



*The Beauty Bar, New York*

#### THE BEAUTYBAR: HYBRID PROGRAMS IN THE SYNTHETIC

At the turn of the millennium there sprouted up a series of so-called theme-based bars and clubs in New York, one of the most notorious called “Beautybar” located on east 14<sup>th</sup> Street in the East Village, originally owned and conceived by Deb Parker.<sup>1</sup> The Beautybar took what was an actual, functioning beauty salon, and turns it into a bar, *while leaving the original salon physically intact*. Remaining in place are hair dryers, sinks, price lists, and miscellaneous paraphernalia of the original beauty salon, mixed with bottles of liquor, glasses, and the other paraphernalia required for a functioning bar.

The Beautybar can be examined as a model of cross programming that differs from earlier notions of mixed use, resulting in a radically different form of experience. It suggests a new type of synthesis of programmed events marked by varying degrees of ambiguity, and the combining of distinct functions and familiar typologies into blurred patterns of habitation undefined by discreet boundaries.

The Beautybar is a manifestation of contemporary culture, and part of a larger proliferation of programs that refer to external references and images, typical of “theme” parks, restaurants, and clubs. Yet the presentation of a beauty salon acting as bar, or vice versa, suggests a

somewhat different species from theme entertainment operations that take on the imagery and sounds of popular culture. In these types of settings, a given theme is overlaid on to an arbitrary, empty site, or neutral container that becomes totally transformed into the selected synthetic experience. The restaurant program is cloaked-over by an artificial fabrication based on its source imagery that had no connections to the chosen site. It is the nature of the ability of the chosen theme to generate displacements in both time and place resulting in the out-of-the-ordinary, or uncanny experience that establishes the restaurant's degree of success as "entertainment."

The Beautybar shares some relationship to this notion of theme entertainment, but is actually a very different phenomenon. In this case, one re-uses the original space, which remains in place, in a way that was not originally intended. The two functions, beauty salon, and bar have no relationship to one another, much in keeping with earlier surreal operations based on the collision of unlike events (as in Breton's dictum, "the fortuitous encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table."<sup>3</sup> In the act of superimposing a function *over* a given function, the club onto a beauty salon, the newly realized program (the bar) is familiar and real, as is the original, found condition (the beauty salon)— they are both intact, relatively unaltered, and remain able to be independently read. Yet it remains unclear as to which identity dominates--the original function or the newly imposed function; whether the old rules for their operation are unaltered, or transformed by the forced marriage between the two.

It is more likely that the hybrid condition has generated a new identity, different than either the beauty salon, or bar, in isolation, in which the cross referencing between functions, and their consequent contamination produces an exaggerated, or hyper awareness of both difference and similarity. Clearly, the two functions were never meant to be together, and when combined, result in a kind of defamiliarization, or shift of expectations, producing another kind of experience different from earlier associations with either bars or beauty salons. In fact, it is the quality and degree of this distancing of the known encounter into the realm of an altered reality from the everyday, a state of fantasy that serves to establish the bar's unique identity and sense of attraction.

There are a number of ambiguities that result from the overlay of functions that enrich the situation even further. If one has drinks while having one's hair done (which often happens, we're told), one might presume that this is still a salon with simply an added amenity. At what point does the identity, or content of the original artifact actually "shift," or cross over into the new hybrid condition? One would assume that the beauty salon has to function like a bar, and at some level, actually resemble a bar for the identity to change, i.e. to "be" a bar. Perhaps even just the re-titling, or only reprogramming the beauty salon at a certain hour is enough to complete the transformation<sup>4</sup>? We know that if the salon remains intact, one can simply remove the bar function, and it will automatically revert back to its original program. There is a risk, however, that the old identity may be affected by the residue, or "aura" of its earlier use, and thus be impossible to completely retrieve. At the same time, there is a possibility that the beauty salon and the bar can also function concurrently, i.e., still function as a salon during the day, and a bar in the evening.

The entertainment, as it were, begins to get better when we push the overlap further, as one decides to have her hair done or nails polished in the evening while everyone else continues to drink (we're told this does happen as well), in which a part of the earlier identity of the beauty salon becomes reinstated. And if the choice of the overlay between the two functions is initially arbitrary, what are the criteria that determine the appropriateness, or the degree of success in making these sorts of transformations? One would assume that certain combinations make no sense, while some make for more interesting combinations. One could also argue that the greater the degree of misfit, or non-congruence between the juxtaposed programs, the more interesting, or at least, the more entertaining the result. Traditional criteria of quality are turned upside down—in this case, *it is the degree and nature of the interference caused by the hybrid—along with the resulting discomfort, visual dissonance, and destabilization* that become key ingredients for inventing new synthetic experiences.

An interesting analogy to this kind of stimulation, one imagines (if not too extreme) is not unlike the activity of "cross-dressing," i.e., one sex putting on the clothes of the other sex. While a male body in male clothes is a normal, ingrained experience producing a singular identity

between the body and its cladding--a male body in female clothes is rather abnormal, a misfit between the covered and the covering, and defines an entirely new experience of one's body. While the body is of course still intact, and hasn't changed, the new clothing, challenges one's former identity, causing a kind of "hyper" awareness of both one's male body as the original condition, and the characteristics of female clothing, as the imposed condition. When combined, there has been produced a new type of body form, a male and a female combined into one, or male-female, made up of forms partly concealed and partly revealed, sharing some of the characteristics of the original body and clothes, but producing both a projected image and internal awareness of a different, newly discovered identity.

It is suggested that these kinds of complex associations are of particular value when applied to the problem of the architectural program in contemporary culture. The combination of unlike programs in the city results in more than the familiar virtues of complexity, mixed-use, cross-association, and all the other qualities of the multi-functional city. It rather suggests a description of radically different forms of urban experience, as well as a potentially new synthesis of built forms marked by varying degrees of ambiguity, and the continuing vacillation between sometimes being (or communicating) one thing, sometimes another, and typically, a little bit of both.

The phenomenon of the Beautybar is only a more extreme example of life in the modern, synthetic city, which achieves new levels of dynamism based on a concentration and mix of divergent programs, unexpectedly combined, or juxtaposed. The tendency to develop hybrid, or composite functioning within traditionally articulated building types is now a common occurrence: bookstores with cafes, artists studios with living space and public exhibition, housing with commercial offices and supermarkets, libraries/schools with community meeting space, housing with health clubs and medical services, and many other examples. Anything that achieves the maximization of combination, mix, and interrelationships, that removes the conforming limits of "normal" expectations and behavior enriches the scene, and the more it's experienced, the more it's expected, but over time, demanded in larger doses.

Recent advancements in communication technologies and increased accessibility have further fractured traditional patterns of living as a linear sequence of bounded experiences. Familiar, undeviating timelines (get up, go to work, have lunch, come home, have dinner, sleep, church on Sunday, etc.) are no longer universal, or distinctly articulated. One might work at home, shop throughout the day, eat whenever one likes, pray in the evenings (or during work breaks), attend school through “distance learning” at alternative locations and times, conduct business through entertaining clients at restaurants, exercise between meetings, etc. Architecture now requires similar complexities--multiple combinations, or hybrids of different programs that traditionally would be separate, but through shifts in living patterns and the fracturing of prescribed relationships between programmed activities, suggesting that any number or combinations of parts are needed to facilitate such a scenario.

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Such combinations have critical implications relative to meaning, as they oppose the “normal,” and “proper” sequencing of events, the established, familiar urban narratives that describes how institutions are used, the relationship between places and events, and how most of us go through our daily lives. Patterns of activity typically follow very simple precepts: one finishes one thing before going to another; some activities are done before others; some shouldn’t be done at all; and most activities take places in particular places that are distinct from other places. To put it another way: one goes to a health spa to exercise—but not to pray, or be exposed to art. One goes to 42<sup>nd</sup> Street to be entertained (in the way which has been determined to be acceptable and desired by the masses)—but not to be educated—and certainly not to be confronted with pornography, or choose to partake in what the majority feel to be improper. The possibility of the hybrid is to confront the norms, the promotion of controlled, accepted behavior that generates a conformist culture with common expectations and life patterns.

The Beautybar suggests two other implications, relative to site and architectural invention:

1. The notion of site is implicitly a charged condition that affects, to a greater or lesser extent, any proposed transformation. Rather than the *tabula rasa* of the modernist, empty shell, in which one identity is completely replaced with another, another approach is to assume a “filled” site, either actual or implicit, which maintains certain peculiar characteristics of its earlier identity. Thus, the terms by which one adds to, or changes the role of a given site are changed. Functional transformation within an existing site becomes a matter of layering new programs, which in combination with earlier artifacts, form unfamiliar, synthetic hybrids, a process leading to higher and higher degrees of entropic disorder, and complexity.
2. The problem of form, style, or the intention of producing an “appropriate” expression of function, culture, the age, etc. becomes subverted, in the sense that the choice of the narrative, or the previous function automatically “produces” the design. If the narrative of the new synthesis has a strong enough identifiable imagery, or semantic power, there is little to be invented, or contrived except for the small choices remaining as to what to maintain, and what to discard. The basis of invention in the evolution of the city, then, becomes the positioning and layering of earlier traces with the combination of additional programs, rather than the creation of new forms or typologies.

The city has the capacity to evolve as more than the random accumulation of disconnected events and generic spaces, based on limited, familiar formal types and programming. The Beautybar suggests something far richer and complex, a sweeping, non-linear narrative with a wild, unexpected mix of offerings taking renewed energy from the clash of cultures, experiences and settings (which all great cities promise us). The result of such combinations can overturn familiar structures by developing radically different patterns of association (a form of surrealist operation?), whereby institutions can be re-defined, combined, and re-programmed, generating new associations between recreation, living, education, worship, and work. These forms of “counter-narratives” go against expectations and norms,

challenge ingrained belief systems, and suggest the potential for alternative forms of living, and possibly, cultural transformation.

**Notes:**

1. “Deb Parker Beautybar” *New York Times*, Sept.7 1998, Metro section, page 1. As of January, 2014, the Beautybar is still open.

2. Examples include the “Hard Rock Cafes,” “Motown Cafes,” “Planet Hollywood Restaurants,” “Harley-Davidson Cafes” and the “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” restaurants and the like that have proliferated throughout cities across the U.S.

3. Lucy Lippard (ed.), *Surrealists On Art*, (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 2.

4. This is not unlike Duchamp’s operation to establish the Readymades, in which the transformation of meaning (and not form) is conveyed through the intent of the maker. See Robert Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Paragraphic Books, 1959), pp. 35-37.