

City's clubs falling silent

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Images of edgy nightclub Sin-é are flashed on oversized plasma screens in the sales office of a new condominium development.

Buyers, lured by the mystique of the Lower East Side's arts and music scene, pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to live at the center of it.

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A few years later that same edgy nightclub goes out of business, having received many noise complaints from the new condo owners, and pinched by skyrocketing rents driven up by those same well-heeled neighbors.

The almost cinematic irony of this situation is not limited to Sin-é (located on Attorney Street), but has become something of a pattern in downtown Manhattan. Another live music venue in the area, Tonic, shut last month and two musicians were arrested there while protesting the closing.

"Venues like Tonic make important cultural contributions to New York City," said Suzanne Fiol, artistic director at Issue Project Room, a performance space in Brooklyn. "When you are working with art on the margins, you need to be valued for what you add to culture, not what you make financially."

Foil opened her experimental music venue in the East Village in 2003, but was forced to move two years later after the landlord tried to double the rent.

Downtown musicians are still lamenting Tonic's demise, as it was a rare club that booked underground acts and gave performers a sizeable cut of door proceeds. Other venues are known to stiff performers, and some even charge bands to do a sound check before the show.

Under these circumstances, city politicians are looking at ways to provide public support for music clubs, while longtime observers say the era of Manhattan nightlife may soon become an era of Brooklyn nightlife.

Nick Bodor, co-owner of Cake Shop on Ludlow Street, says that only by running a café and record store upstairs, in addition to the downstairs nightclub, is he able to keep his business viable.

"The Lower East Side had definitely lost some of its artistic edge with the increased rents," said Bodor. "It's only going to get worse if we don't get some help with tax incentives or grants."

Proposals for such tax incentives may be introduced as early as this month by City Councilman Alan Gerson (D-Manhattan).

After meeting last week with club owners, musicians and city accountants, he plans to introduce bills to lower property taxes for performing arts venues, and perhaps seek special zoning so neighborhoods would be required to set aside a certain amount of land for live performance spaces.

"If we don't do this we are going to lose the verve of New York as a cultural incubator," Gerson said.

Recent downtown club closings
1973– 2006 CBGB, 315 Bowery

1992–2005 Fez, 380 Lafayette

1995–2005 Luna Lounge, 171 Ludlow St.

1998–2007 Tonic, 107 Norfolk

1999– 2005 C-Note, 157 Avenue C

2001–2007 Sin-e, 150 Attorney St.