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Metro Diner, at 100th Street and Broadway in Manhattan, opened in 1989. Credit An Rong Xu for The New York Times

George Blecher

More Than Coffee: New York's Vanishing Diner Culture

For the past 25 years – since the divorce – I've lived a good part of my life in diners. Without them I might be slimmer, but also crazier and more unhappy. Judging by the crowds at the Metro Diner, on 100th Street and Broadway, my current haunt, I suspect that other New Yorkers feel the same way.

To say that the Metro has become my second home would be too vague and sentimental. Better to use the sociological term "the third place" (home and work being the first two), or to quote Robert Frost, the place "where, when you have to go there/ They have to take you in¹."

American coffee shops, like English pubs, Viennese coffee houses and Greek kaffenions, tend to engender klatches, informal clubs. At the old Key West Diner on 94th Street and Broadway, now known as the Manhattan Diner, the laughter of the comedian Anne Meara² and her friends used to fill the room. And where would the sitcom classic *Seinfeld*³, the idea of which was conceived in a coffee shop, have been without the regular scenes at Monk's Café?

The best days of the New York City diner, however, appear to be over. Among the 2016 casualties were the

¹ from a poem by American poet Robert Frost (1874-1963)

² *Anne Meara*: (1929-2015) famous American actress and comedian

³ very popular American sitcom (1989-1998)

15 Lyric Diner in Gramercy and the 40-year-old Del Rio in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, while La Parisienne near
Columbus Circle and the 53-year-old Market Diner in Hell’s Kitchen closed in 2015. Then there was Cafe Edison, a
34-year-old coffee shop that shut in 2014 to much sadness in the Broadway community.

Manhattan has certainly seen more diner closings than other boroughs. That said, with rising costs in rapidly
gentrifying neighborhoods, classic diners like the Neptune and Bel Aire, both in Astoria, Queens, could soon be
under threat. In Downtown Brooklyn, the building that has housed the original Junior’s Restaurant since 1950
was almost sold. But after considering several offers, the owner Alan Rosen decided that the community still
20 needed cheesecake more than luxury high-rises.

Urban renewal, astronomical rents, changing eating habits and the preponderance of no-refill coffee places
like Starbucks have all contributed to the demise of the New York diner. There are roughly half as many as there
were 20 years ago, according to records from the health department.

25 Losing New York diner culture would probably be a watershed in the city’s history. How will New Yorkers get
along without these antidotes to urban loneliness?

“The coffee shop orients us here, in this city and not another,” Jeremiah Moss⁴, of the blog *Jeremiah’s
Vanishing New York*, said. “If we are regulars, we become known, connected, to a network of people who
remain over the span of years, even decades. In the anonymous city, these ties can be lifesavers, especially for
the elderly, the poor, the marginal, but also for all of us. Without them, the city becomes evermore fragmented,
30 disorienting and unrecognizable.”

The Metro is a treasure trove of local history. It is in one of the few wood-frame buildings left in Manhattan.
Built by the grocer Henry Grimm in 1871, it was bought in 1894 by the brewer Peter Doelger. He turned the
ground floor into a restaurant and saloon, with families entering through the back while gentlemen drank beer
in the front. (Around the same time, Mr. Doelger’s cousin Matilda married a prizefighter, John West, whose
35 daughter Mae – yes, the Mae West⁵ – may have picked up some of her unconventional performance style from
hanging around the Doelger bar.)

Over the course of its existence, the Grimm building also housed a milliner’s shop, a tearoom and, in the
1950s, the rehearsal studio and offices of the avant-garde Living Theater.

40 The sociologist Ray Oldenburg⁶, in *The Great Good Place*, a book about diners and taverns, suggests that the
past is an essential element of all third places, which are usually in older sections of cities, and in those areas
“exists the fading image of the city itself and the kind of human interaction, the easy and interesting mixing of
strangers that made the city what it was.”

But not only what it was.

45 One of the charms of the Metro, and of many other diners in the city, is that the employees’ backgrounds are
as varied as the languages spoken by the tourists who have found their way here. Costa Rica, Ecuador, Greece,
Mexico, Poland, Romania – these are just a few of the countries where staff members come from. Together they
constitute a microcosm of the immigrant groups that continue to arrive in New York – who not only made the
city what it was, but the best of what it is and could be.

50 My first diner nesting place was Harvey’s Coffee Shop on 78th and Broadway, in Manhattan, where I would
order matzo ball soup and a Coke after seeing my therapist across the street. Harvey was known for his Yiddish-
speaking Puerto Rican countermen and for serving deliciously seasoned chopped meat on white bread.

After Harvey’s closed, I moved to the Utopia on 73rd and Amsterdam, a venerable place with a low ceiling,
Greek-themed murals and waiters who seemed to never age. As my thighs outgrew the narrow booths, I moved
to the Central Park Cafe/Restaurant, at 97th and Columbus.

55 In the 1990s, the Cafe replaced Mikell’s, a beloved jazz and rhythm-and-blues club. This was the liveliest of
my hangouts. Every morning a group of retired men in baseball caps, along with a spirited Jayne Mansfield⁷ look-
alike, heckled one another and batted sports statistics back and forth for hours. The music of their banter was
pure Bach counterpoint⁸.

⁴ *Jeremiah Moss*: pseudonym of Griffin Hansbury (b. 1971), an American psychoanalyst and social worker

⁵ *Mae West*: (1893-1980) famous American actress and singer

⁶ *Ray Oldenburg*: (b. 1932) American urban sociologist

⁷ *Jayne Mansfield*: (1933-1967) American actress and sex symbol of the 1950s

⁸ (here) different yet harmonious

60 After the Cafe succumbed in 2005, I spent months looking for my next “third place.” Diner regulars can be particular. The ambience has to be friendly but not intrusive, the sound level low but not funereal, the smell a little greasy but not cloying, and the décor more utilitarian than fussy. I eventually settled in at the Metro.



65 Among diners, the Metro is quietly sophisticated. The décor is self-consciously Art Deco, the booths spacious. There is a generous, though tasteful, use of diner decorator staples like vinyl, Formica and chrome. Politicians, including former Gov. David A. Paterson of New York and the city comptroller, Scott M. Stringer, have been spotted in the booths. The hostess, Jenny Bello, wears outfits that could rival the wardrobe collection from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios in the 1950s.

70 Fanis Tsiamtsiouris, known as Frank, and Fotios Hilas own the Metro along with three other diners. They calculated that the Metro poured about 700 cups of coffee, made 150 hamburgers and used over 1,200 eggs every day. The place opened in 1989, when Mr. Tsiamtsiouris consolidated five stores, among them a kosher butcher, a copy store and a Cuban-Chinese restaurant.

75 Though diners are sometimes bought by other enterprising immigrants, many of the surviving ones are still owned by Greek-Americans. Historians differ on how and when Greek immigrants got into the business, but they agree that a growth spurt occurred right after World War II. Their story is a classic American one that combines entrepreneurs putting in long hours, families helping one another and informal associations creating a safety net of connections.

“When my family came over in 1967, we had an \$8,000 debt to pay, so we all went to work,” Mr. Tsiamtsiouris said. “So first I was a cleanup guy, then busboy, then a waiter, then a manager.” He had one uncle in the business when he started out, he recalled, and he met many other owners through Pan Gregorian, a food industry cooperative.

80 In the back of the Metro’s long room, the area is set up with small tables for regulars like me who linger over breakfast. Rosa and Dumitra, Diana and John, and Enid and Fabiano know what we’re going to order, but pretend to let us decide.

85 For years the unofficial queen of the Metro was Batyah Hyman, also known as Betty, a beautiful, 80-something Swedish and South African woman who sat at the head of the room. I don’t remember how we drifted into conversation – probably a political issue that we disagreed about. Somehow we sensed that we could be friends, or at least “affiliated,” the way Mr. Oldenburg, the sociologist, described friendship among regulars at a place like the Metro.

She lives around the corner, but Ms. Hyman no longer eats breakfast at the Metro. She drops by from time to time, and the waitress Rosa Soto babysits her grandchildren. Nobody has dared to claim her table.

90 A few years ago, one of my oldest friends, the political scientist and philosopher Marshall Berman, died in the Metro. An eloquent writer about New York neighborhoods, I think he would have appreciated his heart’s choice of where to expire.

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