Nostalgia Is Coming Back to New York City

By Bruce Bawer

When, as in my case, your job involves reading a lot of news every day, it can be quite depressing. Lately, however, it seems to me that there have been, here and there, a few more positive tidings than usual. One example of this phenomenon – an example that you may, admittedly, perceive as exceedingly minor – is that a 35-year-old named David Arena is planning to bring back one of the all-time great fixtures of the New York City landscape.

But to me, it's no small bit of news. For those of us who grew up in New York City at a certain time, there are certain wonderful features of the urban landscape that used to be a cherished part of our daily lives but that ultimately disappeared – forever, we assumed – leaving the city we loved forever diminished. **(READ MORE: Ladies and Democrats, the Bronx Is Turning)**

Near the top of the list has to be the old Penn Station, which was one of the extraordinary architectural achievements of the age, but was demolished in 1963. I was six years old at the time, but I have vivid memories of the old building, which I experienced on one magical day when my parents, sister, and I went there to board a train to my mother's hometown of Florence, South Carolina. I remember massive, high white columns like something in Washington, D.C. I remember the oyster crackers in the bar. Being in the old Penn Station was like inhabiting a royal palace or the Taj Mahal. It was beyond awe-inspiring. It symbolized New York at the height of its international renown and of America's unquestioned world power.

So of course it had to be destroyed.

But it wasn't alone. Last year saw the demolition of the Hotel Pennsylvania, right across from Penn Station, which was famous for, of all things, its phone number – Pennsylvania 6-5000, which became the title of a Glenn Miller standard. (When it opened in 1919, it was the biggest hotel in the world.) **(READ MORE: Robert J. Costello, Esq., Should Be Trump's Defense Witness No. 1)**

Then there are the countless bookstores that are no more. Take the late lamented Gotham Book Mart, which was located a few steps down from 47th Street between 5th and 6th Avenues – yes, smack in the middle of the Diamond District, that block of pricey emporia that figure in the climax of the movie *Marathon Man*. The Gotham Book Mart was a literary bookstore of the first caliber, with what must have been the city's most comprehensive selection of the latest copies of literary journals. It was, among other things, the place where having just left graduate school and flailing in my efforts to break into established periodicals and become a freelance writer, I caught sight of the first two issues of the then brand-new *New Criterion.* It's no exaggeration to say that that moment marked the beginning of my entire career.

I've often wondered: where would I be today, what would I be doing, if not for that discovery, which led to a ten-year stint as the *New Criterion*'s literary critic – a gig that in turn opened up innumerable other markets to me, and turned me within a year or so from a bum into somebody whose opinions were actually taken seriously by veterans of New York's literary scene? Everything in my life since that day would have been different. The very thought is earthshaking. And then there was another beloved, now long–gone bookstore, Books & Co., located at Madison and 74th, where the generous owner, IBM heiress Jeanette Watson, placed several copies of my debut book in the front window, put me on a panel with her buddy Fran Lebowitz, and threw my first book party.

There was Colony Records, in the Times Square area, where you could find almost any LP you wanted, new or old, and the sheet music to any standard in the Great American Songbook. Also unforgettable was the Upper West Side record store, Tower Records, that was immortalized toward the end of *Hannah and Her Sisters*, when Woody Allen's character, walking by on the sidewalk, looks in and sees his quirky sister-in-law, played by Dianne Wiest, thumbing through the LPs.

Another Woody Allen reference: the Carnegie Deli on 7th Avenue between 54th and 55th streets, which was made famous by *Broadway Danny Rose*, and where I used to reward myself with a massive corned beef sandwich every month after delivering my latest article to the *New Criterion,* whose offices were then located a few floors up in the same building. Not far away was the Blarney Stone at 45th and 3rd, where my dad, who worked nearby, would take me to lunch when I was in the city, and where over the decades the cheap furniture, the tacky decor, the linoleum floor, and the gang of working-class guys at the bar watching some sports event on TV never changed, and the big platters of brisket, beans, and mashed potatoes, smothered in brown gravy, were always magnificent. **(READ MORE: Manhattan Is on Trial)**

There were other memorable eateries that have long since disappeared – among them, the chain of Chock Full o' Nuts diners. But what David Arena wants to bring back is something even more iconic than Chock Full o' Nuts. As reported in the *New York Post,* he wants to resurrect the Horn & Hardart automat.

Fast food automat in the New York State Museum (Michael LaMonica/Shutterstock)

Yes, the automat. That sprawling, amazing eatery where the walls were lined with little windows displaying various food items on plates. You'd plunk a nickel, or a certain number of nickels, into a slot next to a given window, then open the little window and pull out the plate. As Arena puts it, the place reeked with "nostalgic 1920s, 1930s charm," harkening back "to beaux arts" and "art deco." Yep. And, bless him, he doesn't plan to try to update the concept. True, he's going to begin with a location in Philadelphia, where Horn & Hardart's started out in 1888 (who knew?), but he expects to follow that up with an automat in New York.

As a kid, I was taken to the automat frequently. There were several of them in New York, but the one I was most familiar with was the one at 42nd and Third. It was apparently New York's first.

The last of the automats shut down in 1991. Six years later I went to the Netherlands for the first of several dozen times, where I discovered a chain of eateries called Febo. I was surprised and delighted. It was the automat all over again! To be sure, these places – of which there are now, according to Wikipedia, 22 in Amsterdam and nearly 60 in the entire country – are physically very different from Horn & Hardart's automats. They're not huge, brightly lit spaces where you can buy your meal and sit down to eat it at a big table; they're small storefront places where, after a long night out

drinking, you can grab a couple of modest items to chow down on the way home.

These outlets don't even have front doors – you step up off the curb and start checking out the merchandise – a *kroket,* a *frikandel,* a *kipburger?* – and decide what you want. Dutch people refer to going to Febo as "eating from the wall." When I first started going to Amsterdam, you paid, as at the New York automats, with change. (There was always a handy machine present at which you could convert bills to coins.) Now, you pay with the swipe of a credit card, as will be the case at Arena's new establishments.

But questions of scale aside, Febo is very reminiscent of the old New York automats. And I love it. If I'm in town alone, I sometimes feel loath to sit by myself at a restaurant, wasting money I'd rather spend on something else. Febo provides a superb – and superbly cheap – alternative. The one on Leidsestraat, in the neighborhood where I usually stay, is open till 4 a.m. It's always popular, but very late on Friday and Saturday nights – or, rather, in the early hours of Saturday and Sunday – it's packed with high-school and college-age kids on their way home from a night on the town. It's a civic treasure, a beloved institution, a living tradition – just as the automats were in New York. How thrilling to think that David Arena might actually succeed in bringing a touch of this back to the Big Apple. Perhaps his example will be followed by others who miss the New York of yore. Perhaps you can, after all, go home again.

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