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The End of the Road

At long last the Bowery is shedding its infamous skid row past. But what happens now? Welcome to New York's next great battleground.

By David Goodwillie

Let's start at the top, take the street north to south, one Square to another. It's not that far, barely a mile, and certain blocks—languishing through the last throes of New York's manufacturing age—could be found in the decaying center of any Midwestern industrial city. The architecture is inconsistent and uninspiring. There are no churches and few trees, and when the green lights stack up, traffic hurtles to and from the nearby bridges at dangerous speeds. But danger has always lurked on the Bowery, where for nearly two centuries the City's down and out have amassed and sought refuge. Now, the flophouses are almost gone. The fusty gin mills closed long ago. And vanished too are the trappings of legend, the dime theatres and cabarets, the sidewalk hustlers and confidence men. But the famous bums still hang around. They come, as those before them came—from transitional homes, from panhandling parks, from the secret tunnels below Spring Street—and wait patiently on the wide sidewalks for their meals or methadone. Sometimes they whistle at women. Mostly they stay to themselves. And then they too are gone. No one lingers long on the Bowery anymore.

But you were just there last week, you say. You met your girlfriend in the faux-genteel lounge of The Bowery Hotel, or ate dinner at white-hot Gemma. Maybe you went dancing at Capitale or attended a benefit at The Bowery Poetry Club. If you're lucky you bought dinner at the city's largest Whole Foods and cooked it across the street at your boyfriend's new two-million-dollar condo. Chances are you didn't think twice

about where you were. Sure, you *knew*. You heard about the Bowery when you were a kid, and never quite forgot. When you moved here you made a point of watching *Gangs of New York*, or you read a few chapters of Luc Sante's *Low Life*. But life moved on. And who has time for history in a city like this?

Or maybe you did think twice. Walking down the street last week, you saw something that gave you pause. Quite likely it wasn't the new Bowery or the old, but both of them existing together, side by side, strange bedfellows wedded by walls—the methadone clinic next to The Bowery Hotel; The Sunshine flophouse beside The New Museum; The Bowery Mission abutting Freeman's Alley. And either you were shocked by how fast the street was changing, or by how long it had taken. Old and new. New and old. Two sides of a never ending argument. But the Bowery has always been different—more vital, more entertaining, more tragic. And so it is with gentrification. The stakes are higher on this storied street not because it was Manhattan's first battleground but because it may be its last. If The Bowery goes, the last vestiges of the old downtown will go with it. And the turnover will be complete.

In places it's already happened. And that's why we can't start at the top: it barely exists anymore. Cooper Square (which like Chatham Square, isn't a Square at all: the Bowery begins and ends on false pretenses) looks like a European town center recovering from the Blitzkrieg. Backhoes move great mounds of rubble. Scaffolding blocks out the sun. Cooper Union's new Engineering School will soon rise from the block-long empty lot running up the east side of the Square. On the corner of Fifth Street, a massive crane is hoisting the upper floors of the Cooper Square Hotel into place. A block south, on the site of the Bowery's last parking lot, ground will soon be broken on a fifteen-story residential tower.

So let's start a bit farther down, in the heart of the newly minted "Upper Bowery." The name, of course, like "Upper Fifth" or "The Upper Slope," speaks to more than location. Development on The Bowery is a north to south affair, and The Upper Bowery—running from Cooper Square down to Houston—is having its moment. It was only a matter of time. For twenty years these blocks bordering NoLita and The East Village have hosted an ever-changing roster of bars and lounges, catering to a mix of

students, locals, and slumming tourists who'd just found out the hard way that The Ramones no longer commandeered the stage at CBGB. In the March issue of *Vanity Fair*, the architecture critic Paul Goldberger, wrote that "The first sign of change on The Bowery came in 2003," when the New Museum announced its plans to relocate there. But surely anyone familiar with the area would point to a different moment, ten years earlier, when Eric Goode opened the Bowery Bar on the corner of East 4th Street. For two years, the sprawling space dominated the City's gossip columns. Celebrities and supermodels spawned bouncers and velvet ropes. The Bowery had been rediscovered—its sidewalks buzzing with a new kind of crowd—and the old street's grittiness suddenly became an alluring marketing tool—and it still is today.

For as it happens, Goode, along with his business partner Sean MacPherson, is also responsible for the much-hyped Bowery Hotel, which heralded a new era on the Bowery when it opened in February on the corner of 3rd Street. In the years since his first venture, Goode, and now MacPherson, have become downtown impresarios, the Pied Pipers of an ever-shifting nightlife scene. But even with resumes that include The Park, the Maritime Hotel, and the Waverly Inn, the Bowery Hotel is clearly their signature property—a 16-story brick tower that lords over its namesake street like a father waiting for his troubled children to grow up. But the Bowery refuses to mature, even now. In April, a sidewalk knife fight erupted outside the hotel, and a doorman hustled bystanders inside until the danger passed. A few weeks later, an adult video store down the block was padlocked for prostitution. Meanwhile, methadone addicts from the Kenton Hall clinic next door continue to loiter on the sidewalks, often late into the night, catcalling the barely-clad young women wobbling past them through the hotel's glass-paneled doors.

The block surrounding The Bowery Hotel may be the most conflicted in the city. Its wildly varying buildings and businesses tell the story of the street in miniature. It's all still there, if you take the time to look—the elegant cast-iron façade of the Bouwerie Lane Theater; the storied White House Hotel; and the remnants of "Salvation Row," the once-vast network of social services that catered to the hundreds of thousands of broken men who called the street home—Kenton Hall, The Salvation Army, and a block south, the Bowery Resident's Committee (the homeless organization most famous for evicting CBGB). There are more recent additions, too, slick lounges and restaurants that rode in

on the wide coattails of the Bowery Bar: The Remote Lounge, Sala, Kelley & Ping. And now the third wave: the Bowery Hotel, and all that will come with it.

On a stormy day in early summer, I set off to meet Goode and MacPherson in person. I wanted to get their thoughts on the Bowery—why they chose it (or keep choosing it) and how they envisioned its growth. Directly across the street from the Bowery Hotel stands The White House, the most famous of the Bowery’s old flophouses (it now markets itself as a youth hostel, daily playing host to a bizarre mix of Scandinavian backpackers and Bowery pensioners). Outside, a few old timers were milling around, sipping beer from bags. I approached a man in a wheelchair to ask what he thought of the changing neighborhood, but as I got closer I realized he was asleep.

It was a stupid question anyway. We each had our own version of the city, our own tale of moving through time. I stared at the Bowery Hotel and thought of a passage from Colson Whitehead’s *The Colossus 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 Monsey’s, or That used to be the Tic Toc Lounge. You are a New Yorker when what was there before is more real and solid than what is there now.” What was at the Bowery Hotel before was a run-down gas station where I once managed to illegally park a U-Haul truck filled with everything I owned for almost a week, while I waited to move into a tenement apartment on nearby St. Mark’s Place. Now, it was downtown New York’s own Chateau Marmont. And if it wasn’t much to look on the outside (“We inherited this bulk,” Goode would later tell me), the old-world interior was almost magnificent. It was warm and plush and velvet-filled, a lobby from a Graham Greene novel, a place where time slowed down.

It was midday and the rains had yet to come, so we sat in the back patio, near an 18th century graveyard uncovered during construction. Goode and MacPherson were the physical embodiments of their hotel: hip, scruffily handsome, a bit world weary—at once too young and too old to be doing what they were doing. Goode has lived in the neighborhood since 1980, including a stint in Basquiat’s building on Great Jones, where his landlord was Andy Warhol. “My loft constantly had bedbugs,” he said. “I couldn’t get rid of them. And I would have homeless guys wander into my place. They’d come up the fire escape. They were always so fucked up. They were the hardcore Irish.

They're gone now." But he was talking the way so many New Yorkers talk, with a certain pride of place, and I asked if he almost missed those days.

MacPherson jumped in, as if sensing where this might be leading. "New York is a different city every ten years. Everyone laments the old days, but if you talked to the people who lived on the Bowery, who dealt with the tough times, like the guy who ran the gas station for 30 years, he was quite happy not to carry a baseball bat to work every day."

I considered pointing out that the gas station in question no longer existed because of gentrification—because of people like *him*—but I thought it best to move on.

Except we didn't move on. We kept discussing the old Bowery, Goode fondly sharing stories of his early days—the rag shops on Broadway, the machine shops on Lafayette. He talked about the neighborhood artists, as reclusive as they were famous. And then he said something else, something I never thought I'd hear an owner of the Bowery Hotel admit. He said he was conflicted, that it was all a two-way street. "I live here and many of my friends live here, and they don't want more development. Because it's going to turn into the Meat [Packing] District. It's going to turn into a place I can no longer park my car."

"I think it already has," MacPherson added, and then the skies opened up.

The Bowery is older than the city itself. Born as an Indian trail, it grew into a country lane linking the Dutch settlement at the foot of Manhattan to the outlying farms owned by families whose names still resonate today—the DeLanceys, the Bayards, the Stuyvesants (Bowery comes from "Bouwerie," a seventeenth-century Dutch word for farm, co-opted from the motherland by Governor Peter Stuyvesant who nicknamed his estate—near what is now Cooper Square—"Great Bouwerie"). For a time the street was a cattle route, but slowly, as the settlements pushed north and became a city, the farms were replaced by houses, inns and taverns. The Bowery was a respectable thoroughfare through the early 19th century, and served as New York's high-rent theatre district until Broadway assumed that mantle and the entertainments to the east turned more sordid and desultory.

By the mid-1800s The Bowery had become a twenty-four hour carnival of attractions, its vaudeville theatres and German beer gardens providing solace and

sanctuary to the immigrant masses of the Lower East Side. But with the crowds came less savory elements. Gangs like “The Bowery Boys” and “Dead Rabbits,” ostensibly formed as political organizations or fire companies, began throwing elections and inciting riots (including the infamous Draft Riots of 1863). Prostitutes and pickpockets worked the street; rummy bars and pawnshops lined it.

An elevated train was built in 1878 and the Bowery was suddenly thrust into the seedy shadows of the tracks (which ran not up and down the middle of the street, but on either side, enshrouding the sidewalks in a kind of permanent night). It grew desperate and more dangerous. Tens of thousands of down-on-their-luck men—many of them Civil War veterans—made their way to the street because there was nowhere else to go. Flophouses and Missions opened to house and feed them, and drinking establishments multiplied at such a rate that by the 1890s more than half of the saloons in downtown Manhattan could be found there. The last theatres gave way to cheap sideshows and dime museums. Slowly, America’s skid row was born.

The Bowery of the 1890s is the Bowery of legend, a vulgar boulevard of adventure and vice. This was the Bowery of Steve Brodie, who claimed to have jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge and survived, only to open a bar and die amid all the excess and attention. It was the Bowery of Nigger Mike’s saloon (he was actually Jewish), where a young singing waiter named Irving Berlin got his first taste of nightlife; and McGurk’s Suicide Hall, where people swallowed carbolic acid, and the waiters were armed with knock-out drops. This was the Bowery of Negro shock houses, and phony cripples, and joints like The Bucket of Blood that sold liquor through a rubber hose: for a few pennies customers could down as much as they could before coming up for air.

And of course it couldn’t last. Jacob Riis’s shocking photographs of tenement life spawned a reform movement that closed many of the street’s last bastions of amusement—or at least diversion—leaving only the Bums and the low rent businesses that sustained them. But the Bums kept coming. By 1909, an estimated 25,000 homeless were scattered on and about the Bowery, and when Prohibition shuttered their last gin joints, the street fell into a decades long malaise, which neither repeal nor a brief period of nostalgia could help shake. The Bowery had become a dumping ground. But this was still Manhattan, and property, even on the most cursed of thoroughfares, was valuable.

Beginning as early as the twenties, the Bowery became home to a growing number of small manufacturers and wholesalers who didn't need glamorous addresses in order to do business—restaurant suppliers, lighting stores, and cash register shops. In the forties and fifties, the old Bowery became fodder for Hollywood, in the form of dozens of *Bowery Boys* movies, which depicted the gangs of the 19th century in predictably romantic fashion. Meanwhile, the street itself continued its slow rot amid New York City's broader post-war decline.

In 1955, the El came down and the building of new flophouses was outlawed, but there was no rush to bask in the newfound space and light. The Bowery was beginning to assume the characteristics that now define it—the youthful buzz of activity on top, the steady industry of the center, an expanding Chinatown at the bottom—but it was not a street where people looked for growing trends or developments. It was a street that fostered the opposite: hopelessness and decay. It was no longer a place of desperation but of resignation. Men went to the Bowery when they couldn't go anywhere else, when they'd reached the bottom, or the end, or anyway, when they'd decided to die. It had everything one needed to wait out the inevitable: free food and cheap liquor and beds when the weather got cold. For those who could clean up for a week or two, there was work available at the job agencies (often washing dishes at Catskills resorts). But the men never left for long. The Bowery was always waiting when they got back.

The Bowery Bums got younger. Vietnam vets, AIDS patients, crackheads: the story of a city told by those who slept on its streets. Downtown became tolerable and then chic. One by one, the neighborhoods gentrified: SoHo, the East Village, NoLita, the Lower East Side. The Bowery bordered all of these places but was claimed by none of them. It was a dead zone, a line on a map. Double-decker tour buses groaned up the blighted avenue, the guides pointing out shelters and flophouses and sometimes even the homeless themselves. Once again, the street had become a grisly attraction. Only now, it was a parody of itself.

Keep walking south, past the skeletal remains of CBGB, past shining new condos and lounges with names like Crime Scene and Manhatta. Across Houston the Bowery changes; it takes a breath and regroups. The restaurant supply stores start here, and if

you're so inclined you can spend hours browsing the meat slicers, dough boxes, and grease traps that line the sidewalks. I say browse because you can browse. The street empties out. Or maybe the wide sidewalks make it seem that way. In any event, you won't get harassed by panhandlers anymore. The homeless of today's Bowery—such as they are—are smarter than that. They know the street is changing, and they want to stick around a while longer.

Since the seventies their numbers have steadily declined. The economy has rebounded. Outreach services have improved. And then, of course, there was Giuliani. But something happened on the Bowery itself. The support system that had for decades enabled a drifter's lifestyle began to crumble. The old winos always had enough cash for a bed or a bottle. The younger drug addicts did not. And so the flophouses started closing. The liquor stores and dive bars shuttered. And the Bowery's homeless slowly dispersed. New York is now one of the few major American cities without a centralized skid row. Of the city's more than 40,000 homeless, only 3,700 live on the streets (the rest sleep in shelters).

But if the Bowery is no longer a locus for the homeless, it is still a destination, thanks in no small part to The Bowery Mission. Housed in two conjoined brick-front buildings just south of Prince Street, The Mission offers free meals, beds (by lottery), clothing, showers, and medical treatment to anyone who walks through its doors. On a street that once boasted 38 Missions, it is the last of its kind, and yet there is no shortage of business. In 2006, The Mission served more than 475,000 meals (3 times a day, 365 days a year) and provided 76,000 nights of shelter.

The man who runs The Bowery Mission is an evangelical former G.E. executive named Ed Morgan. Morgan took over the struggling charity in 1993, and has turned it into a New York institution. He is well aware of what's happening on the Bowery. "We saw the early signs, the stirrings. We saw property values start to go up. We saw the old flophouses close one by one. It became cool to rent a loft on the Bowery. Obviously we've had a lot of offers [for the building], but we plan to stay because we believe in what we're doing. And we believe that Manhattan is the place to do it."

I asked him if the fancy new neighbors would tolerate The Mission's *clientele* hanging around. "One of the things that's unique about New York is that social services

exist next to million dollar condos and co-ops,” he answered. “New York is truly homogenized in a way that other cities aren’t. The young people at night line up in our alley, called Freeman Alley, to eat behind velvet ropes. When I got here, twelve years ago, I used to drive my old Buick up that alley, which was full of garbage, and park it there....Whatever it takes to keep The Bowery Mission good neighbors, we’ll do.” I opted not to tell him I’d eaten at Freeman’s just the week before, and instead resolved to experience the other side of life on the Bowery.

I arranged a tour with The Mission’s director of outreach, James Macklin. Macklin was homeless himself in the 1980s, and had found The Bowery Mission when a woman told him about it late one night on a subway train. “When I came to this place I had to walk over people,” Macklin said. “It was terrible. Next door was a bar. Drugs were sold there and people were just laid out all night long. That was a rough joint. I thought the guy that ran the bar was homeless myself. Back then nobody wanted to be down here. It was like a wasteland. And now it’s prime property.”

While the Mission provides day-to-day support to those in need, its true goal is rehabilitation. To that end, it runs a six-month “life transformation” program that includes detoxification, counseling, education, job placement, and a healthy dose of religion. Macklin graduated from the program and has been working at The Mission ever since. It didn’t take long to figure out that he was a kind of defacto Mayor of not only The Mission, but the Bowery itself. He was the walking embodiment of a turned-around life. The men (and a very few women) lined up for lunch and Macklin slapped hands, told jokes and offered counsel. Everyone knew him, everyone loved him. As I watched him work the ragtag crowd it became clear that James Macklin was a man who could show me the real Bowery—as it is, and was.

We met at the Mission a few days later, and walked up the block to The Sunshine Hotel. The Sunshine was still operating as a flophouse until two years ago, when its owners—one of the major restaurant supply families—decided to sell the building. But the few dozen men still living there refused to leave, and hired a lawyer who has managed to stave off the inevitable. Now they’re holed up inside and rarely came out. Sure enough, the door was locked and no one answered the buzzer, so we waited. Eventually, a lively,

pot-bellied man came strolling around the corner. He was carrying beer in bags. When he saw Macklin his eyes lit up, and he invited us in. His name was Bruce Davis and for 18 years he had been the Sunshine's "runner." Like Morgan Freeman in *The Shawshank Redemption*, he was the guy that could get things, anything, for a price. "No one knows the Bowery like me," he said, as we walked up the stairs.

Time stopped inside the Sunshine Hotel many years ago. The men in the second-floor lobby registered surprise when we walked in but their bodies didn't move. They sat in what few chairs there were, or stood gazing out the window at the sunny street below. Men alone with their memories. Davis led us past the empty cashier's cage to a table across from a row of rooms. He sat down and cracked open a beer.

"The first day I walked down the Bowery I seen a robbery in broad daylight," he said, without prompting. "I was originally coming up here from Texas on a parole violation. I was trying to find a place to escape to."

I asked if he had noticed—or even cared about—the changes on the street.

"Like the Whole Foods?" Davis said.

"Yes, the Whole Foods."

"I walked in there once, looked around, and said, 'This ain't for our crowd.'"

A short man who'd been standing against the wall near the cage walked over and took a seat. His name was Frank Calzarano, but everyone called him The Rat Man, because he went out every night and fed the Bowery's rats.

"I came here December 16, 1955," Calzarano said. "I dreamed of doing a lot of interesting things and I did. I did a lot of traveling, checking restaurants, back alleys, red districts, everything. I was in the military. I took it as a joke. You have to take it as a joke, because a lot of people come out with mental illness. They come back crazy. They hear voices, stuff like that. I always wanted to have a simple job so I could study things. Like the rats. No one can feed them better than me. I feel I'm doing something productive. I'm not bothering anybody."

Calzarano started talking about some of The Sunshine's more illustrious boarders. "This guy Joel Rifkin, the serial killer, used to live here. And then Rakowitz, you know Rakowitz. Fed his girlfriend to the homeless people in Tompkins Square."

“We had a guy who dressed like Jesus Christ,” Davis added. “Robes, sandals, walked around with a cane.”

“He had mice in his room,” Calzarano said.

“[We] went into his room one night and the guy had cockroaches lined up,” Davis said. “He was sitting there feeding them.”

“He had mice in his room, not cockroaches.”

“Oh no, he had roaches. A whole army sitting there waiting to be fed.”

“He never told me about that,” Calzarano said, dismissively. “He told me about mice. He had about 15 mice.”

I was worried that I’d upset the fragile routine inside the Sunshine and that most of the men didn’t want me here, but now others started coming over. An unkempt younger man with a beard offered to show me his room. He was wearing a military coat, its patches attached with safety-pins. His cubicle was smaller than a jail cell, and had just enough space for a single bed. The walls were thin and didn’t reach the ceiling. They were lined with chicken wire to prevent “over the topping.” He beckoned me inside, but there was nowhere to go—the room was dark and packed with the accumulated detritus of an unfortunate life. Still, I wedged my way in, and for a minute the two of us stood there in silence, admiring walls I could barely see. And so it went at The Sunshine Hotel. When Macklin and I finally got back outside, it was like waking up from some twisted dream. “That’s what the Bowery does,” he said, “and those guys have it pretty good.”

Two days later, Macklin called me at home. “If you want the real deal then come around tomorrow. There’s one more guy you need to meet.”

His name was Frank Grande and he was a seventy-year-old giant of a man. He had been homeless for much of Sixties and early Seventies, and when he hadn’t slept on the Bowery he’d slept in the tunnels underneath Grand Central. He was a drinker who had tried and failed to make it through the Bowery Mission’s recovery program over a dozen times before he finally succeeded. For the last 33 years he’d worked as a specialist for an industrial cooling company. I’d worried that Macklin might be trotting him out as a Mission success story—and that was surely part of it—but as soon as Grande opened his mouth, my concerns vanished. He spoke slowly and was a few times moved to tears.

But he always collected himself and kept going, and soon enough he was opening the heavy doors of his wounded past to reveal the old Bowery as it truly was.

“When you’re on the street,” he said, “and I mean on *the street*—no I.D., no nothing, just you, yourself—that’s what they call ‘carrying the stick.’ And the stick is the razor. [I lived in] the streets, the tunnels, anyplace. Men’s rooms in gas stations, subways, wherever you could find warmth. I got burns on my back. A woman came out and dumped hot water on me because I was in the doorway of her apartment house. I was thrown out of every flophouse there was. At that time the flophouses lined the whole street. I was in The Sunshine. They threw me out. All the places. The White House, The Providence, I can’t even remember...”

But he could remember. He remembered a cop they called The Walking Greek, who used his nightstick to smash liquor bottles stashed in pockets. He remembered the gruesome pigs’ tails they served on Hart’s Island, where the winos were sent for 15-day dry outs. He remembered a jug of wine getting broken on his head, and how maggots laid eggs in the open wound. He remembered the blinking liquor store sign across the street from the Mission, and how he succumbed, again and again, to its neon promises. And he remembered how close he came to the end. “I’d kill at the drop of a hat,” he said. “On the street, a guy was stealing my bottle, a lousy 35 cent bottle of wine, and I had him in a choke hold, and this guy was dying, and...you know where Great Jones Street is, the bar house there, well those guys used to watch over me. I used to sleep right across the street. Well, the [bar house] guy came out, an Italian or a Jewish guy, and he pulled me off the other guy. He says, ‘It’s not worth it.’ And that was it. I’m not trying to say that I was bad, but when you live in the street so many years you become very...I don’t want to say animalistic, but...you can only take so many slaps down. First your Daddy. Then the church. Then your hometown. Then the army. Every place I’d go I’d wind up in jail. And then you come out and you’re broke. You got no place to go. Finally, when I hit New York, it was totally crazy. People would sleep out on the streets. It was just so desolate. And it was rough. If you had a bag full of money in the morning, you’re not gonna have it at night.”

These were the horror stories. Men at their lowest on a street that kept them down. I asked if he’d been back recently, seen the Bowery changing block by block. But

he didn't care about The Bowery Hotel, or the New Museum, or all the construction. He looked at the street on a personal level, the way someone might if they slept for years on its hard and unrelenting sidewalks. "It's good to go back to whence you came. Because a lot of times you look in the mirror and say, 'I've got this nice car, nice home, grandkids,' and you forget what you were. And it's always good to remember. I went back to the Mission one day for a prayer service, and I see this guy from Attica prison—and Attica's a bad place—and this guy's up there and he's a free man and standing tall. You're not talking about flim-flam kind of people. You're talking about bad guys. The Bowery Mission has got to stay open, because when you went through those doors..."

He'd come all the way around to the party line, but then he stopped. He'd said all he needed to say. This was about more than the Mission. He'd taken on the roughest street in America and lived to tell the tale. He didn't care what would become of the Bowery now. Why should he? What had the street ever done for him?

And so time has passed, and yet the Bowery itself remains so much the same. Continue south across Delancey and kitchen wholesalers are joined by lighting, carpet and tile stores. This is where the street reveals itself. You notice the original architecture for the first time, the Federal-era row houses with dormer windows. You notice the width of the road and the sunlight and it feels like you've come a long way to get here. Ahead, Chinatown begins in earnest, and yet the shell of the old Bowery is still everywhere in evidence. You can recognize the flophouses now—the Crystal, the Soho, the Grand. Those still in business cater to Chinese immigrants just off the boats. And this is where you'll find the Bowery's few buildings of majesty: Stanford White's roman-classical Bowery Savings Bank (now Capitale); the bronze-domed Citizen's Savings Bank (now an HSBC); and the grandiose—if out of place—Manhattan Bridge colonnade. It is fitting that banks were the buildings of greatest import on the old Bowery. Perhaps it's because the neighborhood had so little money. It's hard to believe that you're standing in the center of what was once America's most horrific slum, just a few short blocks from the horrors of Five Points, The Rear-house Empire, and Mulberry Bend. History is everywhere around you, from the still-visible 1880s advertising signs to the tiny Shearith Israel Cemetery on St. James Place. But it's hard to picture the past because the present

itself is unfamiliar. You probably haven't been to the bottom of the Bowery. Maybe you've poked around while waiting for the Fung Wah bus to Boston, or biked through Chatham Square on your way to Brooklyn. But this part of New York, "the Chinese Chinatown," remains obscure not just in custom and language, but physically, too. The Bowery Hotel suddenly seems a million miles away. And yet, it is here, amidst the cheap auctioneers and glitzy jewelry stores, around the bends of Doyers Street and the sloping sidewalks of old Lung Block, that we might find clues to the Bowery's future.

We save our cities through historical preservation. In New York, the Landmarks Commission can designate a building or an entire area (Greenwich Village being the largest) to be of historical import, after which all changes to the physical structures therein must be approved. Only six Bowery buildings currently enjoy landmark status. The street is such a mishmash of architectural styles and eras that it's hard to find a unity or sense of common purpose. But the Bowery has never been about individual buildings. It is about a lifestyle, a kind of romantic American bawdiness. Ultimately, it is a street about humanity, escape, and survival. And how do you save something like that?

Not everyone thinks gentrification is an inherent evil. "New York changes," says Lisa Chamberlain, who writes about real estate for *The Times*. "That's what it's all about. Now, I'm the first one to say we need rent stabilization and affordable housing, and I by no means want to see luxury condos up and down the Bowery, but it's still a pretty loud, dirty street, and I just don't see it becoming completely overrun. For a long time it was skid row, [but] does that mean it should stay skid row for the next 100 years? See, that kind of thinking I just don't understand."

Bob Holman, who owns The Bowery Poetry Club, has become, through occupation and attrition, the Lower East Side's poet laureate. He has lived or worked in the area since the Seventies, and takes a similar, if more cautious view. "I was at a dinner party the other night where someone said, 'One thing I can tell you about the Lower East Side is that people don't want change.' And I was the heckler in the back who called out, 'We *invented* change! This is The City. It's about change.' But what do you keep? What is worth fighting for? What is the soul of the city?"

The soul of the Bowery can be found at its base, where its physical history is most plainly in evidence. This was the conclusion reached by the members of Columbia

University's 2003 Masters in Historic Preservation Program, who spent a year studying the Bowery in an effort to save it. And they aren't the only ones. The Bowery is on the radar of several preservationist groups, the most prominent being The Municipal Arts Society, which has organized several meetings with neighborhood activists and business owners. Unfortunately, the Bowery sits on the borders of three Community Boards, a situation that has complicated grass-roots opposition efforts, and made it all but impossible for the anti-gentrification cause to establish a unified voice or platform. The Columbia University Preservation Plan is about as far as anyone's gotten.

Their idea was to create a Five Points/Chinatown Historic District at the Bowery's southern terminus, where the immigrant neighborhoods so vital to the history of the street still thrive—in a different form—today. Not only would the designation save the architectural qualities of the area, but it would open up one of Manhattan's most fascinating—if least known—areas to tourism. Secondly, they proposed a Historic Commercial District on a Bowery block (between Grand and Hester) still rich with 19th century structures that once housed the saloons, beer gardens, flophouses and theatres. Another idea—mine, though hardly revolutionary—would be to turn one of the street's more historically intriguing buildings into a Bowery Museum. It would make an ideal companion to the popular Tenement Museum, a few blocks east.

Saving the past is one thing, but controlling the future is quite another. For now, the Bowery remains extremely vulnerable to development. With space at a premium, downtown real estate prices continue to climb. It's a trend that has not escaped the Bowery's many small businesses, especially the restaurant suppliers (an industry moving increasingly online). Many have already sold their buildings or leased their storefronts to new bars and restaurants. Not long ago, developers and institutions (like NYU, which built a dorm on the corner of Bowery & Second, making sure the address reflected the side street) shied away from the Bowery and its connotations. Today, in an increasingly homogenized city, those connotations are suddenly cool. Certainly, they helped attract the Bowery's most striking new resident, The New Museum of Contemporary Art.

“We were looking on Bond Street, on Lafayette Street, a number of sites, many of them very good,” says Lisa Phillips, the museum's director. “But there was something

about the Bowery, the roughness of it, the invisibility of it, the fact that it was just languishing as a street. No one was paying attention to it.”

They will be now. At the end of the year, the “new” New Museum will open on the site of a former parking lot at the end of Prince Street (two doors up from the Bowery Mission). The building—by all accounts an architectural marvel—is composed of a series of misshaped boxes stacked on top of each other, as if to mirror the arbitrary chaos of the street itself. This is not the first time the museum has forged into uncharted territory. In 1983, it moved to a still rough-around-the-edges SoHo. “I remember bullets flying one day when I was walking down the street,” says Phillips. “It was not a place where people wanted to be. [But] we did serve as an anchor there, and gradually galleries started populating that street. It became a very popular destination, but it took time.”

Now it’s the galleries that are anticipating the New Museum. More than a dozen small spaces have opened nearby since ground broke in 2003, and some people are hoping a burgeoning art scene on the Bowery may stave off some darker fate. “I’ve been hoping for a revival of the populist arts,” says Bob Holman, “and we’ve got kind of a swing in that direction. The New Museum is a destination. And it’s our only hope.”

In a way, it makes perfect sense. Artists have called the Bowery home for decades, but it’s been a mostly hidden community. William Burroughs holed up for years in a former YMCA known as “The Bunker” (his loft had no windows). The photographer Jay Maisel has lived for decades inside the mysterious graffiti-covered Germania Bank building on the corner of Bowery and Spring. And the names keep coming: Rothko, Marden, Lichtenstein, Copeland and Frank. Perhaps the New Museum will bring this secret art scene to the surface. Then again, maybe they’ve stayed quiet for a reason. Look what happened to SoHo.

Time will tell, of course, and soon. Maybe the street will roll over like the Meat Packing District, become saturated with hotels and lounges, clubs and boutiques; maybe the Bowery Mission will keep the old “Salvation Alley” tradition alive; or maybe the New Museum will inspire the next bohemia. Then again, something completely new could happen. Chamberlain thinks the Bowery would be an intriguing location for a grand experiment in urban living. “It would be great,” she says, “now that everyone is talking about ‘greening’ the city, to adopt some of the principles that Chicago’s Mayor

Daly has undertaken. One of the things he did was massive street-scaping projects, and it had the effect of revitalizing entire neighborhoods. I think the Bowery would be a perfect test case in New York to try something along those lines. You have that skinny median, and there's virtually no shade or trees on the sidewalk, so you could really slow down traffic and build up a canopy all down the Bowery. It could be beautiful. It could be transformative. It could be the perfect place to make a make a bold substantive and symbolic gesture. And an intriguing irony."

Will Bruce Davis recognize the Bowery in ten years? Will Frank Grande? Should a place's past—especially the Bowery's past—even play a part in its future? After all, a city needs to reinvent itself periodically to stay alive. But the Bowery has never been just another place. And its history is disappearing before our eyes. Two years ago the building that housed McGurk's Suicide Hall was demolished. Last October, the longstanding Music Palace on the corner of Hester Street came down. And still, the City has remained silent on any plans for preservation.

Leave it to Holman, the poet, to speak up. "[The Bowery] is a dividing line—between community boards, between zip codes, between cultural identities. Like Broadway, it's the only street in New York that exists as a place. There's no word after it. It's not Bowery Street, Lane, Drive, Terrace. It's just the Bowery. What's the 'The' doing there? The 'The' is there because the Bowery was The Farm, the place you went to get away from the hustle and bustle of downtown New York. The cow path you followed was—is—the Bowery. The bottom of the Bowery is Five Points. It's where things start. It's where you hang out. It's where you get away from everywhere else. It's where they would sell you beer by the minute out of a tube. It's a place of populism. It's the people's place."

Which people, exactly, he didn't specify.

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