

small BUSINESS

Downtrodden shoe stores hang on

Transformation of West Eighth Street footwear strip progresses slowly even though rents have plummeted.

By **Cara S. Trager**

On a recent brisk afternoon, Yvette Mansour kept the door wide open to her footwear store, seeking to entice the rare passerby inside to warm up—and buy a pair of shoes.

“With fewer people on the street, I want to make the store as inviting as possible,” says Ms. Mansour, the owner of 28-year-old DaVinci in Greenwich Village.

Situated between Fifth and Sixth avenues, Ms. Mansour's firm is among the half-dozen or so remaining specialty shoe businesses limping along on West Eighth Street. Once regarded as a shoe district, Eighth Street is struggling to attract customers as it slowly transforms into a restaurant destination.



Buck Ennis

FOOT TRAFFIC: Murray Newmark, who owns Stylish Shoe on West Eighth Street, says the new restaurants are not drawing customers from other parts of the city.

“The street is going through a transition,” says Bill Abramson, director of brokerage for Buchbinder & Warren Realty Group, which owns 12 properties with storefronts on the strip.

Currently, seven stores—or 9% of the strip's 80 retail spaces—aren't leased, according to Honi Klein, executive director of the Village Alliance business improvement district. And since last year, rents have plummeted as much as 25%, to \$100 per square foot, says Faith Hope Consolo, chairman of Prudential Douglas Elliman's retail leasing and sales division.

“Eighth Street is a revolving door,” says Ms. Consolo.

For decades, West Eighth Street was a bona fide shoe block, with two dozen or more shops attracting shoe-lovers from all over the city, and even beyond. But foot traffic dwindled after Sept. 11, say retailers. Then, the weak dollar drove up prices of imports by a third, and shoe discounters—including DSW, Shoe Mania and Filene's Basement—arrived nearby on East 14th Street. More than 15 of Eighth Street's shoe stores closed.

“Shoe stores had an enormous run, but things do change,” says Ms. Klein. “You can buy slippers, sneakers and flip-flops at CVS.”

Restaurants are gradually taking the stores' place, but the change isn't happening fast enough

to drive traffic, say some.

Shoe-store operators blame property owners for diluting the strip's shoe-destination reputation with restaurants, and the eateries for failing to bring more people to the neighborhood. Since the end of 2007, seven eateries have opened—including Cho Cho San, a Japanese restaurant; Patty & Bun, a specialty burger place; and restaurant and bar Affair on Eighth—and two more are under construction.

“These restaurants are local and not well-known in Manhattan,” laments Murray Newmark, the third owner of 48-year-old Stylish Shoe, a cowboy-boot shop he purchased in 2005. “They're not destinations, like the Second Avenue Deli or Katz's.”

Richard Geist, owner of Eight Street stalwart Uncle Sam's Army Navy Outfitters and a member of the BID's board of directors, says the demise of the strip's image as a shoe mecca may be partly the merchants' own doing.

“Forty percent of the businesses on the street don't [even] have e-mails, and if you don't have a presence online, you're not going to make it,” says Mr. Geist, who generates the majority of his revenues through the Internet.

Some of the restaurants have also shown a lack of staying power.

Since opening SushiYawa in December 2007, shop manager Dharma Chandra has seen six other eateries slip away, including a Mexican restaurant and a pizza place.

“A lot of people don't know that this is a restaurant way,” says Mr. Chandra.

About three months ago, Michael Vasiliadis opened a new pizzeria called Lizzie's, spending more than \$200,000 to renovate a space that had housed a footwear shop for three years.

“A lot of the reason for coming here was based on [the street's] previous reputation,” says Mr. Vasiliadis, who had owned a 24-hour deli in Times Square for 15 years before a rent hike drove him away. “I expected more traffic.”

Jung Min Kim is a partner in 8th St. Kitchen, which opened last November, making it the third Korean restaurant at the site in three years.

“Between Fifth and Sixth avenues, it's dead,” he says. “People don't hang out.”

Ms. Klein says the strip's restaurants could do more to drum up business, including joining NYC & Company, the city's tourism organization, in order to participate in its Restaurant Week promotion. But the Village Alliance also plans to do its part: It will turn the block into a pedestrian mall in the late summer for a special community activity.