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On Orchard Street, a Place of Fresh Starts

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Orchard Street in Manhattan: Scenes from along Orchard Street including morning deliveries, the Lower East Side enement Museum and late-night partygoers.

Video features Lower East Side Tenement Museum

ON a recent Wednesday, as the late morning sun shone on the Lower East Side, two gentlemen had crossed Canal and were headed north on Orchard Street. Both wearing one of the better uniforms of the day — dark washed jeans with one-inch cuffs skimming the ankle above brown leather oxfords, blouson jacket zipped up, short wool scarf in neutral tone looped around the neck, sunglasses with dark lenses and metal frame — they were out for a stroll, maybe to take in a few of Orchard Street's new art galleries.

"This street reminds me of SoHo," said the younger of the two. "Only not as crowded."

"And it's grittier," the older one replied, as they passed a small team of Chinese workers unloading a van full of heavy cardboard boxes and transporting them, via a steep ramp, to a subterranean storage space.

In the waning days of 2011, Orchard was a street in transition. While the old printers and specialty lingerie shops kept a foothold, the stylized boutique selling $200 jeans and the skin-care spa with the cult following had quietly moved in.

Orchard Street is eight blocks in length, runs like a spine from Division Street at the southern end to East Houston Street at the northern end, and has a kind of split personality. It abuts the eastern edge of Chinatown at the bottom (see the inexpensive cut daisies at Mei Flower Shop) and gives way to the sidewalk barkers ("Everything, $99") outside the zoot-suit and luggage purveyors at the top, with plenty of new enterprise in between.

This stretch spans a long period of New York City's history. The street was named for the orchard that grew here in the mid-1700s, as part of a 300-acre farm owned by James DeLancey, a lieutenant governor of New York Province. (Delancey Street intersects with Orchard, running east-west, and divides it in half.) And there are few better living examples of the city's immigrant experience.

“It’s a welcoming street,” said Joe DiNoto, a former architect who moved here from Alphabet City, now tends bar at Barrio Chino over on Broome Street, and lives in the Pink Building, the old department store that takes up the southwest corner of Orchard and Grand. “It accepts you pretty quickly. Everyone knows each other and helps each other.”

S. Jarmulowsky’s Bank Building, Nos. 5-9 Orchard Street, sits at the lower end of the street, within striking distance of a Chinese-owned glass and steel development now going up. Built in neo-Renaissance style in 1912 by Sender Jarmulowsky, a Russian Jewish immigrant who began his life in America as a peddler on Hester Street, the bank served the neighborhood’s Jewish immigrant population, failing in 1917. Since 2005 the building has been on and off the market, and today it is dormant, awaiting its next incarnation — hotel? condominium? Maybe an Apple store?

There are great uninterrupted stretches of tenement buildings, with their iconic brick and fire-escape facades, some of which date to the mid-1800s and still offer lowish rents to workers and bohemians.

At the Tenement Museum, No. 103, immigrant life is depicted in stark relief. For $22, you can visit the restored apartments at No. 97, which from 1863 to 1935 was home to about 7,000 people from more than 20 countries. Items like loaves of bread in the Gumpertz apartment, clothes hanging from pegs by a basin at the Rogarshevskys’, and teacups on the tiny kitchen table at the Baldizzis’ make it look as if the families had just gone out.

The old buildings have lately been joined by a few striking residential structures, like the rusty-steel-and-wood-framed 30 Orchard. Erected in 2008, it looks a bit like a late-night game of Jenga as played in a student lounge at the Rhode Island School of Design. A two-bedroom two-bathroom unit of about 1,200 square feet, recently sold by Corcoran, was listed for $1.43 million.

At 60 Orchard, another unobtrusive but highly modern addition to the street, there are three floor-through apartments on the market, starting at $1.295 million. Susan Wires, a senior vice president of Stribling, pointed out the NanaWall windows, which open the front of the unit to the street, creating a terrace inside the house.

The least expensive units at 50 Orchard sold early on, but when the recession hit, the $5 million triplex on the top floor found no buyer.

“We dismantled the triplex and we’re combining units to make full-floor penthouses,” said Larry Michaels, a senior vice president of Douglas Elliman. “They’ll come onto the market in March 2012 for $3 million. They’re lofty-type one-bedrooms; all have direct elevator, with unobstructed views to the west of the city of New York. And they’re half the price of TriBeCa.”

Meanwhile, at street level, a strong sense of independence courses through the corridor. You can see it in the proliferating art galleries, like Scaramouche at No. 52, that keep their own hours. You can find it among the puffy parkas and painfully hip sneakers at Reed Space, No. 151, a pioneer in the “lifestyle boutique” wave that has rolled into Orchard Street; see also Project No. 8, a men’s outfitter at No. 38.

You’ll discover it if you push beyond some of the dodgy-looking storefronts to encounter Victor Osborne, a hat designer, at No. 160, or Gargyle, a women’s shop, No. 16A. You can’t miss it at No. 118, Moscot, the optical business started in 1899 by Hyman Moscot, who sold eyeglasses from a pushcart on Orchard Street.

You can taste it in the neighborhood restaurants like the Fat Radish at No. 17 and Little Giant at No. 85, whose customers are equal parts locals and adventurers from abroad. The skateboarders have it, popping up whenever the mood strikes and on Sunday afternoons, when the upper blocks of Orchard Street are closed to vehicles.

“I love this in-transition period,” said Michael Little, who opened Lost Weekend NYC with his soccer buddy Chad Eggers in August. From the sidewalk, the glass-front place looks like the cool coffee bar it is (the first in Manhattan to serve Blue

Bottle Coffee). But inside, it's something else again: an art space with photographs, or maybe some surf film footage, projected on the walls. It's also a boutique that sells everything a man might need for a weekend in Montauk: Maelen + Goetz toiletries, Salt Box swim trunks, sturdy canvas totes. Then again, Lost Weekend could be a corner of Berlin, where young intellectuals spread out their papers next to their laptops on the repurposed wood tables, and stay for hours.

"Just a few years ago, it was still the outskirts," said Mr. Little, who lives with his wife over on Norfolk Street. "Now I could throw a wet sock and hit about a dozen D.J.'s and makeup artists. There's an emergent vibe."