

Signs of the times

Like all modern cities, New York is forever rebuilding, reinventing itself. Yet the fading ads on its walls bear witness to the past

Underneath the glass and steel and hustle, New York is a nostalgic city. The skyline is dominated by the Empire State Building – an almost sepia-tinted 1920s vision of the future – and the fabric of Manhattan remains much as it was 80 to 100 years ago. The Luftwaffe and the planners might have altered most British cities beyond recognition, but look above the traffic and beyond the crowds of latter-day New Yorkers, and you will see the Manhattan of old – a city of flappers, mobsters and ‘wall dogs’.

Wall dogs were itinerant artists who worked on vast canvases. They painted the huge advertisements that still cover the sides of many old buildings in Manhattan, fading but vivid reminders of the city’s past.

High above 7th Avenue, between 20th and 21st streets, there is an ad for Griffin’s World Famous Pinking Shears that must be the best part of a century old. Around the corner, on 8th Avenue, a garage long since closed down advertises ‘genuine spare parts’ in the vibrant colours and graphics of 1940s America. Above the old shopping district of Ladies’ Row, Bazar Français still calls out for custom, though the store must have been closed for decades. Who might have looked at these from the back of a cab while waiting for the traffic to move – Dorothy Parker, WH Auden, Jack Kerouac, Sid and Nancy on their way back to the Chelsea?

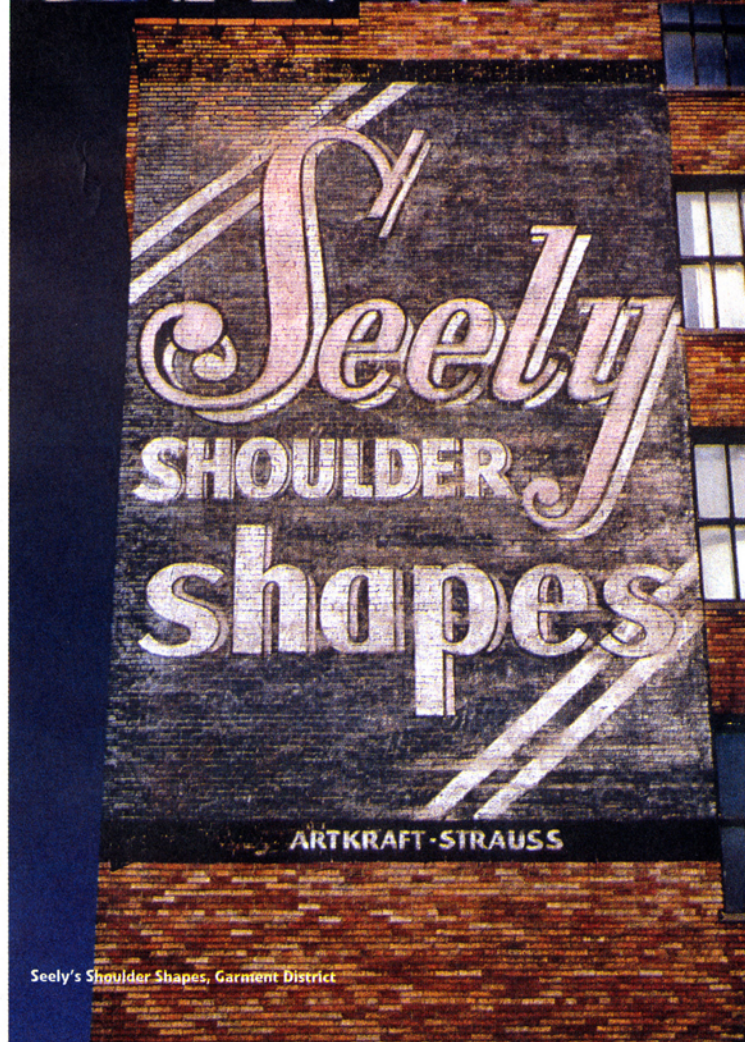
In the Garment District, where, to this day, rails of clothes are run up and down the street between showrooms and workshops, the sides of some buildings are divided, floor by floor, section by section, like giant classified ads for the businesses that were located within – button-makers, furriers, purveyors of corrugated cardboard – even though they long ago made way for designer fashion houses or loft apartments. An ad for Liberty Beer in Little Italy has seen the Italians come and go, and is now surrounded by Korean signs, while in Times Square – perhaps the part of Manhattan that has been most altered since the War, beyond recognition, in fact – demolition recently revealed a sign advertising a carriage manufacturer. It remains a relic of the 1880s amid the 1990s bright lights and neon.

It is tempting to see, in these flaking old sales pitches, poignant memorials to the industry, appetites and thrift of the New Yorkers who commissioned and painted these signs. Who needs Shelley’s thoughts on Ozymandias (‘Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair!’) when we can look mortality in the eye with Griffin’s World Famous Pinking Shears?

And yet, viewed through photographer Frank Jump’s lens, the fading ads have a different meaning. A handsome, healthy-looking gay man of 39 (he looks about 30), Jump has been HIV-positive since 1984. When he began photographing the ads, eager to capture them before they disappeared, he didn’t see the connection – ‘until someone shook me and said, “Can’t you see, they never were expected to last this long. And neither were you!”’

So maybe the images are not so much about loss as they are about survival.

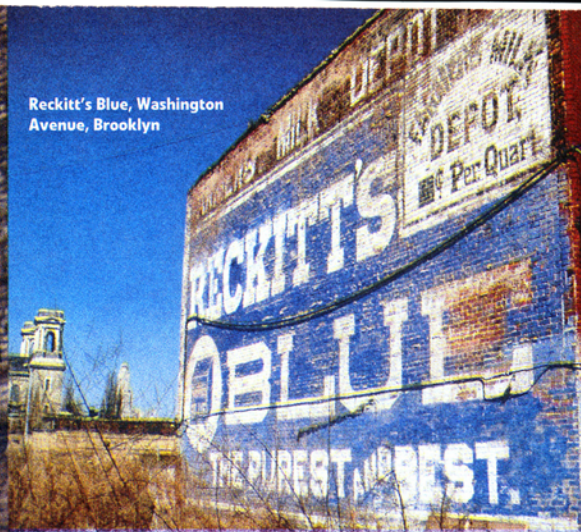
Frank Jump’s work can be seen on www.fadingad.com



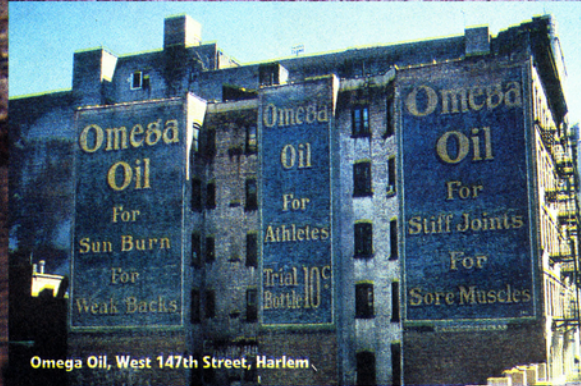
Seely’s Shoulder Shapes, Garment District



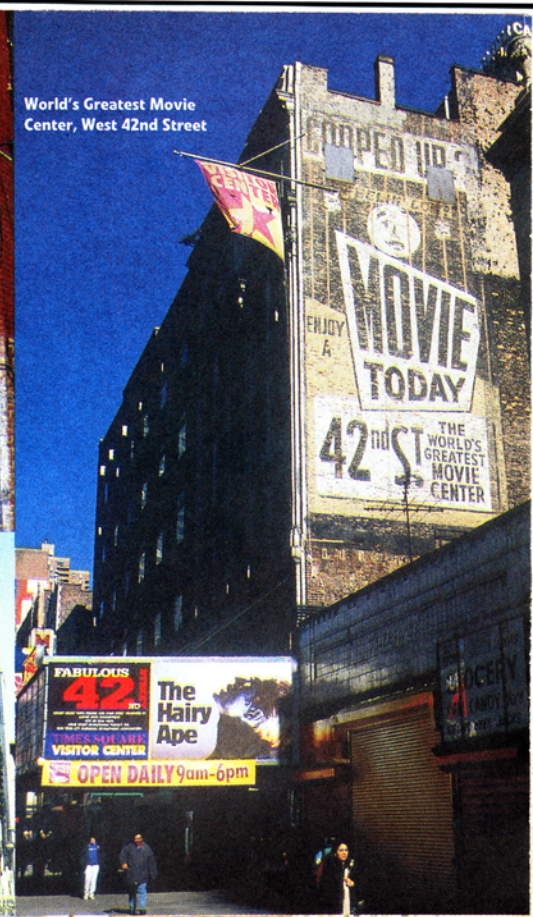
JA Keal’s Carriage Manufactory, Longacre Square, Midtown



Reckitt’s Blue, Washington Avenue, Brooklyn



Omega Oil, West 147th Street, Harlem



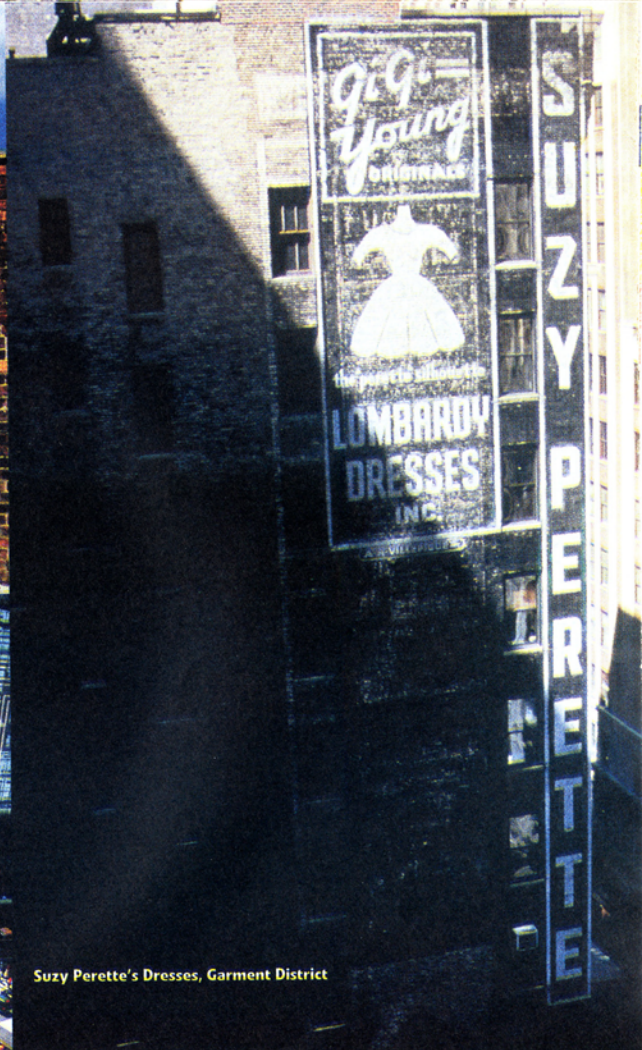
World’s Greatest Movie Center, West 42nd Street



Hans, Capocolli/Wallabout Provisions Co, Flushing Avenue, Brooklyn, Navy Yard



Baby Ruth Candy, Delancey Street, Lower East Side



Suzy Perette’s Dresses, Garment District