

Old York

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extravagant case in point is the palatial home of John D. Rockefeller Jr. and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller at 10 West 54th Street. Demolished 62 years ago to make way for the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden at the Museum of Modern Art, the house literally came to light last month when its foundations were exposed as part of the museum's enormous construction project. Within the remaining walls were cornices, moldings, flowery ceramic shards and a heavy white porcelain doorknob.

The artist Mark Dion has been salvaging artifacts from the construction site that he will eventually incorporate in an architectural and archaeological installation to inaugurate the rebuilt Modern in 2004.

"The installation will reflect various stratified layers of history," said Roxana Marcoci, a curatorial assistant in the painting and sculpture department, who is working with Mr. Dion. "It will be a highlight to have in the new museum a work reflecting the history of the old one."

But you don't have to go to the Modern to see stratified history. You can go to Samad's deli, 2867 Broadway, between 111th and 112th Streets, where the walls converge at a 26-degree angle to create a disorienting triangular space. The irregular north wall hews to the route of De Peyster Lane, which separated the farms of Nicholas De Peyster and James De Peyster in the late 1700's.

Wassim Malaeb, who works at Samad's, said that many customers wondered about the skewed wall. "Even though I'd like the place to be square, because I could fit more things in, it's interesting," he said. "It's a piece of the past."

No wonder there has long been an appreciative audience for Jack Finney's novel "Time and Again," set in New York City, which is to reappear itself next month at the Manhattan Theater Club as a new musical. New Yorkers know that time travel is not a fictional conceit. It is something they do every day.

Breakfast at Bickford's

Just this summer, a Bickford's cafeteria reappeared after 35 years at one of the most heavily trafficked intersections in New York, Eighth Avenue and 34th Street.

If you lived in New York anytime from the 1930's through the 1960's, chances are you knew Bickford's. They were up and down Broadway, on Fordham Road and the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, Nostrand Avenue and Fulton Street in Brooklyn, Main Street and Jamaica Avenue in Queens.

"Breakfast at Bickford's is an old New York custom," a 1964 guidebook said. "In these centrally located, speedy-service, modestly-priced restaurants a torrent of traffic is sustained for a generous span of hours with patrons who live so many different lives on so many different shifts."

To say the least. The best minds of Allen Ginsberg's generation "sank all night in submarine light of Bickford's," he wrote in "Howl." The Beat Generation muse, Herbert Huncke, practically inhabited the Bickford's on West 42nd Street. Walker Evans photographed Bickford's customers, and Andy Warhol rhapsodized about Bickford's waitresses. Bickford's made its way into the work of writers as diverse as Woody Allen and William Styron.

Cheesecake, apple pie and rice pudding were some of the favorites, recalled Jeffrey S. Bickford. His grandfather, Samuel, founded the company, and his father, Harold, was president. The third-generation Bickford, who is now a financial forecaster, worked in the branch on the Avenue of the Americas and 44th Street when he was a teenager, cracking eggs, washing dishes and waiting on tables.

"The food was good and the prices were reasonable," said Mr. Bickford, whose Web site (www.plazaview.com) contains photographs, contemporary articles about the chain and a directory of the branches that existed as of 1959.

Beginning in the 60's, Bickford's fell victim to rising labor costs and rising crime, which kept people home after dark. "The night business disappeared," Mr. Bickford said. "It just totally evaporated."

So did Bickford's. There were 48 Bickford's in New York in 1960, 42 in 1970 and 2 in 1980. Then they vanished altogether.

Or so it seemed until five months ago, when a failing metal facade was removed from the Adult Entertainment Center at 488 Eighth Avenue, between 34th and 35th Streets, to reveal: Bickford's.

Bickford's, trim and tidy in white terra cotta, its distinctive script logo in a stepped entablature over a field of Art Deco chevrons; serving up fur-lined handcoffs instead of lamb stew, to be sure, but unmistakably Bickford's nonetheless.

"It's a gift back to the street of a beautiful facade," said William K. Dobbs, a lawyer and amateur preservationist who has immersed himself in Bickfordiana ever since discovering the old facade. He determined that the branch at 488 Eighth Avenue, whose telephone number was once CHickering-3339, went out of business in the mid-60's. It was replaced by a restaurant called Snacktime, which was supplanted by the adult book store.

The Writing on the Party Wall

The ghostly emergence of a jukebox-style cafeteria just two blocks north of Pennsylvania Station is a remarkable sight itself, but in another sense simply a fresh addition to the city's already rich temporal tapestry.

It is a tapestry to which New Yorkers are paying more and more attention. And Web sites are well suited to the task of sharing discoveries.

Survivors like cast-iron lampposts, vest-pocket cemeteries, forgotten alleyways, trolley tracks and the 59th Street station on the Metro-North Railroad line are shown at "Forgotten N.Y." (www.forgotten-ny.com).

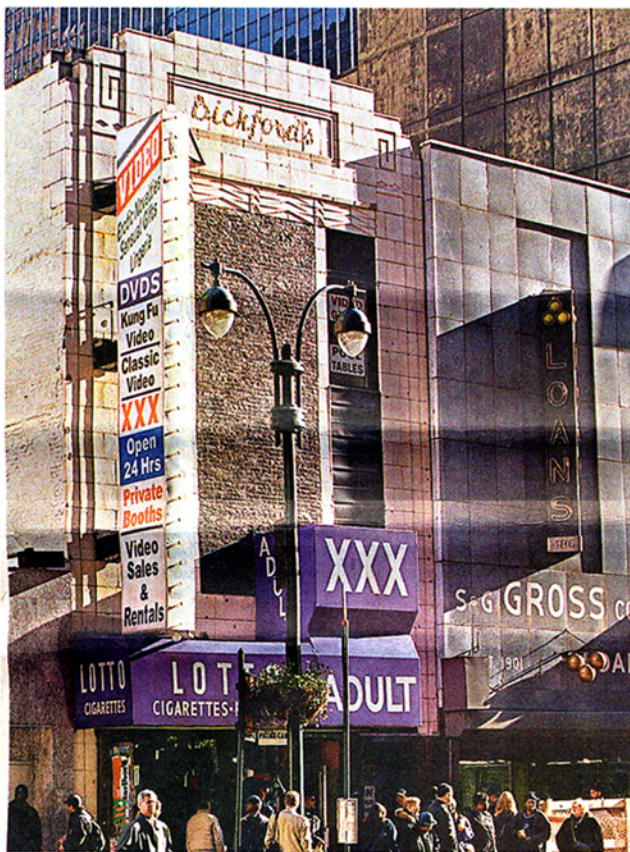
Kevin Walsh, a copywriter and graphic designer in Flushing, Queens, said he started the site because "there was no one out there who was really calling attention to the artifacts of a long-gone New York." The site



NOT FORGOTTEN A terra-cotta lunette that once adorned a Midtown hotel has been relocated to a Lower Manhattan subway station.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times



Richard Perry/The New York Times



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

has recorded some 205,000 visitors in the last 20 months.

Mr. Jump, the photographer, maintains "Fading Ad Campaign" at his Web site, www.frankjump.com. On view are signs for Weber & Heilbronner clothing stores, Fletcher's Castoria oil, Amarosa Scalp Rub, R. H. Macy's Uptown Stables, J.A. Keal's Carriage Manufactory and more than 90 others.

Through the Internet, Mr. Jump has cultivated an audience that extends from Scotland to the Maldives. "The fact that old signs are still lingering is something of a marvel to people abroad," he said, "because their image of New York is that nothing lasts that long."

Closer to home, the exhibition "Fading Ad Campaign: The Brooklyn Signs" is scheduled to run through this month at the Williamsburg Art and Historical Center, 135 Broadway, at Bedford Avenue, near the Williamsburg Bridge.

Specially prized are murals that appear suddenly when the demolition of one building re-exposes the brick side wall of a neighbor. That happened in August when a sign for the Young & Schumuck Pool and Billiard Parlor at 772 Eighth Avenue — "Fine Wines, Liquors and Cigars" — was revealed after being hidden for more than a

PAST IS PRESENT A recently uncovered expanse of Penn Station's original pink granite wall, above; a mural advertising the defunct Seely Shoulder Shapes, on West 40th Street, above left; the logo for Bickford's cafeteria atop the Adult Entertainment Center on Eighth Avenue, above right; a surviving sign for Longchamps restaurant on Madison Avenue, right, and fragments unearthed from the long-demolished Rockefeller home at 10 West 54th Street.

century by 776 Eighth Avenue. It, too, was soon rubble.

Another vintage sign that is not destined to last much longer trumpets Seely Shoulder Shapes, a garment business from the 1950's. Painted by Artkraft Strauss, which is still in operation, the mural is at 265 West 40th Street, on the site where The New York Times is planning its new headquarters.

If Mr. Jump is a latter-day Howard Carter, his Tutankhamen is a colossal equestrian figure tipping a silk top hat, in full handlebar mustache, looming like a phan-



Naum Kazhdan/The New York Times



Richard Perry/The New York Times

tasm against the brickwork of a party wall on lower Broadway.

This mural, which might have been an ad for mustache wax, once overlooked the corner of Bond Street, but has been obscured for nearly a century by the building next door. Interior windows in the newer building offer the only vantage from which the sign can be seen today.

Under Penn Station

In 1998, New Yorkers were startled out of their long-held belief that every last block of Milford pink granite from McKim, Mead & White's Pennsylvania Station — columns, walls, cornices and statuary — was dumped in New Jersey.

Workers excavating the station basement tore down a cinder-block partition to find a section of the original granite wall. It once enclosed a sunken taxi ramp, parallel to 31st Street, that brought passengers to the old waiting room. On two massive stones were painted the words "Drive Slow." (Asking cab drivers to slow down a bit is apparently not a new pastime in New York.)

While the rest of the station was torn apart in the early 1960's and hauled to the Meadowlands, these granite blocks were evidently spared because of their subterranean location. They were forgotten until New Jersey Transit claimed the area for its new East End Concourse.

The blocks with the words "Drive Slow" were hoisted out of the construction site and donated to the Pennsylvania Station Redevelopment Corporation, the state agency overseeing the proposed reconstruction of the James A. Farley Post Office into a new station.

These stones and other architectural artifacts salvaged from the original 1910 station are to be incorporated in the design of the new building. "We're storing them in New Jersey," said Marijke Smit, project manager for community affairs at the redevelopment corporation, adding quickly, "Not in the Meadowlands."

Treasure Hunt

The lesson from Penn Station is that even buildings known to have been lost can briefly reappear when the ground shifts again. So it was that the ghostly outlines of a nine-story town house built at 10 West 54th Street for the Rockefeller family between 1912 and 1913 presented themselves last month.

Designed by William Welles Bosworth, the house included an infirmary, a gymnasium, a squash court and a rooftop playground. Reaching a height of 102 feet, it was the tallest single-family home in New York. Naturally, there was a passenger elevator. But there was also a freight elevator.

And it was put to good use, since Mrs. Rockefeller created a seventh-floor gallery of modern art in 1930, designed by Donald Deskey and Duncan Candler. Most of the art that hung in that gallery was eventually given to the Museum of Modern Art. Bernice Kert wrote in "Abby Aldrich Rockefeller: The Woman in the Family" (Random House, 1993).

For young David Rockefeller, who was born in the house, there were other charms to the midblock family enclave, which included his grandfather's home next door at 4 West 54th Street. "We used to ice-skate back there in the winter, when it was



Roxana Marcoci/Museum of Modern Art

flooded," he recalled recently.

In 1938, having donated No. 10 to the fledgling Modern to be used as the site of a sculpture garden, the Rockefellers moved to Park Avenue.

Ever since the garden opened in 1939, it seemed as though nothing consequential remained of the Rockefeller house. The foundations lay largely undisturbed under the works of Calder, Maillol, Moore and Rodin.

As part of the Modern's expansion project, however, the garden site has been newly excavated to a depth of about 15 feet, thereby briefly exposing and then destroying the old brick and limestone base.

Mr. Dion, the artist who has been combing the site, has also found more recent artifacts, like the remains of Bruce Nauman's "Audio-Visual Underground Chamber," which was buried in the garden as part of a 1995 retrospective. Mr. Dion salvaged a video camera and microphone from the Nauman piece.

A flurry of excitement attended the recent discovery on the site of an oval structure, about six feet long and four feet wide, made of two or three layers of brick and lined in steel.

"I can't imagine what it would have been," said Richard A. Wolkowitz, an assistant vice president of Morse Diesel International, the construction manager for the project. "I've never seen anything like it."

Though no one knows for sure what it was, almost anyone on the museum staff who heard about the odd structure guessed that it was a Rockefeller vault of some kind. But Terence Riley, the chief curator of architecture and design, simply contented himself with a doorknob, a brick and the fragment of a small iridescent bottle as souvenirs. He did not expect the excavation to yield a golden cache.

"The Rockefellers didn't get to be the Rockefellers," he said, "by leaving mounds of valuables behind when they moved."