

New York stories: notes from the Lower East Side

Excalibur's Jeanine Amber recently visited New York City. She reports on what she found to be the reality of the cultural mecca.

What they don't tell you about, in those glossy exposés, is the smell. New York city smells like pee. Sometimes it's just a vague aroma carried on a breeze but more often it comes in an oppressive and nauseating stench that hangs in the air like the smell of smoke after a fire. That's what I'll remember most — the smell.

The other day I picked up the first issue of a new Toronto alternative magazine. Inside, the editor declared that his magazine was "New York" style. As part of our consciousness, Canadians have adopted the notion that New York is the apex of North American culture. New York has the best theatres, galleries, shops and restaurants; all frequented by the right people, wearing the right clothes, doing the right things.

But the mythology of the city rests on more than these tangible features. The allure of New York is its energy, vitality and sense of infinite possibility — 'it's the city that never sleeps where anyone can be a star.'

New York is a big city. Maybe these romantic visions are true in an area I didn't see. What I saw, in my small corner of the metropolis, was a city that looked as if it was well past its prime and was rapidly falling into an irreparable state of sordid decay. Glimmers of past glory sparkled here and there amid the encroaching chaos, but it seemed like a losing battle.

The East Village, where I was visiting, is a little community nestled in between Soho (a sort of arty area with little galleries and expensive furniture shops where rich people come to buy 'interesting' and 'original' accoutrements for their homes) and the Alphabet City (where for a mere \$10 you can buy enough heroin to allow you an evening's worth of distraction).

In the East Village, the entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well. On St. Marks Street you can purchase new art books on Monet, Rembrandt and Georgia O'Keefe, which are conveniently displayed on a blanket on the sidewalk. They sell for \$25. "Where did you get these?" I asked the merchant. "Oh, this guy I know deals wholesale . . ."

Should art be of no interest, the man beside him had a panoramic display of back issues of *Playboy* and *Hustler*. Prices varied, as some magazines were collector's items, or so I was told.

Or, if you prefer you can buy drugs, available every 10 feet on every residential street of the neighbourhood. "Smoke Coke Smoke? How about a nice half gram? No? You sure? O.K. dude, have a nice college day."

On street corners, a little further south in Alphabet City, men and women and girls and boys offer passers-by a plethora of varieties of heroin and the appropriate administrative utensils. They call their drugs names like Spiderman and Roadrunner. The irony implicit in the cartoon character names underscores the brutality of the offering. There is a strange sense of protocol drug dealers adhere to. Apparently it is not acceptable to try and deal to the residents of the building on whose stoop you do your business. Much to my amusement, my New York friend received profuse apologies every day when the man on his steps, failing to recognize him, offered his wares. The apology seemed genuine, despite the fact that this was a daily occurrence.

Have a nice college day. Were we that obvious? If tomorrow I set up shop out at Yonge and Bloor and decided to panhandle, nobody would question whether I was genuinely poor. By Toronto standards, I could look convincingly poor. In New York the poor people look different. They look hungry, and so destitute that there is absolutely no hope they will ever — even if everyone they solicited gave them a hundred dollars — be able to regain what they have lost through the weeks or months or years of trying only to survive. You can feed them and clothe them but you cannot eradicate the

damage that has been done to their person. In New York the poor look wretched and they look sick. And their existence is so removed from anyone who has even the tiniest roach-infested apartment that nobody is moved to think 'could be me.' These people are a different species.

I was asked for money a dozen times a day; I always gave and I know it made no difference.



In Toronto we have the luxury of thinking that the bag lady who operates near Bloor and Dalton has chosen to live that way. Just like the punk rockers have chosen to beg instead of work. And that middle-aged man huddled on the stoop of the exotic food shop also chose his eccentric lifestyle. In fact, I often think, he probably brought the sleeping bag he's always clutching with him when he deserted his middle class family. From Algonquin park camping trips with the kids to this. In New York, the homeless take on the look of a defeated army — the walking wounded. It has nothing to do with choice.

In New York, panhandling is a competitive field. One day a haggard, young woman came into the subway car I was in, stood at the head of it and gave, what was for the most part, an unintelligible account of her present situation and extended an outstretched hand. A few people gave some coins. She disappeared into the next car.

A few moments later, a large man took her place

at the make-believe podium. In a clear voice he projected his plea, "Now I know I'm a big guy, and I know this might make some of you uncomfortable, all I'm asking for is a few spare coins you might have. I've got a family to feed and I'd be much obliged for any help you can give. Thank you very much and you all have a nice day." He walked through the subway car holding out a crumpled brown paper bag. Many people smiled and gave him money. What were they thinking? 'A much better performance. Here's 50 cents, you and your family have a good meal, my treat.'

And what of the style, the originality, the flair of New Yorkers? I saw a shop called Pluto The Dog On Earth: Clothing Hats and Jewellery. Pretty snappy title, very original. Stylish for sure. The shop was an oasis, the author of its name a minority. Again, maybe this alleged stylishness is happening in some other area of the city. Unless wearing a black motorcycle jacket constitutes having style. Everyone wears one and long gone are the days when these jackets implied rebellion. They mean nothing anymore, they're just cheap outerwear.

In the heart of the East Village, with all the students and artists, I saw only rampant stylelessness. Not that I care, but it certainly wasn't what I expected. In fact, one New York resident I spoke with complained about how fashion-conscious we are in Toronto. She said it makes her uncomfortable. And here we are, constantly berating ourselves for not living up to the style level of New York. How ironic. For those who care about such things, there is nothing to worry about. The Lower East Side is suffering a slow death and it's taking everything down with it.

My New York friend used to live on the edge of Alphabet City. He says it's out of control now; "They'll shoot you for a fix." I have this delusion that the dealers would treat me well because I'm female and I'm their colour. My friend rolls his eyes. "Maybe in Toronto," he says.

There's a park near where my friend used to live. People live in the park, even in January. They live in little tents and cardboard boxes and build fires in garbage pails. In the summer, in this same park, there was a big show called "Wigstock." All the drag queens in the area came out to impersonate their favourite female stars. It was a very elaborate production. Madonna was there. A few weeks before I got to New York all the homeless people were forced to leave the park. This caused riots. The police came on horseback. My friend said it was like some macabre western where the good guys and the bad guys fight over a precious piece of land, except in this scenario only one side had horses. My friend won't walk through the park at night anymore.

On January 5 I watched some T.V. It said that so far there were 30 people murdered in New York City for the year 1990. Thirty people, five days.

I was still watching television after midnight when the pornography came on. Women masturbating with telephones. Call 970-TITS, 970-SCREW, 970-TWAT, 970-FUCK and on and on. Women doing unimaginable things to themselves on television. Women suggesting men tie them up and hurt them, on television. All you have to do is call and these women will do over the phone what they are demonstrating on television. Your number will be automatically billed. This programming comes free with Manhattan cable and is tolerated in the name of free speech.

When I came back to Toronto, everyone asked me about the clothes and the galleries and the clubs. Nobody asked me about the homelessness or the drugs or the dirt or the horrors of cable. I feel as if I've been to a different city than the one people are referring to. I don't know if I should spoil the illusion. But I do know that despite what I saw, and despite what I felt, the experience was valuable. And when it was over and I came home, I could pretend that people were good and that I was safe.

You can do that in Toronto.