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American Dreamer on 42nd Street Who Fled From a Deal

By **LIZ ROBBINS**

A four-story white stucco building, with its fire escapes painted baby blue crisscrossing the windows set in lemon-yellow sills, stands stubbornly at the western end of 42nd Street.

Dwarfed by gleaming high-rise towers, the 1920s edifice — Greek village meets Greek diner — looks completely incongruous now.

Its story is of an American dream realized, and perhaps an opportunity missed.

The owner, Louis Gritsipis, a 73-year-old naturalized citizen from Kandila, Greece, had a chance to sell the modest property, at 647 West 42nd Street, around 2000, when the J. D. Carlisle Development Corporation was planning to build a luxury tower next door. According to Mr. Gritsipis, he was offered \$10 million for the building, which has three two-bedroom apartments along with Mr. Gritsipis's diner on the ground floor. According to Jules Demchick, J. D. Carlisle's chairman, the initial offer was somewhere closer to \$7 million.

The company did not necessarily want to use the 21-by-100-foot space. "We wanted to control the environment," Mr. Demchick said last week. "We felt that it would be less than attractive to our buyers."

Costas Kondylis, the prolific architect hired for the project, appealed to Mr. Gritsipis, their shared heritage and their same age. Mr. Gritsipis was skeptical during negotiations in a Midtown office. He demanded that a \$480,000 tax be paid by the developer. Then he panicked. He asked for the men's room; he never came back, leaving the lawyers dumbfounded for 45 minutes until they realized he was gone.

Mr. Gritsipis said he ran all the way back to 42nd Street.

Mr. Kondylis, in an interview last week, said he understood. "They didn't give him enough of an incentive," he said. "Perhaps if they had offered him an apartment or two in the building."

The building changed developers to the Moinian Group, and in 2007, **the Atelier** opened with 47 floors of views and amenities. (Moinian has since sold the property.) Mr. Gritsipis still lives next door, in a two-bedroom railroad apartment on the top floor of his building, which he bought for

\$150,000 in 1980.

It remains as a monument to family, if not obstinacy.

Mr. Gritsipis claims to get offers all the time, as much as \$15 million. “Even if they give me \$1 billion, I will not sell,” he said. “Where am I going to go? This is my Park Avenue, my Fifth Avenue.”

Raquel Gritsipis, 52, his Argentine-born second wife, who works as a hostess and waitress there (the menu says, “We also speak Greek and Spanish”), shook her head. “This is his kingdom,” she said.

Inside the bright, spotless restaurant, there are paper signs on the wall with his decrees. Bathrooms are for customers only. No cellphones. According to the napkin holders, customers must each order a minimum of \$5.

“There are rules everywhere; it turns people off,” said Ryan Taylor, 37, a hedge fund manager who lives in the Atelier. “But then I had the pizza.” Mr. Taylor was sold on the red sauce (pleasantly sweet) and the crust (satisfyingly crispy). A soda and a slice cost \$5. He comes in twice a week for lunch.

The restaurant is rarely full. It makes its money on deliveries and on tourists trekking to the Circle Line. Like many Greek diners, it has an overstuffed menu, offering 175 items spanning numerous cuisines. Outside the restaurant, which is named 42nd Street Pizza Corporation, is an American flag planted in a concrete block. “I’m more American than Americans,” he said.

One afternoon last week, a city health inspector showed up. Mr. Gritsipis was a nervous wreck. An hour later, an employee was replacing the picture frame with another “A” hanging in the window. Mr. Gritsipis was beaming.

But then he scowled when he saw a moving van still humming in front of his restaurant. Calls to 311 or the police did not yield a response. The van appeared to be connected to an event put on by the British media company 7th Sense, held at the Atelier’s velvet-roped space next door: [Espace](#) (pronounced Eh-SPAHSS.)

Mr. Gritsipis’s space sits at the northern edge of the hot Hudson Yards project. On the corner at 12th Avenue is the Chinese Consulate. “They are friendly,” he said. “They plow my sidewalk during the winter.” Across the street is One River Place, with 941 rental apartments.

“The big buildings, they destroy the neighborhood,” Mr. Gritsipis said.

He has been witness to change on 42nd Street since he first rented the restaurant in 1965. The block had police horse stables and parking lots. He has been held up 27 times. He chased drug

dealers with baseball bats. Last year, he had six feet of water in the basement after Hurricane Sandy.

But the foe that wore him out the most was construction of the Atelier. Dynamite and digging sent plates shattering, cracked walls and floors, caused flooding, damaged the roof and made the building lean, according to engineers hired by Mr. Gritsipis's lawyer. He sued the developers, the contractors and the subcontractors, who all denied being responsible. During the trial, they reached a settlement for what Mr. Gritsipis considered a pittance: \$225,000.

"I work all my life like animal to have this building," Mr. Gritsipis said to Judge Jane S. Solomon, according to the 2009 court transcript. He was crying. "They destroy my building left and right and they give me peanuts. I have no choice. I take what is left."

Mr. Gritsipis said he still loved America, despite his experience in the courts. He traces his gratitude to post-World War II, when American soldiers in Greece handed him pants to wear and gave out flour. After visiting New York at 18, he returned to Greece and joined the NATO Navy. Mr. Gritsipis was a ship's cook.

Mr. Kondylis said it was possible that when Mr. Gritsipis turned down the buyout offer years ago, he thought his land would appreciate. But Robert Knakal, the chairman of [Massey Knakal Realty Services](#) and an authority on commercial real estate, said the value most likely decreased once the Atelier went up. The restaurant and apartments (which Mr. Gritsipis rents for \$3,000 a month) could now be worth at most \$5.9 million, Mr. Knakal said, adding that a property that narrow could not be developed into a stand-alone high-rise building.

Mr. Gritsipis's granddaughter, Athena, 17, whom he raised since she was 3, understands why he refuses to sell. "He loves this place," Athena said. She is a senior at St. Demetrios high school in Astoria, Queens. Mr. Gritsipis's son with Raquel, Andreas, 11, goes to the Cathedral School, which is affiliated with the Greek Orthodox Church, on the Upper East Side.

He insists on only the finest Greek schools for them, which makes him sound like the father in "[My Big Fat Greek Wedding](#)." Mr. Gritsipis has seen it many times. "Great movie!" he said.

"That's him," his wife said.