



NAVIGATOR

The Storefronts That Survive

An oral history project collects stories from the owners of some of New York City's mom-and-pop shops.

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Brendan McDermid/Reuters

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On Avenue A in New York City's East Village, a two-headed cow stands guard over a Ouija board. Obscura Antiques and Oddities has been holding court in the neighborhood since the early '90s, when its slice of storefront real estate commanded just \$250 a month. Since then, many neighboring businesses have closed up shop; others have fled to reaches of the city where they can still find a better deal.

Nearby, Downtown Yarns is stocked with skeins in every imaginable hue, and offers free patterns and classes for beginners worried about ensnaring their fingers; the owner, who has run the place for 15 years, lives upstairs. Despite rising rents and the proliferation of cheap, quick online shopping, the shop has beaten the odds.

This spring, first-year students at the Macaulay Honors program at Hunter College undertook interdisciplinary research projects that wove together interviews, photographs, and other media to stitch portraits of 110 small businesses throughout the city, including Obscura and Downtown Yarns. In the classroom, the students traced small-business owners' role as protagonists in the city's history, from pushcart operators on the Lower East Side to modern-day Halal carts. Then, they produced [Storefront Survivors](#), an online resource of dispatches from the small-business owners who have managed to eke out a living in a climate that has brought the axe down on so many mom-and-pop stores.

The project was supervised by Michael Benediktsson, a sociology professor at Hunter who is fascinated by the role stores play in social cohesion, and building, maintaining, and stabilizing neighborhoods over time. On a more personal note, he's seen shakeups in the stores on his blocks in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Flatbush, Ditmas Park, and Clinton Hill over the last two decades.

Local coalitions are campaigning for legislation that insulates independent store owners against some of this volatility. Earlier this summer, the city approved legislation that creates small-business advocates who can help shepherd queries and complaints through government channels.

"Small businesses make up a neighborhood," Lena Afridi, policy coordinator from the [Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development](#), told [DNAinfo](#). "So, it's not just small business displacement; it's really cultural displacement." Afridi told DNAinfo that, in her mind, the legislation was simply a stepping stone to more provisions, such as the stalled [Small Business Jobs Survival Act](#), which would enforce leases for a minimum of 10 years, with a right to renew.

Benediktsson agrees that small businesses are central to a neighborhood's identity. "When you have an independent diner where the owner is behind the cash register, or an independent hardware store where the owner is involved in the day-to-day and regular customers come in and out, that's very different than a T-Mobile, which is staffed by one or two people and has no regular customers," he says. "The role of these commercial establishments in the community is qualitatively different."

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When the students set out to compile the interviews, Benediktsson expected to hear stories about resilience—of businesses so deeply entrenched in their communities that they navigated past obstacles unscratched. Though he knew that store owners faced particular pressures, Benediktsson says, "I thought it would be kind of upbeat." The reality, he found, "was far more bittersweet."

The businesses they polled weren't sparks that flashed and fizzled—the subjects were local stalwarts that had remained afloat for decades. "By any objective standing, they're successful," Benediktsson says. And yet many described operating

under a constant precariousness. The businesses' age "makes it all the more perverse that they're being forced out, being uprooted, purely by the vagaries of the real estate market." Benediktsson says. "I'm still struggling with that."

Rising rents were a through line connecting the 110 stories the students collected. Roughly a third of respondents described the threat of a rent hike when their lease was up. For Benediktsson, the project emphasized “how fragile and risky the future is for established, successful businesses that shouldn’t have anything to fear.” Being priced out was a constant and widespread threat.

Acclimating to residents’ changing preferences proved to be a challenge, too. “The majority of [these businesses] have a formula that has worked for 10, in some cases, 100 years,” Benediktsson says. But as a neighborhood’s demographic landscape shifts, that formula may no longer cater to patrons’ tastes. Sometimes, businesses stave off obsolescence by implementing small or incremental changes to reshape an existing routine to appeal to new customers. A diner in Flushing, Queens, for example, stopped sending a waitress around to top off mugs of coffee with refills straight from the pot. Instead, the restaurant now serves coffee in individual pots—a tablescape more aligned with the setup of the numerous dim sum restaurants nearby. “Changes in menu, or diversification of menus, we saw that over and over,” Benediktsson says.

“Our interactions with the guy at the bodega are often very fleeting and potentially very superficial.”

Benediktsson says that the businesses face a difficult choice between adapting the business or abandoning it, or “closing up shop and moving somewhere else, where you can continue to do what you know how to do.”

The students, many of whom grew up in New York, already felt a pull towards these stores and the stories behind them. “It wasn’t much of a heavy lift for me to suggest to them that these places matter just as much as a Starbucks or

Subway," Benediktsson says. In dense, high-traffic areas like New York, where sprawling commercial spaces are anomalies and big-box stores are relatively scarce, shoppers often have a network of regular spots. The task wasn't necessarily to humanize the small-business owners—many locals could easily conjure up a familiar face—but to go into greater depth. "Our interactions with the guy at the bodega are often very fleeting and potentially very superficial," Benediktsson says.

These interviews, he says, offered a way for students to more meaningfully engage with a place that interests them. A young artist profiled [a drawing studio in Soho](#) that had been bounced out of its old space and relocated to Chinatown. She inflected the profile with her understanding of the multifaceted role these types of stores can play for customers, Benediktsson adds. "She understood it as a sanctuary for artists from a place of deep solidarity." Other students dove into [florists](#), [pet stores](#), [pizza joints](#), and a [slot car raceway](#).

Benediktsson hopes the project will be ongoing, and that, over the course of subsequent semesters, students will continue to create a robust archive—both for the sake of prospective researchers and to fuel students' own engagement with the world around them. "I know that the project changed them," he says, "and the way that they think about neighborhoods."

About the Author



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