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Recession Culture

No money changes everything, from murder rates to museum attendance, from career choices to what you eat for dinner. And not all of it for the worse.

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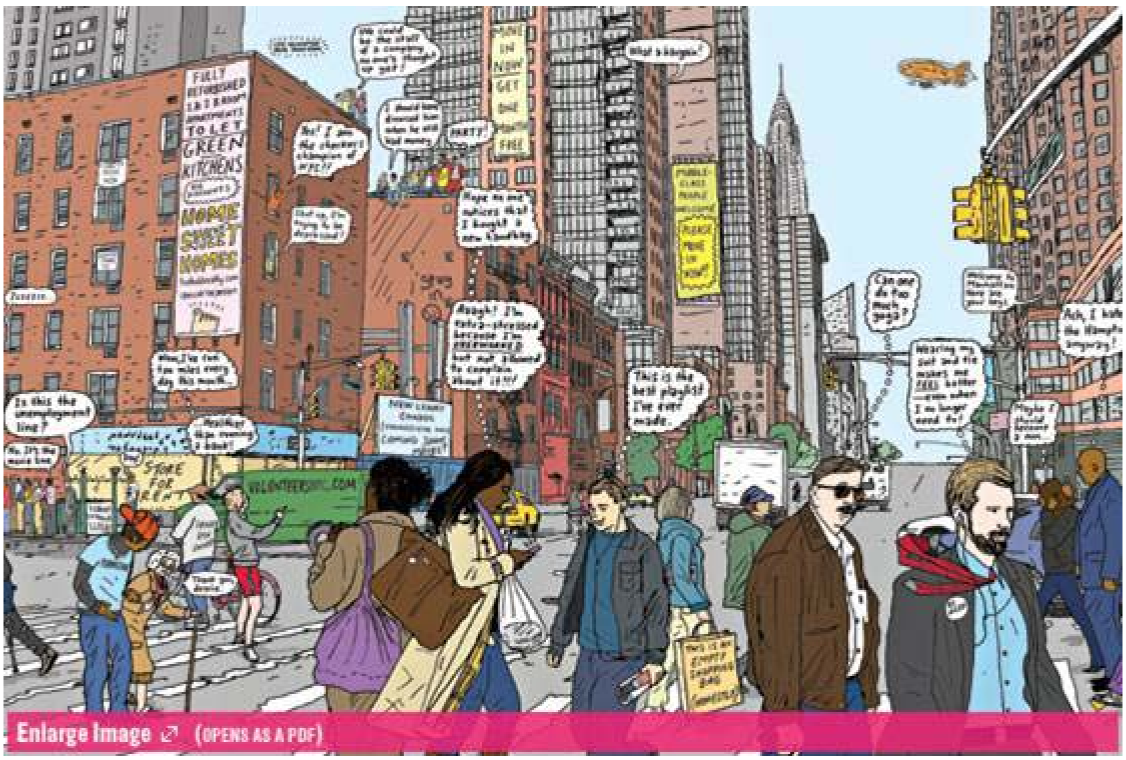

oh. My. God.” Ande Sedwick, 24 and lithe as an orchid, pops out of the doorway of a third-floor walk-up on Carmine Street in the West Village, beckoning her boyfriend, Isaac Woofter, to come have a look around. They’ve been casing various one-bedrooms for the last hour or so, all nice, but all with deal-killing problems. Not this place. It has light. It has closet space. *It has a kitchen separately defined by a wall*. Oh. My. God.

Jacquelyn Leahy, their broker from Mark David & Co. real estate, gives them a triumphant look—*What'd I tell you?*—and then turns to me. "The difference between this year and last," she says, "is that this year we can help people." The list price for this apartment is $2,400 per month, but she's pretty sure she can knock $100 off without the landlord protesting. In the spring of 2008, it'd have gone for $2,800.

If the market hadn't crashed, Ande and Isaac would never have been able to conduct this search. They're currently living with two roommates in West Chelsea, on a club-saturated block so loud that Ande can barely get to sleep at night. She's a singer-songwriter, but makes most of her money from coaching figure-skating and tending bar; he, an aspiring actor, also makes most of his income pouring drinks. "We'd never have looked in this neighborhood, either, if it hadn't been for the market," says Isaac, as he admiringly looks around. *Space!* "Maybe we'd have heard from a friend—'Oh, we're moving out, do you want to take our lease?' But that always happens when you don't need it."

Dalton Conley, author of *Elsewhere, U.S.A.* and a sociologist at NYU, sometimes likes to compare New York to the United Arab Emirates. Wealthy people on a tiny island serviced by poor immigrants from neighboring countries—that's what it is, essentially; it's just that the island here is Manhattan, and the neighboring countries are … Queens. No one in their right mind would say that this recession will suddenly erase New York's economic disparities. But one of its silver linings is that it might provide a brief window for people like Ande and Isaac to gain a toehold in this city. The middle class, long vanishing from New York but once its spine, has a chance to reclaim its place. Most brokers say their rentals are going for roughly 20 percent less this year. Manhattan home prices have fallen about the same. "And what that means," says Jonathan Bowles, director of the Center for an Urban Future, "is that people will have the opportunity to buy apartments and homes in neighborhoods other than the far Rockaways."

As a matter of gestalt, this city no longer belongs to those with large bonuses and expense accounts. The city is awash in deals on everything from clothing to furniture. It’s cheaper to join a gym. Even the city’s most upscale restaurants have been humbled. “When the economy goes sour,” says Danny Meyer, the impresario behind Union Square Café, Eleven Madison Park, and Shake Shack, among others, “there are three different kinds of restaurants that do well: the smaller-scale neighborhood restaurants that don’t ask much of you; those that have banked enormous goodwill by offering great value during the boom; and those with proven records of excellence, a sure thing.” I point out to him that two out of three of those types fall into the unpretentious category. “Well, yeah,” he says. “People aren’t going to want to go where they aren’t being hugged.”

And so Molly’s Shebeen, a Third Avenue pub with sawdust on the floor and a bow-tied Irish barkeep, is still doing a brisk business; Cru, which refers to its wine selection as its “wine program,” seems totally dead. The Upper West Side’s Kefi, a warmly appointed neighborhood spot that serves rustic Greek, is doing 500 to 600 covers on a Saturday night; Fiamma, which *New York*’s Adam Platt once described as “overwrought, fussy, and never comfortable in its own skin,” has closed; and Gilt and Adour, its spiritual twins, seem to be on life support.

There is still potential for a significant decline in our quality of life. Subway service is about to become both more expensive and less frequent. The city Parks Department budget is set to decrease. But the biggest fear about this recession—that it will return us to the days of seventies Babylon, of violent crime and *Taxi Driver* paranoia and fetid garbage pileups—seems unwarranted. Only about 23 percent of New Yorkers owned their places back then; now about 33 percent do. Times Square is squeaky clean. Policing methods have improved. According to the NYPD, violent crime has gone down in virtually every category this year compared to this same time last year: Murders by 21.1 percent; rapes by 19.1; robberies (which include muggings) by 17; assaults by 3. More surprising still, property crimes have gone down: fewer car thefts, fewer home and store burglaries. None of this evokes the seventies very much.

“I wouldn’t want to minimize the economic pain that many folks are experiencing,” says Conley. “But as a city, it is possible we’ll end up with the good parts of the seventies—a rich bohemian culture—and not the bad.”