

## McDonalds on 96th Street, New York City

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*Not to be outdone by the Eastsiders' "92nd Street Y", Manhattan's Westside has its own popular cultural center:- McDonalds at 96th Street. (No website.)*

A sunny autumn day in New York City, perfect for a stroll along Upper Broadway. Before noon restaurant staffs are arranging lunch tables on the wide sunlit sidewalk. It's a school holiday too; so 5 and 6-year-olds dressed in brand-name casuals skip beside parents, mingling with infants strapped in strollers overseen by their Filipino or Nepalese nannies. All signs of our stratified but celebrated multi-cultured New York.

I pass bargain-seekers browsing through stalls of used books set up outside Symphony Space (formerly Thalia film theater) whose broad window posters announce evening concerts and poetry readings.

A bulky, balding man in running shorts steps out of NYSportsClub wiping sweat from his neck and hurries southwards. Strolling singles' are bejeweled with ipod buds; people perched at the Starbucks window, likewise muffled, focus on computer faces, coffee at their elbows. Fixed on the pavement is the fruit wagon stacked with trays of blue, purple, red, and black berries, pyramids of green papaya, a terrace of apples and heaps of unripe avocados; the vendor needs an assistant to handle waiting customers.

This is the New York which its residents proudly cling to and where tourists arrive from their own suburban institutions to observe us from an open tour bus- as on a safari. Two squat white vehicles, currently empty, are parked at the curb. I recognize them; they're designed to transport wheelchair-bound commuters and handicapped youths, ferrying them from their suburban institutions for day- excursions into these poly-peopled streets.

Determinedly focused on my target at Broadway and 96th, I pass laptop gazers in Starbucks and breakfasters at Filicori Zucheln Café likewise absorbed scrolling a screen or resolutely hunched over their morning crossword puzzle. Cafes are interspersed among three commercial banks; a manicure shop advertises holiday specials. Then my destination: the most visited store along this promenade. I step inside, not for McDs new all-day-breakfast menu but for an ethnographic check in.

I've been into several of New York City's 354 McDonalds restaurants, but I'm returning to this 96th Street outlet with a specific goal, namely to test my earlier assessment, and then to share its culture with you. I'll linger in order to revisit the tenderness and tolerance I've glimpsed nowhere else that serves a Big Mac. Please suspend your hostility towards McDonalds' fast food empire and its fattening menu and step inside with me.

The counter, manned by young, underpaid yet smiling waiters is at the back of the high-

ceilinged room. I amble slowly forward. As I pass 8 or 9 tables en route I imbibe the mood I experience every time I drop by here.

The store is small, perhaps 15 feet wide with hardly 30 chairs, only few of which are empty. Both window tables, one on either side of the door, are occupied. At the table to my left sit three women, two elderly ladies in wheelchairs, and the third, younger, who's probably their caregiver. They seem like young girls, huddling close to one another—intimate and unreserved.

The table on the other side of the entrance is monopolized by one customer with shopping bags, papers, and two briefcases consuming the floor space around him and the tabletop as well. Not even a cup of coffee. He's alone, absorbed with his cell phones, one in each hand. It's unclear if he's speaking with anyone. I keep my gaze on him, but he avoids any eye contact. He's dark skinned with African features except for his long, straight hair pulled untidily somewhere behind his ears. I note the fringe of a prayer shawl in his lap and when he turns I see he's wearing a yarmulke, the Judaic head cover for men. Could he be on lunch break from the Hassidic-owned B&H electronic outlet downtown? Doubtful. Moreover, I learn he's here every day; same table.

"Yep," says my interlocutor. "And you just missed Frank; he's 90 and never misses a day; yep, every morning." Joe Wilson (that's the name embossed on his shield) is a policeman who I interrupt speaking to a customer with a spread of CDs and papers covering his table. "Are you here to remove people if....?" (I anticipate Wilson's reply but I needed an opener) "Nooooo Mam", Joe assures me, turning so I can read his shoulder badge-NYC Traffic Police; "That's up to management; I'm here for my pancakes."

I explain my purpose and Officer Joe willingly responds. "Yep, I know most of these folks." He nods toward the Hassidic guy with the phones: "That's his spot; never eats anything." I look over my shoulder towards the well-dressed couple at a third table. I'd already noticed how animated the woman is and how purposefully she speaks. The man, younger, nods as he listens. Three Christian bibles lay open at their elbows (no coffee cups here), also a copy of *Awake*, the magazine distributed by Jehovah Witnesses. (This makes sense; these evangelists often work travelers at the 96th Street express station; this stop is a common venue for them.) I overhear "...and now the world was created", and, "when somebody goes to church..." . They're regulars too, says Joe Wilson. "Yep, a regular meeting hall this here place is."

The two washrooms further along the passageway are in constant use. A young couple arrives, tennis rackets under their arms. The man sits and checks his phone while the woman heads into the ladies room. They both exit without purchasing even a cookie. Throughout all this traffic, a woman, her shirt printed with All-Day-Breakfast, gently moves among the tables with a wet mop, sweeping up crumbs, adjusting chairs, and frequently checking the toilets.

Although almost every seat in this McDonalds is occupied and people are constantly arriving and leaving, the place is quiet. A man (bus driver?) wearing an MTA uniform sits down across from me absorbed in calculations with his electronic meter. Many of these McD patrons sit alone; others are in pairs. No one's hurrying through their fast-food here.

When I return in the afternoon, I find the scene unchanged. Except the chairs around the table where I sat this morning are now occupied by a group of 6 people, adults who appear

like children because of one disorder or another. They sit silently, smiling, neither talking nor eating. Some gaze at the ceiling, some at their nurse. Their day outing has ended and they're awaiting their bus.

Can these customers purchase enough McPancakes and McBurgers to pay operating costs here? Given soaring property values, it's remarkable that this small shop survives in a city being converted to serve only the rich. Would that out-of-city home for handicapped youths lobby Ronald McDonald to keep it open? Or, in the interests of public health, would wealthy citizens moving into this neighborhood in order to lounge in another \$6./cup organic Starbucks mobilize to eject an unwholesome 'greasy spoon'? Or will they know here is really a community center?

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