

**Clubbed to Death: The Decline of New York City
Nightlife Culture Since the Late 1980s**

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the impact of city policy changes and the processes of gentrification on 1980s nightlife subculture in New York City. What are important to this work are the contributions and influence of nightlife subculture to greater New York City history through fashion, music, and art. I intend to prove that, in combination with the city's gradual revanchism of neighborhood properties, the self-destructive nature of this after-hours sector has led to its own demise.

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Introduction:

To me, for the past 100 years New York has represented a place for a misfit or a bohemian. You could come here and live. But downtown ended when the rents shot up. It is dead. It was finished 10 years ago – Howard Goldkrand, Founder of Soundlab.¹

Underwear, lunchboxes, heavy make up, and wigs mark the grave of New York City's ostentatious 1980s club culture. While the local nightlife is still the most vibrant in the nation, it is a shadow of its former drug-addled, costumed club-goer self. In the cusp of the 1980s, at the time of its white flight and when fear of crime was already an integrated component of living in Gotham, New York City's urban decay produced a hard and fast counter culture that attracted filmmakers, artists, and DJs to its mecca of self-expression. Nightclubs at this time clustered in the heart of Manhattan, patronized by a community of bohemian eccentrics. However, the celebrated hedonism found at such venues as Palladium, the Limelight, and Danceteria was fleeting. Over time, the scandal, gentrification, and politicization of the nightlife circuit altered New York's reputation as the premier party capital. Why is the quality of nightlife no longer what it used to be? Why did this occur in the advent of positive economic change?

My research intends to prove the trajectory of authenticity within the nightlife culture, throughout its approximate decade-long existence from 1980 to mid-1990, is negatively correlated with New York City's economic improvement. The authenticity I refer to describes the unique milieu that existed, specifically in Lower Manhattan, where a wide variety of multi-disciplinary creatives (namely within arts, music, and fashion) lived, worked, collaborated, and sought entertainment. These fringe communities are distinguished by a confluence of

¹ Edward Lawrence, "Is Downtown Dead?" *New York Times*, 25 May 1997, Web.

² Terry N Clark, *The City as an Entertainment Machine*, (revised edition, Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2011)

independent art galleries, coffee shops, restaurants, and clubs. However, the problem with the authenticity or “the edge” I intend to explore is that both have gradually become popular urban tropes without the same signification. *The City As An Entertainment Machine* by Terry Clark considers this trope as he suggests that cities such as New York with a “gritty industrial past” and rich with long-established cultural production and consumption have the ideal properties for successful redevelopment. The nightlife in this era demonstrates the inception of such an aesthetic-driven consumerism. Such entertainment venues, closely interwoven with art and music and often frequented by urban tastemakers, fall under New York City’s increase of cultural offerings. As a result, Clark explains, “The intervention of large numbers of artists in space evincing depopulation and postindustrial decay often precedes and provides a condition for increased capital investment and more advanced gentrification.”²

Richard Florida, author of *Cities and the Creative Class*, explains his “creative capital theory,” whereupon creative people are the champions of regional economic growth and innovation. Creative human capital is split between the “super creative” core and “creative professionals.” The former and fundamental group consists of members such as university professors, poets, novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers and architects. Whether this entails designing a new product or composing a sheet of music, these core members that he describes “produce new forms or designs that are readily transferable and broadly useful.”³ The latter group is highly trained, highly educated professionals who work in technology, financial services, law, health, or corporate business. These are often the innovators that generate solutions to complex problems, are often challenged to continually develop new ideas within their

² Terry N Clark, *The City as an Entertainment Machine*, (revised edition, Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2011) Print, 12.

³ Richard L Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class*, (New York: Routledge, 2005) Print, 8.

respective fields, and hold greater economic clout than the former. Florida claims the cities within which the two parties reside are the most economically successful. High concentration of creative people translates to an equal number of forward-thinking innovations and subsequent positive economic outcomes. Thus, these cities display “strong signs of overall regional vitality, such as increases in regional employment and population.”⁴ Florida’s well-known theory may have some validity, neglects to consider the cultural dynamics between the two schools that form his broad, 38 million strong “Creative Class”. The “super creative” core may eventually effectively coexist with “creative professionals”—which include young professionals or Yuppies—but the initial relationship is hostile and resistant, as evident in 1980s New York City. Framing Florida’s theory within Clark’s argument, the “super creative,” who align with the authenticity I previously described, exist first. They, in turn, attract corporate professionals that are drawn to the same aestheticized lifestyles as their bohemian counterparts, but are neither in the same creative class nor contribute to the same cultural conversations. Clark points out, “The standard ideological assault on Yuppies takes them to task for callously destroying the community fabric of once vibrant poor and working class neighborhoods, leading to wanton cultural and economic displacement.”⁵ To clarify, “Yuppies” encroach on the spaces of lower-income locality, but these intrusions exist both physically and ideologically. Tight-knit communities face gradual dispersal of longstanding cultural establishments through higher cost of living associated with gentrification. Poor neighborhoods also stand as a moral antithesis to the representation of affluence and consumption embodied by “creative professionals.” A case study of 1980s downtown nightlife underscores these ideological differences, as a resistance to

⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵ Terry N Clark, *The City as an Entertainment Machine*, (revised edition Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2011) Print, 9.

commerciality motivated and connected many cultural workers. In broader terms, professionals frequented and consumed the aesthetic productions of “super creative” tastemakers, yet fail to support, contribute, or sustain it.

Simply being “creative”, an umbrella descriptor Florida uses, neglects to observe the social intricacies between two distinct factions and also insufficiently considers the disruption one causes to the other. “The division between bohemia and the bourgeoisie (the “artist” and the “Yuppie”) ⁶ is belied by the extent to which Yuppies turn to aesthetic practices of artist for their cultural cues.” ⁷ The “super creative” core may share the same progressive ideals as creative professionals, but they associate with completely separate dichotomies. The exploration of this contentious relationship is where the authenticity of Manhattan nightlife, or rather the disintegration thereof, is explicated.

The decline of New York City nightlife can be attributed to more than the advanced gentrification it appears to have caused itself. As detailed in this paper, inexpensive or derelict spaces give rise to Gotham’s creative culture via direct affordability and artistic mentality. The construction of clubs and related nightlife businesses laid the foundations for areas where similarly creative-minded, low-income individuals settled. The gentrification and ascension of capital that followed cannot be directly attributed to the mere movement of these people, but rather the popularity of these establishments, their players, and the transformations of specific

⁶ Also known as the “super-creative” core and the “creative professional,” in the language of Richard Florida. Note, specific artists in 1980s New York.

⁷ Terry N Clark, *The City as an Entertainment Machine*, (rev. ed. Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2011) Print, 12.

neighborhoods areas that contained them. We find evidence of this through the swell of property prices, nightclub closures, and upscale real estate development throughout lower Manhattan.⁸

Simultaneous to this demographic metamorphosis, government officials also sought to advertise New York as a livable environment and tourist destination through implementation of strict policy changes, of which pertained to the environment, patronage, or functionality of nightclubs and led to the gentrification of the institutions themselves. The combination of such initiatives became precursor to competitive citywide capital development and the steady displacement of those workers responsible for contributing to New York's cultural enterprises. Nightclub culture unwittingly fed into capital and benefitted little in return.⁹ Further tribulations, from the AIDS epidemic, drug abuse, to sensationalized media coverage, concluded the freewheeling era of this after hours sector.

To the question "Is Downtown Dead?" or rather, what diminished the vibrancy and interconnectivity of artistic innovation and collaboration within lower Manhattan, Edward Lewine of the *New York Times* considers the extremities that both propelled Clubland into the limelight and ultimately drove it into extinction. He writes, "The decade that seems to define downtown for most of us today is the go-go 80's when everything heated up. Wall Street money poured in. Loft prices soared. Starving artists suddenly achieved rock-star status. Drugs were plentiful and strong. Clubs like Area and Palladium became the places to watch bohemia, money, and the underworld mix and combust."¹⁰ Within Lewine's observation is a thinly veiled diatribe

⁸ Tim Lawrence, "Big Business, Real Estate Determinism, and Dance Culture in New York 1980-88," (*Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 23.3 2011): 288-306, Print.

⁹ Tim Lawrence, "Big Business, Real Estate Determinism, and Dance Culture in New York 1980-88," (*Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 23.3 2011) 288-306, Print.

¹⁰ Edward Lewine, "Is Downtown Dead?" *The New York Times*, 25 May, 1997, Web.

against the abrupt collision of wealth and nightlife culture. It contemplates the terminus of this subculture as a reflection of the greater 1980s and as the impetus for a city transformed.

I. The Limelight

In the 1980s New York City, Clubland was just on the brink of its emergence while Manhattan, specifically the interconnected neighborhoods of East Village, Alphabet City, and Lower East Side, was spiraling further into its bankrupt tatters as a result of its economic stagnation, deindustrialization, white flight and subsequent urban decay that occurred within the 1970s. It was a bleak time for the United States' premier city. Between 1970 and 1980, the number of citizens below the poverty line increased by 20% in spite of a 10% decrease in population. Between 1980 and 1990, there was an average of 1906 homicides per year.¹¹ As described by resident and *Details* writer Beauregard Houston-Montgomery, who began renting an apartment for \$100 a month in East Village's St. Mark's Place in 1975, "The East Village was a challenge because it was literally unlivable. You couldn't even get near any of the stores because the streets were all ripped up".¹² Through *New York Magazine* writer, Jay McInerney's eyes, Gotham was a place "where muggings and rapes weren't considered news. The Hells Angels ruled East Third Street, and after dark you went east of Second Avenue strictly at your own risk. The cops didn't go there. East Tenth beyond Avenue A was a narcotics supermarket where preteen runners scampered in and out of bombed-out tenements. In fact, great swatches of

¹¹ Marc Vorgna and John McCarthy. "Mayor Bloomberg and Police Commissioner Kelly Announce 2012 Sets All-Time For Murders and Fewest Shootings in New York City." *News from the Blue Room*. 28 Dec. 2012.

¹² Michel Musto. (*Downtown*. New York: Vintage, 1986) Print

the city were dirty and crime-ridden. Even [the] West Village was pretty gritty by today's standards, and Times Square was a scene of a spectacular squalor".¹³



Figure I. Drastic changes in the Lower East Side (Michelle V Agins, New York Times, 2008)

Graffiti and street art covered all surfaces downtown, whether above or under ground within all the subway cars. Due to budget cuts, the MTA lacked the appropriate funds for subway maintenance. Times Square was rampant with drug dealers, junkies, prostitutes, and lined with peepshow and adult sex shops. In Alphabet City, makeshift shacks covered in blue tarp and salvaged wood of those displaced by the low-income housing shortage sat next to the rubble of decrepit, abandoned apartment buildings. Looking at old photographs of 1980s New York, the city is near unrecognizable—more of a war zone reeling from fallout than the international powerhouse regarded today.

Within the rubble of this urban wasteland came the stomping ground for a burgeoning bohemia. Since the 1960s, artists colonized downtown—or more defined by its geographical parameters, below 14th street—due to cheap rent and ample vacancies to set up, oftentimes

¹³ Jay McInerney. "Yuppies in Eden." *New York Magazine*. 28 Sept. 2008. Print

illegal, loft and tenement studios. From 1974 and 1984, the price index of New York City housing was at a plateaued low. The inexpensive standards of living, however, move beyond the ostensible assumptions regarding quality of life and towards an influential collective psychology. Artists living in a constant state of poverty indicated that the mentality towards creating art was drastically different. As a stark contrast to the art world today, these creatives placed a low value on the commerciality of their productions. This contributed to engagement in experimental, offensive, and innovative work, that had no intention of appealing to a wide audience and disassociated itself from any true utilitarian function. While not completely aligning with the stark philosophy of “art for art’s sake,” in which the pure motivation regarding the production of work legitimizes the work itself, the slogan in part describes the laissez-faire attitudes of creatives in this period. Already operating on limited budgets, artists fiercely sought any means necessary to fund their creativity, whether this necessitated stealing or conning, but this also eliminated the expectation of art production for profit.¹⁴ Further, many claimed that the state of America’s political rest, with the end of the Vietnam War, Nixon’s resignation, and the economic conditions, produced an anti-establishment arts movement. The radicalism was an effort to rebel against the cultural norms set by a society that they viewed failed them. It was in these unregulated spaces that artists, musicians, and writers, in an effort to resist traditional art forms, bred an activist community, from which punk rock, new-wave, and hip-hop music, no-wave filmmaking, zines, graffiti painting, and outsider art fluxed. In his exploration of the Downtown Art scene, Marvin J. Taylor explains, “Artists worked in multiple media, and collaborated, criticized, supported, and valued each other’s works in a way that was unprecedented. The new modes of art—whether installation, performance, or a host of others—

¹⁴ *Blank City*, Director Celine Dahnier, Perf, Nick Zedd, 2010, Film.

opened new paths for all art to follow”¹⁵. This trajectory of creativity embedded in the downtown scene continued to attract eccentrics to New York City, and thereby sparked the youth-driven counter culture of Clubland.

It was the same convictions towards individuality and DIY that the foundations to Clubland were constructed. Among the images taken by Alexis Di Biasio, a well-remembered scene photographer, there is a forthright celebration of eccentricity. In one photograph, a notorious nightclub promoter, Michael Alig is pictured pulling his hand out of a sequined sock, dressed in only high-waisted, cheeky white underwear. His nipples are painted turquoise blue to match his clown-sized blue lips. He has two different shades of red haphazardly painted across his eyes and nose. To complete the look, a string of pearls is fixed onto his upper chest.¹⁶ This particular image, taken in 1991, exemplifies the recurrent themes of the club scene uniform: face painting, body modification, and self-constructed costumes. Known as “Club Kids,” this was an underground movement of outrageously dressed misfits started by James St. James. A misfit himself, Michael Alig epitomized the very attraction of this nightlife culture. He grew up as a closeted homosexual in South Bend, Indiana who moved to New York City post-high school-graduation to pursue his interests in fashion and art. The club scene encouraged androgyny, drag, and other societally unacceptable manners and behaviors while maintaining a tolerant party environment. Through the destruction of a certain appearance-based gender binary, Club kids were able to explore the fluidity of identity and authentic self-expression. Fashion, in this sense, served as visual art with the artist as both the creator and the medium.

¹⁵ Marvin J. Taylor, (*The Downtown Book: The New York Arts Scene, 1974-1984*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton UP, 2006) Print.

¹⁶ Jordan Teicher, “New York’s Fabulous 1980s and ‘90s Club Scene,” *The Slate*, 12 Mar 2014, Web.



Figure II. Michael Alig, 1991 and James St. James, 1990 (Alexis Di Biasio, *PAPERMAG*, 1991 and 1990)

Dance floors became safe spaces where Club Kids could reveal their latest designs. For Richie Rich, founder of the now discontinued label Heatherette, and Leigh Bowery, fashion was almost synonymous with individuality. In a 2013 interview, Rich reflected, “I was living in the club scene with all my friends. It came purely from a place of designing what we wanted to wear—we weren’t following the fashion world”.¹⁷ When the retail stores could not accurately capture what they wanted to express, Richie, Bowery, and others pushed fashion boundaries by entirely hand making every element of their subcultural personalities. This mix of performance and costume not only provided a conduit for creative freedom, but it also came with nightlife benefits. With each outfit more provocative and impractical than the next, Club Kids made a name for themselves, gained notoriety in Manhattan for their eccentric attitudes, and attracted several clientele to venues. According to one former Club Kid, people were drawn to the “circus

¹⁷ Maggie Dolan, “Catching Up With Past Nightlife Award Winners: Heatherette,” *PAPER*, 15 Oct, 2013 Print.

environment” that the Kids created, and promoters showered them with free drinks or free admission. As the popularity of this subculture increased, prominent nightlife figures—such as the original group of Club Kids—were paid every night for appearing. They drew crowds of spectators and imitators, but were known to be able to navigate the social waters with models, artists, and hipsters alike.¹⁸ This flexibility with customers landed people like Alig as party promoters on the multiple-club payrolls. As mentioned by Clark in his critique of the aestheticized lifestyles of urbanites, “nightclubs, whose ambiance is improved by patrons of whom being beautiful is a full time job, are not the property of ordinary tourists.” He evaluates the role of these Club Kids as those who have “mastered the social codes of privileged entertainment spaces so thoroughly that they are paid...they are human props” but this is proven to be a blatant trivialization. The “beauty” and “privilege” of Club Kids in his statements are not of the traditional variety; they evolved out of a social resistance to reclaim and giving agency to the idiosyncrasies of those marginalized. The incentives attached to such behaviors were not an intention but an unexpected byproduct. Privilege is not the basis of Clubland’s creation, although it is the consequence of its popularity, and these distinctions are important to define.

At the time, clubs operated seven days a week with a different theme every night, providing an endless stream of inspiration and income. Their prevalence reached the extent even beyond New York City, Joan Rivers and Phil Donahue invited the original Kids, in full regalia, onto their respective talk shows. These personalities dually took advantage of and contributed to the creative milieu New York was during the 1980s. While fashion was one artistic outlet, partying became another. Michael Alig was credited for leading his hundreds of followers into impromptu and illegal parties. These outlaw parties, equipped with only a boom box, took place

¹⁸ Steve Lewis, “Why Michael Alig Is Still in Jail,” *BlackBook*, BlackBook, 19 Nov, 2012, Web.

in McDonalds, Burger King, subway platforms, or donut shops. The radical fashion and performance art these costumed Club Kids embodied is only one specific representation of an entire underground culture, albeit one of the most influential. According to James St. James, Club Kids prided themselves on breaking barriers and subverting gender stereotypes, “We created our own trends, tackled taboos, and lampooned social protocol. Ultimately—and I say this with a straight face—I believe we had a destabilizing effect on pop culture as a whole. We influenced a whole generation of kids on shows like Geraldo, Phil Donahue, and Ricki Lake”.¹⁹

In the ‘Nightlife Ephemera’ Exhibition retrospective at Gallery98, Clubland is remembered for fostering a strong community in the arts. New nightclubs such as Area, Danceteria, Limelight, Palladium, Paradise Garage, and the Tunnel appeared on the 1980s night scene, most clustered in Flatiron and the Lower East Side (See Figure VI). Each earnestly strove to become more than just a dance hall, but rather a fully integrated arts platform for new music, art, film, fashion, video, and performance.²⁰ Marc H. Miller, a columnist for the *East Village Eye*, remembers the past:

For artists and performers it was a golden age with clubs needing to book events seven-days-a-week. To attract the trendy crowd, artists were recruited to paint murals and design publicity; curators were hired to organize exhibitions; photographers were booked to present slide shows and document events; filmmakers and video arts were paid for screenings; and performers were engaged to make music, stage cabaret shows and host interactive events involving audience participation.²¹

¹⁹ James Nicholas, “Art Dark: Meet James St. James, Original Club Kid and Nightlife Icon,” *The Huffington Post*, 14 September, 2014.

²⁰ Marc Miller, “The Night Time Is the Right Times,” *Nightclub Ephemera*, Gallery98, 1 Jan 2014 Web.

²¹ Ibid.

During this pre-internet era, thousands of invitations and posters displaying the graphic design of various artists were cheaply produced and mass printed for promotion. Hired artists even experimented with the concept of an invitation. Keith Haring, a New York-specific street artist and social activist, designed a jigsaw puzzle to promote a 1985 party at The Palladium.²² The Area's first-ever invite was a within liquid-activated capsules, whereupon guests dropped these pills into a glass of water, the vessel would open, and the event details would float to the surface. Within clubs like Area, renown for its over-the-top themed parties in 33,000 square ft. space, the art department worked obsessively or hired artists to create large-scale, ever-changing installations that fit with the event description. For the "American Highway" theme, Area constructed an imitation petrol station in the middle of the dance floor. "Alphabet Soup" saw an enormous pool of murky red broth and enlarged floating "peas," "carrots," and alphabet noodles with table servers wading around within.²³ For "Suburbia" Area's team researcher and buyer bought one hundred boxes of cereal, Flutternutter, Goobers, a washer and dryer, plastic flamingos, an oak-veneer bedroom set, a toilet, and Astroturf.²⁴ While this nightlife scene seems overly indulgent to some, a hardworking and obsessively imaginative characteristic to continually reinvent oneself was at the heart of the counterculture.

²² Kenzo Nakamura, "Palladium," *DiscoMusic*, 15 July 2005 Web.

²³ Peter Davis, "Inside Area: A Look Inside Area, the 1980s Club That Turned Partying into an Art," *PAPER*, 6 Nov, 2013 Print.

²⁴ Glenn O'Brien, "AREA," *Glenn O'Brien*, 17 Nov 2013, Web.

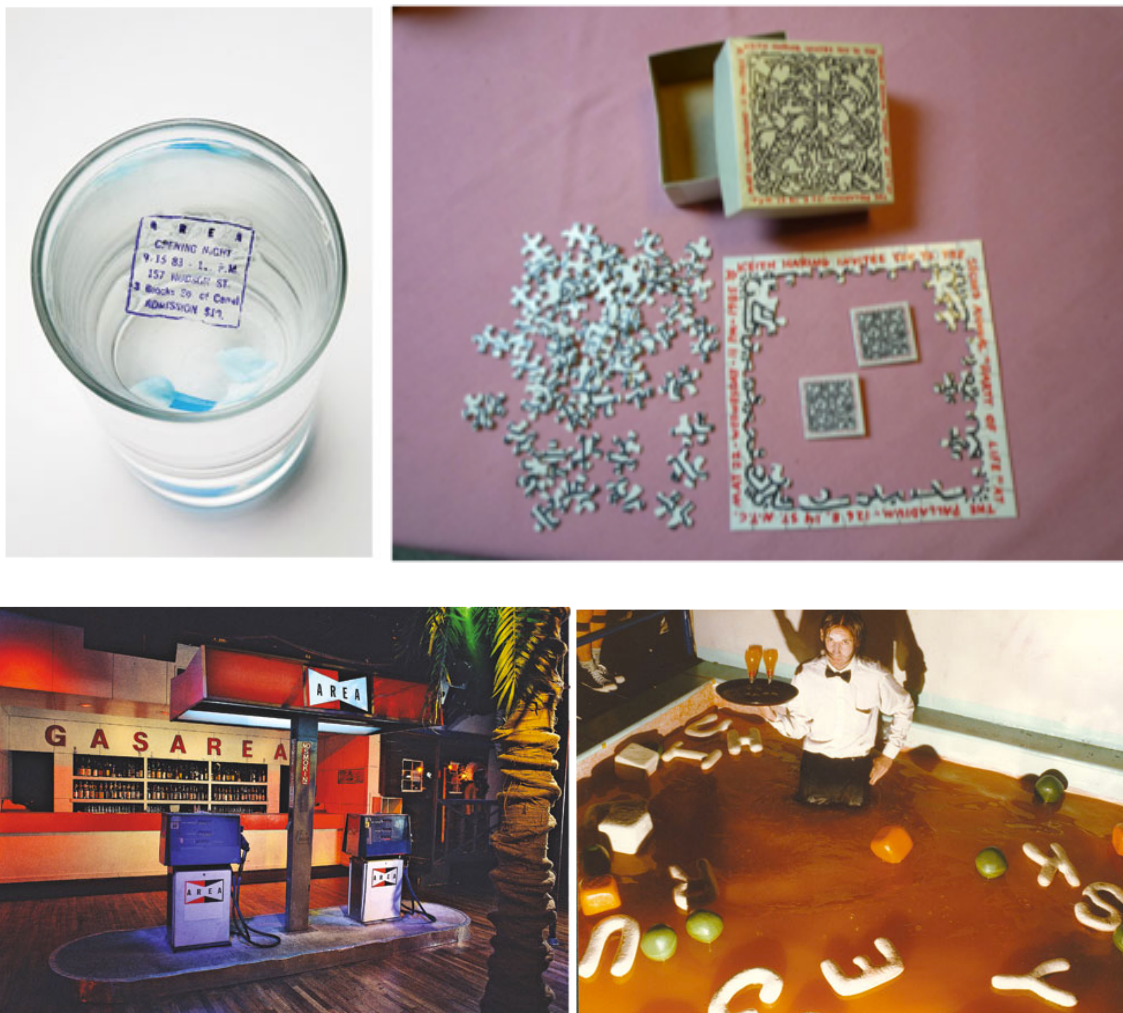


Figure III. Top left: Pill capsule invitation (Eric Goode and Jennifer Goode, *PAPERMAG*, 1983-1987); Top right: Keith Haring Jigsaw Puzzle Invitation (Kenzo Nakamura, 1985); Bottom two: American Highway Theme and Alphabet Soup (Eric Goode and Jennifer Goode, *PAPERMAG*, 1983-1987).

Music shared the same multi-dimensionality around nightclubs as the arts did. In an interview with the *Vulture*, Moby—a notable musician and six-time Grammy nominee—reflected on the odd eclecticism and openness of the music scene as he described what one might find in an ideal 1980s nightclub. In *Danceteria*, he mentions climbing to four different floors with four vastly different kinds of music being played at each level: “There was no compartmentalization. The hip-hop scene was part of the dance-music scene, was part of the

punk-rock scene, was part of the art scene. That to me was the ethos of the time. It's the ethos by which I've judged every other counterculture movement."²⁵ Venues often had specific genre nights on weekly rotation. At Limelight, Pearl Jam and Guns N' Roses played at rock 'n' roll night. Smashing Pumpkins and Nine Inch Nails played industrial nights on Tuesdays. The Limelight was also the first venue in New York City to play techno, imported from clubs in the U.K. Mary J. Blige, Jay-Z, and Puffy performed hip-hop Sunday nights at the Palladium while record executives scouted for new talent.²⁶ Michael Alig claims that nightclubs were incubators of culture, whereupon genres of disco, punk, hip-hop, house, techno, electro, acid-house would have otherwise not been created. What Moby, seasoned through his teenage exploits in 1980s New York, recalls about the culture is, "that on first glance, none of it made any sense. Part of the criteria by which it was judged was how effectively did it challenge the viewer or the listener".²⁷ Placing the fluid Club Kid personas within the megaclub amalgamation of disjointed music genres proves a testament to the confusing and exploratory nature of the decade.

II. After Dark

The decadence of subculture may have inspired the creative, but it also spilled over onto a darker, destructive side of nightlife. These seven-days-a-week marathon parties were physically-demanding and unsustainable without the fuel of rampant drug use. In the 1980s, ecstasy had just recently entered the American black market from England, and without clear investigation from the FDA, it was an unregulated and, therefore, an unoutlawed drug.²⁸ By the late 1980s, the seemingly benign happiness of ecstasy tablets erected a gateway for harder

²⁵ Jennifer Vineyard, "Moby on Klaus Nomi, the '80s Club Scene, and '90s Rave Drugs," *The Vulture* – *NY Mag*, 28 Mar 2014, Web.

²⁶ Marlow Stern, "New York's Lord of Late Night," *The Daily Beast*, 22 Sept 2011 Web.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Limelight*. Director Billy Corben, Magnolia Pictures, 2011, Film.

narcotics. The use of cocaine, heroin, ecstasy, and ketamine—whether in single doses or in deadly combination, rapidly escalated from recreational use in the 1980s to full-blown addiction as the years progressed for many participants in the New York club scene. Concurrent to the increasingly severe drug problems, was the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Ground zero for disease-related hysteria in the mid-1980s, Club Kids encouraged those who were sick or diagnosed positive to party their fear away. James St. James, stated, “There was a prevailing sense that you and your friends might not be *around* this time next week—so enjoy the now! Don’t think about tomorrow”.²⁹ However, these clubs may have been the very places they contracted the disease. Hand-in-hand with drug use, club bathrooms and dark corners were used as places to either shoot-up with contaminated needles or engage in unprotected sex.

The first mention of HIV/AIDS in public media occurred on July 3, 1981. The article headlined the unusual outbreak as a “rare cancer seen in 41 homosexuals,” of whom all had symptoms of Kaposi’s sarcoma, characterized by purple lesions found on the skin, mouth, and lymph nodes of disease victims. Two months later, more than 100 gay men had been diagnosed with Kaposi’s sarcoma, pneumocystis (a form of pneumonia caused by microfungus organisms)³⁰, or both. Almost half of them had died. In early 1980s New York, city and state government officials, along with large media outlets, failed to provide adequate, widespread coverage of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or AIDS epidemic. An absence of circulating public information existed regarding the sexual-transmission of the virus. The lack of resources available and immobile city services led to the opening of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, which trained clinical volunteers, coordinated the city’s only AIDS education sessions, and provided

²⁹ James Nicolas, “After Dark: Meet James St. James, Original Club kid and Nightlife Icon,” *The Huffington Post*, 14 Sept 2014.

³⁰ Cécile-Marie Aliouat-Denis, Et Al, "Pneumocystis Species, Co-evolution and Pathogenic Power," (*Infection, Genetics and Evolution* 8.5 2008): 708-26, Print.

home nursing care to victims in the disease's advanced stages.³¹ However, operating on a limited budget, the GMHC did not have the political nor financial power to create city-wide changes. New York State Health Commissioner at the time, David Sencer marginalized AIDS as a health problem that he concluded should be kept within the gay community. When asked about the initiation of a public health education program, Sencer responded, "I think there are ways in which this could be accomplished without taking to the soapbox. I certainly believe that the information is going to be better accepted and come from a stronger support if it comes from the affected communities themselves."³² Sencer represents the majority of public officials who refused to recognize or provide support for AIDS services or education, despite rumors of the fatal "gay plague" rapidly spreading throughout the city. Doctors and other medical researchers attempted to motivate members of New York City Council through planning diversified AIDS care alternatives, with no avail.³³ By the conclusion of 1983, the Centers for Disease Control had reported 1,092 national AIDS-related deaths out of 2,640 diagnosed cases. 1,042 of those national deaths were reported in New York, yet city officials persisted in minimizing the virus' severity.³⁴

³¹ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic*, (New York: Souvenir, 2011) 380-400. Print.

³² *Ibid.*, 379.

³³ *Ibid.*, 380.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 382.

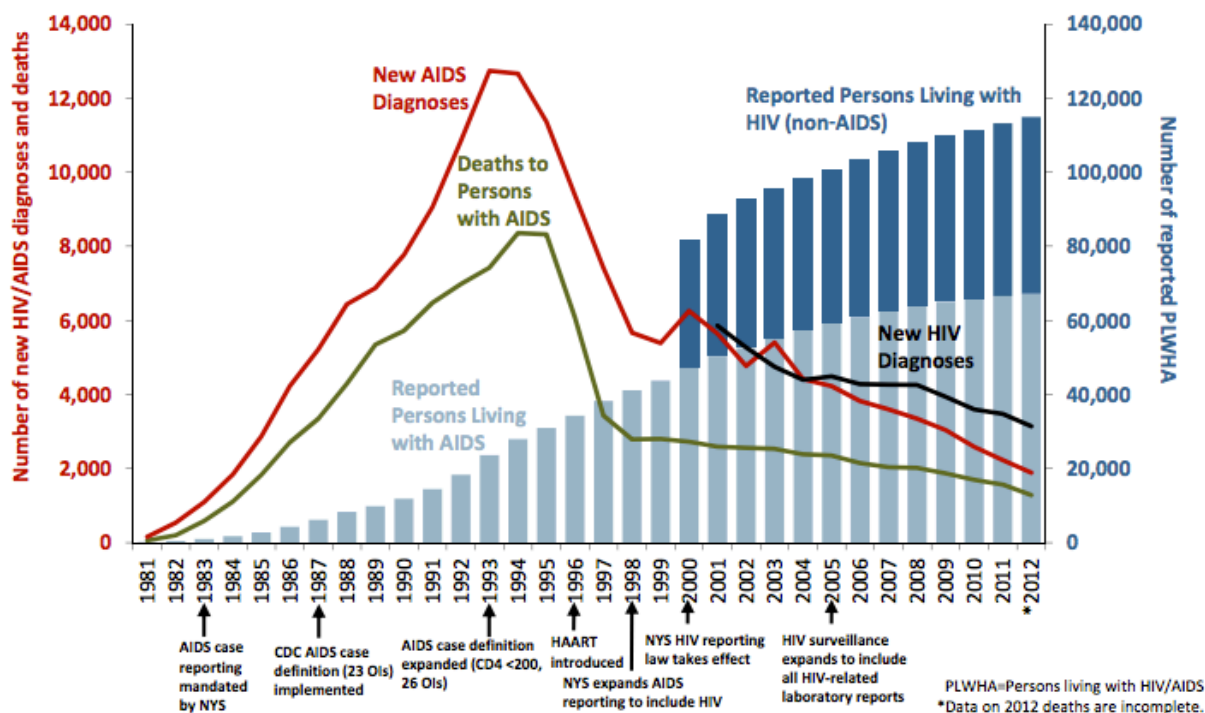


Figure IV. Reported AIDS Cases and Deaths in NYC, 1981-2012 (New York City Dept. of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2013)

Within two years, medical researchers already considered the AIDS “the century’s most virulent epidemic.”³⁵ The occurrence of AIDS concentrated primarily in urban areas with large gay communities, such as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.³⁶ Researchers at this time also isolated a Human T-cell lymphotropic virus (HTLV-III) and lymphadenopathy associated virus (LAV) from infected people with AIDS. Three years later, the former was reclassified under a Lentivirus genus, both isolated viruses proved to be identical, and The International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses renamed both HTLV-III and LAV to human immunodeficiency virus or HIV.³⁷ Between 1981 and 1988, the overall incidence of diagnosed

³⁵ Robert Marantz Henig, “A New Disease’s Deadly Odyssey,” *The New York Times* 6 Feb 1983 5 Apr 2015.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Ewa Maria Szczypinska, “Human T-Cell Lymphotropic Viruses,” *Medscape*, 28 Aug 2014, Web, 16 April 2015.

AIDS cases in New York increased 68% per year. Given its large size and heterogenous composition, the AIDS epidemic affected New Yorkers of both sexes, of all races and ethnicities, and in all transmission categories. Among the first 100,000 cases of AIDS diagnosed in the city, 43% reported having sex with other men and 46% reported intravenous drug use.³⁸ By this time, shared needle transmission exceeded cases of homosexual transmission in the city. Even with FDA-approval of zidovudine (AZT), the first anti-HIV drug, in 1987, its \$10,000 per yearly supply pricetag was far out of reach for most patients.³⁹ An HIV diagnosis continued to be a death sentence for those unable to afford AZT treatment.

As New York citizens watched the death toll on what appeared an unstoppable disease climb past 13,000 casualties, high-risk behavior among some victims abounded. The city's slothful health policies, societal discrimination, absence of effective vaccines, and lofty mortality rates left those infected with little support to cope with their HIV-positive status. Through what D. J. McKirnan refers to as "cognitive disengagement," these people engaged in high-stimulation activities such as substance use and unprotected sex as an escape from the realities of their illness. McKirnan's 1996 study of the psychological and socio-medical aspects of AIDS/HIV considers the sexual risk of victims, given their "strong negative affect" and thus their "high cognitive restraint." Those affected strategically engage in substance use in order to escape stressful self-awareness, however this external stimuli is also responsible for obstructing rational behaviors. Alcohol and drugs are examples of such stimuli, readily available in nightclubs, bars, and bathhouses, that lead to "a state of cognitive release." As a result, individuals are able to justify HIV-risk behaviors through both a heightened mental state and sexual satisfaction.

³⁸ E.J. Fordyce, Et Al, "Evolution of an Urban Epidemic: The First 100,000 AIDS Cases in New York City," *Popular Research and Policy Review* 18.6 (1999): 523-44, Print.

³⁹ "Thirty Years of HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic," *AmfAR*, 1 Jan, 2015, Web.

McKirnan reports, “Thus, a stimulus may become associated both with sexuality, and with behaviors that facilitate cognitive avoidance of HIV concern. As with any avoidance response, these associations may be difficult to extinguish once learned.”⁴⁰ Once these mechanisms of avoidance are in place, individuals habitually return to these behaviors to cope with stress, loneliness, or arousal. Furthermore, the physical environments themselves become associated with such behaviors, abetted by dark lighting, loud music, erotic visual imagery, and a multitude of willing, anonymous partners.

Given the amount of New Yorkers diagnosed throughout the 1980s, McKirnan’s findings emphasize the large-scale risk patterns associated with HIV/AIDS in the absence of adequate community support. There were few therapeutic outlets with which outcast victims could express their psychological distress, so instead they took to reliable sexual settings. Kalil Vicioso’s 2005 study of sex environments and escapism for HIV-positive men substantiates McKirnan’s findings with individual narratives. In these testimonies, some participants sought to escape the emotional impact of HIV through substances:

Oh I’ve been very depressed about it. Because we didn’t understand it back then because it was just all for aids and we didn’t understand what it was. So, I became depressed suicidal, started using drugs and alcohol to cover up the fact that I had this thing in my body and I didn’t want to think about it. And I started having more sex to make myself feel better and to also get revenge because I was angry.⁴¹

Others found cognitive escape through sex itself:

⁴⁰ D. J. McKirnan, D. G. Ostrow, B. Hope, “Sex, drugs and escape: A psychological model of HIV-risk sexual behaviours”, (*AIDS Care: Psychological and Socio-medical Aspects of AIDS/HIV*, 1996), 655-670.

⁴¹ Kalil Vicioso, Et Al, “Experiencing Release: Sex Environments and Escapism for HIV-Positive Men Who Have Sex with Men,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 42.1 (2005): 13-19, Print, 3.

No one talked. They don't want to know [about HIV status]. They don't care and, of course I am afraid, but in, in that moment no one cares. I believe I was more at risk... It's like blocking your, your mind. I don't- at that moment I don't think. I want fun. I want to, to have company... Because it's an escape. Some people use drugs to escape and I use that. I use that to escape.⁴²

Many treated their terminal diagnoses as justification to maximize pleasure in the present, which is exactly the rationale James St. James encouraged. Victims didn't want think about tomorrow because the future held a grim reality.

Some, like Moby, credit the fall of New York City nightlife to rampant drug use and AIDS epidemic. Indeed, AIDS claimed a peak of over 8,000 lives in 1993.⁴³ This conclusion may explain the deaths of significant cultural tastemakers and patrons, however it does not give credit to the entire scope of city politics and negative press against entertainment venues throughout the later 1990s. It also does not clarify the series of oppressive neighborhood restrictions and neoliberal policies clubs continue to struggle with to this day. Several of the club closures occurred within the duration of the outbreak, as evident in Figure I and Table I, yet the decline of this subculture exists within a greater, more complicated narrative. Most nightlife denizens and workers give evidence of a multi-layered demise, where gentrification was the final nail in the club coffin.

Gentrification describes a series of economic and social changes to a neighborhood, whereupon business investors and real estate developers convert working class or ethnic enclaves into desirable properties for affluent, middle-class customers. The original low-income or minority residents are displaced in the process. In the context of 1990s New York City, third-

⁴² Ibid., 5

⁴³ "HIV Surveillance Report, 2012," HIV Epidemiology and Field Services Program, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 1 Dec 2013, Web, 18 Apr 2015.

wave gentrification is often closely associated with the mechanisms of political economy, namely neoliberal urbanization. The latter term articulates many of the actions taken by city government towards inner city revitalization and reinvestment. This transformative agenda assumes an underlying expectation of capital gains and globalized in the future. Gentrification, subsequently, becomes larger than the displacement of long-time community members, but a large conversation rooted in, as described by Smith: global finance, the power of the state, political tensions, and geographical dispersal.⁴⁴ This third-wave is the era of gentrification that is accountable for destabilizing nightlife subcultures.

A complex phenomenon, gentrification in urban areas occurs in gradual stages. Blighted 1980s New York represents the second-wave.⁴⁵ With a focus on downtown Manhattan, creatives entered the Lower East Side, originally characterized by abandoned properties, and reinvented the sordid neighborhood as a burgeoning arts community. Understanding this “reinvention” as a product of a middle-class ideal and early gentrification, it is difficult to rest the initial blame entirely on these young pioneers. Those who settled either bought buildings at low cost to repair themselves or joined the large community of squatters and artists’ collectives.⁴⁶ The differences between early and advanced are stark. These creatives, unlike the private developers following them, made honest efforts to work with the community. Those who purchased buildings only altered the insides of properties and kept old facades and storefront signs to preserve the character of the neighborhood. Artist Adam Purple collected the brick rubble of nearby derelict tenements and created one of New York City’s largest-scale community gardens, The Garden of

⁴⁴ Neil Smith, “New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy,” (*Antipode* 34.3 2002), 427-50.

⁴⁵ Jason Hackworth and Neil Smith, “The Changing State of Gentrification,” (*Journal of Economic and Social Geography*, 92.4, 2001), 465-69.

⁴⁶ Lara Belkind, “Stealth Gentrification: Camouflage and Commerce on the Lower East Side,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 21.1 (2009): 21-36, Print.

Eden. Artist-activists, such as ABC No Rio in 1980, installed “The Real Estate Show” exhibition in a vacant building to expose the plight of long-time residents. At this time the Lower East Side was an area fraught with drug trafficking, landlord disinvestment, and arson, yet ABC No Rio organizers noted “but at the same time a new group of real estate speculators were moving on the neighborhood, abetted by the city government’s planning and policy, setting the stage for a new wave of gentrification.”⁴⁷ The Saint’s 1988 closure fits into the later half of second-wave gentrification (See Table I). Activists describe city government’s plans to demolish gardens and homes of squatters to promote privatized development. The othering of this new wave implies that artists did not consider themselves responsible for the prior wave. Moreover, artists, who considered themselves in solidarity with the close-knit population, did not contribute to a conscious and intention displacement of previous residents. They also became part of those who were eventually displaced. Pinning middle class motivations on creatives as a characteristic of gentrification undermines their earnest contributions and flattens the contentious dynamics between hegemonic officials and artist-activists.

Dot-com “Silicon Alley” companies and the ascent of the city’s financial sector ushered in third-wave, advanced, or neoliberalism-driven gentrification, after five years of recession in the early 1990s. The closures of Palladium, The Limelight, and the Tunnel all belong within this period (See Table I). New York City also rose as a global seat of information, media, cultural production. With greater links to large-scale capital and competition for space, city-government assisted developers to reshape entire neighborhoods through aggressive municipal policies to lure the white, professional “creative” class. Such measures included zoning ordinances, restricting noncompatible land uses (such as nightlife activity), and the J-51 tax incentive, a

⁴⁷ Lara Belkind, “Stealth Gentrification: Camouflage and Commerce on the Lower East Side,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 21.1 (2009): 21-36, Print.

benefits program heavily used in the 1980s and 1990s for multiple-resident building rehabilitation and often accused of fostering gentrification.⁴⁸ New York City's ravanchism created a ripple effect of higher land and housing prices, driven by real estate speculation and diffused from its urban center. A new sixty-one unit condominium in the Lower East Side financed by the European American Bank and developed by an Israeli company in the 1990s illustrates the percolation of global capital and powers of the state into fringe neighborhoods.⁴⁹

In the Furman Center's 1970-2006 graphs of Lower East Side/ East Village/ Chinatown, we see the consistent increase of mean income and educational attainment with sharp decreases in poverty rates. Note that increases in both income and education tend to move in tandem. These outcomes signify that the previous lower-income and lesser-educated residents are being pushed out (See Figure V).

⁴⁸ "J-51 and Gentrification," *Citizens Housing Planning Council*, CHPC, 2 Feb 2012, Web, 14 April 2015.

⁴⁹ Neil Smith, "New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy," (*Antipode* 34.3 2002), 427-50.

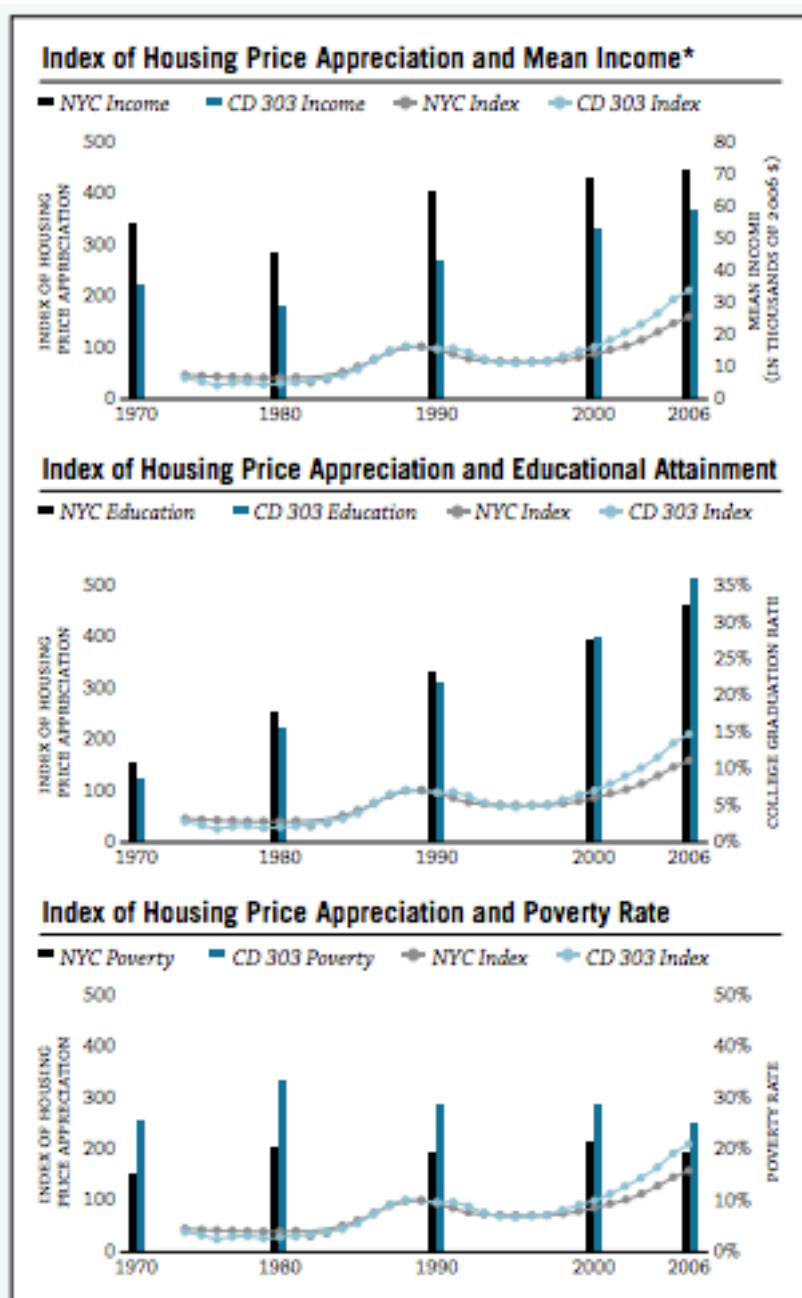


Figure V: Index of Housing Price Appreciation and Mean Income, Educational Attainment, and Poverty Rate, CD 303: Lower East Side/Chinatown, Manhattan (The Furman Center, 2008)

Ancillary to such consequences, “underground” or “avant-garde” nomenclature of urban subcultures within the Lower East Side became marketing tropes upon the new era of economic improvement and hyperconsumerism. In her case study of the Lower East Side, Belkind

describes New York's culture industry appropriating its ample pool of entertainment venues into sources of content.⁵⁰ This is where the complications in bridging early and advanced gentrification arise. Note that early gentrification was distinguished by the intention of blending and sustaining existing communities. Later gentrification is criticized for colonizing spaces that cater to the wealthy, thus reducing public facilities and low-income support services.⁵¹ Taking into account Clark's "aestheticization of space," creatives in the third-wave, who originally lived a bohemian lifestyle out of political choices, found their way of life marketed as a social package. Gentrification thereby assumed a more insidious role in the divorce between artistic culture and outsider communities. When urban revitalization pollinated low-rent neighborhoods and brought in ambitious investors and real estate speculators, the creatives that lived there faced a bifurcated fate: they were forced to move out or the popularity of their bohemian activities, upon the expansion age of the culture industry, created new business opportunities for existing artistic entrepreneurs. The latter galvanized what used to be a subculture into a utility for consumption, thus eroding the very foundation of anti-commerciality that popularized the subculture in the first place. Both effects spell death for the subculture, either by breaking up the social structure through displacement or dismantling crucial creative ideology.

The circumstantial propinquity of the AIDS epidemic and gentrification caused both issues to collide in the nightlife sector. At The Saint, a Lower East Side gay superclub, owner Bruce Mailman fought to keep his venue alive when a large portion of his private membership was dying. By the mid-1980s, numbers began to decline by such a noticable degree, Mailman

⁵⁰ Lara Belkind, "Stealth Gentrification: Camouflage and Commerce on the Lower East Side," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 21.1 (2009): 21-36, Print.

⁵¹ Deliah Lawrence, "Community Development: Can Communities Effectively Fight Displacement Caused by Gentrification?" *Journal of Affordable Housing and Community Development Law* 11.4 (2002): 357-73, Print.

chose to allow straight dancers on Thursdays and Fridays and lowered membership costs, to make up the loss. At one point, some even referred to AIDS as “Saint’s disease” given its prevalence among the club’s clientele.⁵² Mailman fought the decline in his customership and railed against city government officials, who intended to close his two gay-centric establishments including St. Mark’s Baths for community safety. Given the two factors, closure may have seemed imminent, but according Saint DJ and confidante of Mailmen’s, Terry Sherman, it was an eight-figure offer from a real estate developer that doomed The Saint. The offer not only doubled Mailmen’s initial investment, but appeased the club’s investors and provided him an escape from the immense overhead costs and stress involved in managing a large-scale club.⁵³ The Saint threw its last party in May 1988.

The real estate boom struck The Paradise Garage in September 1987 after ten years of musical influence, attracting celebrities from Diana Ross, famed Motown singer, to Calvin Klein, American fashion designer.⁵⁴ The property owner leasing the building of the pop and dance discotecque refused to renew the lease. A luxury apartment block was in pre-development next to The Garage, and pressure from the neighborhood association and developer prevented another ten year run. David DePino, DJ at the club observed, “Neighborhood associations are powerful. It’s not something a landlord wants to have problems with.” Owner Michael Brody, claimed a discriminative issue: “They don’t want a black club in their neighborhood,” referring to the space’s ability to attract mixed races (predominantly Blacks and Latinos) every weekend.⁵⁵ DePino remembers the neighborhood pre-Garage as completely non-residential. It was over the

⁵² Randy Shilts, *And the Bands Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 500.

⁵³ Tim Lawrence, “Big Business, Real Estate Determinism, and Dance Culture in New York 1980-88,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 23.3 (2011): 288-306.

⁵⁴ Frank Broughton and Bill Brewster, “Larry Levan’s Paradise Garage.” *DJ History*, 1 Jan 2000, Web.

⁵⁵ “Garage Stories,” *Paradise Garage*, 1 Jan 2005, Web 28 Nov 2014.

course of the the venue’s lease, the processes of gentrification took its toll, perhaps also due in part to the club’s popularity. Brody resisted the club’s fate, futilely seeking new locations to move The Paradise Garage, until he, too became diagnosed with the AIDS virus.⁵⁶

“When Danceteria opened, 21st Street was in an abandoned neighborhood,” leaseholder Rudolf Pieper noted, “You could walk for blocks and not find anything open at night. Then gradually, the excitement of New York brought in hordes of moneyed bored from the rest of the country and real estate prices went up.” Continuing the trend of nightlife venues pummeled by the real estate market, Danceteria closed the doors of its four-floor Manhattan institution in 1986. With its avant-garde videotape art on the third floor, the 30 West 21st Street location was often inaccessible to most customers and fit in with a specific niche of urban artists.⁵⁷ In the midst of the mid-1985s, Alex Di Lorenzo, the building’s freeholder, was receiving offers of \$25 per square foot, while leaseholders Rudolf Pieper and manager John Argento could only rent for \$1.20 per square foot. A year later, a speculator purchased the lease for \$600,000. The location now stands as a residential building, housing “apartments of unsurpassed luxury”.⁵⁸

Table I. Nightlife Venues: Address, Establishment Year, Closure Year, and Present Establishments

Nightclub	Address	Establishment Year	Closure Year	Present Establishment
1018	515 18 th Street	1986	1991	Hauser & Wirth Contemporary Art Gallery
Area	157 Hudson Street	1983	1987	Taymour Grahne Gallery and residential apartments
Danceteria	30 West 21 st Street	1979	1986	Luxury condominiums above NY Stone Manhattan
The Limelight	656 Avenue of the Americas	1983	2003 (2007 under “The Avalon”)	Shopping center of boutiques and eateries

⁵⁶ Tim Lawrence, “Big Business, Real Estate Determinism, and Dance Culture in New York 1980-88,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 23.3 (2011): 288-306.

⁵⁷ Harry Post, “Heart of Darkness,” *New York Magazine*, 2 May, 1982: 27.

⁵⁸ Tim Lawrence, “Big Business, Real Estate Determinism, and Dance Culture in New York 1980-88,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 23.3 (2011): 288-306.

Palladium	140 East 14 th Street	1985	1997	NYU Dormitories and Athletic Center
Paradise Garage	84 King Street	1977	1987	Verizon Facilities
The Saint	105 2 nd Ave	1980	1988	Emigrant Savings Bank
Studio 54	254 West 54 th Street	1977	1980	Roundabout Theater Company Venue
		Reopened 1981	1986	
The Tunnel	220 12 th Avenue	1986	2001	Eastern TV Production Company / 54 Below Nightclub (in basement)
Underground	860 Broadway	1980	1989	Petco Pet Store
The World	254 East 2 nd Street	1987	1991	Luxury apartment building

III. Clubbed to Death

New residents of the city or the same “moneyed bored” that Pieper refers to resisted the influence of club culture in their respective communities. Coalitions such as ‘Save Chelsea’ and ‘The Save Avenue A Society’ consisted of angry community activists preserving the sanctity and livability of their neighborhoods. Another measure taken by community boards was restricting the number of licenses distributed by the State Liquor Authority in 1993.⁵⁹ If three liquor-serving licensed businesses existed within a 500-foot area, another request within that same area would often be declined. The State Liquor Authority cannot approve similar-type license applications under the 500-foot rule without consultation with the community board and other interested parties. This entails conducting an open hearing to determine whether issuing the license would be of public interest.⁶⁰ In cases where the application is met with opposition, community members have the bargaining power to leverage specific business conditions in exchange for approval. For the local politicians that backed them, support for the anti-nightlife movement translated to a large voter base and more “wholesome” publicity, whereas support for

⁵⁹ "Measuring the Distance: The 200 and 500 Foot Rules," *New York State Liquor Authority*, 2 May 2013, Web, 6 Mar 2015.

⁶⁰ “Community Board Q&A.” *New York State Liquor Authority*. Web.

nightclub business owners, musicians, DJs, promoters, and patrons only made up a small constituency and were painted with negative stereotypes.⁶¹

Pressure from neighborhood boards on city administration resulted in a the City Planning Commission's (CPC) 1990 rezoning and tightening permit regulation of dance establishments in Lower Manhattan.⁶² On December 13, 1989 the CPC issued an "Entertainment Use Text Amendment," which includes an overview of proposed changes and comments from Community Boards across the city and individuals from the public hearing. The document specifically states its intentions to "impose more restrictive regulations on larger entertainment establishments and those with dancing"⁶³, evidence of which is found through proposals placing limitations on the number of "eating or drinking establishments with entertainment and a capacity of more than 200 persons, or any capacity with dancing (Use Group 12 A)"⁶⁴ to occupy commercial and manufacturing districts. Under the resolution, it also states that the review was prompted by club-related noise, traffic, parking, sanitation, and crowding complaints by community residents.⁶⁵

Table II. Overview Table of Modified Zoning Districts

Adopted Regulations	Zoning District	
As-of-right Districts	<i>Commercial</i>	
	C4*	Regional commercial centers located outside central business districts (Ex. Specialty and department stores, theaters, and other commercial and office uses)
	C6**	High-bulk commercial uses requiring central location
	C7	Large open amusement parks/ Other large open and enclosed entertainment facilities (Ex. Skating rinks, sports stadiums, miniature golf courses)
	C8	Bridge commercial and manufacturing uses (Ex.

⁶¹ Laam Hae. "Dance in New York City: The Cabaret Law, Alternative Cultures, and Neoliberal Urbanism." *Intersection of Rights and Regulation*. 1 Jan. 2007: 145-47.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ New York City Planning Commission. 1989. *Entertainment Use Amendment*. (CPC ULURP No. 890808). New York, New York: CPC Reports Online Database. 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

		Automobile showrooms and repair shops, warehouses, gas stations)
		<i>Manufacturing</i>
	M1	Light industrial uses (Ex. multistory lofts, one- or two- story warehouses, woodworking shops, repair shops, storage facilities)
	M1-5A, M1-5B, M1-5M, M1-6M	SoHo/NoHo- obsolete industrial buildings
	M2	Medium industrial areas. Older waterfront industrial areas.
	M3	Heavy industrial areas that generate noise, traffic, or pollutants (Ex. Power plants, solide waste transfer facilities, recycling plants, and fuel supply depots)
Special Permit Districts		<i>Commercial</i>
	C2	Commercial districts largely residential in character (Ex. Grocery stores, dry cleaners, drug stores, restaurants, clothing stores)
	C3	Waterfront recreational facilities (Ex. Bicycle shops, ice cream stores, public/private beaches)
	C4*	See above
		<i>Manufacturing</i>
	M1-5A, M1-5B, M1-6M	See above
	LMM (Lower Manhattan Mixed Use District)	Light industrial district within growing residential communitites with special rules
Not Permitted		<i>Commercial</i>
	C1	Commercial districts predominantly residential in character
	C5 (permitted in hotels)	Central commercial districts with continuous retail frontage for offices and retail establishments

*C4 - minimum 4 sq. ft. of waiting area required and use must be minimum 100 from nearest residence zone, except that where such establishment is less

** In C6-1, C6-2, C6-3, C6-4, minimum of 4 sq ft. waiting area required, and entrance must be minimum of 100 from nearest residence zone

Source: New York City Department of City Planning

Table III. Summary Table of Proposed Entertainment Venue Use Group Changes (February 8, 1990)

Use	Prior Regulations (before 2/8/90)	Proposed Regulations (as voted by CPC)	Adopted Board of Estimate (BOE) ⁶⁶ Modifications (as of 2/8/90)
Eating or	- as-of-right: C4, C6,	- as of right: C6*, C7, C8,	- as-of-right: C4*, C6**, C7, C8, M1

⁶⁶ The New York City Board of Estimates, a governmental body responsible for citywide budget and land-use matters, was abolished after August 27, 1990 after the United States Supreme Court ruled its voting principals unconstitutional. The Board served as a precursor to the current City Council with review, modification, and veto powers over CPC actions.

drinking establishments without restrictions on entertainment, capacity or dancing (Use Group 12)	C7, C8, and most M districts - special permits: C2, C3, M1-5A, M1-5B - not permitted in C1 or C5 (permitted in hotels in C5)	M1 (except M1-5A, M1-5B, M1-6M, M2, M3) - special permits: C2, C3, C4, M1-5A, M1-5B, M1-5M, M1-6M, LMM - not permitted in C1 or C5 (permitted in hotels in C5) * in C6-1, C6-2, C6-3, C4-6, minimum of 4 sq. ft. of waiting area required and entrance must be minimum of 100 from nearest residence zone	(except M1-5A, M1-5B, M1-5M, M1-6M), M2, M3 - special permit: C2, C3, C4*, M1-5A, M1-5B, M1-6M, LMM - not permitted in C1 or C5 (permitted in hotels in C5) * in C4, minimum 4 sq. ft. of waiting area required and use must be minimum 100 from nearest residence zone, except that where such establishment is less than 100 ft. from the nearest residence district a special permit may be granted in accordance with Section 73-244 ** In C6-1, C6-2, C6-3, C6-4, minimum of 4 sq ft. waiting area required, and entrance must be minimum of 100 from nearest residence zone
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Source: New York City Planning Commission, 1990

As evident in Tables II and III, businesses would be allowed in “C6, C7, C8 and most manufacturing districts”⁶⁷—meaning specific commercial areas with high bulk commercial uses were among the few places nightclubs could locate without an additional permit. Businesses located below residential buildings (C2), on waterfront recreational community facilities (C3), in regional commercial centers (C4), within multistory lofts mapped in SoHo/ NoHo (M1-5A and M1-5B), residential space in industrial buildings in Chelsea (M1-5M and M1-6M), and the Lower Manhattan Mixed Use Districts required additional special permits for business operation, whereas none were previously needed. In particular high-bulk commercial areas, mainly the outer business districts of Lower East Side and Chelsea neighborhoods of C6-1, C6-2, C6-3, and C6-4 Districts, establishments were mandated to provide at least four square feet of interior waiting area per person permitted under the occupant capacity. Extra space outside the entrance was compulsory to keep a minimum of 100 feet from the nearest residential district, the main

⁶⁷ Ibid.,7.

concern behind these changes being the community's protests against pedestrian congestion and sound levels. The resolution also includes "appropriate controls to minimize adverse effects on the character of the surrounding area, including, but not limited to, location of entrances and operable windows, provision of sound-lock vestibules, specification of acoustical insulation, maximum size of establishment, kinds of amplification of musical instruments or voices..."⁶⁸

Community Board Review, a series of neighborhood recommendations throughout Manhattan and the outer boroughs, are also considered within the document. The original text mandated that any places with dancing close by 12:30 AM weekdays and 2:00 AM Fridays and Saturdays would be within the jurisdiction of C4 and C6, and special permits required for Districts M1-5A and M1-5B. The Community Board Number 1, Manhattan, voted all dance clubs be required to file for special permits, given "Use Group 12 [large entertainment venues with dancing] are difficult to live near no matter what their hours of operation."⁶⁹ The Community Board Number 5, Manhattan, modified the resolution of cabarets with wording later echoed by Giuliani's mayoral campaign. It states, "that the abatement of *quality of life* infringements resulting from large discos and clubs being of primary concern, that the language...must include provisions for strict compliance with noise mitigation...provisions of sound lock vestibules, specification of acoustical insulation..."⁷⁰

The remainder of the report details the tensions between the Community Board and the New York Cabaret Association, in which Board members primarily benefit from the proposed changes, which disproportionately impacted the viability of Association businesses. Taking into account drastic court decisions including, but not limited to, expensive soundproofing

⁶⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 11.

installation, indoor waiting area construction, the opportunity costs of obtaining a special permit, and less as-of-right zoning for clubs with full operating hours, the representatives from the Association, the American Federation of Musicians, Local 802, nightclub directors, party promoters and planners, and musicians strongly, albeit unsuccessfully, challenged the amendments at a Public Hearing on June 21, 1989. A representative from the Association provided his justification on the grounds that, “few individuals will invest the considerable sums necessary for building new nightclubs while not knowing in advance whether or not a special permit will be granted and, if granted, then only for a maximum of three years.”⁷¹ Speakers often cited the potential of adverse economic effects on the nightclub industry as cornerstone to their arguments against requirements of special permits and an expansion of locations where such permits would be required. They asserted that the “time consuming, costly, and unpredictable” process of obtaining a three-year special permit would render the possibility for long term business investment impossible, as well as reduce the number of new entertainment ventures in the City.⁷²

Speakers at the Public Hearing also took objection to the stipulation requiring venues to secure the landlord’s consent before renewal of the special permit, stating that permission from the building owner often comes at a high cost to club owner.⁷³ Revisiting cases as The Paradise Garage and Danceteria, where Neighborhood associations and landlords have had contentious relationships with nightclubs, as well as examining the Manhattan Community Board testimonies, reveals the difficulties of reaching agreeable consensus. Evidence demonstrates Board members disliked the existence of afterhour businesses, therefore the power of community

⁷¹ Ibid., 18.

⁷² Ibid., 20.

⁷³ Ibid., 20.

organizations manifested in either stringent amendments or pressure on the landlord to hinder lease renewal.

In the final zoning resolution resolved by the City Planning Commission, all amendments passed despite night sector objections, except for those inhibiting the full operating hours of new as-of-right area clubs in all C6 Districts. The Board of Standards and Appeals, appointed to oversee the applications of special permits designated in commercial and manufacturing districts, commented, “In granting special permits, the Board is accorded broad discretion and may impose conditions on the special permit use.”⁷⁴ The restrictive language in the statement underscores an ominous future for New York City nightlife.

Requests for special zoning permits now necessitate filing a BZ application to the City of New York Board of Standards and Appeals (BSA). To date, the application includes a lengthy form encompassing: Department of Building Objections, Affidavit of Ownership, Statement of Facts, Statement of Findings, Certificate of Occupancy, Zoning Map, BSA Zoning Analysis Form, Tax Map, Radius Diagram/ Land Use Map, Photographs, Existing Condition Plans, List of Affected Property Owners and Tenants, and an additional City Environmental Quality Review (CEQR) Application.⁷⁵ The filing fees of special permits range from \$2,960.00 square feet or less of floor/ lot area to \$7,580.00 in excess of 100,000 square feet of floor area.⁷⁶ The CEQR Land Use and Environmental filing, which must be included with the BZ Special Permit filing, includes: Land Use Application, Land Use Supplemental Form, Attachment 2- Site Data, Attachment 3 – Project, Official Zoning Map, Tax Maps, Project Area Photographs, Survey, Zoning Analysis, Site Plan (used for presentations to the Commission), Statement of Findings,

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷⁵ “Checklist for BZ Applications,” *NYC Board of Standards and Appeals*, 1 Sept 2010, Web.

⁷⁶ “Schedule of Current Filing Fees Pursuant to §25-202 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York,” *NYC Board of Standards and Appeals*, 11 July 2011, Web.

Owner's Authorization, as well as a number of action specific attachments or project- based considerations and a non-refundable fee.

The action of imposing zoning sanctions on entertainment venues and mandating a lengthy and expensive process by which to approach a cultural enterprise, when before none existed, is oxymoronic to the uninhibited attributes clubs became famous for. The act of suppressing a culture is readily apparent, in spite of what the Commission ostensibly concurs, that "nightclubs and dancing establishments serve an important role in the cultural life of this city. They should not only be accepted, but encouraged. At the same time they should be good neighbors at appropriate locations."⁷⁷ To claim that dancing establishments were not only accepted, but encouraged, would be inaccurate. If anything, they were marginally tolerated. Nightlife ventures and overhead were already considerably exorbitant and clubs were not necessarily guaranteed to succeed, but compounded with community board approvals, specific construction requirements, short-term special permits and, later expanded upon, cabaret licenses, the stakes for founding new New York City clubs climbed much higher.

Zoning ordinances are powerful methods by which proprietors and city officials can exert control. By prioritizing some land-use activities in residential and industrial areas more important than others, the City Planning Commission, in coordination with the City Council, Mayor's office, local politicians, and Community Boards, are able to sculpt the municipality as they see fit. The interconnected nature of zoning recommendations and approvals through these regulatory systems prevent socially stigmatized or disenfranchised groups from intervening or amending proposals, as seen in the Public Hearing. Special Permits have historically been a sugarcoated method for the CPC to stifle certain land uses, without declaring them strictly off-

⁷⁷ Ibid., 30.

limits. This maneuver allows the CPC and Community Boards to appease potential resistance while exerting political leverage in any future land-use negotiations.⁷⁸

The 1990 Entertainment resolution, which since has not adopted any drastic amendments, continues to inconvenience the lives of New York venue owners. Navigating the city bureaucracy is what Alex Baumol, real estate broker of Sankeys NYC,⁷⁹ cites as particularly problematic. “The real challenge,” he explains, “is getting a raw, new space that isn’t licensed and requires build-out. That takes lots of money and time. And there’s a risk that the deal will never consummate. You go forward pending community board approval. The landlord says you don’t have anything until you get that, but the tenant wants to lock up the space. Both sides are right, but it’s a headache right off the bat. And no one is going to pay you commission until the CB [Community Board] approves.”⁸⁰ It took Andrew W.K., co-owner of Santos Party House, four years to fully establish his downtown club. He reflected, “It felt like you were going through a labyrinth. You had to prove yourself to the city, the [State Liquor Authority], community boards, and really, yourself that you could even do this. After that we had a lot more respect for how difficult it was. And actually running the club was comparatively easy.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ Laam Hae, *The Gentrification of Nightlife and the Right to the City: Regulating Spaces of Social Dancing in New York*, Hoboken, NJ: Tyler & Francis, 2012, 46.

⁷⁹ Sankeys is a twenty-year-old dance franchise founded in Manchester, England with 2013 roots in Manhattan. It has since closed.

⁸⁰ Billy Gray, “The Agony and the Ecstasy of Opening a NYC Nightclub,” *The Commercial Observer*, 5 Nov 2013, Web.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*



Figure VI. Nightclubs Establishments: Locations Past and Present

- Black markers indicate clubs prior to the 1990 Entertainment Amendments. Gray markers indicate the locations of present-day popular clubs.

Table IV. Present-Day Nightclub Locations and Zoning Districts

Nightclub	Street Address	Zoning District
1 Oak	453 West 17 th Street #1	C6-3 (Commercial As-of-right)*
Amnesia NYC	609 West 29 th Street	M1-6 (Manufacturing As-of-right)
Cielo	18 Little West 12 th Street	M1-5 (Manufacturing As-of-right)
The Griffin	50 Gansevoort Street	M1-5 (Manufacturing As-of-right)
Le Bain	848 Washington Street	M1-5 (Manufacturing As-of-right)
Marquee New York	289 10 th Avenue	C6-3 (Commercial As-of-right)*
Output	74 Wythe Avenue	M1-2 (Manufacturing As-of-right)
Pacha NYC	618 West 46 th Street	M2-4 (Manufacturing As-of-right)
Space Ibiza New York	637 West 50 th Street	M2-4 (Manufacturing As-of-right)
Verboten	54 North 11 th Street	M1-2 (Manufacturing As-of-right)

* In C6-1, C6-2, C6-3, C6-4, minimum of 4 sq ft. waiting area required, and entrance must be minimum of 100 from nearest residence zone

The zoning changes limiting which districts dance clubs are able to operate as-of-right also change real estate dynamics. Nightclubs typically avoid special-permit areas in favor of more desirable commercials and manufacturing zones, similar to present day clubs within the Meatpacking District or near the Williamsburg waterfront. Currently all of the most popular dance clubs in New York City such as Cielo, Pacha, 1 Oak, and Le Bain are in as-of-right districts. M1 and M2 districts eliminate the necessity for Community Board approval, but even the spaces themselves come with a fair share of caveats. Approval by these neighborhood associations is still required for cabaret and liquor license applications. The Alcohol Beverage Control Law mandates businesses applying for on-premises license notify their community board thirty days before filing to the State Liquor Authority. Proof of the notice is included with the application. The board is then able to submit an opinion to the SLA, which is recorded in the filing and used by the Authority to decide licenses.⁸² As these boards have considerable sway in the decision, they are often the biggest obstacles for potential venue owners. Additionally, even in the neighborhoods where new spaces are eligible for cabaret licenses, heavy competition for M1 and M2 development means the owners abstain from long-term fifteen year and twenty year leases in hopes of selling to a future developer.⁸³

Clashes between city government and nightlife grew by the end of the 1990s. A case against two venues owned by “King of New York Clubs”, Peter Gatien, further scandalized and increased hostility against Gotham nightlife. Accused of operating two major “drug bazaars” and arrested in 1996, the club magnate became a target for the United States and New York City drug

⁸² “Community Board Q&A,” *New York State Liquor Authority*, Web.

⁸³ Billy Gray, “The Agony and the Ecstasy of Opening a NYC Nightclub,” *The Commercial Observer*, 5 Nov 2013, Web.

enforcement. The Federal government charged Gatien with conspiring and distributing MDMA within his two establishments. The U.S. Attorney's Office aimed to jail Gatien for eleven years, punishment for the pills bought and sold in his clubs. While Gatien did not personally conspire with or receive profits from drug dealers on his premises, he also failed to prevent them, thus benefiting from the excess pool of customers. Michael Caruso, or "Lord Michael" as he was known in the downtown club scene, was an example of one of these vendors. The Staten Island transplant imported ecstasy tablets and rave culture from London and directly into places like The Limelight. From party invitations with "x" and "e" in direct reference to MDMA to serving 200-pill strong ecstasy punch at the DJ booth, Lord Michael's Future Shock Fridays were powered by flagrant drug use and techno music. Gatien turned a blind eye. Caruso, found guilty for wholesale drug trafficking and a stream of other felonies including home invasion and bank robbery, testified against Peter Gatien in exchange for leniency. In his plea he also describes "Emergency Room" parties at the Limelight, where party promoters role-played as doctors and wrote out fictitious "prescriptions" of cocaine and Ecstasy for club patrons inside a mock medical tent.⁸⁴

Given the circumstances, city officials easily cited the three undercover drug buys within New York City's Nuisance Abatement Law to close The Limelight and The Tunnel for up to a year. Sean Kirkham, the Drug Enforcement Administration confidential informant accountable for the club closures, claims that in his six years working for the DEA once a business is targeted it becomes impossible to prevent its shuttering. Kirkham explains that a DEA agent can phone a drug dealer to enter the premises of a business, make a transaction in the agent's presence, and

⁸⁴ Joseph P. Fried, "Clubs Offered Drugs, Witnesses Say," *The New York Times*, 8 Feb 1998, Web.

such an action is enough to close a venue.⁸⁵ It was suspected that this action was taken against the Limelight and the Tunnel to prevent Gatien from affording his defense. One of his four enterprises, Palladium, had to be sold to bear the expense of the trial. In 1997, it was purchased and demolished to make way for Palladium Athletic Facility by New York University.

Publicist for The Limelight and The Tunnel, Bruce Lynn, claims that attendance at these venues was from five thousand to ten thousand people every weekend. The sheer volume of traffic prevented thorough drug regulation. At the time of the investigation, Peter Gatien managed four clubs at the same time, meaning he was held with full criminal responsibility for what narcotic deals went on at any given time, whether he was present or otherwise. Michael Alig claims, “Every single club was saturated with Special K... crystal meth, ecstasy, and cocaine, but they didn’t have an evil, sinister eye-patched figurehead at the helm.”⁸⁶

Running concurrent with Gatien’s two-and-a-half year drug-racketeering investigation was yet another narcotics-related arrest—Michael Alig’s murder of drug dealer Angel Melendez. A financial drug dispute between the two men quickly escalated into Melendez violently shaking and choking Alig while pounding him against the wall, threatening to kill him. Robert “Freez” Riggs, a fellow Club Kid answered his pleas for help by grabbing a hammer and striking Melendez three times over the head. All three men were high on ketamine on the night of the crime. Alig remembers recently coming off a four-day binge of cocaine, Special K, heroin, and crystal meth. In a drug-induced haze, Alig’s and Riggs’ testimonies deviate: Alig claims to have poured Drano down Melendez’s throat and then proceeded to duct-tape his mouth closed. Riggs claimed to have filled a syringe with Drano and injected the fluid into Melendez’s veins. The corpse was left propped in the bathtub for a week until Alig finally reached an agreement with

⁸⁵ *Limelight*, Director Billy Corben, Magnolia Pictures, 2011, Film.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Riggs: after ordering twenty bags of heroin and buying a pair of butcher's knives from Macy's, they would dismember Melendez's body. Then together the Club Kids hauled and disposed the decomposing remains of their former drug dealer into the Hudson River.⁸⁷ Rumors circulated around Angel's disappearance throughout the nightlife sector. Alig himself even boasted about the event at dinner parties, but police were too focused on Peter Gaten and, given Alig's history of outrageous behavior, everyone assumed his role in the murder to be either a prank or "some kind of performance art."⁸⁸ When the body finally washed up in November 1996, Riggs immediately confessed and Alig was arrested in a New Jersey hotel. Both pleaded guilty to manslaughter and were sentenced to ten to twenty years in prison. Michael Alig had previously worked for Gaten as a party promoter, and stood to be a key witness in his trial until his arrest.⁸⁹

In his New York Post exclusive, he remembers the beginning ideology of his Club Kid lifestyle, "In the early days...it was really quite beautiful and positive. We helped the disillusioned and the disenfranchised believe in themselves—the gay kid from Iowa who didn't dare tell anyone for fear of being mocked."⁹⁰ But by the mid-1990s, Clubland—like its figurehead, Alig—had descended into darkness. Initially, Michael Alig asserted that at the beginning of his rise he had been anti-drug. Peter Gaten concurred that in the early years of their working relationship, Alig had stayed away from drug use. That was, until he began to dabble in

⁸⁷ Jonathan Van Meter. "Party Boy in a Cage." *New York Magazine*. 24 Oct. 2007. Web.

⁸⁸ Michael Alig. "Party Monster Relives Catfight That Ended in Murder." *The New York Post*. 12 May 2014. Web.

⁸⁹ Joseph P. Fried. "In Setback, Prosecutors Forced to Drop a Key Witness in a Club Owner's Drug Trial." *The New York Times*. 31 Jan. 1998. Web.

⁹⁰ Michael Alig. "Party Monster Relives Catfight That Ended in Murder." *The New York Post*. 12 May 2014. Web.

heroin.⁹¹ The provocateur quickly turned into a junkie, stating he landed himself in the hospital twice for nearly overdosing on a cocktail of heroin, cocaine, ecstasy, and ketamine.⁹² Michael Alig's headlining narrative is one echoed by the many artists and designers that lost themselves to drug addiction and mirrors the rapid demise of Manhattan nightlife. What was initially intended to be a decadent subculture founded on creativity, community, and social tolerance careened into dangerous self-indulgence.

Gatien won an innocent verdict against the Federal government, but he was found guilty in his next battle with the State of New York for tax evasion. His run-ins with the law set a precedent for the club owners at large, and also changed the way Gatien continued to operate his own businesses. During his five-year sentence under probation, he made an effort for a clean return to Clubland. Peter Gatien hired Robert Silbering as security monitor for the Tunnel. For the first time, businesses adopted strict measures such as scanning IDs to prevent underage attendees, employing undercover security guards, placing cautionary signs against drug use outside entrances, using metal detectors, and conducting full body searches in an effort to prevent nit-picky club closures. Deterred by the level of club security, patrons took their business elsewhere.⁹³

Once the subculture criminalized itself on national headlines, gentrification was rapidly eating into the fabric of nightlife. From 1996 to 2006, Manhattan experienced a 185% increase in housing prices.⁹⁴ New residents of Manhattan railed against the socially abhorrent and criminal

⁹¹ Chelsea Regan, "Peter Gatien On Michael Alig's Murder of Angel Melendez: He Was The Last Person I Thought Could Commit Murder," *UInterview*, 14 May 2014, Web.

⁹² Michael Alig, "Party Monster Relives Catfight That Ended in Murder," *The New York Post*, 12 May 2014, Web.

⁹³ *Limelight*, Director Billy Corben, Magnolia Pictures, 2011, Film.

⁹⁴ "Trends in New York City Housing Price Appreciation," *The Furman Center for Real Estate & Urban Policy*, 2008, Web.

behaviors—public drunkenness, vandalism, and street noise—that were readily attributed to clubs. Places such as The Tunnel, one of the last places Gatien fought to keep open, came under fire for these very complaints within the Chelsea neighborhood where it was located. In this community, these claims introduce the question of race issues. At The Tunnel, Hip-hop nights on Sunday was the most successful of weekly musical events. The patronage was predominantly African American, who walked from the subways through upper class neighborhoods to reach the club. According to the 10th Precinct, Hip-hop nights had a higher incidence of crime. It gained a reputation for violence and Peter Gatien was issued an ultimatum. Either he changed the night to a different theme—even shut down specifically on Sundays—or he would face the consequences of his patrons' behavior. Peter Gatien, who owed more than a million in back taxes on both Federal and State levels, recognized that no other genre in 1999 was as relevant as Hip-hop and that he could not afford to lose the money from Sunday admissions. The police inevitably claimed the nightclub. Gatien was forced to sell his remaining businesses and file for bankruptcy.⁹⁵

The aftermath of Gatien's trials reverberated throughout the after hours sectors. Due to negative exposure of owners and clientele alike, City Hall and other departments closely targeted club life. Proprietors of nightlife establishments accused the NYPD and city officials of harassment regarding noise and traffic violations. They claimed complaints only occurred after the advent of gentrification, in neighborhoods originally settled by club owners. A scene usually fraught with competition, owners started The New York City Cabaret Association in July 1996 to make amends with city departments.⁹⁶ David Herskovits, editor in chief of Paper Magazine—

⁹⁵ *Limelight*, Director Billy Corben, Magnolia Pictures, 2011, Film.

⁹⁶ Trip Gabriel, "Who's Hanging Together? Club Owners," *The New York Times*, 21 July 1996, Web, 12 April 2015.

a publication whose survival is contingent on nightlife advertising—, in part founded the trade group to address rising concerns of club closures. “Anything construed as trendy or hip that will attract too many people or the wrong kind of people has a real problem.” Herskovits claimed a stigmatization of nightclub attendees. City officials also offered their opinions. Despite club intentions to turn a profit, City Council member Kathryn E. Freed placed greater weight on the her constituents ability to sleep at night. Captain Thomas Lawrence of the 10th Precinct in Chelsea also cites pressure from the community board that leads to strict law enforcement. Captain Lawrence refuted the claims of harassment, citing NYPD’s more assertive measures as a way to show the community board their proaction.⁹⁷ The collaborative efforts of owners and city officials over neighborhood demands not only manifested in operational restrictions, but the marketing strategies towards wealthier patrons. Under fire for recurring instances of fights and killings, an inherently classist and racist language began to tinge improvements to the nightlife landscape. The Underground serves as an example of such shifts. As a club known for its concerning rates of street violence and a concentration of police monitoring, community leaders feared the crime surrounding the Underground would deter people from moving into the Union Square neighborhood, of which has experienced unprecedented economic growth concurrent to the park’s renovation. The Underground is among several clubs, including the World, 1018, The Tunnel, Studio 54, that insisted the police targeted businesses with racially mixed clientele. In an ongoing battle against the authorities, the World lost its liquor license. 1018 and The Tunnel shut its doors. Studio 54 changed its name to the Ritz and became a rock concert venue.⁹⁸ The Underground responded to pressure similarly. Managers hinted that it had intentions of drawing

⁹⁷ Trip Gabriel, “Who’s Hanging Together? Club Owners,” *The New York Times*, 21 July 1996, Web, 12 April 2015.

⁹⁸ Michael Frietag, “Neighbors Complain As Nightclub Crowds Turn to Violence,” *The New York Times*, 17 May 1989, Web, 10 April 2015.

“an older, more affluent crowd” by replacing its weekly Friday reggae nights in favor of pop music.⁹⁹ It soon changed its name to La Palace de Beauté. Under a different moniker, the newly “upscale” business catered to “young hip kids” and models.¹⁰⁰ Clubs like Studio 54 and the Underground serve as the beginning of a wider nightlife phenomenon focused on racially and socioeconomically exclusionary measures. Such solutions to crime emphasize more than simple neighborhood conflicts, but rather the effects of gentrification on the club world, both external and internal. Whitening and up-scaling dance culture demonstrates what Deborah Talbot, UK professor of emergence of nighttime economies, refers to as “spatial and subcultural closure.” The term describes the systematic sanitization of racial or ethnic minority contributions to nightlife. Once purged, the creative and experimental facets of the subculture also suffer, after surrendering much of its character and conforming to upper middle-class tastes. The cancellation of events attracting predominantly African American crowds such as reggae and hip-hop nights informs this conclusion. This process, observed in such places as the Underground, provides a critical narrative with which to observe all conflicts between nightlife figures and New York City government.¹⁰¹

Several cultural players as David Herskovits, Peter Gatien, and Michael Alig attested to the expansion of anti-nightlife procedures through Rudy Giuliani’s quality-of-life campaign. Thomas Onorato, who later worked as doorman for such parties as Misshapes and Motherfucker¹⁰², was fifteen when he first started attending The Limelight and Palladium. Onorato witnessed

⁹⁹ Michael Freitag, “Violence at Discotheque Mobilizes Neighborhood,” *The New York Times*, 8 Jan 1990, Web, 16 April 2015.

¹⁰⁰ William Glaberson, “Irritated Neighbors Are Pressuring Discos,” *The New York Times*, 7 September 1990, Web, 16 April 2015.

¹⁰¹ Laam Hae, *The Gentrification of Nightlife and the Right to the City: Regulating Spaces of Social Dancing in New York*, Hoboken, NJ: Tyler & Francis, 2012, Print.

¹⁰² Misshapes and Motherfucker are known to be the last Club Kid-like, dress-up parties of their era.

the rapid evolution of nightlife under Giuliani's mayoralty and states that smaller clubs suffered the effects of his newly instated cabaret laws the most. After national coverage of The Limelight started to wane, Onorato reports that the Mayor "went on a warpath" and aggressively policed all types of art or entertainment venues. "I watched tons of people who chose nightlife as their career get torn apart."¹⁰³

During Giuliani's 1994-2001 term, population in the city grew 9.4% from 1990 to 2000¹⁰⁴, crime was at an all-time low, but it was with an iron-fisted rule and punitive measures that these changes occurred. Rudy Giuliani's term marked the rise of the NYPD, a force that increased by 35%. Such scorched earth policies manifested itself on all levels of crime. In 1990, misdemeanor arrests and felony arrests rose to 70%. Robberies, motor vehicle theft, and homicides percentages all fell. Crime rates dropped in New York City more than rates in the entire United States.¹⁰⁵ In his public statement titled, 'The Next Phase of Quality of Life: Creating a More Civil City' Giuliani claimed, "Obviously murder and graffiti are two vastly different crimes. But they are part of the same continuum, and a climate that tolerates one is more likely to tolerate the other."¹⁰⁶ The scope of the mayor's crackdown spanned to the nightlife sector, where recreational drug use, drug trafficking, and also chronic disturbances ran rampant. Giuliani may have been the impetus in creating a safer New York, but he is also accused of criminalizing the city's nightlife.

¹⁰³ Andy Beta, "'You Look Like A Tourist': Manning the Door in '90s New York," *Red Bull Music Academy*, 7 January 2013, Web, 5 April 2015.

¹⁰⁴ "Population – New York City Department of City Planning," *Population – New York City Department of City Planning*, Web.

¹⁰⁵ David Francis, "What Reduced Crime in New York City," *The National Bureau of Economics Research*, Web.

¹⁰⁶ Rudolph Giuliani, "The Next Phase of Quality of Life: Creating a More Civil City," *The NYC Archives of Rudolph Giuliani*, 24 Feb 1998, Web.

Compared to Giuliani, his predecessors Ed Koch and David Dinkins (1990-1993) were significantly more reasonable with nightlife policing. When Mayor Koch took office in 1978, deindustrialization and depopulation in New York City was still underway. Nightlife establishments were one of the few industries well anchored as a tourist attraction in the city's economy.¹⁰⁷ In Mayor Dinkins' term, in spite of the neighborhood opposition to club presence, he did little to intervene and left most political action to the appropriate city agencies. The most notable action Dinkins took was after an arson attack killed 87 people at Happy Land Social Club in 1990. Two years earlier, the two-story Bronx venue had been ordered to vacate after its violation of building and fire safety codes, but a miscommunication between the local fire department and City Buildings Commissioner meant follow-up procedures never occurred. An adequate sprinkler system, light-up exits, and a number of other emergency equipment were not installed in the building. The tragedy motivated Dinkins to investigate the statuses of 176 other clubs with building violations.¹⁰⁸ He quickly increased the number in his nightlife task force, a team originally assembled by the Koch Administration after a similar fire-related tragedy in 1988. The task force's intentions were straightforward: to search neighborhoods for illegal after-hours clubs and to shut them down. Through Dinkins' efforts, the team found 1,391 entertainment venues and padlocked 505. The Mayor also pushed through more stringent laws penalizing illegal club landlords. Thirteen weeks later, Dinkins demonstrated that the project had achieved its mission and reduced task force teams back down to ten. He claimed that maintaining

¹⁰⁷ Laam Hae, *The Gentrification of Nightlife and the Right to the City: Regulating Spaces of Social Dancing in New York*, Hoboken, NJ: Tyler & Francis, 2012, Print.

¹⁰⁸ Ralph Blumenthal, "Fire in Bronx; 87 Die in Blaze At Illegal Club; Police Arrest Ejected Patron; Worst New York Fire Since 1911," *The New York Times*, 26 Mar 1990, Web, 19 April 2015.

the expanded force would be a “waste of resources.”¹⁰⁹ We see that even in extreme nightlife emergencies, Dinkins’ treatment towards venues was within reason. Giuliani’s, on the other hand, was a direct attack.

Richard Goldstein’s 1997 article, “Whose Quality of Life Is It, Anyway?” highlights the citizens that take the brunt of Giuliani’s campaign. Despite New York’s rectified reputation, Blacks, Hispanics, homosexuals, and the lower class have been continually targeted and implicated in crime by the NYPD.¹¹⁰ Nightlife business owners and patrons are another segment of the city that Giuliani has fought a battle against. His mayoralty was characterized by penalizing lower-level crimes in order to reclaim public spaces. During his eight-year administration, Giuliani revived the prohibition-era cabaret law—initially intended by Mayor Jimmy Walker to restrict interracial mixing occurring in uptown dance clubs—to curtail the ill effects of nightlife in said public spaces. The New York City Administrative Code, Chapter 2: Licenses, Subchapter 20: Public Dance Halls, Cabarets, and Catering Establishments states that a “Cabaret” by definition is “any room, place or space in the city in which any musical entertainment, singing, dancing, or other form of amusement is permitted in connection with the restaurant business or the business of directly or indirectly selling to the public food or drink, except eating or drinking places, which provide incidental musical entertainment, without dancing, either by mechanical devices, or by not more than three persons.”¹¹¹ The mandate requires that specifically zoned “cabaret” businesses apply for license renewal every two years for a fee of up to \$1,300.¹¹² This license is entirely different than such zoning ordinances

¹⁰⁹ James McKinley, “Dinkins Reduces Task Force on Safety of Social Clubs,” *The New York Times*, 30 June 1990, Web, 19 April 2015.

¹¹⁰ Richard Goldstein, “Whose Quality of Life Is It, Anyway?” *Village Voice*, 18 Feb. 1997: 38, Print.

¹¹¹ “Cabaret (073),” *NYC Consumer Affairs*, NYC: Department of Consumer Affairs, 1 Jan 2014, Web,

¹¹² *Ibid.*

discussed earlier in the chapter. Given the influence of community boards on government-issued licenses, obtaining an additional cabaret license on top of a liquor license often proved to be impossible. Enacting this 1926 law legitimized the aggressive oversight of nightclubs by the nightlife inspection city agents.

In 1995, Multi-Agency Response to Community Hotspots (MARCH), a cooperative effort between FDNY, NYPD, DOB, and DCA agencies, was created to make routine, unexpected nightlife inspections throughout New York City. Unlike its former model, Mayor David Dinkins' Social Club Task Force, which aimed to regulate unlicensed businesses for the purpose of safety concerns in the aftermath of a social club arson, Giuliani's new team monitored both legal and illegal establishments.¹¹³ The Task Force became notorious for what some referred to as "creative ticketing,"¹¹⁴ or rather an overly critical interpretation of the law. Such infractions could include an ice scooper touching an ice cube, an obstructed window view, fruit flies on cocktail fruits, or the advertising of bands on power line poles.¹¹⁵ This 'cabaret' edict also effectively maintains (as it is still in practice) that it is illegal for any business owner to have group dancing in his or her establishment without a license, meaning that even the accidental rhythmic moving of four people could result in fines and closures. Between August 1996 and August 1998, the Task Force closed 50-60 nightclubs.¹¹⁶ Considering the rate of club closures yearly since Giuliani's term, often for minor infractions, the number of businesses holding

¹¹³ Laam Hae, *The Gentrification of Nightlife and the Right to the City: Regulating Spaces of Social Dancing in New York*, Hoboken, NJ: Tyler & Francis, 2012, Print.

¹¹⁴ William Bastone, 1997, Quality of (Night) Life Issues, *Village Voice*.

¹¹⁵ Laam Hae, "Dancing in New York City: The Cabaret Law, Alternative Cultures, and Neoliberal Urbanism," *Intersection of Rights and Regulation*, 1 Jan. 2007, 145-47.

¹¹⁶ Laam Hae, *The Gentrification of Nightlife and the Right to the City: Regulating Spaces of Social Dancing in New York*, Hoboken, NJ: Tyler & Francis, 2012, Print.

cabaret licenses have since dropped to 179 in 2008 from 12,000 in 1960.¹¹⁷ One of these places included Twilo, a Chelsea venue with an invalid basement assembly permit. This was not the first time the club had run-ins with the law. After a patron overdosed on ecstasy, the Giuliani administration had been after Twilo since November 1998. Twilo frequenters were unfazed by the building violations and cited it as a thinly veiled way to force the club out of business. One customer took to Twilo's online messaging platform, calling the cited infractions "excuse to ensure that there are no bumps in the road in Giuliani's Disney-gentrification plan to have NYC become an ultraconservative suburb."¹¹⁸

In Giuliani's 'quality of life' campaigning, nightclubs needed to be a necessary target. The sterilization of public spaces for the purposes of global capital real estate investment by the city government added to the effects of gentrification.¹¹⁹ Taking into consideration the meaning of real estate values on the economic viability of a city, 'a safer city' meant that Giuliani pushed along a neoliberal agenda towards a gentrified city, in order to attract tourists and appease inhabitants. Dinkins may not have taken an aggressive stance on nightlife, but both Giuliani and Dinkins administrations have steadily sanitized New York City. Dinkins razed several squatted tenements in the Lower East Side and evicted all the homeless residents of Tompkins Square Park in January 1990.¹²⁰ Upon his election, Giuliani took to accelerating the decline of nightlife.

¹¹⁷ "Cabaret (073)" *NYC Consumer Affairs*, NYC: Department of Consumer Affairs, 1 Jan. 2014, Web.

¹¹⁸ Eric Lipton, "City Closes Dance Club Over Problems With Permits," *The New York Times*, 7 May 2001, Web, 19 April 2015.

¹¹⁹ Laam Hae, "Dancing in New York City: The Cabaret Law, Alternative Cultures, and Neoliberal Urbanism," *Intersection of Rights and Regulation*, 1 Jan. 2007, 145-47.

¹²⁰ Judith Halasz, "Get Back to Work," *The Bohemian Ethos: Questioning Work and Making a Scene on the Lower East Side*, New York: Routledge, 2015, 139-140, Print.

In his 1998 press release, titled ‘The Next Phase of Quality of Life: Creating a More Civil City,’ Giuliani reflects upon his contributions in the city’s drastic turn-around: “The sum of all the quality of life initiatives is that an increasing number of people are optimistic about the City’s future... that’s why more and more people want to live in New York City.”¹²¹ Yet with the migration of new middle-class residents, in combination with overarching neoliberal city policies and the nightlife’s own self-destructive tendencies, the thriving subcultural milieus of creatives once attributed to Clubland have all but disappeared.

Conclusion

Throughout New York City history, location and culture have always had strong ties to one another. With its outlandish characters and colorful costumes, Downtown Manhattan and 1980s nightlife subculture are no exception. However, the self-destructiveness of the Clubland lifestyle not only echoes through the demise of nightlife subculture as a whole, but also can be observed in the physical transformation of the city. The rise of creative bohemia through the rubble of Lower Manhattan contributed to a fast-paced legacy of fashion, music, and film. As the decade progressed, nightlife began to suffer the consequences of its wild and aestheticized lifestyle. Its demise happened quickly, assisted by the ravages of New York’s AIDS epidemic, community unrest, newspaper scandals, zoning amendments, and mayoral interventions.

The Lower East Side today teems with commercial activity. Trendy sidewalk cafes, high-end boutiques, and tastefully decorated restaurants line next to each other as people jostle one another on the narrow sidewalks. The building on the corner, The World—former incubator of the Club Kid phenomenon, betrays nothing of its untamed past on its luxury condominium

¹²¹ Rudolph Giuliani, “The Next Phase of Quality of Life: Creating a More Civil City,” *The NYC Archives of Rudolph Giuliani*, 24 Feb 1998, Web.

façade. Of course, the bustle of this Manhattan neighborhood comes to no surprise to the plethora of pedestrians and window shoppers, but little to their knowledge; the ground they walk on was originally rubble belonging to the seediest part of New York City. It is the same rubble, of ripped up sidewalks and crumbling tenement buildings, which the political creatives occupied less than forty years ago. Unrecognizable in its upscale state, its previous residents would no doubt revolt in the irony of its drastic transformation. Yet it is worth considering that these artists, musicians, and Club Kids are the ones responsible for the commercial and residential urban revitalization enjoyed today. The creative culture that preceded this neighborhood's changes planted the very notion of a "gritty" and a bohemian way of life, the biggest draw to those who want to experience the Lower East Side, whether they intended to or not. "Authenticity", or "avant-garde", or "experimental" are expressions that have been repurposed from a largely artistic-activist movement into a commoditized lifestyle, abetted by the rise of cultural consumption. The Lower East Side is no longer an area of squatters, working class, or homeless citizens, but of upper-middle class residents that owe the livability of their neighborhood to pro-gentrification city policies catered to bourgeois ideals.

Hardly any traces of the vibrant past remain. Iconic venues such as Limelight, the Tunnel, Area, and Palladium have all evolved for a tamer New York, converted into upscale storefronts, dormitories, and luxury apartments.¹²² Yet there exists a difficulty in mourning the liminality of Manhattan downtown. While the death of 1980s youth counter culture synonymous with venue closures contributed to Manhattan's demise as the premier party capital and heart of an eclectic bohemia, it is also credited to the city's climb out of decrepitude and to plunging crime rates. New York may not be what it once was, but its drastic metamorphosis has arguably

¹²² Matthew Perpetua, "Iconic NYC Music Venues, Then and Now," *Buzzfeed*, 22 July 2013, Web.

kept the city alive. Thirty years ago, downtown was a place where crime proliferated and even New York locals feared. If the city itself were to survive, one could argue it needed to make itself attractive and more livable to potential investors. Unfortunately, this meant a departure from the core ideology that drove the 1980s subculture. Commerciality and fame that came to nightlife and its neighborhoods ultimately ended the unconventional characteristics that made it so unique. Is Downtown dead? Changing New York's reputation from a delinquent metropolis to a global city and the parallel metamorphosis of sanitized nightlife signifies a combustible culture at its end—clubbed to death.

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