

As a subscriber to TimesSelect, you can access up to 100 articles per month from The Archive.

Articles remaining this month: 90

Want to easily save this page? Save it into your Times File by simply clicking on the "Save icon" in the article tools box below.

MY MANHATTAN; West 12th Street, By the Numbers

By MIMI SHERATON
Published: October 20, 2006

HAVING lived on West 12th Street for the last 50 of my 61 years in Greenwich Village, I am still beguiled by its many diversions. I regularly walk its length from the Hudson River to Fifth Avenue, recalling a rich trove of history, public and private, and admiring the ever-changing light that dabbles cobblestones and gilds beautiful old streets and houses, and I frequent several of its appealing restaurants and places for assorted intellectual pursuits.

Proud of living here, I cherish unexpected corroboration from people I admire, none more so than E. B. White, who wrote in his poem "Village Revisited (A cheerful lament in which truth, pain and beauty are prominently mentioned, and in that order): "In the days of my youth, in the days of my youth,/ I lay in West Twelfth Street, writhing with Truth."

Even a negative comment can be reassuring. Knowing M. F. K. Fisher had lived in New York, I asked her why she had never written about it, and exactly where she lived. "West 12th Street," she said. "I hated it."

Like many devoted Villagers, I shudder at unharmonious modernizations and bless the landmark preservation laws that created the Greenwich Village Historic District in 1969. For the provenance of buildings, I rely on the A.I.A. Guide to New York City and a beat-up copy of an out-of-print paperback, "Gaylord's Guides -- The Only Complete Guide to Greenwich Village, by R. Bruce, published in 1984 with references to almost all of my favorite nooks and crannies.

Walking east from the sunny Hudson River Park, with its foot and bike paths, gardens and benches, you follow the street's chronological development, although in reverse order of address numbers, which begin at Fifth Avenue.

The oldest stretch of West 12th Street is in many ways the saddest, paved with cobblestones and contentions. Being west of Washington Street, it is outside the protected boundaries of the historic district. The sturdy building and iconic chimney stack of Superior Inks, a relic of the far West Village's industrial waterfront days, is doomed. See it while you can -- demolition is under way.

The most inviting shop on the whole length of West 12th Street is the DVF Studio, No. 385, a boutique with Diane Von Furstenberg's colorfully breezy clothes. About 40 years ago it was a stable for the New York Police Department horses; the liquid clip-clips of hooves against cobblestones were heard daily. Until early next year it will remain Ms. Von Furstenberg's office, pied-à-terre and shop. Sold in 2004 for \$23 million, it is probably set for larger development.

With the elevated railway long gone from this part of Washington Street, both of its corners on 12th Street offer solid sustenance. One of the best recent additions to the Village is Barbuto (the name means "bearded" in Italian), as is the chef-owner, Jonathan Waxman, who brought his California-Italian culinary creations here four years ago, just below Industria SuperStudios. His moist and golden wood-oven-roasted chicken, crisp salt codfish cakes and rustic pastas keep this hectic setting jammed, especially when weather permits doors to open, creating an outdoor cafe.

Tortilla Flats, across the street, has not really been about the edible but lackluster Tex-Mex food since it opened 24 years ago. But the surprisingly good, sloshy quesadillas are foils for the bracing margaritas and sangrias. The real attraction is the nightly New Year's Eve party in the frantic bar-dining room, where Christmas lights and confetti fringe flicker from the ceiling.

Job Market
nytimes.com/jobs

E-MAIL

PRINT

PERMISSIONS

SAVE



[Sign up to get the latest jobs e-mailed directly to your inbox](#)

Also in Job Market:

- [Browse 500,000+ jobs online](#)
- [Browse jobs by category](#)
- [What would it take for you to make \\$1 million dollars?](#)

Rows of early- and late-19th-century houses, many with florid ironwork, line both sides of the street. At No. 353, B y l Asian Antiques & Decorative Arts, in what was originally a tackle and sailmaker shop, sells dramatic Chinese furniture and irresistible old stacked baskets and red lacquer boxes.

At the corner of Greenwich Street, drop into Jarnac, run by the chef Maryann Terillo and her partner, Tony Powe. This is the sort of spot you dream of finding in the Village: small, intimate, with soft, rosy lighting, hospitable service and hearty food with French-Italian overtones. Among other delicious dishes, the celebrated cassoulet has rejoined the menu, and in midwinter, so will choucroute. Save room for a luscious dessert, like the incomparable bread pudding.

Along the south side of this short block, the Village Nursing Home on the Hudson Street corner is a substantial building in the 20th-century Neo-Federal style. Residents are often seated outside, where they can exchange a few words with passers-by. Marion Tanner, the inspiration for Auntie Mame, was among the more notable residents; her nephew, the playwright Edward Everett Tanner III, wrote about her under the pen name Patrick Dennis.

As an example of Village townhouses with nine lives, look for Nos. 319 to 325, dating from around 1841. All have been pristinely restored in the last 10 years, with typical low stoops and French parlor windows.

The Abingdon Square centerpiece is a little triangular park with decorative plantings. Part of the 300-acre estate bought in 1740 by Sir Peter Warren of the British navy, it was a gift to his daughter Charlotte when she married the Earl of Abingdon. Bordering on the north at 299 West 12th Street, and on the east, 302, are two luxury apartment houses by the famed developers Bing & Bing, almost as prestigious today as when they opened in the early 1930's.

The square is at its most festive on Saturdays, when the park is rimmed by vendors of a mini-greenmarket. Shiny white canopies protect stalls filled with brilliant fruits and vegetables, like icily crisp Japanese and Korean cucumbers. They also offer sea-bright fresh fish and crimson cooked lobsters, turkey sausages and smoked meat. Most stands stay open until Christmas, and a few remain all winter.

A victim of pre-landmark renovations, this tiny stretch is an architectural mess but boasts a few attractions. Although the entrance to the Ink Pad is on Eighth Avenue, the window on 12th Street provides a sample view of thousands of rubber stamps, creatively ready-made or custom designed. Real old-timers may recall the now-closed Beatrice Inn, No. 285, its name still on the building, which was combined from two in 1928, both with inexplicably fanciful Roman tile cornices. A bright new spot is the yellow-fronted Smorgas Chef. One of a small chain, it is a friendly, sparkling cafe where the best choices are Scandinavian dishes like the herrings, and Swedish meatballs with whipped potatoes and ruby lingonberries.

On the southwest corner is Cafe Cluny, opening on Monday. Because one of the partners is Lynn Wagenknecht, operator of the justly popular Odeon and Caf  Luxembourg, locals anticipate pleasantly casual French-American bistro food, hoping that extensive traffic will not mar this fragile corner .

Scenes for the new ABC drama "Six Degrees" have been shot on the block between Fourth Street and Greenwich Avenue, to the delight of some residents and the annoyance of others. Number 241 is the fictional home of the series heroine, Laura Morgan, played by Hope Davis. The neighborly Cubbyhole, on the northeast corner of 12th and 4th Streets, is a gay and lesbian bar with colorful flowers painted on the window, suggesting a cutesy tearoom.

Note the two small 1841 Greek Revival townhouses, Nos. 264-266, and the grander, later homes, 268-274, with well-tended window-box gardens. Incredibly, at the corner, an Equinox fitness club has replaced the Greenwich Theater, a much-loved movie house, a sign to the nonathletic that the end of the good life was not far off.

Stay straight on 12th Street and avoid veering onto Greenwich Avenue (not to be confused with Greenwich Street), or you'll miss the Village Den, No. 225, a favorite coffee shop. Order any of the

well-prepared breakfast dishes or just a cup of coffee so you can study the high-kitsch acrylic mural "Leo and Friends," painted by Greg Constantine in 1999. It's "The Last Supper," New York style; try to identify the celebrity disciples. Leonardo has the place of honor, despite connections to the city that must have been tenuous at best.

A few steps east is the gleaming monumental building completed in 1964 as headquarters for the National Maritime Union of America, A.F.L.-C.I.O. Now essentially an outpatient clinic for St. Vincent's Hospital, its flat top and abstract portholes suggest a huge ship aground on concrete. I doubt that I'll ever pass this corner without experiencing a flashback to the blazing hot morning of Sept. 11, 2001. A stunned crowd looked south toward the smoking towers of Windows on the World, while across the cordoned-off avenue, doctors and nurses lined up gurneys outside of St. Vincent's, waiting for victims, almost completely in vain.

The stretch between the Avenue of the Americas and Seventh Avenue seems more devoted to the flesh than to the spirit. The overwhelming presence is St. Vincent's, where Dylan Thomas died in 1953. Its long string of undistinguished buildings faces No. 167, the James Beard House, run by the foundation that honors this culinary master.

Handsome stonework marks the low apartment complex, from Nos. 137 to 151. Lavishly carved Gothic doors and high stoops lend grandeur to Nos. 133 and 135, and No. 117, built in 1846, was considered this block's best-preserved example of the Greek Revival to Italianate style in Gaylord's guide.

The next block is a cultural strip with many fine examples of Italianate and Greek Revival townhouses, richly ornamental ironwork, shade trees and wide, leafy front gardens. Fortify yourself for its high-minded attractions at Joe Jr.'s, a pocket-size favorite on the southeast corner of 12th Street and Avenue of the Americas, where the coffee-shop menu has lured celebrities as disparate as Isaac Mizrahi and Dan Rather.

Attractions on the south side demand closer attention, so walk there and look north to some of the Village's most historic architectural landmarks. Pass the two charming early-19th-century townhouses, Nos. 78 and 80, and you are at the New School. Known as the New School for Social Research when it began in 1919, it had as its stated purpose "continuing education of the educated"; it did not grant degrees until 1948.

During the 1930's the school was a haven for liberal European intellectuals, mostly Jews fleeing Germany. The main building, designed by Joseph Urban and completed in 1930, is prized for its restrained horizontal lines, which respect the small scale of surrounding buildings. The swerving, curving lobby is pure Art Deco, as is the ovaloid, arched John L. Tishman Auditorium, said to be the model for Radio City Music Hall.

Among other works of avant-garde art here is the powerful four-wall fresco by the Mexican painter José Clement Orozco, done between 1930 and 1931. Lining a meeting hall, it is a vibrant, earth-toned tribute to the workers of the world, but is in need of repair and rarely open. I never pass the handsome black-and-white building without recalling the magical uplift of night courses I took there between 1948 and 1951, when I was awed by lecturers like the literary scholar Elbert Lenrow and Sidney Hook, the polemicist and philosophical pragmatist.

Considering the school's socialist roots, you might have expected its founding fathers to have spun in their graves when Newt Gingrich and Senator John McCain recently addressed students. "On the contrary," said Bob Kerrey, the New School's president for the past six years. "They would have been upset by the opposition to those speakers. They believed all opinions should be heard." With typical New York provincialism, he added that because he lives on 11th Street, he knows little about 12th Street. "Except, when I stand on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 12th, I know I'm not in Nebraska anymore."

Handsome apartment houses on the north side include No. 59, designed by Emory Roth and built in 1931 by Bing & Bing; Butterfield House at 37, built in 1962 and one of the Village's most coveted residences; and the Ardea at 31-33, a fortress dating from 1895-1901, by John B. Snook & Sons. At No. 45, note the angular protrusion on the right edge of the house. It is a remnant of the

original wall, slanted to afford a view of the Minetta Brook, long since covered over. No. 35 looks as if it were cut in half because in 1893 it was, and 19 is an elegant 19th-century townhouse, formerly the home of Meryl Streep.

Thirty is the address of one of the city's most idiosyncratic bookstores, S. F. Vanni. Hours posted on the door of this 65-year-old establishment are not always observed, and, given the general air of *déshabillé*, it looks closed even when it's open. But it houses myriad Italian-language books, from arcane encyclopedias to popular novels, cookbooks and dictionaries.

A few doors east at No. 24, New York University's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò sponsors Italian-based cultural events like concerts, art exhibitions, films and lectures, many in the suave downstairs auditorium of this mid-19th-century mansion.

If my education was enriched at the New School, that of my son and now my granddaughter began at the nursery school in the Church House, No. 12, of the First Presbyterian Church. Designed by Edgar Tafel and built in 1960 of chocolate-brown brick with Gothic Revival quatrefoils, it harmonizes with the ashlar stone of the stately 19th-century church. Its liberal pastor from 1918 to 1924 was the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, who in 1922 delivered his controversial sermon with the still-open question, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"

Step through the gate at the Church House entrance and enjoy the urban Eden of a garden. The formidable limestone building on the north corner, built in 1925, has for many years been home to Forbes magazine. Entered at 62 Fifth Avenue and charging no admission, the Forbes Galleries are filled with collections of model boats, antique toy soldiers and, until Dec. 30, a glorious array of French period jewelry. The high spots for me are the enameled Art Nouveau pieces by Lalique and Georges Fouquet.

West 12th Street becomes East 12th Street just across Fifth Avenue -- another walk for another time.

Time Out for Tasting

Restaurants mentioned in this article:

BARBUTO, 775 Washington Street, at 12th Street, (212) 924-9700; barbutonyc.com.

CAFE CLUNY, 284 West 12th Street, at West Fourth Street, (212) 255-6900; scheduled to open on Monday.

JARNAC, 328 West 12th Street, at Greenwich Street, (212) 924-3413; jarnacny.com.

JOE JR.'S, 482 Avenue of the Americas, at West 12th Street, (212) 924-5220.

SMoRGaS CHEF WEST VILLAGE, 283 West 12th Street, at West Fourth Street, (212) 243-7073; smorgaschef.com.

TORTILLA FLATS, 767 Washington Street, at West 12th Street, (212) 243-1053; tortillaflatsnyc.com.

VILLAGE DEN, 225 West 12th Street, at Greenwich Avenue, (212) 691-0303.

Mimi Sheraton is a former food critic of The Times. Her latest book is a memoir, "Eating My Words."