Cultural Daily

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INTERIOR: Chez Nick

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, January 3rd, 2018

The expression "Chez *someone*" refers, in French, to someone's place, usually that someone's home … and usually its interior.

"Chez Nick" translated in English would be "At Nick's place." In short: "At Nick's".

Restaurants bearing the name of the owner-founder suggest a special *ambiance* that permeates place, staff and menu, a quality of *personification* that affects one's general expectations and disposition toward the restaurant … almost as one would have toward meeting the person in the flesh.

We will discuss the ambiance at Nick's Place from the point of view of the agents that seem to weave self, place and sociability into a memorable experience: how does it happen? Through what physical and human agents?

Chez Nick is a counter and booth eatery with a long history, being founded in 1920, that is represented in photos of the original place and staff tacked on the walls, and in enlarged certificates and newspaper articles that attest to the special ambiance and quality of food of the place.

The image below shows the counter, at one end of which is the cash register *strategically located at the crossing point of entering and leaving*, and, at the other end of which is the *usual seat chosen by the staff while on break.* Note *the date of founding* inscribed on the back of the overhead strip-light that runs the length of the counter service area.

Note how the dropped ceiling, *discretely defining the general entrance area,* accommodates an air vent *that cools the area in summer and warms it in winter, while jousting* what appears to be an original hanging light fixture, and the blades of a vintage ceiling mounted fan; in other words, note *the matter of fact, dare I say unabashed, juxtaposition of vintage and new furnishing and technology.*

The counter at Nick's

Entering Chez Nick involves therefore entering layers of time and space: from the *neighborly welcome*, to the surviving *luncheonette-like counter*, to the *homey food, and to the way one is served.*

The way to enter Chez Nick is rather unique in that it is not mediated by a sign asking you to wait

for someone to seat you, but rather by the smiling face of the nearest staff member who will *wait a brief instant* in order for you to decide on counter or booth seating, *and only then*, would point or guide you to either.

That *brief instant* makes the whole difference in setting the *respectful tone of the welcome*, as it carries the sense of *attentiveness* that is *at the heart* of the place ambiance.

To wait on every client with that much attention requires a rather large staff which is the case Chez Nick; dressed in black they *move about constantly*, sometimes exchanging banter, particularly for the counter staff, but most of the time carrying on discretely while discussing menu or bringing food to the client – see image below.

View toward the dining area

During my last visit I chose to sit at a booth located between the front counter and the rear general booth sitting areas, and was waited upon by a rather quiet and reserved person who broke into smile when addressing me with comments or questions about the food.

It was only after a brief instant, during which she engaged an eye to eye contact that meant "you have my attention" she would ask, for instance: would you like more water for your tea? Etc.

I welcomed the service with a "thank you" to which a "you are welcome" was provided. As I already mentioned it is not so much the words, but *the attention expressed in the timing of the exchange that contributed to the particular ambiance Chez Nick.*

There is plenty to look at and listen to, while *visiting* Chez Nick; for indeed there is an ambiance that makes one feel like a *visitor* as much as a customer:

The physical organization of the place seems to be the result of a long matured process of *defining* the adequate relation between circulation vs seating areas, dimensions and clearances vs comfort, visual and aural exposure vs privacy, etc.

The "constant movement" of the staff dressed in black resembles a ballet, in that if you removed all the physical trappings of the place one could still easily read the nature of that place from the postures, movements and interaction of the dancing staff.

Amid that movement one character stands out, often with a glass of herb tea in his hand, he will be stationed at the end of the counter where the back room begins, and will usually be talking to the nearest staff member or to a customer at the counter, or stand quietly for while before moving on to his corner office near the entrance.

He is the current owner who, in a corps de ballet dressed in black, is usually dressed in a different color, moves slower than the staff members, and does NOT man the cash register.

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One other character who does not escape one's attention is the dish-washing person. He wears heavy duty rubber gloves, receives the dirty ware, washes and rinses it in a double sink set up, before storing it nearby for reuse, again in a precise series of gestures that constitute a mini-ballet

within the larger one.

The counter serving staff, on top of taking an order, will usually prepare short order items while cooked food will come from the kitchen. The rather narrow space between counter and service wall creates a reduction in personal space that is behind the banter and body language of contact avoidance that defuses the stress induced by that social-spatial constrain.

The general waiting staff is the group to whom the characteristic constant movement best applies, however, my observation of the way they interact with the customers makes me think of them collectively as the “ball bearings” upon which the whole restaurant ambiance smoothly runs … one in which the “social lubricant” is the engaging visual contact and the simple thank-you / you are welcome exchange with the customers.

On my way out, after paying and leaving a consequent tip to the person who waited on me I expressed my appreciation of the way I was served, then left with a feeling of true contentment … a contentment free of second thought and issued from my participation in a physical and social environment supportive of *mutual and freely engaged respect.*

NOTES:

CHEZ NICK is a *neighborhood* café-restaurant. Located in an Anglophone select enclave of Montreal, and situated on a shopping street of boutiques and galleries; it stands apart for its *homey food and friendly and respectful ambiance appreciated by a faithful clientele.*

THE STORE FRONT shown in the feature image has been recently renovated and homogenized *with its neighbors, by the building owner.* The new store front is of *slick dark* aluminum and glass, the uniform lettering from one business to the next is bronze colored, and *the date of the restaurant foundation has been kept.*

THE INTERIOR LAYOUT has not changed in recent past, but the new owner has structured a *work environment* I have tried to describe in my article, in terms of its unique employer-employees and employees-customers relationships, that have created that ambiance of friendliness and familiarity based on *a notable degree of attention and respect toward everyone’s particular needs.*

POST SCRIPTUM:

The piece is not meant to be a publi-reportage for the venue being discussed, but only an analysis of its ambiance and supporting interior physical and social environment.

Credit photographs to Google Earth Image

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