

Open Storefront Directory: Interviewing NYC Residents about Storefront Businesses

Introduction

Business turnover is constant in every neighborhood in New York: bakeries replace Mexican restaurants; shoe stores replace butcher shops. In his essay, “City Limits,” Colson Whitehead wrote about this change as a natural condition of New York: “No matter how long you have been here, you are a New Yorker the first time you say, That used to be Munsey’s, or That used to be the Tic Toc Lounge. That before the internet cafe plugged itself in, you got your shoes resoled in the mom-and-pop operation that used to be there. You are a New Yorker when what was there before is more real and solid than what is here now.”

Let us call this Whitehead’s rule: the only thing constant in New York is change. The corollary to this rule is that no neighborhood business is permanent. But what if the experience of living in a neighborhood—the experience of that very change—has itself changed? With the ease of ordering online and the Covid-19 pandemic, have New Yorkers begun approaching the storefronts in their neighborhoods differently?

To answer this question, in August, 2022, one of our researchers, William Swett, interviewed 18 residents living around two blocks of Manhattan about how the storefronts in their neighborhoods had changed during their lifetimes. One block was in the Upper West Side, between Columbus and Amsterdam, from 74th to 75th street. The other block was in Central Harlem, between Frederick Douglass Boulevard and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, from 133rd to 135th street. Below, we describe the results of these interviews.

In addition, Ignacio Lopez Gaffney and Jeremy Ben-Meir, the two other researchers, examined these neighborhoods using a database of storefront businesses in New York City from 2010 - 2021. Highlights from this analysis are also included below. See further below for more information about the database and how we chose the interview locations.

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Interviews

I spoke with Bill, (65, Black) who has lived in Central Harlem his whole life, under scaffolding on the corner of 133rd street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard. He pointed out storefronts in the distance, as if he were a land surveyor atop the scaffolding; he seemed to have a proprietary feeling about the whole place. His memory of storefronts went back many decades, and he stored it in his pointer finger.

This used to be an auto insurance place. Prior to that, it was a mom and pop supermarket. Right next door, it was a little restaurant, Leroy’s Heroes. There on the corner there used to be a number joint.

Elizabeth (60, white) has lived on the Upper West Side for thirty years. We spoke on Columbus Avenue between 74th and 75th about the businesses that used to be there.

This was Nancy's Wine For Food. It was one of the fancy stores that opened at that time. Under here was a club. Memphis. It was very loud at night. This restaurant has been here the whole time. That was an Indian restaurant. These weren't here. There was a little restaurant on the next block, called Big Apple. But little. It was on two floors.

One of the downsides of losing so many mom and pop shops, Bill said, was that many of them provided credit to neighborhood residents.

With the absence of the mom and pop stores, you can't get credit or anything from these stores. With mom and pop stores, you can go in, you don't have the money. "Okay, come back at the end of the week when you get the money." They let you go with it. They don't happen now. That's one of the things that is bad about the change.

Elizabeth thought that the loss of many of the old stores in the Upper West side was tied to the rising rents.

It became a neighborhood where nobody can afford to move into it. If you're lucky like me and have a stabilized apartment, you stay. But what they didn't do was to create an atmosphere where people stay in this neighborhood.

Yet neither Bill nor Elizabeth seemed to think anything could or should be done to get those businesses back.

Bill: *I don't think you can do anything about the changes. Change is gonna happen. They say get with it or get lost.*

Elizabeth: *We missed them, but you really had to get used to it.*

If anything, the overriding feeling they expressed was one of uncertainty. Bill describes a feeling of not really knowing where he is, as if he is still looking for the businesses that are no longer there.

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I get lost. I get confused. Because I'm like, "When did that get there?" Then I'm thinking back, thinking back, to what used to be there.

Many younger people walking down the street ignored me when I asked them to be interviewed. One man asked me what the interview was for and when I said "businesses in your neighborhood" he turned around and walked away, as if I were a salesman.

One of the exceptions to this trend was Eric (14, Black), who has lived in Central Harlem his whole life. Though his lifetime has been short thus far—he is only fourteen years old—he did share one observation, which other residents in Central Harlem corroborated. There has been a lot of recent development on 125th street — there is now a Nike, Chipotle, Just Salad, Burlington, Victoria's Secret, and H&M.

According to our data, in 2015, at least nine new big box stores began operating on 125th between

Frederick Douglass and Adam Clayton Powell. Tiffany (23, Black), who moved to Harlem from the South Bronx in 2009, said this was a good thing.

We used to go to 34th, 42nd, 86th, to get things that now we can go right to 125th and get.

A 2015 New York Post article echoed this sentiment: “Gentrification of 125th Street may sadly displace some venerable businesses — but longtime residents can look forward to having better goods and services that were for too long denied them.”¹

As the New York Post describes, there seems to be a sentiment among Central Harlem residents that gentrification is irreversibly altering their neighborhood. While some, including Tiffany, are happy to enjoy the newfound goods and services, Kenneth (56, Black), a longtime resident of Central Harlem, was skeptical that this change was all good. He highlighted exactly what had been lost due to gentrification around 125th.

It’s becoming more commercialized. It used to be a lot of mom and pops, now we see more and more mainstream businesses coming in.

The main thing is that they have pushed a lot of the street vendors of 125th street. And they started bringing in these more mainstream [businesses] like H&M.

The increase in chain stores was also a concern on the Upper West Side. Jason (30, white), who moved to New York from Los Angeles in early 2019, said that even in the short period of time he had spent in the neighborhood, he had noticed some changes.

There’s just a lot more vacancies now since Covid. It seems like every other place is vacant or for rent. And also a lot of the big box chains have come in. It’s less local.

¹ <https://nypost.com/2015/12/29/the-changes-coming-to-harlems-125th-st-make-it-a-hot-spot/>

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Based on our data, the shift from local stores to big box stores that Jason commented on likely occurred before Jason even moved to the neighborhood. In 2018, there were six big box stores between Amsterdam and Columbus, from 72nd to 79th, compared with only two big box stores in 2012; there wasn’t an increase after 2018.

Between 2010 and 2020, according to our data, the vacancy rate between Amsterdam and Columbus, from 72nd to 79th, reached a low in 2017 and has increased since then, especially in 2020. Jason was optimistic that the vacancy issue, in particular, would be resolved in the future. Arianna (28, white), who also lives on the Upper West, agreed.

I moved [here] in January 2021. It was a lot of available retail spaces. I think a lot of them are filling up.

Newcomers, though they were quick to acknowledge storefront vacancy and the increase in chain stores, recalled fewer of the actual businesses that had become vacant or been replaced. Jason clearly had a sense that the neighborhood he had moved into changed because of the pandemic, but he didn’t have the years of knowledge to say exactly how.

I can't think of particular names, but coffee shops, cafes, little places that I used to go to, got shut down.

I spoke to Jasmine (28, Black) on a Sunday morning outside her church in Central Harlem. As we spoke, she greeted the people who passed by, just as she had greeted me, before I asked her to be interviewed. She attributed vacancies in Harlem to rising rents and the more general trend of gentrification. She gave the example of a pizza place, Olga's, which had operated for 30 years in Hamilton Heights.

By me during the pandemic, one of the pizza shops closed down. That pizza shop had been there probably over 30 years. And it got to the point where the neighborhood was willing to bring it back. They started a GoFundMe. But she [Olga] decided to retire. Mainly because she's out here selling a slice of pizza for two, two fifty. When rent is 10,000 a month, do you know how many slices of pizza you can get yourself with that?

That pizza place is still vacant. I'd say that one of the downsides to all of this is how many vacant storefronts there are. To make the neighborhood look lively, they actually implemented this new thing where they're putting art from local artists in the windows. Sad that there's a need to do that, but it's great for the local artists.

Jasmine was describing an increase in vacancy around her home in Hamilton Heights due to the pandemic. According to our data, there was also a 4% increase in vacancy from 2019 to 2020 in the area of Central Harlem between Adam Clayton Powell and Frederick Douglass, from 125th to 137th.

Jasmine's sense is that the businesses that are moving in now are of a different kind.

Now there are more smoke shops than there ever were before.

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You know how downtown they have Starbucks on every block? That's how we are with smoke shops.

It used to be a safe place where businesses would know you. As a kid, everybody knew everybody. You still got a little bit of that culture left. The businesses, a lot of them have shut down, burned down. The pandemic took a lot of stuff.

Right now I feel like they're just trying to finish us off with the smoke shops and fast food on every corner.

She acknowledges Whitehead's rule: New York is a city where the constant is change. *Walking through*

New York is like: huh, there used to be a building here, now it's a giant pit.

Yet Jasmine seems to think that there is something especially pernicious about the changes happening in Harlem, and what they might mean for her and the other Black residents.

I like to say Harlem will always be Harlem. The spirit of us is still here, so it can't exactly be moved. But it just makes it hard... Whether New York will reach a place where it's too expensive for anybody.

I think they will continue to try to push us out, but Harlem will continue to fight back. The people who live here in Harlem nowadays may not have been here for forever, but their spirit is strong... gentrify us all you want, it's not gonna stop. As long as there's a little bit for us to fight for, we'll always fight for it.

People mentioned restaurants and bars often. Eileen (80, White), who has lived in the Upper West Side on-and-off since the 60s, said that although many shops have closed down, restaurants have survived. According to our data, the number of restaurants between Amsterdam and Columbus, from 72nd to 79th, has stayed constant between 2013 and the start of the pandemic.

There are I think six restaurants on 74th street, and on the other block on Columbus there are a couple. I would say preponderantly, it's restaurants that are successful.

Outside a bar on 132nd and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, I spoke to a group of three men sitting in folding chairs. The bar's windows were blacked out and there were no signs, except for a red awning, which said Just Lorraine's Place 2 in white letters. James (74, Black) began to reminisce about the restaurants and bars that used to populate Harlem. He said that Just Lorraine Place 2 was "one of the last Black bars" standing. He speculated that some bars had been replaced by upscale, African bistros. He nodded to a place on the corner, as he said it.

On every corner at one time in Harlem there was a bar.

At one time they had a lot of good soul food restaurants up in Harlem.

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I spoke to Ali (49, Black), the owner of the bistro on the corner. He has lived in Central Harlem for 24 years. He explained the changes in the restaurant world that he had noticed.

When I first moved here...not a lot of restaurants. Many people, when they [were] celebrating...they traveled to go downtown. Celebration, birthdays, graduation. At that time, Harlem... not a lot of good restaurants. But right now...a lot of good restaurants. Every avenue has a good restaurant.

According to our data, since 2010 there has been little change in the number of restaurants or bars on Adam Clayton Powell or Frederick Douglass, between 125th and 137th. If there was such a change in the number of bars, as Ali and James suggest, it likely happened over a decade ago.

Barbara ("well over 50," white) has lived in the Upper West Side for forty years. She described to me the Upper West Side that she knew in the early 80s, as she watered plants outside her apartment building.

I moved here in the early 80s. It was really a drug, kind of infested area, and you didn't want to take the stroller around. It was very difficult to be here. Even though it's an artsy neighborhood, a lot of actors, a lot of painters, singers, it was a lot of drugs. Probably started changing when the first building on Columbus and 79th that went up. It was the first tall building. It wasn't a skyscraper. Probably had about 20 floors. A lot of people in the neighborhood were against it. They totally revolted. The city got involved

and it went up anyway. That's when it started changing.

Like Jasmine, she thinks that people knew their local businesses better in the past.

The Last Wound Up was very popular for children. I would take my children there. And he had everything that... kids between 3 and 10, 12, would enjoy.

People sort of knew each other... 'hi how are you, how are the kids,' and it certainly was not as crowded as it is now.

But Barbara did not express nearly the same level of concern about the future of her neighborhood, as Jasmine had. While acknowledging the loss of mom and pop shops and the high business turnover, Barbara's final conclusion was that at least the Upper West Side was not as bad as the Upper East.

So the change is, it went from a very friendly neighborhood, everyone kind of [knew] each other, to a much more kind of...looser crowd. Still not East Sidey. Which is good.

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Sitting next to James outside of Just Lorraine's Place 2 was a man who introduced himself to me as Iceman (66, Black). He was smoking a cigar. He remembers when Harlem began to change—twice. First, there was the period of white flight. Now, there is a period of gentrification.

I remember the white folks ran from here, in the early 60s, 70s. They got the hell out of here.

I remember they started fixing up Seventh avenue and I knew the white folks were coming back. They were tired of commuting, two, three hours each away in the suburbs. You know, Westchester, Rockland, Suffolk, Nassau county.

Just by the way Iceman describes the neighborhood, James explained to me, you can tell he has lived there a long time. Many older people still refer to Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard as Seventh Avenue because they were alive before it was renamed.

People still get confused with 7th avenue and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. But basically you hear people say Seventh avenue: all the younger people say Adam Clayton Powell boulevard; the older people say 7th avenue...

As James continued to talk for many minutes, a third man in the group, who was sitting across the sidewalk from the bar, said, "James doesn't talk to us this much!" I asked the man if he could remember anything about the period James and Iceman were describing. He laughed at me.

I have no memory. I was locked up for my whole youth.

The oral history that James and Iceman had begun sharing with me was unavailable to this third man.

Incarceration had prevented him from having long-term memories of his neighborhood.

James began telling me about the restaurant, Well's Chicken and Waffles, which had, for decades, been in the spot where Just Lorraine's Place 2 now stood. According to James, Nat King Cole had his wedding reception at Well's; Bumpy Ellsworth Johnson, a Black gangster portrayed in the 2007 movie *American Gangster*, died of a heart attack at Well's, while eating chicken; the list goes on.

Well's Chicken and Waffles. You came out after a drink. You go to the bar, drink, suddenly you're getting hungry, it's now 3, 4 o'clock in the morning, and you want something to eat. The bar was famous for chicken and waffles. They... originally started chicken and waffles.

This was Count Basie's bar over there. And Doug E. Fresh the rapper later on, he bought it. And that was his place. And then you got Small's paradise, on 135th street. Will Chamberlain's Small Paradise. That's where the International House of Pancakes is now.

Based off Google Maps and according to our data, the IHOP closed in 2020.

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The building over there, right across the street from this one. That was the Williams Institutional Church. They'd been there for years and years and years. They used to have the gospel singers come up. And then you got Abyssinian church. That also housed the first black movie theater in Harlem.

I usually avoided interviewing people who had lived in New York less than a year because I suspected they would have clichéd views of the city and little understanding of its history. Guy was an architect, though, and 56 years old, so I thought he might have some wisdom to share about the buildings on the Upper West Side. In fact, he said little about architecture. He liked New York for its work ethic, which far exceeded that of Miami, where he had lived before, and he liked the neighborhood for its people and its history.

I love that they're preserving everything. All the scaffolding here is proof.

I asked if he thought that the neighborhood had changed. Did it look the same?

He cited Whitehead's rule.

I would probably say about the same. I mean it's New York. Huge change is the baseline.

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Conclusion

The quotes that we excerpted in this report represent a small portion of the interviews we conducted. Not everyone we interviewed was included in the report, and many ideas and observations made by people who were included in this report were left out for reasons of length. Our hope, in presenting the materials in this way, was to highlight the changes to storefronts that people in Central

Harlem and the Upper West Side think about most: vacancy, gentrification, and the displacement of local businesses.

Local businesses that last many years serve a purpose for residents, which is not captured in the cost of their products. They tie a group of people to a place; they serve as repositories of long-term memory, which incarceration erases like amnesia; and they function as cultural institutions, similar to museums or theaters, in defining a neighborhood's feel. When neighborhoods lack big-brand shops which are available in richer and whiter neighborhoods, as was the case in Central Harlem for many years, it is no surprise that some residents are happy when these shops finally decide to open nearby. But that does not make the loss of local businesses any less great. Most local business may not sell items on credit or be as connected to the residents of the neighborhood as they once were, but they continue to provide unrecognized benefits that chain stores cannot replicate.

Whitehead's rule that change is New York's constant is only true at times. Yes, the record shop became the local shoe store decades ago. And more recently, the local shoe store became Adidas. But if the Adidas store becomes a pick-up center for online orders (as one resident mentioned to me is happening downtown), or, more significantly, if Harlem has fewer Black-owned stores, a new, possibly more harmful kind of change is occurring. Whitehead's rule no longer applies. Or, at least, we need an updated version of the rule: the only constant in New York City is change, except once in a while, when the nature of the change changes, possibly for the worse.

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About the Interviews

We considered a few different ways of getting in touch with residents. We posted in Next Door, a neighborhood-based social media; we tried to contact a Business Improvement Districts in order to ask them to put us in touch with residents. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, we found that the easiest way to speak with New Yorkers about their neighborhoods was by going to them. I (William Swett) stood on the blocks asking people if they would share their observations about neighborhood businesses. Many did, and, after asking for permission, I recorded the interviews.

We chose the block from 74th to 75th street, between Columbus Avenue and Amsterdam Avenue, because it had the 5th highest average vacancy rates between 2010 and 2021 in all of Manhattan, according to our data; we chose the block from 133rd to 134th between Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard and Frederick Douglass because it had the 6th lowest average vacancy rate during that same period. (In fact, when we visited both locations in August 2022, the Harlem block seemed to have more vacant storefronts.) In addition, in Harlem, we conducted interviews on 132nd street.

We had considered a few different ways to pick the blocks. A random number generator initially seemed to be the most impartial method, but it had the drawback of generating blocks without storefronts (e.g. Lincoln Center). We also did not want to pick the blocks with the absolute highest or lowest vacancy rates, since they were unusual blocks: a block near Times Square had the highest average vacancy rate in Manhattan, but it is hardly residential; a block in lower Manhattan had the lowest, meanwhile, but it is also one of the smallest blocks in Manhattan, and has very few businesses.

In addition to their notably high and low vacancy rates, there were also other reasons to pick the blocks in the Upper West Side and Harlem. Storefront vacancy on the Upper West Side has received a lot of media attention, as has gentrification in Harlem. That is not to say that we focused our interviews on either vacancy or gentrification. Rather than prompt residents to speak about these topics, we decided to see what topics arose spontaneously by asking them to recall memories of storefronts. Our focus, in conducting these interviews, was on gaining a sense of how residents actually understand the changes to their neighborhoods, rather than merely describing empirically how they have changed using our database.



About the Data

Businesses in New York City need to be licensed and inspected by the government to operate. We used the addresses and dates recorded in these licenses and inspections to create the Open Storefront Directory. It is the first database of every storefront business in New York City from 2010 - 2021, built using only publicly available data.

Our method, though unique, means that our database ranges in quality. We have good data on restaurants, for instance, which are inspected and graded annually by the City's Department of Health. Our data on clothing stores, on the other hand, is inconsistent. Clothing stores are neither licensed nor inspected by the city; the only available proof of their existence is a certificate from the Department of Finance authorizing them to charge taxes.

Even more challenging is the fact that our database includes many businesses, which are licensed, but do not operate in storefronts. These are primarily home businesses and some doctors' offices. In addition to using some of the funding for conducting interviews and transcribing them, we also used the funding from the Harvard Mellon Urban Initiative Grant in January, 2022, to maintain the website for the database and acquire additional data. We have also spent many hours brainstorming how to address issues with the data, and will continue to do so. For a detailed account of how we created the database, along with some of its limitations, see our website's about [section](#).