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Number Madness

Last night I had dinner at Bar 89, stopped by 23 Watts for a drink, and then lounged at 357 for a few late night hours. The next morning, I had brunch with a friend at 535, and when she asked me where I had been the prior night, I felt the need to pull out my phone book to recite all the of the places I had been to. We both laughed and considered what gallery we should visit after eating: Gallery 292, Gallery 456, 494 Gallery, Gallery 5, 55 Mercer, or Gallery 91.

No, this is not an excerpt from Aldous Huxley's futuristic novel "Brave New World". This is New York City of today. Furthermore, I do not purposely plan my nights to hit number-spots. I could have chosen any number of different New York City bars: Bar 9, Bar 6, Bar 13, Bar 54, Bar 85, 119 Bar, 169 Bar, or 55 Bar. If I had wanted to dine in the exponentially expanding East Village, I would have had some fabulous number-letter combinations to choose from such as 7A, 7B, 2A, and 9C. If I were in a letter-less mood all together, there would still be several Manhattan options available to chose from, since "straight numbering" is a New York favorite, with First, One & One, One 51, 1, 13, 21, 44 44, 76, 288, 57 57, 147, 247, 233, 203, and 205 topping the list.

The phenomenon of naming restaurants, bars and clubs after their street address (or some other random number) has reached levels of absurdity, and is due to reach a new ridiculous high with the opening in September of a new SoHo hotel by the name-number of 60 Thompson. The owners cringe at anyone who calls it "60 Thompson Hotel", and correct them: "No. There's no 'hotel' at the end. It's just '60 Thompson.' That's all."

Although there are a handful of number spots in L.A. (360, Club 7969, 26 Beach Cafe, and 72 Market Street), and a handful in San Francisco (One Market, 1015 Club, and 330 Ritch), these cities do not come close to comparing with number-maniac New York. I haven't heard of any number spots in Chicago or Boston. Nothing like this exists across the Atlantic in Paris, London or Milan. (Except for the British prime minister's home being called 10 Downing Street)

Vietnam, however, deserves all the credit for inventing the name-number system. In downtown Saigon, dozens of Pho shops (cafeteria-style restaurants serving the famous rice noodles in broth) dot the busy Pasteur Street, each named "Pho" followed by its street number (i.e. Pho 585, Pho 245). But how could chaotic New York, the city that stands for individualism, entitle its diverse places with such uniform numbers-names?

It could be that business owners have simply become lazy with thinking up new names, but with all the money and creative energy invested into slick New York interiors and elaborate menus, I highly doubt it. I think this number madness might be a symptom of a deeper phenomenon. It might very well be that numbers have finally won the ultimate victory over words. In the Metropolis of American capitalism, where deli workers and taxi drivers invest in the stock market and everyone anticipates the reporting of quarterly corporate earnings as if they were the Oscars, numbers have proven to be the one

important thing in our lives. Today, words are considered fluff, almost too artsy for serious consideration. “Money talks” they say, and we all know that the language of money is all numbers.

Furthermore, numbers are no longer solely the language of money; they are the language of the Internet as well. Every Word document is transformed with a click into a web-ready document composed of bits and bytes for which we can measure the hits, the average age of our ‘site visitor’, and the dollar amount they spend in e-commerce a year – all in numbers, of course. In our cyber-age, names, thoughts and even feelings, are becoming more orderly, ‘sortable’, something a college student can write an algorithm to search through. URLs might be word names, but we all know that they are also Internet addresses, understood by our servers and computers as binary code formed by the minimalist language of 0s and 1s.

Whether this numbers-for-names phenomenon signifies the ascent of dollar, a new cyber-age, or just another silly city trend, I cannot say for sure. But I do think I should’ve considered entitling this essay 750 words!