats: A new generation of clubgoers gets hooked on 'Nintendo with a beat,'" *New York Newsday*, January 3, 1992, p. 54.

A 1956 *New York Times* article highlights this fact when it gives detailed advice on how to differentiate the New Yorker from the out-of-towner:

However recklessly they play on a visit to the city, out-of-towners tend to look slightly less knocked about than New Yorkers. 'New Yorker's,' according to a sociologist who works for a living running a night club, 'are perpetually drunk not with whisky, but with motion -- with subways, buses, cabs.' Out-of-towners will telephone ahead for reservations with greater regularity than city people; they will accept the edicts of a maitre d'hôtel and tastes of a waiter with greater docility. Upon entering a night club, it is their habit to scrutinize the room first, for geographical reasons, and then to narrow their focus to a search for celebrities. The New Yorker already knows the room and looks for his friends. 'This is where the out-of-towner gives himself away,' the nightclub owner went on. 'He can't case a room with aplomb; he can't quite hide that eager look. Sometimes a New Yorker has reason to look around but the way he does it is neither furtive nor with hope. It is secret and beautiful. He doesn't rush, but he can count the house before he is seated.'¹¹⁶

The social make-up of a place is closely linked to the type of club it is. In the more elegant, upscale clubs such as M.K., "Our customers are an older and successful crowd," notes Howard Schaffer, general manager at M.K. Howard Stein makes a poignant comment about the unique setting offered by this new genre of clubs: "You might see two generations of the same family in the club at the same time."¹¹⁷ Thus, where 50 years ago you began to see a dramatic change in the ethnic and racial make-up of the clientele that attended the popular

¹¹⁶ Gilbert Millstein, "Night Life: Brash, Bubbly and Boppy," *The New York Times*, April 29, 1956, Part 2, p. 56.

¹¹⁷ Dottie Enrico, "Clubs: Marketing the Night Life," *New York Newsday*, January 16, 1989, p. 8. [Stein's comment about two generations indeed proved to be the case with the Palm Beach Au Bar, where Senator Kennedy and his nephew were there on the same night of the alleged date rape.]

nightclub, in the past decade or so we are seeing the beginning of diversification by age.

◆ **The Myth**

When considering the social interaction in the nightclub it is important to take note of "the myth" associated with the supposed social exclusivity of the nightclub. According to a November 29 *Los Angeles Times* article, "The Myth" is a code by which Rudolf ruled his clubs and it goes like this:

The vision of Studio 54 was to give the image of a great VIP place where nobody could get in. But the fact was that they had 4,000 people there every night. So even in a city like New York, yes, there are a lot of fabulous people there, but not 4000 every night. So on a bad night when you had, say, 2000 people waiting at the door, you picked the best of those 2,000 and left the rest out. But the best out of this 2,000 might not have been so great. The Myth was there . . . but it's just a myth. I think the secret really is to make a club big enough that it can accommodate everybody, but at the same time you can make the Myth.¹¹⁸

When Richard Sennett talked about Public Places he referenced the Coffee Houses of London and Paris in the eighteenth-century. It follows that the argument can be made that the nightclub represents the exact same type of public place for the twentieth and twenty-first century. In fact, the well-known club impresario Rudolf (like Madonna, he now only has one name) made this exact argument quite well:

Rudolf tells the *Los Angeles Times* in a November 29, 1993 article:

¹¹⁸ Jeannine Stein, "The Club Guy; To His Fans, Rudolf is Nightlife the Veteran Clubgoer is Out to Wake Up the LA Scene," *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 1993.

People judge the degree of sophistication of a city by many aspects, one of them being the quality of its night life. Society is almost molded in nightclub tendencies. Maybe its hard to believe, but if you look at the past, the Russian Revolution was probably brewed in some smokey Paris bar, the Nazi party was probably started in some brewery. Its a caldron of new ideas, good or bad. It's a way of shaping up what the future should be, or could be.¹¹⁹

In essence, the nightclub has gone about creating a public place step by step in the same manner as some of the great urban designers and commentators would recommend. Although the masterminds behind the nightclubs do not consciously set out to create public value, by building and running the nightclubs they way they do, they are in fact orchestrating a public space.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Chapter Four:

TWO CASE STUDIES:

The Supper Club

LOCATION:

The Supper Club is located on West 47th Street, in the center of the Times Square area. Its presence there is a throw back to the neighborhood's past heyday, a time when the streets were safe and everybody seemed to have enough money to spend some of it on leisure. And what better place to spend one's money in boom economy of W.W.II than in the center of the cultural capital of the world, filled with theater and nightclubs and so much more. Because the Supper Club is meant to recreate the experience of the supper clubs of the 1930s and 40s, it represents a sort of safe haven on the street. It is a place where one can venture through the dirt and the crime and the smut of Times Square and find refuge in a journey into the past, to a happier, safer, more innocent time.

DESIGN:

The Supper Club is located in the space that once housed the Edison Hotel Theater. The space was designed to recreate the interior of the Green Room from the 1930s. It is intended to capture the ambiance of the old supper clubs from that era. What is perhaps the most unique about this nightclub is that it

carries the fantasy outside. Its main entrance on 47th Street is marked not simply by a sign, but by a large blue awning protruding out into the sidewalk, making this nightclub's presence known and felt by all passersby. Beyond the awning, through the double doors, the entry space is immediately both large and imposing. The ceiling is two stories tall with pillars at the back corners of this approximately 10 foot by 15 foot entry space. There is a two person hostess stand to the right immediately as you enter. Once you have paid your admission, or passed the complimentary guest list test, you go up a couple of steps and are faced with a choice: Gold mirrored doors to the right lead you to the main floor dining room and dance floor. To the left, a large and imposing winding staircase leads you upstairs to the balcony, where one may dine or simply have a cocktail and look down upon the goings on below.

Open the doors to the right and enter the palatial multi-level dining room, measuring 60 feet by 100 feet in total. Go down a couple of steps and you are on the same level as the bar. The room is configured so that the back of the room is to your right, and the front of the room, to your left, has a stage at the far end. The bar is at the back of the room with a sort of balcony meeting area in front of it that overlooks the dance floor. The stage, at the far end of the dance floor, has been designed in the style of a grand old theater. Shiny, luminescent electric blue curtains have been pulled to either side to reveal the stage, where a black grand piano sits waiting to be played. Behind the stage is a huge movie screen, which shows footage of popular bands from the 30s and 40s playing their favorite tunes.

The space has been organized in levels. The dance floor is the most public level, so it is the lowest. After entering, one must cross the balcony and descend three more steps in order to set foot on the dance floor. The gathering area in

front of the bar is a little more private, so it is a little higher. There is an ornate railing that surrounds the dance floor, separating it from this raised level.

The walls of the room are cobalt blue. The matching blue carpet has a pattern of gold crescent moons, stars, shooting stars and ribbon throughout it. The railing has been painted white, with its intricate designs highlighted in gold. The 25-foot ceiling is gilt-inlaid, covered with an elaborate design of original moldings which have all been highlighted in gold. Six pillars surround the dance floor, holding up the second floor balcony -- three on either side. The pillars rise up to a sort of flower design; the uppermost part of the pillars is covered with a pattern of leaves and lamp fixtures that are shaped like tulips. There is in fact a tulip theme to the lighting fixtures of the supper club. There are the most conventional wall fixtures that protrude out depicting half a tulip in their quarter sphere shapes. In addition, above all the side tables are ceiling fixtures shaped like hanging tulips. And most uniquely, from the walls, fully sculpted male forearms and hands protrude outward holding gigantic tulips with light bulbs inside.

The bar at the back of the room is mirrored. And ornate gold mirrors such as those found in well appointed living rooms or bedrooms, hang on the walls throughout the Supper Club's main room. At the rear left corner of the room next to a wall of mirrors, is a staircase (smaller than the one outside by the main entrance) that heads up to the balcony. The elaborate designs of the banister, similar to those on the railing around the dance floor, have been painted in gold. Further back from the dance floor, on the far right and far left sides of the main floor balcony, there are eight small rooms (four on each side) raised up a couple of steps, each with its own private round dinner table inside. The tables have been raised slightly, to the highest level in the room, so by nature of their height alone these rooms are the most private. In addition, each room has a white

railing to the sides of the small steps, and long red velvet curtains that can be drawn for complete privacy. There are small t.v. sets hanging from the ceiling in each of the rooms that show the same videos as those shown on the stage's big screen.

The dance floor itself measures 60 feet by 40 feet. In the evening, from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. only the front area, 15 feet long by 40 feet wide closest to the stage is left as a dance floor. The rest of the sunken level is filled with approximately 25 tables.

The second floor is as breathtakingly blue as the first. Looking over the railing on all three sides, a patron standing on the second floor balcony is afforded an optimum view of the dance floor below. The upstairs can be sealed off and used for private parties. The far right and left walls are lined with raised small private rooms similar to those downstairs. However, in each of these small rooms, behind the table is a red velvet couch facing outward. Clearly the orientation of these tables is not privacy, but rather public viewing. There are small round tables about 1 1/2 foot in diameter that seat two, that line the railing of the second floor balcony, three on each of the three sides. The bar in the rear right hand corner is small and unimposing. Everything about this floor implies intimacy. At the very back of the second floor, in the center, is a booth raised several feet over head. Here is where the d.j. sits, looking down like God at the nightclubs creations.

This is how a recent *New York Newsday* review described the interior design of the Supper Club:

This is not a movie set, but the cavernous interior of this huge, gorgeous space might make you think so. The proportions are fitting for its location in the heart of Times Square, amid venerable theaters and grand-scale hotels. Midnight-blue walls

The Supper Club





A view from the balcony

suffused with a golden glow are set off by the blue carpet with a subtle gold moon and stars pattern. A golden dome shines over the diners and dancers, and mood lighting is provided by "Addams Family"-esque torches that look like hands protruding from the walls.¹²⁰

The design of the nightclub is traditional. There is nothing exciting or innovative about the space itself. But, it translates a certain sense of safety. The colors are soothing; the space is well organized; there's a place to socialize and a place for privacy.

FANTASY:

The fantasy, of course, is time travel. Enter The Supper Club and you are immediately transported back to the 1930s. On Saturday nights from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. the stage fills with an 8-piece band and the club hosts a night of ballroom dancing. People both young and old come to The Supper Club on Saturday nights to experience the illusion that they are back in 1930s, out for a night of dancing on the town. On a typical Saturday night, from the moment the Supper Club Big Band gets up on the stage the dance floor is filled with people who are clearly living the fantasy -- men in tuxedos, women in full length dresses and silver shoes. As a recent *New York Newsday* review said: "It's a lovely place for a night of dreamy dining and dancing."

Originally, when the Supper Club first opened, it offered Big Band ballroom dancing six nights a week. However, in an effort to maintain a steady flow of income, the Supper Club has expanded the number of fantasies it offers. Wednesday night is called "Havana" night. This is in fact fitting, because Havana

¹²⁰ Jana Eisenberg, "Places that will simply floor you," *New York Newsday*, March 26, 1993, p. 69.

was a popular fantasy theme in the 1930s and 40s. The place is filled with palm trees and free salsa lessons are given. However, the club uses actual living palm trees, and this is beginning to become a problem according to the manager Joe King. "It's hard to keep the trees alive without any natural lighting," says King. "We go through so many palm trees a week." King says the club may have to switch to rubber trees, but worries that it may make the night seem a bit more artificial. Meanwhile on Fridays and late Saturday nights the dance floor is cleared of tables at 11:30 and the screen up front is changes from 40s band to techno-videos. Disco balls, discretely placed to the corners of the ceiling come out, the lighting changes, boxes are put out on the dance floor and the space becomes a discotheque. While the transition is going on, the lights are dimmed and "wild classical music" is played, meaning classical music set to a techno beat.

The Supper Club has also held concerts in the early evenings, featuring such notable stars as Bob Dylan, Little Richard, Arrested Development, and Pia Zadora.

SOCIAL INTERACTION:

The dance floor is the central to the Supper Club design and similarly, dancing is central to the Supper Club's social activities.

The Big Band night appeals to diverse crowd ranging from people in their 20s to people in their 80s. The majority of the people are in their mid 40s to mid 60s. Most of those who come on Saturday nights, according to Joe King, are either new to ballroom dancing and trying to practice as often as possible, or used to ballroom dance all the time when they were younger and are trying to relive their youth. The younger crowd tends to dress more casually while the older ones tend to dress to kill. There are a lot of regulars at the Ballroom

dancing night. Many people come back again every week to relive their fantasy of being back in the Big Band era. They also come back to see friends. According to the bartender, John Zahangor, the majority of the patrons on Saturday evenings are white. [This, of course, helps to reinforce the time travel fantasy.]

Different nights at the Supper Club encourage different forms of socialization. On Ballroom dancing night, couples mingle with other couples. It is a more formal, more traditional form of socialization. A couple might swap partners for a dance, and might meet and interact with new people in this fashion. However, it is predominantly a night for intimate mingling. It is not a place where people go alone to meet and interact with strangers. As the *New York Newsday* review rightly warns: This is not a place "to go to alone, looking for a partner. It is more appropriate for a special date or event with people who all agree to splurge." (There is a \$10 to \$15 music charge and dinner is on the pricey side with entrees ranging from \$15 to \$25.)

Wednesday nights is also focused around dancing. However, in this case the dance is salsa and the clientele is mostly Latin American. Conversely, late night disco on Friday and Saturday is a place where people from all backgrounds come together to meet and commingle. Both nights the crowd is racially and ethnically mixed. The crowd on Saturdays is a bit older, 20s and 30s, and a bit more white -- some of the younger ballroom dancing crowd stays on for the Saturday night disco. On Fridays the crowd is about 40 % spanish, 40% white, 20 % black and many are likely underage. About 2,000 people come each night, and the dance floor is usually packed like sardines.

The clubgoers say that disco nights are a good way to meet new people and hang out with friends.

"I come here to socialize ," said a young woman named Taffy on a recent Friday night. "I like the atmosphere. . . the hot guys," she adds with a giggle.

"But seriously, it is so easy to meet people here. There's just so many people," she gestures around the fully packed room. "People from all over," she concludes.

Imer, perhaps one of the hot guys Taffy was talking about, agrees with her assessment of the Supper Club. "Yeah, it's easy to meet people cause it's crowded and people are friendly. I just come here to hang out, to get away, you know."

Jean Denoyer, owner of the Supper Club comments on nightclubs in general: "At their best, they're a place where you can dream a bit."¹²¹

Club USA

LOCATION:

Club USA is located next to the Supper Club on West 47th Street. The nature of the Times Square location is a disorienting one. It is one of the few places in Manhattan where the organized grid system is broken. Several streets overlap creating a chaotic intersections. The buildings, billboards and neon lights that surround the square direct your attention to all different themes, in all different directions. Club USA is adjacent to Times Square and its design scheme plays off of this location.

¹²¹ Ron Alexander, "A Step Back to Supper Clubs and Swing," *The New York Times*, December 15, 1991.

DESIGN:

The Entry Sequence:

The entrance is a metal roll up garage door. It is closed during the day and there is no entrance to signify that a club lays behind the black bare exterior. However, slightly above eye level are a pair of eyes, the drawn eyes of a woman, as a painted mural amidst so much graffiti. The letters USA are discretely written vertically to the lower right of the image of the woman.

The entrance through the garage door leads to a long black brick passageway, about 10 feet wide, with three or four barriers of security through which one must pass. The first are the infamous velvet ropes. If you have the right look, the right attitude, if you'll help to increase the crowd's diversity that night, or if you know the right people, the ropes will be opened for you. To the left, past the ropes, are two or three people holding clipboards. Each clipboard contains one of the illustrious guest lists for that evening. If you are "on the list," you must give your name to whomever is holding the appropriate roster and they will in turn cross your name off the list and hand you a ticket, commonly known as a "comp" [short for complimentary admission.] If whoever put you on the list wasn't convinced that you are that cool, or there is a discrepancy of some sort, you might instead be handed a different colored ticket, known as a "reduced admit," requiring you to pay approximately half of the standard admission fee.

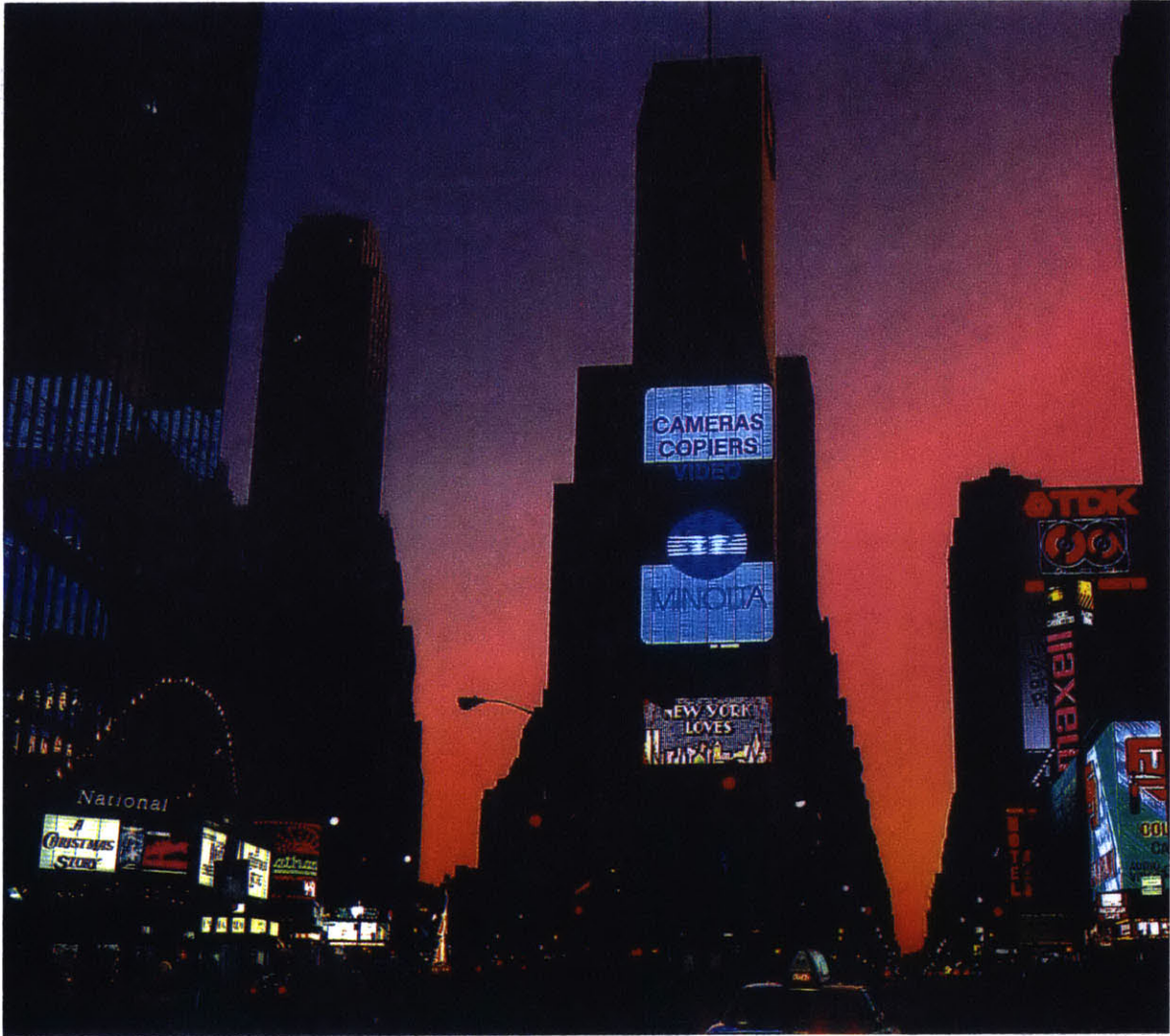
A few yards back to the right stand two glass ticket booths, one behind the other. The first one is for reduced admits. Hand the man or woman in the booth your ticket and pay the reduced admission fee. They will hand you back your ticket. If you didn't initially stop at the group with the clipboards, then you have no ticket at this point. Go to the second booth, pay full price (\$20), and get a ticket. Now, armed with one of the three different colored tickets, you come to

another velvet rope. Hand the man at the rope your ticket --- Again, the thrill! The velvet rope is lifted and you are officially inside.

The Interior

You pass through an open door to your left and enter a black room. Large neon red and blue arrows with flashing and alternating light bulbs lead you through the entry foyer and up the stairs. The staircase is red metal. The walls of the stairwell are red painted brick. More flashing neon arrows on the sides of the walls lead you up the stairwell and out onto the mezzanine level balcony. Make a left and follow the balcony around to what appears to be the terrace of some lavish New York Penthouse. Surprise! Look down over the terrace railing and you have a fabulous view of Times Square, Blade Runner style.

In actuality, the balcony looks out over the main floor's dance floor, which measures 3600 square feet. Neon signs and billboards surround the dance floor, on the walls, behind the stage, hanging from the ceiling. To the right of the dance floor, there's a huge yellow billboard advertisement for Hoover, depicting a beautiful, larger than life (about 10 foot tall) model-like woman dressed in a Robo-Cop style outfit, armed with a vacuum cleaner. To the left of the dance floor, there's an even larger billboard of the face of a beautiful Japanese woman with Japanese writing on the side. From the ceiling hangs an approximately 20 foot Spiderman cutout, and of equal proportions the cutout of the dismembered legs of a woman wearing thigh high black leather boots. There are also eerily futuristic products and corporate logos and symbols, such as a satanic looking Mickey Mouse. Neon signs blare "Girls, Girls, Girls," and "XXX" and similar slogans in neon Japanese writing. Other neon signs hanging from the ceiling



Times Square

The disorientation of Times Square is incorporated into Club U.S.A.'s design scheme.

Club USA



The mezzanine level at Club USA is meant to look like a penthouse with a balcony that overlooks Times Square.



Designer Thierry Mugler's V.I.P. room with multi-staggered catwalks and spiraling staircases.



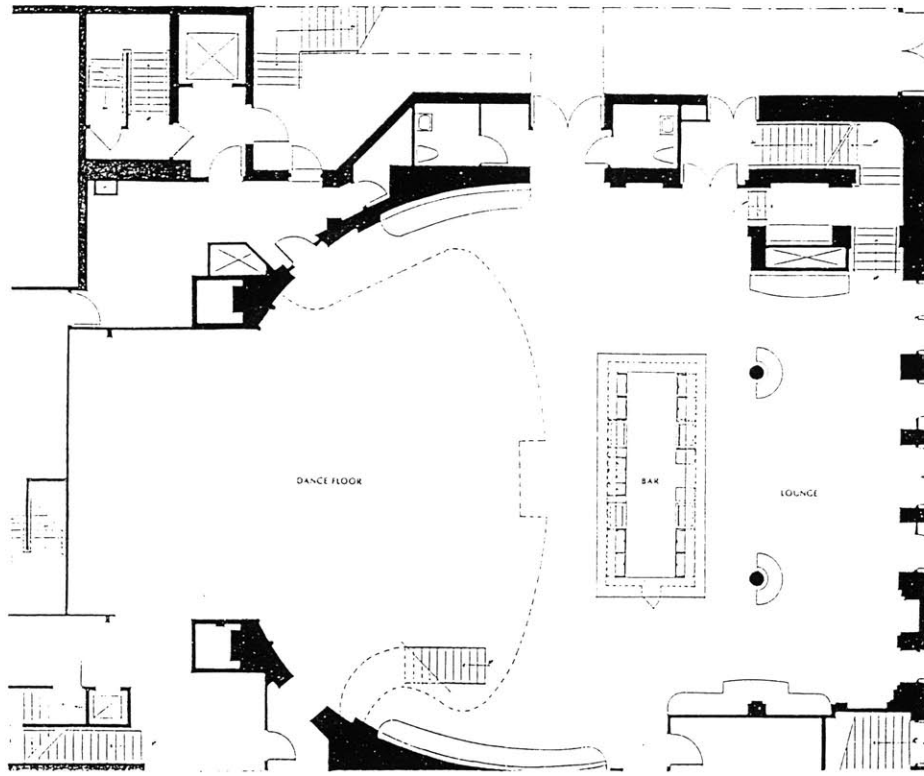
Club U.S.A.'s dance floor with its mirage of neon lights --it's where "Times Square meets Blade-Runner."

read Bacardi, Trojan Condoms, and a vertical rectangular "Drugs" sign such as those found outside Drug Stores, although this image takes on a very different implication in this location. To your right on the side of the terrace is a mannequin of a dominatrix with her slave. Inside the pseudo-penthouse is a large bar and seating area, measuring 2240 square feet with a capacity for 250 people. The room features three-toned purple carpet and black vinyl "S&M" chairs and sofas. The entire wall of the room facing the balcony is floor to ceiling glass doors. There's a staircase on the left hand side of the balcony that can take you downstairs to the dance floor. But there's a more exhilarating way to exit: Sit on a sand bag (to protect your clothing) and get pushed down a blue enclosed tubular slide with flashing lights all along the exterior, which sends you snaking and curving for 50 feet to the dance floor.

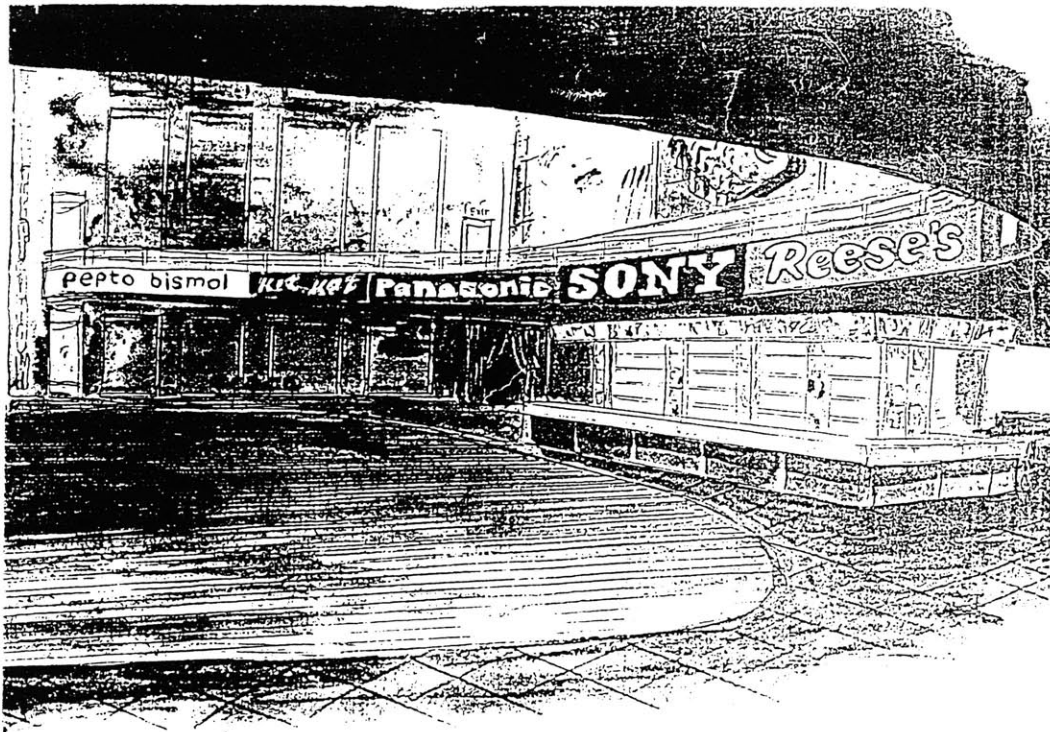
There are several other sights worth noting from the dance floor. The balcony above is lined with neon billboards down below. The most memorable of these is one picturing a nude mother and her child, demonstrating a machine that detoxifies breast milk. Underneath the balcony is a bar that looks like an adult magazine stand. Next to it are a couple of instant photo booths like the kinds found in Woolworth's. The entire main floor measures 7200 square feet with a capacity for 950 people.

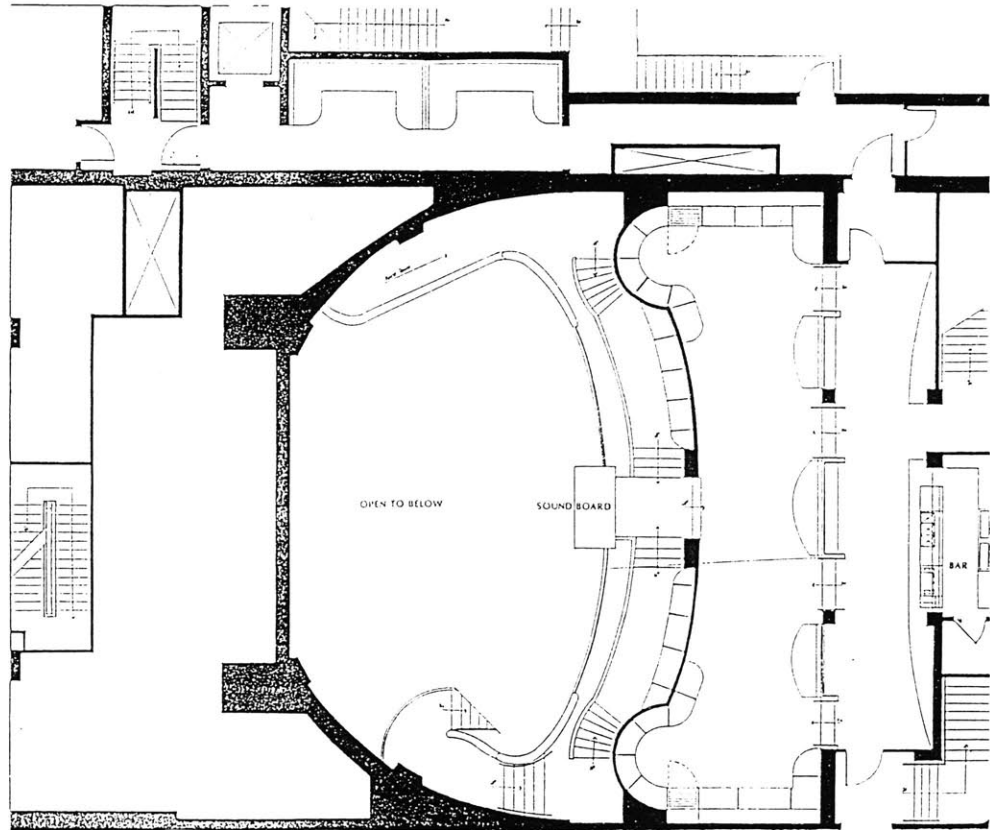
Two flights above the mezzanine is the Paris Designer Thierry Mugler's V.I.P. room with multi-staggered catwalks and spiraling staircases. Mugler incorporated the coldness of steel and cement with warm, colorful lighting and geometric accents, like a conical dance floor which tapers inward toward the ceiling. The room has a 250 person capacity and measures 2,000 square feet. There's an elevator that goes from the V.I.P room to the mezzanine to the main floor. On the mezzanine level, lining the hallway heading to the elevator are

Club U.S.A.

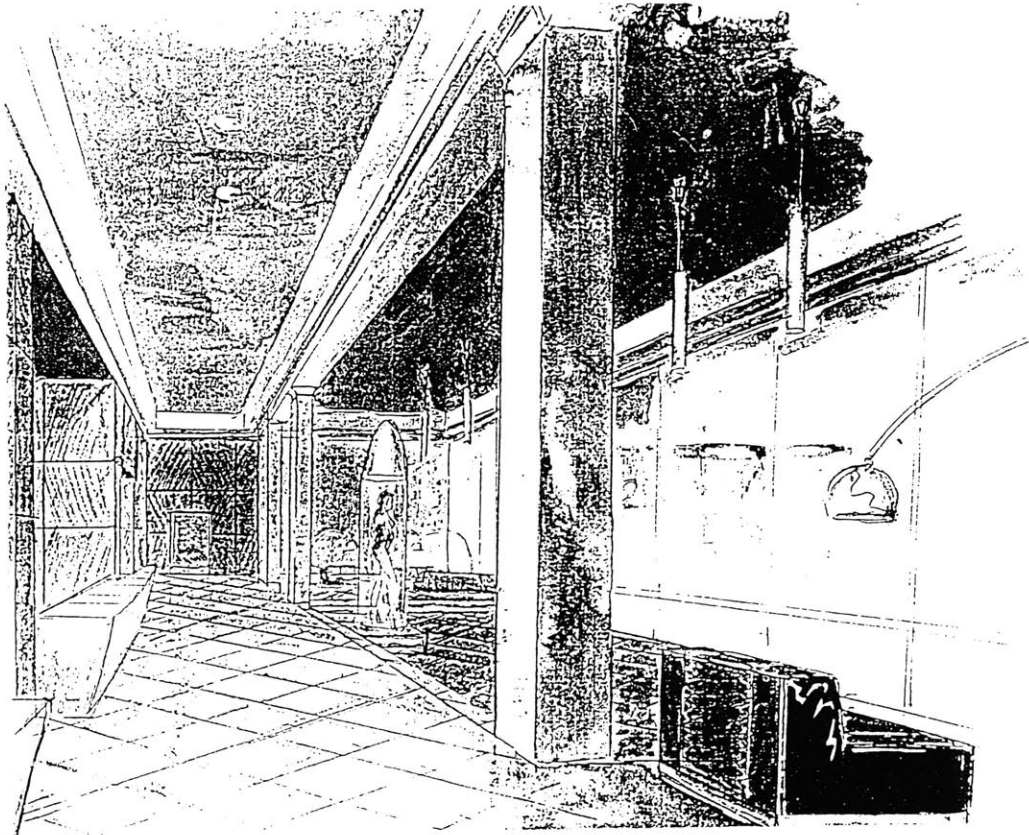


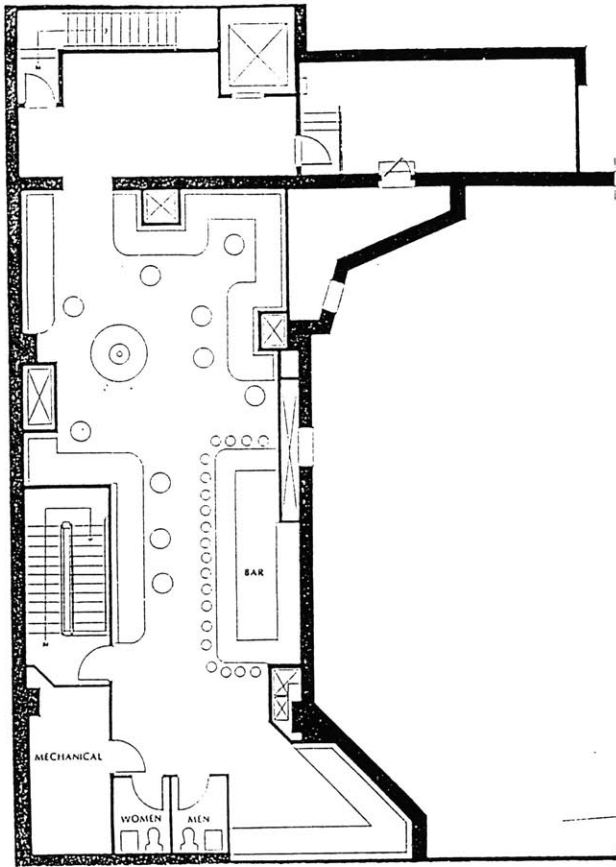
The Main Floor



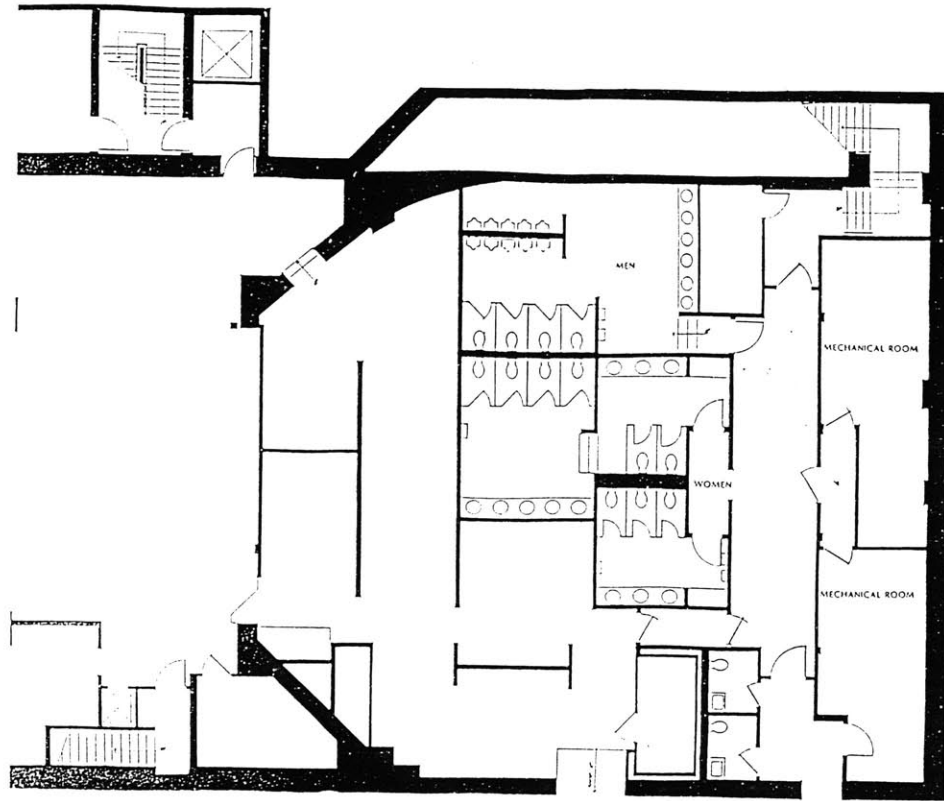


The Mezzanine Level

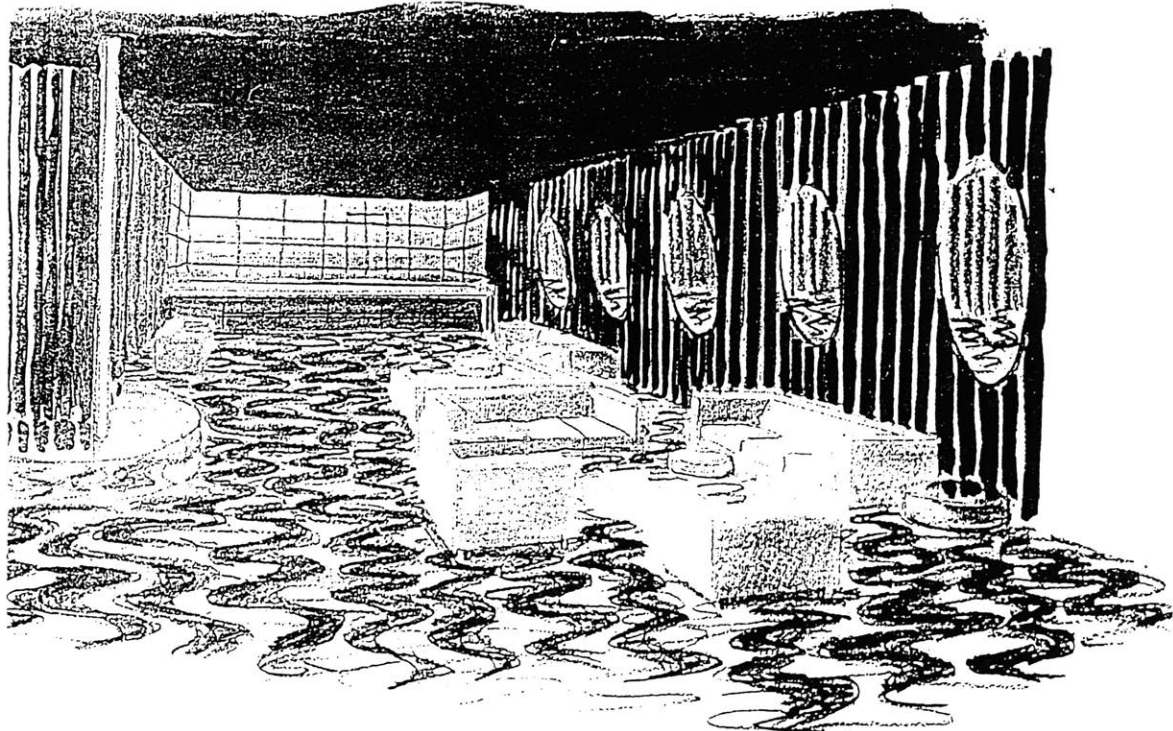




The Mugler V.I.P. Room



The Basement



nine peep show booths. The booths have long red curtains that can be drawn over them, and they accept all the quarters you can feed them.

There is also a basement, which is not accessible by elevator. The main room in the basement, called the "Big Bottom Lounge," measures 1500 square feet with a capacity for 175 people. The room is dimly lit, filled with big cushiony sofas and a bar at back. If you head towards the bar, there's small room at the back to your left. This room has cushioned benches lining the walls; silk blue and white illusion scarves draped from the ceiling; and, at either narrow end of the rectangular room are small, slightly raised rooms with big ornate red velvet couches at the far end and cushioned benches surrounding. The entire room is meant to look like some immense harem.

The basement contains the coat check. And also worth noting, the bathrooms are located in the basement. One set are labeled Ladies, the other, Men, but both attract both. There are huge, larger than life photos of women involved in S&M activities hanging in the bathrooms, continuing with the clubs S&M theme.

There is also a dose of reality available in this fantasy world. Above the V.I.P. room is a roof deck that opens, weather permitting. The deck itself is austere, tar roof with wood paneling. However, here patrons can look out over the railing at an unobstructed view of the real Times Square.

THE FANTASY:

The fantasy at Club U.S.A. is that you are experiencing the future and the fantasy category is the total environment. The goal of the night club is definitely to overstimulate the senses. And in doing so, it invokes in the patron a mind altered state of being. Its effect is the exact antithesis to that of the Supper Club.

The design of Supper Club implies a sense of safety; everything about it -- its soothing color (mostly blue), its images, its music -- all has the effect of being soothing. Whereas the sights and sounds and images of Club U.S.A. are all extremely disturbing.

According to Tony, the lighting director, "We have certain pre-programmed lighting sequences; each one sort of messes with people's senses in a way. And, if you hit the right one at the right time, you can really get people going. They get real excited, you can hear them scream."

USA also employs a large number of people who serve in a sense as part of the interior design and atmosphere: Men on stilts wearing everything from clown costumes to Uncle Sam suits; Male transvestites who dress in outlandish outfits and stand on tall black boxes on the dance floor and do impromptu dance performances; there are also "candy girls" which serve to further disorient and confuse the fantasy experience -- these girls are a throw back to the 1930s and 40s when these women, outfitted in candy stripe uniforms with large boxes that hang down from around their necks containing candy, cigarettes and cigars, were popular fixtures of the typical nightclub.

Despite the arrows at the entrance that are intended to orient the arriving clubgoer, the immense size (the club measures 29,000 square feet in total) and complicated layout of Club U.S.A. serve to completely disorient the patron. This disorienting theme of USA is not unlike the disoriented nature of Times Square itself. In fact, what the club does in essence is simply to bring the outside indoors for an exaggerated reality of the present or future Times Square.

In this sense, Club USA bears similarity to City Walk. In the case of City Walk, the designers sought to capture the best element of the city of Los Angeles and recreate versions of these elements, in a new and improved form, within a small pocket of the city itself. Similarly, Club USA has taken the most intriguing

and stimulating elements of Times Square and recreated them in an exaggerated form within a small pocket of Times Square itself. USA is ultimately an enhanced reality. Its theme is Times Square, and Times Square is very sex driven. Thus, the theme of Club USA is very sex driven as well.

Ultimately, the club's visual elements, its sense of chaos, of disorientation, all serve to create need for communication and thus the fantasy is a very social one.

SOCIAL INTERACTION

People at USA experience a sort of bonding with one another. Various groups of people are huddled together, supporting one another against the wild elements of the place. According to the club's publicist, Ron Cook, the clientele at USA has always been racially and ethnically mixed. "That was the club's original intention. If we'd wanted the upper East side crowd we would have opened a club on the upper East Side. That's not what USA's about. It's a big club and we wanted to fill it with lots of different types of people." Since USA has been fortunate enough to have the luxury of a long-standing exclusive door policy (meaning they get more people wanting to come in most nights than they have capacity for), the doorman (that means those at security at the first velvet rope) are told to keep careful track of the mix of the clientele. In their heads they are supposed to keep track of how many blacks, how many Hispanics, how many whites, how many women, they have let in over the past several hours. The result is that the crowd inside looks like a rather accurate representation of the population at large.

This is what Alex Neuman, who works for Prudential Securities, had to say about why he likes nightclubs in general, and USA in particular. "I work

very hard during the day and I have to wear a suit. I like to be able to go somewhere where I can be with people who are completely different than all the people I see all day long at work," said Neumman. "This place is crazy," he added, "People really, how would you say, let loose here. They're very relaxed, outgoing, crazy."

When asked how the club makes her feel, a young, blond professional model named Tina replied, "It makes me feel like a robot."

One man, whose real name is Eric and whose real occupation is a computer analyst, told me that his club name is Ninja, and he introduced me to his friend whose club name he said was Neitzche.

"When people come here they want to unleash. They want to forget who they are when they're working. It's just another fantasy, another mind candy," said Eric/Neitzche.

"The whole place is kind of like you're inside a television set," said Eric. "You're overloading the senses and there's this whole sexual overtone thing." But, Eric, who comes to USA regularly, finally concludes, "Eventually everyone does connect with someone and make friends, so that's cool."

Meanwhile, a man who told me he "works security," who turned out to be none other than the legendary club impresario Michael Alig summed up USA's appeal perfectly:

"The area here is very neutral. It's not like we opened a club in Wall Street or something. We get people from all over and everybody sort of feels good here -- the club kids, the professional whites, blacks, older people, you name it. At first people get taken back by the place. It's sort of overwhelming. But then they

get really into it. People feel free here, and they do a lot of things that they wouldn't normally do."¹²²

¹²² The information contained in both case studies is based on personal visits to the establishments and personal interviews conducted by the author, Joanna Stone.

Chapter Five:

CONCLUSION

The modern day nightclub is in fact a modern day urban public space. It bears as much right to hold the title of public space as do recognized forms of Twentieth Century public places such as Coney Island or Central Park or as do other modern day public places such as the enclosed atriums in Manhattan office buildings that display bronze signs designating them as "Public Space," or American shopping malls which many have come to refer to as the present day town square.

First and foremost the nightclub succeeds as a public place because it offers a fantasy. In general, people are attracted to fantasy environments. The overwhelming popularity of Disneyland attests to this fact. Fantasy design has played a role in the architecture of places of gathering such as churches, parks or town squares since time in memorial. More recently, we are seeing a certain category of public space begin to incorporate fantasy as a theme in its design scheme. This trend can be seen in train stations, enclosed public atriums, and most notably at shopping malls. The book Variations on a Theme Park discusses this subject in depth. In this book, Margaret Crawford makes the assertion that one of the ways the shopping mall is able to sustain its popularity is because it offers theme park attractions:

"Theme-park attractions are now commonplace in shopping malls. . . . While enclosed shopping malls suspended space, time and weather, Disneyland went one step further and suspended reality. Any geographical, cultural, or mythical location, whether supplied by fictional texts (Tom Sawyer's Island), historical

locations (New Orleans Square), or futuristic projections (Space Mountain), could be reconfigured as a setting for entertainment. Shopping malls easily adapted this appropriation of "place" in the creation of a specialized theme environment.¹²³

Crawford gives the following examples of two shopping malls that were able to create a what could be termed a "total environment" fantasy -- complete with a mixture of geographic and time travel fantasies -- within the enclosed mall space. In Scottsdale, the Borgata, an open-air shopping mall set down on the flat Arizona desert, reinterprets the medieval Tuscan hill town of San Gimignano with piazza and scaled-down towers (made of real Italian bricks). In suburban Connecticut, Olde Mistick Village reproduces a New England Main Street, circa 1720, complete with shops in saltbox houses, a waterwheel, and a pond. Crawford goes on to explain the fantasy phenomenon:

The larger the mall, the more sophisticated the simulation. The West Edmonton Mall [WEM] borrowed yet another design principle from Disneyland: the spatial compression of themes. To simultaneously view Main Street and an African jungle from Tomorrowland was a feat previously reserved for science fiction. By eliminating the unifying concept of "land" -- Disneyland's main organizing principle -- the WEM released a frenzy of free-floating images. If Disneyland's abrupt shifts of space and time suggest that to change realities could be as easy as changing the channels on a television,, the WEM, as one writer observed, was more like turning on all the channels at once.¹²⁴

¹²³Margaret Crawford, "The World in a Shopping Mall," Variations on a Theme Park, Ed M. Sorkin, 1992, p. 16

¹²⁴Ibid.

Crawford's descriptions of the fantasy themes offered by the various shopping malls sound remarkably similar to those offered by modern day nightclubs, including time travel, climate travel, and WEM's total environment with its "frenzy of free-floating images." If we are to accept the premise that the shopping mall has become the town square of suburbia, then we must in turn accept the theory that nightclubs constitute an important public space in New York City. For while shopping malls have become the hang-outs of choice for suburban teenagers and the main street and public square for their parents, New York nightclubs offer a common meeting place for both teenagers and adults where people from all over the city, from all backgrounds, all races and ethnicities can come together and interact. Both are artificial environments, offering climate control and security -- safe havens from the unpleasant elements. And both places are selling something: The shopping mall is selling actual goods, while the nightclub is selling experiences (and mind altering goods, such as alcohol and drugs.) Crawford aptly dubs it: "Public Life in a Pleasure Dome."

Thus, fantasy is becoming an ever-increasingly important part of the design of public space. And it is the nightclub's ability to offer the ultimate in fantasy that makes it successful as public space. However, in order to, once and for all, formally define nightclubs as public space, the comparison of a nightclub to a park must first be validated. Just like shopping malls or nightclubs, parks offer the public a fantasy. Most obviously, parks offer the fantasy of being in the "country." In turn, they offer the fantasy of money. You can imagine you own your own boat, you are independently wealthy and are out for a relaxing day on the English country side in your pond filled with swans. Parks offer the fantasy elements of nature, greenhouses, botanical gardens. Parks can also offer a geographic fantasy, such as the fantasy of Egypt represented by Cleopatra's

needle in Central Park, or other geographic fantasies in other park locations, such as Roman temples or rustic gazebos. All these elements work together to engage the public in a fantasy and help them forget the horrible cityscape elements outside.

Parks have often been designed in a manner that is similar to a series of rooms, each offering a different or altered fantasy. Today's consumer culture dictates that people are more demanding of realism in their fantasy experiences. The nightclub literally offers a series of rooms and a series of fantasies and can deliver these fantasies in a more sophisticated manner than can the park's analogous rooms of fantasies. Thus the nightclub is just as valid and defensible a public space as the traditional civic, planned public spaces of American cities. But the nightclub and the park are in fact complementary public spaces, rather than competing ones. For the high level of crime today dictates that the park can be used only by day, and the nightclub by its title alone dictates that it is to be used only by night.

Truly public spaces are in essence a myth. In the eighteenth century we had the English coffeehouses, each catering to a particular group or a small variation of groups. There was not one coffeehouse for everyone, for Londoners from all classes, races and ethnicities to come together. And yet these coffeehouses have for centuries been lauded as commendable working public places. And today, because of the consumer culture and global market, the public has become more demanding, more mobile and more fickle. Thus, for a place to successfully attract the public at large, it must offer a wider range of possible experiences in a space that continually reinvents itself.

There are hierarchies of public spaces. There are city meeting grounds where people from all the different districts and cultures of the city meet and communicate. These places are referred to as nodes or magnets because they

draw people together from all over. And then there are neighborhood meeting grounds. Some of these local meeting places only attract people from the neighborhood in which they are located. Other neighborhood places, however, are located on seams: that is, on the borderline between two or maybe even three different neighborhood. These "seam" public places bring together a more varied group of people. However, they are all still from the same district or same geographic location of a city. And often, they are from similar ethnic and racial backgrounds as well.

The number of neighborhood and borderline neighborhood public spaces within New York City are still quite numerous. There are neighborhood parks and parks that cross two or three different neighborhoods. There are neighborhood squares, theaters, sports facilities, etc. There are also the privatized public spaces, such as the enclosed atriums of midtown office buildings. All of these spaces fulfill their role of providing a meeting place for a group of people from a given neighborhood or nearby neighborhoods. However, it is destinations that serve as city-wide public space that New York City is in danger of losing. Jack Hitt, senior editor of *Harper's Magazine* made the following assertion about public space in New York City:

Well, what do we mean when we say we want to encourage a public life among all these disparate groups? I was arguing the other day that there is less racial tension in New York City than in Los Angeles or even Washington, D.C., due to an unlikely public space -- the New York subway system. Although the public interaction is inchoate -- rolling our eyes together at fools or irate passengers, perhaps an occasional courtesy -- at least the people see one another. Maybe that's enough. ¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Hitt, Fleming, Plater-Zyberk, Sennett, Wines, and Zimmerman, "Whatever Became of the Public Square? New Designs for a Great Good Place" *Harper's Magazine*, July, 1990, p. 51.

In response to Hitt's statement, Ronald Lee Fleming retorted:

It's great to have a working subway system and to see different people on the platform. But if that's what the public space has degraded into, it is no cause for celebration. It's pathetic.¹²⁶

But, in fact, the subway is not the last vestige of city-wide public space. Instead of the subway, where it is dirty and dangerous and not fun, the nightclub offers big happy spaces. It offers security, entertainment and socialization. In essence, it offers not only a public experience, but a communal ecstasy experience. It is also interesting to note the similarity of the nightclub as public space to the public squares of Rome as discussed by James Wines. He asserts that public life is animated by virtue of the fickle nature of the Romans. Wines notes: "Certain places thrive and then dry up, and it turns out that this is because the tourists are driving away the natives."¹²⁷

Just as tourists chased the Italians out of the piazza in Rome, tourists chase New Yorkers to new public spaces, in this case, to new nightclubs. St. Marks Square was like a citywide node. But eventually it became a destination for tourists. The popularity of a given public square is apparently fleeting, as Italians search for new, more undisclosed and thus exclusive public places. Thus here again there is the sense of the fickle public and the need for change in the design and the atmosphere of public space

The popular nightclub presents us with an illuminating model for a working public space. Urban designers will often spend millions of dollars to

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

create a public space and then no one comes. Meanwhile, they're lining up outside the door to get inside nightclubs. This study of New York nightclubs, hopes to introduce the reader to some good ideas about how to make public places more attractive. In this thesis I have presented how nightclubs attract people through a variety of ever-changing fantasies. Nightclubs appeal to people from all walks of life, and bring them into a place where they are forced to interact. It is the enduring success of the nightclub that merits further study of it. In essence, the nightclub is an important part of the urban fabric. More attention should be given to the elements that make up the nightclub -- the threads that weave together a divided city to create a successful public space.

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