

Will Harlem lose its soul?

PHOTO

The death of an eatery.

BY WILL BREDDERMAN / NEW YORK
SUNDAY, AUGUST 3, 2008



Assistant manager of Manna's, Harlem native Philip Bulgar, behind the counter.

Like most other Harlem eateries, Manna's Eighth Avenue location presents little to look at: it's a standard two-floor affair, with the food on the first level and seating upstairs. The restaurant occupies the southernmost end of a low-rise building between 125th and 126th Streets: a red-brick edifice running almost the entire length of the block's western edge and comprising several other establishments, all local businesses.

Just inside the entrance hangs an ornate crystal chandelier, a furnishing somewhat at odds with Manna's predominantly utilitarian aesthetic. Once entering, patrons immediately pick up their Styrofoam clamshell carton and browse the steaming trays on the pair of glass-sheltered buffets.

Representing a broad cross section of the traditional Afro-American palate, the cuisine here includes Collard Greens Seasoned w/ Turkey Meat, Creamy Rich Baked Macaroni & Cheese, Corn & Okra 'n' Tomato Sauce, Manna's Specialty B.B. Que Spare Ribs, Lima Beans Seasoned w/Ham Hocks, Honey B.B. Que Chicken Wings, Manna's Homemade Peach Cobbler w/Homemade Crust, Southern Style Fried Chicken, Sweet Plantains, Crab Cakes, and Jamaican Style Rice & Beans, among other entrees.

Having made their selections, customers carry their food to the long stainless steel checkout counter, where Assistant Manager Philip Bulgar weighs and rings up their meal at the rate of \$5.49 a pound, typically exchanging a few casual remarks in the process. Then they head upstairs, passing the two awards displayed proudly on the wall above the landing: the twin distinctions of "Best Soul Food Buffet" according to the New York Press's Best of Manhattan 2004, and The Village Voice's "Voted Superior Soul Food" from the paper's Best of NYC 2001.

The dining area above extends into the second floor of the four-story building next door (a forlorn-looking structure with the metal skeleton of an awning wrapped around its southeast corner and gates closed over its

storefronts like aluminum eyelids). Its large plate glass windows overlook the bustling activity of Harlem's central commercial corridor: shoppers and street vendors, locals and tourists, all walking, talking, pushing, shouting, and pressing on toward their respective destinations, and then the interminable flow of traffic along the street itself. In the early months of the year, the decor here consists mostly of an abundance of indoor plant life — including a few lingering holiday poinsettias — as well as renderings of civil rights leaders and framed photographs of owner Betty Park flanking notable personalities, many of them hanging at an angle. Aside from the most recently vacated tables, the place is exceptionally clean and well maintained.

The customers fit no one description: Manna's serves a multicultural clientele, spanning races, classes, and occupations, from middle-aged white businessmen to Latino teenagers, to African American families and Asian American solicitors.



Many of Manna's neighbors have already left the building.

Fighting change

Last summer, Betty Park and the other leaseholders learned that Kimco Realty had purchased their building and intended to demolish it. The deal was brokered by Harlem native Eugene Giscombe, of the real estate company Giscombe-Henderson, and a board member of Harlem's Business Improvement District, a taxpayer-supported organization designed to bring jobs into the neighborhood. When asked about the development, Giscombe declined to comment.

Several businesses left the premises immediately, including Bobby's Happy House next door, among the first African American-owned businesses in Harlem. But Manna's and its remaining neighbors (the House of Seafood, Victor Body Lawson Architects, the Million Nail Salon, and Rotiplus Caribbean Cuisine) coalesced into the Save Harlem Association. Together they hired Adam Leitman Bailey, a prominent Manhattan real estate attorney, hoping to obtain an injunction against Kimco and prevent their eviction.

"My opinion is that Kimco does not respect how long we have been here," says Park. "We want to take them to court."

Park, a New Jersey resident and emigrant from Korea, opened Manna's on the heels of the 1984 riots, which were directed against Korean merchants operating in the area. Although a self-described "new kid on the block" at the time, Park says she recognized that in order for a Korean American-owned business to gain acceptance in Harlem, it had to both appeal to and hire people from the community. One African American employee born in the South — who left Manna's in the early '90s — showed her how to make the "soul food" for which Park's restaurant became known. In need of more space, Manna's moved to its current Eighth Avenue address from its original spot around the corner. Two more Manna's opened in Harlem: one in 1990 and the other six years later, both on the south side of 125th Street, to the east of Lenox Avenue and at the corner of Madison respectively.

According to Bailey, Kimco's representatives claimed in an early settlement meeting that they planned to build a four-story community center on the location. However, on November 15, 2007, Kimco ran an ad in *The New*

York Amsterdam News for a much larger retail center called "Harlem Plaza" to be built on the site. He also states that his clients were collectively offered \$100,000 to leave by January — an offer Kimco has since retracted.

"They are liars and they keep on lying," says Bailey, a brash-voiced and energetic gentleman.

Fred Winters, a spokesman for Kimco, asserts that the real estate company has intended from the outset to construct a large retail building on the site with office space available on its upper levels, some of which would be allocated for community use. He calls the \$100,000 figure "grossly understated," insisting that Kimco's actual offer was far greater. It was withdrawn, he says, because the business owners brought suit against Kimco. Winters promises that the Harlem Plaza will bring innumerable economic advantages to the area, providing employment both in its construction and in the new businesses it will attract to the neighborhood.

"The [existing] building is old, and Kimco wants to build a building that is new and modern," Winters says.

Bailey argues that Kimco's project will have a devastating effect on the neighborhood's character, saying further that the development will take years to complete, reducing the 125th Street and Eighth Avenue hub to a "parking lot." His legal case rests on the fact that the Save Harlem Association's members signed their leases with the building's previous owner with the understanding that they would not be evicted and the building demolished, granting them legal protection from Kimco's plans for the spot. In addition, the lease included a provision waiving the right to judicial review, which Bailey believes should render it void under New York State law.

Bailey's law firm has drafted a piece of legislation that would declare all of 125th Street — also called Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard — a historic district, preventing any further development along the thoroughfare. Bailey views his work in the area as an extension of the civil rights activism based out of Harlem in the 1960s, and of the prototypical American enthusiasm for "underdogs."

Winters, who lives only five blocks from the Plaza's prospective address, considers the possibility of damage to Harlem's authenticity "a very complex debate" that he prefers not to comment on.



Manna's menu, as seen from 125th Street.

Harlem locals say...

The accelerated gentrification of Harlem over the past decade has left many natives feeling pinched between rising rents and changes to the neighborhood's appearance and demographics that have come with the upswing in apartment building construction. Added to that in the past year have been Columbia University's city-approved plan to convert a 17-acre tract of Harlem's Manhattanville area into campus buildings — while demolishing most of the existing structures, including 132 apartments — as well the rezoning of 125th street to permit further high-rise and residential development.

Assistant Manager Philip Bulgar, who has worked at Manna's now-imperiled address since 1996, recalls first hearing about Kimco's purchase last March. He is clearly angry, and is voluble in expressing his indignation.

"This store has been here since 1991," Bulgar says, referring to the restaurant's current location. "It has been one of the cornerstones of the community for a long time. We service the community and we give jobs to people in the community."

He points to Manna's diverse staff, a group of 20 individuals drawn entirely from the neighborhood, and that includes among its number immigrants from Africa and Mexico. Bulgar believes that new retail developments, like Harlem Plaza, will neither hire nor cater to locals. Moreover, he sees it as part of the wide-scale gentrification of the area, which he calls "ugly" and "immoral."

"I was here in the '90s, when Harlem was bad," says Bulgar, recalling the neighborhood's past problems with drugs, gangs, and petty crime. "You couldn't give away a building in Harlem in those days. But today, Harlem is safer and cleaner than ever before." He points out that last year, Harlem's 28th Precinct won an award for its safety, but asks "at what cost?"

Nonetheless, Bulgar admits he prefers Harlem's present situation to its previous one. And while he concedes that upscale development will make the neighborhood "look nicer," he argues that "it will be artificial, very artificial."

"A lot of businesses are going to be gone and a lot of people will lose their jobs," Bulgar asserts. "These small businesses reflect people's dreams and lives. And I guarantee that people will miss this."

"This is not some corporate store," he continues, characterizing Manna's approach to business as "people-oriented and hands-on." Bulgar mentions a nearby Disney Store that went out of business "without anybody noticing."

Operating the register, Bulgar — a Harlem native who lives just blocks away from his place of employment and whose daughter attends nearby City College of New York — appears comfortable and familiar with nearly all of Manna's customers, addressing most of them like old friends. One patron invites Bulgar to his new Washington Heights apartment, which he selected for its high ceilings and its location in a vintage building. The two men spend a few moments discussing the superior merits of pre-World War II architecture.

Other customers have their own comments about the changes in their neighborhood.

"Columbia's taking over," one woman complains, referring the university's increasing incursions into West Harlem. "I'm ashamed that I work for them."

"It's not your fault," Bulgar assures her. "You're not the one who makes the policy."

"You know that in 25 years, Harlem's going to be mostly white," another customer, a light-skinned African American man, declares. "Seventy-five percent white and just 25 percent black."

Noting the current rate of gentrification to the neighborhood, Bulgar estimates the interval will be closer to five years.

"Look at this," Bulgar exclaims, gesturing out the window toward a new Soho North building on 123rd Street. "None of this was here a year ago — these condos and everything. It's happening faster than people even realize." He laments what he sees as obliviousness and indifference on the part of many Harlemites.

"Most of the people here are unaware of what's going on, unaware or apathetic. They think, you know, 'what can you do?'"

Condominiums like the one noted by Bulgar are sprouting up all over south Harlem — or as it has come to be known in real estate circles, SoHa. And with the new zoning laws, the trend is only going to continue. Proponents of the rezoning include the owners of the Apollo Theater and Congressman Charles Rangel, himself a frequent Manna's customer. They assert that the construction of new buildings and the importation of chain stores will

further rejuvenate the neighborhood.

Manager David Taylor has a different idea of why Harlem politicians are supporting City Hall's plans.

"We live in a community where our leaders can be bought," Taylor says. "Our leaders don't work for us."

"What they're saying is that the Harlem of old has no future," Bulgar remarks. "A lot of these properties, the condominiums, they are going to cost half a million dollars. Now, the median income in Harlem is \$27,000 a year. Who's going to live here?"

Postlude

In the unisex bathroom on the upper level, a number of visitors to the Eighth Avenue Manna's have written their thoughts on the wall.

"Harlem is state of mind and spirit. If you work hard enough and with the right spirit you can get Harlem back."

"HARLEM IS OUR Promised LAND. Think about it!!"

"Black people in Harlem could have owned Harlem but they gave it away!! Now think About that!!"

Written in reply: "No one owns the earth."

And as commentary on its predecessor: "he who has might has Right."

And a final quip, punctuated with a smiley face: "Lease :)"

On June 11, 2008, Kimco Realty settled with the Save Harlem Association for an undisclosed sum. According to the agreement, the tenants must vacate the building by September 30 of this year. Most have left already. Manna's continues to operate out of the 125th and Eighth Avenue location, and will relocate one block northward — to 126th and Eighth Avenue — sometime this winter.

[EMAIL THIS](#)

[BOOKMARK](#)

[SET AS FAVORITE](#)

Trackback(0)

[TrackBack URI for this entry](#)

Comments (12)

Interesting comments

As an outsider to this whole issue I would just like to say that the series of comments following the article gave a lot of insight into the pros/cons raised by the article, itself. I used to get to New York a lot, but now live in South Florida where the frenzy to build 'bigger and better' turned a coastline where people with medium incomes could still afford to live to one populated by high rise condo where the wealthy have almost taken over. Because of that, my natural tendency is toward caution when something is to be rebuilt and to wonder if all options towards renovation while businesses aren't displaced were explored first. It's a question. I don't know.



Pris Campbell , August 12, 2008 | [url](#)

Re: Response to the Author

Perhaps it would be appropriate to mention that the title "Will Harlem Lose Its Soul?" was intended as something of a play on the term "soul food." I didn't write the subhead.

I was not responsible for the insult that was directed at you, and I regret that it occurred. I have always believed that name-calling impoverishes any discussion.

I am not a Harlem resident or native, but my desire in writing this article was to interact with members of the community at one of the most fundamental levels--over food--and to let them articulate their feelings. I thought the "discussion" on the bathroom wall neatly encapsulated the debate over the changes afoot in the neighborhood and at Manna's, and represented an unorthodox and oft-ignored medium for expressing one's opinions, and I included it for those reasons.

It is worth noting that the gentrification phenomenon often involves the displacement of lower-income residents, and disproportionately affects minorities--something I thought Philip Bulgar picked up on rather well. I would also mention to Paul that anyone in NYC knows that rent stabilization is always a tenuous proposition, and that budget-cuts have forced the Housing Authority to sell some of its units (something Mayor Bloomberg has encouraged).

Again, I appreciate everyone who has read and remarked on the piece, and am happy to have prompted serious discussion on a controversial topic.

Will , August 8, 2008



editor's response to Damita Butler

First and foremost, thanks for reading InTheFray and thanks for sharing your opinion! I'm sorry for the negativity that was directed at you and I hope to keep this conversation civil going forward.

I'm the editor of InTheFray who wrote the quotes you used in your first comment and I will readily cop to being an outsider. I've lived my whole life in Minnesota and don't have much experience with Harlem or New York in general. If you have a disagreement with the use of those phrases, it is with my (inaccurate?) characterization of Will's piece, not with the piece itself.

You ask why the media is ignoring other voices within the community. I think Will addressed your question in his response, when he noted that a journalist's ability to do his or her job is dependent upon the subject's willingness to cooperate. Will said that Manna's was the only establishment to cooperate openly with him on this piece. It is difficult to write a story featuring voices that don't want to make themselves heard. I assure you, it isn't a lack of interest that's caused InTheFray to miss the perspectives you feel are absent, but rather lack of access.

That said, I'd like to invite you to write a piece for InTheFray that does tell these untold stories of gentrification in Harlem. You are a strong writer with a valid viewpoint, and we'd like you to provide some of the balance you feel is missing, if you're willing. If this interests you, please see <http://inthe fray.org/submit> for more information.

Aaron Richner , August 7, 2008



Aaron's Quotes

Perhaps Aaron is the one that I should have addressed but I still would have liked more balance. The title was a bit hyperbolic considering the circumstance. Also, were there some other individuals you could spoken to about the issue? Harlem is a sensitive issue and must be approached in that manner. There is a lot of history to the area and much of it has to do with race since it was one of the few places in Manhattan AA's could live. So yeah, it is a race issue when folks feel they are being pushed out of the last part of Manhattan they can live and embrace their own culture. Not necessary unique to the AA community but it is a highly charged issue considering the history of the people.

"Often the price of speaking out is the feeling futility. In Will Harlem lose its soul?, William Bredderman talks to Philip Bulgar about Manna's, the Harlem eatery that's been serving some of the best soul food New York has to offer for more than 20 years. As gentrification spreads into Harlem, the building that houses Manna's has been purchased and slated for demolition and redevelopment. Bulgar and the residents of Harlem know that a community landmark is in danger, but their voices seem buried under the voices of the wealthy, who stand to make a fortune from a new shopping plaza on the location."

Damita , August 7, 2008



Response to the Author

I directly quoted those phrases from the front page of Inthe fray.com. Perhaps an editor wrote it? In any event, anything enclosed in quotes was quoted. The criticism weren't directed at you personally as the author of the piece. It stems from a frustration with the "media" who have yet to present the story in a way that most residents see it. The story is constantly being told from the viewpoint of outsiders who have no perspective. There are two sides to this issue but most stories I've seen take one side or the other -- one of two extremes. There are other voices that need to be heard but the media doesn't seem interested in hearing those voices. Why? I wish I knew. That is the basis of my original comments and I didn't deserve to be called a "bitch" for giving my opinion.

Damita , August 7, 2008



Racism

I'm all for supporting local businesses. But interwoven into this article are examples of racism that I just find repugnant.



Several of those interviewed made it clear that what they are afraid of was Harlem "becoming white." Not lost jobs, not other changes to the neighborhood (good or bad) -- just the population "becoming white."

Never mind that the vast majority of Harlem residents are insulated from any real pressure by rent control laws and other housing programs. Never mind that the number of people living in new construction (built on mostly empty lots) will always be dwarfed by the existing population. Never mind that many newcomers are in fact middle-class African Americans. No matter how you break it down, the notion of Harlem being "75% white" in 5 years, 25 years, or 100 years is just nonsense.

I think it's just sad that this is what people are really thinking and what they're really afraid of. I understand why they think that way, and I sympathize. But were it any other group, in any other neighborhood, making similarly racist statements, the level of sympathy -- from anyone -- would be pretty close to zero.

Paul , August 7, 2008

Re: The Big Spin on Gentrification in Harlem

I thought I ought to step in and respond to some of the criticisms made here before the dialogue on my piece degenerates any further.



Damita, you allege that my article is "spun" and "distorted," and complain of a lack of balance. I can assure you that I take such charges seriously.

As a profile of an individual business, this article addresses the particular concerns of Manna's owner, customers, and employees. However, as I mentioned in the story, I attempted to contact Eugene Giscombe--who, as a real estate agent and member of the Harlem BID, could possibly have discoursed at length about the benefits of the sale in terms economic development--but he elected not to speak on the subject. Similarly, the story includes comments I gathered from Kimco spokesman Fred Winters, who defended his organization and its actions. The duties of journalistic impartiality were thus fulfilled. Bear in mind that a reporter must be impartial in the same way that a judge or jury must be impartial.

You refer to Manna's as "Korean owned and operated." While--as I noted--Manna's is owned by a Korean-American woman, the location I visited is entirely staffed by African-Americans, and so only the former part of your statement is correct.

In your post, you put the words "community landmark" and "some of the best soul food New York has to offer" in quotations. These phrases do not appear in my piece. Perhaps you read them elsewhere and became confused. I don't know.

As a matter of fact, the only place where you quoted me accurately was on the description "exceptionally clean," which you objected to, citing your own experience of the eatery (though you later concede that the serving area is well-kept for a 125th Street business). On the occasions when I visited Manna's, I indeed found the restaurant to be extremely sanitary--something I had not expected. It may also interest you that, in its "Best of Manhattan" review, the Village Voice compared Manna's favorably with the average New York deli.

I am aware that a few other articles have been written about Manna's, though I believe that I treated aspects of the situation there that had previously been neglected. It is an unfortunate fact of news reporting that a journalist's ability to cover a story is to a great degree dependent on the compliance of their subjects. I was interested in writing about a long-operating business in Harlem (and on 125th Street in particular) facing eviction, and Manna's was the only one to openly cooperate with me.

I am sorry you were dissatisfied with the article, but this is clearly something you feel passionately about, and I am glad to have provoked some discussion on the topic.

Will , August 7, 2008

>:((but seriously)

Maybe the article focuses on an over-emphasized victim of this real estate development. And maybe it's debatable as a community landmark (which I don't think the writer ever actually asserts), but Manna's is certainly an established presence in the neighborhood. Okay, that's really not important and it's also not really important that this particular branch of a Korean-owned purveyor of mediocre soul food had to move a block after receiving what was probably a huge sum of money from these Kimco people, but the situation demonstrates certain disheartening trends, changes in attitudes, and pernicious forces at work now, and the article illustrates the state of things beautifully. You came down really hard on it. You seemed pompous and unnecessarily hostile. I called you a bitch. As a joke. You got bitchier. I wasn't going to respond, but the only thing I have to do today is finish this peach I'm eating, and I'm already half-way done.



Isabella Sweeney , August 6, 2008 | [url](#)

:D

Meh.



Isabella Sweeney , August 6, 2008 | [url](#)

...

@Isabella, Bitch factor or not, the article was flawed. No personal attacks were launched at anyone so I'm not sure why this comment was directed at me. I stuck to the content of the article. I suggest you do the same.



Damita Butler , August 6, 2008

@ Damita

Wow! Maybe the rezoning of Harlem will take care of the obvious bitch problem there...



Isabella Sweeney , August 5, 2008 | [url](#)

The Big Spin on Gentrification in Harlem

Wow! The spin on this story is so distorted, I just don't know what to say. Yes I do. As a Harlem resident, I can say for a fact that most Harlem residents don't consider Manna -- a Korean owned and operated eatery -- "a community landmark." Add to the fact that Manna has additional locations on 125th AND near 135th Street and it becomes clear that Manna is obviously in no danger of being seriously threatened by the move. This is not to discount the other businesses in the same area with only one location who will probably not be able to recover, but for some reason they don't get press coverage. It seems it is the same ole' businesses -- Manna and Record Shack -- getting the spotlight. One would think that smaller and independent publications would try to take an angle that doesn't follow in the footsteps on the Times.



And, if Manna's is serving "some of the best soul food New York has to offer," then that isn't a good thing. They serve steam table food sold by the pound. Not exactly what soul food is known for.

Finally, if you call the typically NYC Deli "exceptionally clean" then um, yeah, I guess you say that Manna's is "clean." My personal experience has been flies in the dining area and old food stuck to the walls and windows. True, they do keep the serving area relatively clean -- as much as to be expected in a high traffic area like 125th Street.

So, I guess what was missing from this article was balance. It would have been more powerful had it actually been closer to reality. I'm getting tired of the news outlets getting it wrong. If I see another article with Nellie Hester Bailey, Shange from the Record Shack, Manna's, or Willie Suggs I will gag.

Damita Butler , August 5, 2008

Write comment

This content has been locked. You can no longer post any comments.

Last Updated (Monday, August 4, 2008)

[CLOSE WINDOW](#)