



Last Call for Neon in New York City

Signs at 30 Rockefeller Plaza and the Apollo Theater are among the latest to lose their vintage glow in favor of LED lighting.

LAST CALL FOR NEON IN NEW YORK CITY

By [John Freeman Gill](#)

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For nearly eight decades, the warm glow of a handcrafted red-and-white neon sign beckoned passers-by outside the White Horse Tavern in Greenwich Village. Dylan Thomas, Jack Kerouac and Bob Dylan all imbibed at the storied watering hole, which opened in 1880.

But this year, the sign abruptly went dark. In the spring, the White Horse removed its 1946 neon sign and replaced it with a replica illuminated not by gas but by light-emitting diodes, or LEDs.

Outside the White Horse Tavern in Greenwich Village, where an LED-lit replica now hangs in place of the original 1946 neon sign.

Traditionalists promptly began to rage against the dying of the light, and a warning letter to the building's owner from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission followed. Because the tavern is in a historic district, any changes to the facade must be approved by the commission.

"It is very disturbing," Andrew Berman, executive director of Village Preservation, said of the vintage sign's removal. "The White Horse is really synonymous with the literary, political and cultural history of Greenwich Village, and the neon sign is an integral part of the tavern."

Eytan Sugarman, the bar's owner, said that the old sign was falling apart and had become a hazard.



Credit...Ashok Sinha for The New York Times

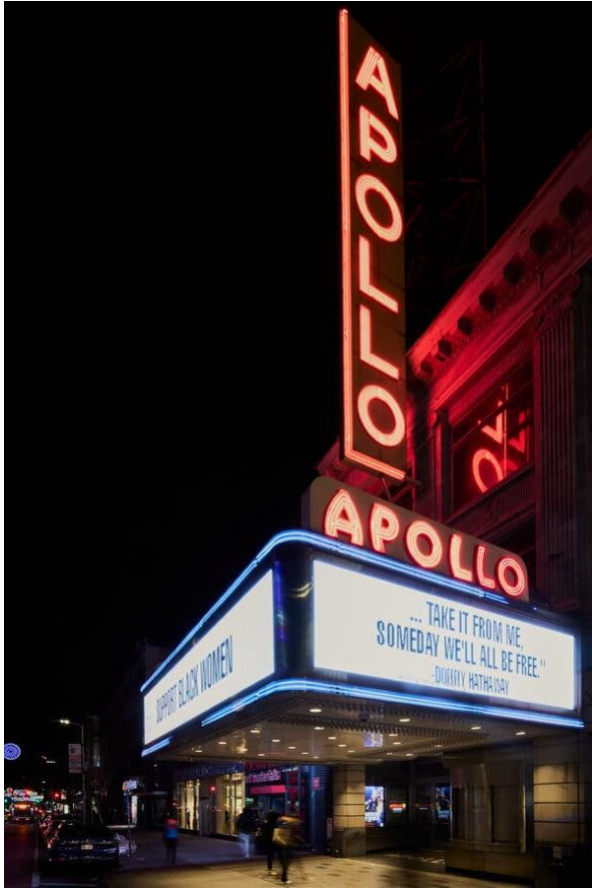


The bar's 1946 sign now sits inside, stripped of neon tubing. The owner, Eytan Sugarman, said that the sign was falling apart and had become a hazard.

"I'm still determined at some point to get it fixed, restored and used again," he said. Currently, it sits in a window by the entrance, its enameled-steel face stripped of glass tubing.

These are dark days for the city's historic neon. This year is the centennial of the installation of the first neon sign in Times Square, by the automaker Willys-Overland. But instead of celebrating that anniversary, the city has essentially been holding a series of funerals, as one vintage neon sign after another is lost, either because the business it hangs on is shuttered or its owners opt for LEDs.

"Some of the losses this year have been particularly gut-wrenching," said Thomas E. Rinaldi, the author of "New York Neon," who has been tracking the disappearance of the city's neon signage since 2006. "This year, it's the real iconic signs that are biting the dust."



Credit...Ashok Sinha for The New York Times

The owners of two world-famous landmarks, 30 Rockefeller Plaza in Midtown Manhattan and the Apollo Theater in Harlem, won the blessing of the landmarks commission this year to replace the neon tubing in their marquees with LED versions. The vote on 30 Rock's two oldest Streamline Moderne marquees came on Dec. 17, after a hearing at which several individuals and preservation groups argued that neon is a historic material that should be preserved.

Before the vote, Cas Stachelberg, a historic preservation consultant for the building's owners, said that LEDs would ease maintenance and use only 10 percent the energy of neon. Todd Matuszewicz, of Save the Signs Colorado, disagreed, testifying that the red neon letters "NBC" on the marquees were roughly 90 percent as energy-efficient as LEDs.

"No one would dare to put a fake plastic tree in Rockefeller Center," he said. "So why would you put fake plastic neon on the Rockefeller Plaza marquee?"

Nobody at the hearing mentioned that perhaps the most vivid counterargument to 30 Rock's LED plans was right down the block at Radio City Music Hall, part of the same landmark complex. Just last month, Radio City completed the replacement of more than 10,000 linear feet of dimming neon tubes as part of a resplendent restoration of its wraparound Art Deco marquee and vertical signs.



Credit...Ashok Sinha for The New York Times

Every year, Mr. Rinaldi publishes a [blog post](#) of eulogies for neon signs whose demise came to his attention in the previous 12 months. This year's list of 15 will include the signs for the Subway Inn bar, [Smith's Bar and Restaurant](#) and the Playpen sex shop, all of which had lit up Midtown for years with a certain timeworn pizzazz.

Such signs are perhaps taken for granted because they were once so ubiquitous. From 1923 to 1955, roughly the golden era of neon signage, the Manhattan Buildings Department issued 73,539 permits for electric signs, a vast majority of them neon, according to Mr. Rinaldi. Today only about 150 of those survive, he said. Citywide, around 300 neon signs remain from that period, with a bleak attrition rate of about a dozen a year.



Credit...Ashok Sinha for The New York Times

Last week, the landmarks commission voted to allow the replacement of neon tubing with LED versions on two Art Deco marquees at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, ranking preservationists.

Neon aficionados said that while LED-lit tubing may look similar to neon from a distance or in photographs, the distinctions are obvious once you get close, not least because neon has a signature glow.

"The light neon emits is a warmer light — it's not harsh, it's not cold," said Jeff Friedman, the owner of Let There Be Neon, a sign fabrication studio in Tribeca that uses both technologies. "Neon is like a vinyl record. LED is like an MP3."

Below are seven neon signs around the city that have recently faced lights out. One succumbed, one still glows brightly and some were salvaged or may yet be. The future of several remains uncertain.



Credit...Thomas Rinaldi

As the neighborhood gentrified around her in recent years, the naked neon lady in the window of the Playpen sex shop on Eighth Avenue became an increasingly lonely survivor of a far more raffish era of Times Square. By late 2016, her lower body, garters and heels had all gone dark, and this year she vanished entirely, along with the business she advertised.



Credit...Thomas Rinaldi

For 70 years, a red-and-green neon extravaganza shone out from the corner facade of Smith's Bar at 44th Street and Eighth Avenue, on a once seedy strip of Hell's Kitchen. The bar even scored a cameo in the closing credits of Martin Scorsese's neon-suffused 1976 film "Taxi Driver." Smith's was shuttered this year and is set to be replaced by a cannabis dispensary, but the neon signage was salvaged last week by Noble Signs, which plans to display portions in its nascent New York Sign Museum in East New York. The company plans a fund-raiser to support a restoration. But for now, its studio is crowded with an alphabet soup of glass tubing and metal letters as tall as 56 inches.



Credit...Ashok Sinha for The New York Times

Since opening in 1937 near a subway station entrance across from Bloomingdale's, the Subway Inn has been as itinerant as its name suggests, reopening two blocks east on Second Avenue in 2015 and then across the street in 2023. With each move, the self-proclaimed dive bar's midcentury neon sign came along. But Dec. 28 will be last call for the watering hole. "Before we turn off the iconic neon lights for the final time and take them home with us, we hope you will come and visit," the bar posted on its Facebook page. The owner, Steven Salinas, said in an interview that the sign represented "classic America" and that he would reinstall it if the bar reopened elsewhere.



Credit...Ashok Sinha for The New York Times

When a vinyl awning was removed from a Nassau Street storefront in the Financial District in 2016, a long-buried neon treasure emerged: a circa-1950s sign from a Loft Candies shop. Astonishingly, some of the neon lettering still worked. Two Boots Pizza, which planned a restaurant there, hired Let There Be Neon to restore the vintage beauty. The pizza place never opened, but the company now renovating the space intends to retain the sign, said Mr. Friedman, the sign studio's owner. For now, the sign "is safe and sound in my shop, with all the neon and all the channel letters," he said.



Credit...Ashok Sinha for The New York Times

Last year, Mr. Friedman, of Let There Be Neon, got a call from J.J. Hat Center offering him a big antique neon Stetson Hats sign. When he got a good look at it, he was flabbergasted to discover that he recognized it from the 1960s. "I remember when I was a kid being on a bus with my mom going uptown on Sixth Avenue and seeing that Stetson sign by Herald Square," he said. He surmised that when the hat store, founded in 1911, moved to Fifth Avenue, "they took this sign with them and threw it in the back of the place." Now restored by Mr. Friedman's studio, the sign, which he estimates dates to the 1940s, hangs proudly in his shop, a glowing emblem of his youth.



Credit...Ashok Sinha for The New York Times

The ghost sign on the facade of 154 Stanton Street advertises the long-departed shop of Louis Zuyacht, an Austrian immigrant who sold "smart clothes" there with his sons. Installed in 1942, the sign was one of the last produced in New York before the city's neon sign shops went dark during World War II. The building is on the market, and Noble Signs has made preliminary inquiries to try to salvage the sign, said David Barnett, a co-owner.



Credit...Ashok Sinha for The New York Times

The glorious, one-story, green neon harp of the Dublin House bar has hung above West 79th Street since 1933. In 2021, a GoFundMe campaign organized by Let There Be Neon quickly raised \$20,175 for the restoration of the time-battered sign. Donors of \$50 or more received a special coaster redeemable for a thank-you pint of Guinness.