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Crisis hones city's ability to improvise

Refusing to give up in this time of hardship, people of NYC work harder to find a way to make do

By Tom Kenworthy, Donna Leinwand and Jill Lieber
USA TODAY

NEW YORK — In a city burdened by almost unimaginable necessity, New Yorkers have become masters of invention.

Not that they're unaccustomed to that role. This is a place where even in normal times, improvisation is a basic life skill, whether it's driving cross-town, snagging a good table or making commerce hum. Now, a week after terrorists struck the city's heart, New Yorkers are just doing more of it.

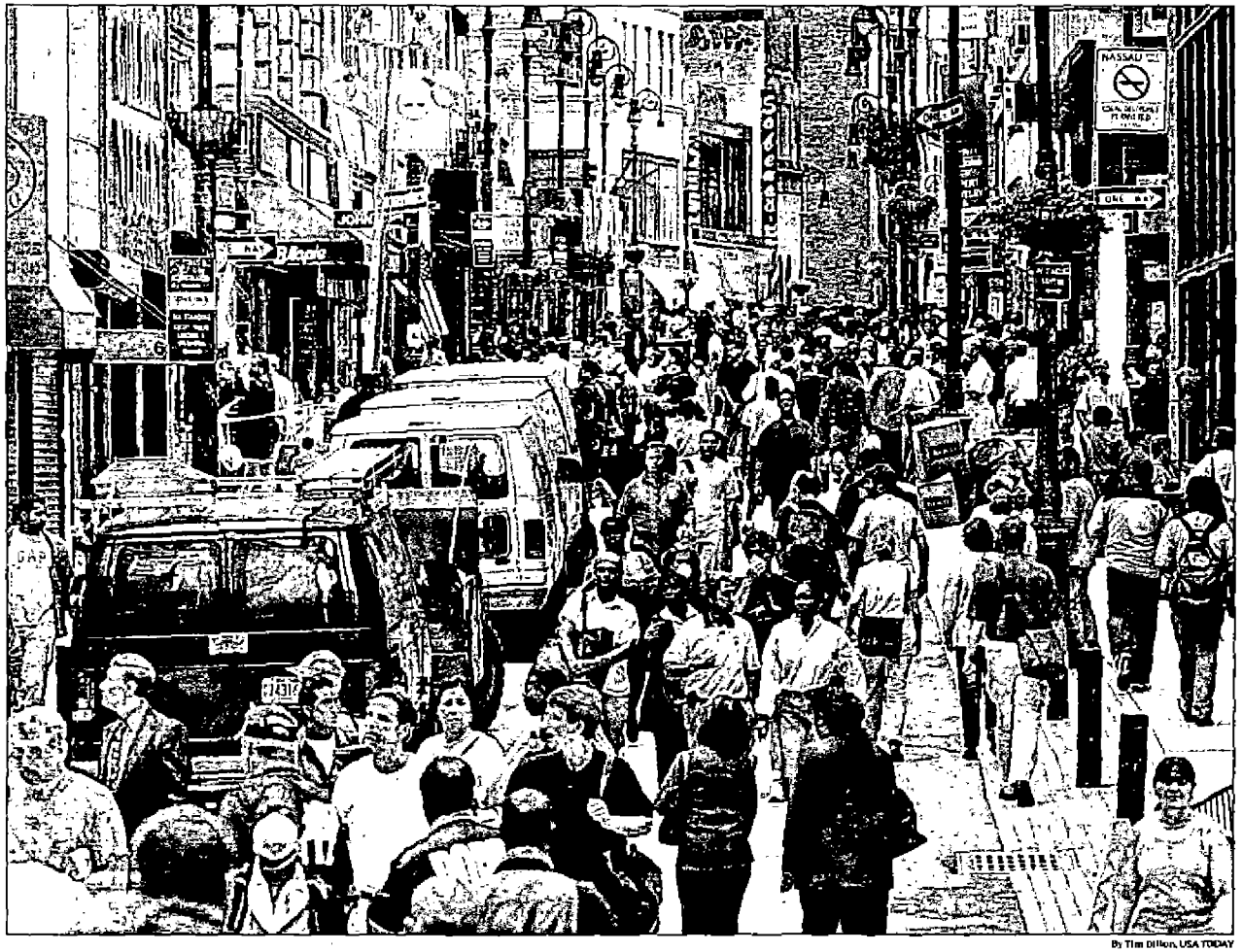
In ways large and small, this brash city is making do. Whether it's finding a new path to work with bridges and tunnels shut down, or reopening for business near the disaster site with no phone service or moving the Fulton Fish Market lock, stock and sea bass from Manhattan to the Bronx, New York is, like Michael Jordan, inventing plays as it goes.

South of Canal Street — where police barricades have kept trucks and most commerce out since Sept. 11 — businesses were shaking off their coating of dust and reopening. Pedestrian traffic was picking up, even though everyone must show identification to pass the police lines.

Typical of those making do was John Balanca, owner of Downtown Pizzeria near the federal buildings in southern Manhattan. When everything shut down last week, including the electricity, Balanca lost 100 pounds of chicken, the cheese went sour and the dough hardened into sculpture.

With no deliveries, Balanca drove to his distributor in Brooklyn on Tuesday, loaded up his car with pizza sauce and cheese, drove back to Manhattan and carried his supplies in from the barricades.

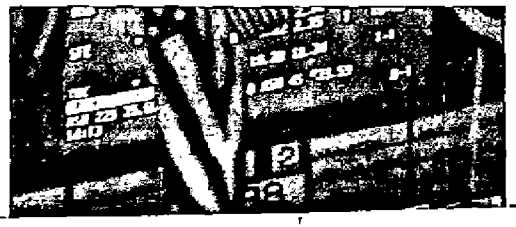
"Pizza, just pizza," Balanca said. "Not even a topping. I just went and got the basics just so we could open the doors. The distributor brought over some pepperoni and sausage a little while ago just to make it look like a pizza place."



By Tim Dillon, USA TODAY

City bustles with life: On Tuesday, Nassau Street, two blocks from the World Trade Center, is overflowing with people who came to take a look at the site of the twin towers' collapse.







Prayers for Jewish new year: Col.

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sausage a little while ago just to make it look like a pizza place."

"Everybody's got to feel better seeing the foot traffic," says Rachel Hitch, a city economic analysis project manager doing temporary duty at the Business Assistance Drop-In Center. Just a few blocks from the smoldering remains of the World Trade towers, the center has had 750 people come in for help already.

Foot traffic is fine, but it would be nice to have phones and deliveries, noted Vernon Torrance, owner of the New Dimension plaques and memorials store on Nassau Street, a tiny store with customers throughout the World Trade Center area.

Torrance had to go to Bay Ridge in Brooklyn himself Tuesday morning to pick up shopping bags full of plaques completed at the factory. It was a 2-hour round trip.

Now, flipping through a 2-inch-thick stack of recent orders, he's trying to figure which ones to cancel because they came from buildings that are gone.

And he'd like to start sending out condolence letters to companies that have lost workers, and entire offices.

"It's hard because nobody can make phone calls," he says.

On Broadway, UPS driver Anthony Gadaleta showed up Tuesday to the great relief of his regulars, who, he says, were more concerned about how he was than where their deliveries were.

Can't drive down the side streets? Well, park on Broadway, station one man to guard the truck and deliver via handtruck. "We're walking packages off, as opposed to driving up," Gadaleta says.

What about lunch?

What with all the big decisions to make, some New Yorkers are understandably having trouble with the little ones. Like what to order for lunch.

At Sarabeth's Kitchen at 81st and Amsterdam, waitress Jessica Hendricks handles that like it happens all the time, which it does these days.

"A lot of people just don't know what to order," she says. "It's because of a loss of appetite, also because they are so overwhelmed with the events of the past week — so much on emotional overload — that they can't make a decision.

"I always suggest our tuna fish sandwich. It's a good basic sandwich."

Sign in, please

Out of this monumental disorder also comes new order, new routines.

Outside the IBM building at 57th and Madison, employees joked about having to sign in and out during their smoke breaks. "This is the IBM building, a landmark of corporate America," one said. "This is so if we get blown up, they can grab the sheets and know who was inside."



By Tim Dillon, USA TODAY

Vernon Torrance: The owner of the New Dimension plaques and memorials store wonders which orders for plaques to cancel.

High-profile help

New York in crisis may be the ultimate democracy, a place where celebrities hurt and mourn — and volunteer — along with everyone else.

So it was that actors, and brothers, Alec and William Baldwin showed up near the Canal Street entry point to the restricted area. Alec had the day off from performing in a play on Long Island.

"I came down to volunteer, and they told me to go to the Jacob Javits Center with everybody else. But if you go up there, they'll take your name, and you'll just sit around all day. So I came down here on my own."

Politely, city police turned him away, as they did everyone who wasn't a resident or involved in the rescue effort.

Baldwin said he'd be back.

Gotta get there somehow

At Tiffany's, a sales clerk recounted the following story. A customer had come in a cab — from Chicago. Fare: $650. He is British, lives in Tokyo and had to get to New York last weekend for a birthday party.

He came to Tiffany's wearing a red, white and blue bandana he'd picked up on Canal Street.

"There are still special days in people's lives," the clerk said. "You can't let it pass by."

'Old-fashioned is good'

John Franco lives on Water Street, owns a gallery in Soho and was out walking his two huge Rottweilers. With no electricity in his apartment, he's eating all his meals out and using candles.

"Very old-fashioned," he says "But old-fashioned is good."



By Beth A. Keiser, AP

Dust still clogs the air: A trader adjusts her mask as she works Tuesday during trading on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange.

The firemen and policemen and rescue workers are getting the basics plus perks. At Eden Spa on Broadway, proprietor Jason Wong is offering restrooms, showers and free massages. About 100 massages a day, in fact.

"We feel better for helping and they come to have our services and maybe they feel better, too," Wong says. "It's like we feel over here that our heart is more open now to each other."

A sale, but no takers

At the Antique Orange, a sprawling clothing store near Franklin and Broadway, there's hardly a customer in sight, and assistant manager Timothy Anderson is playing solitaire on his computer.

"You try to put a sale on," he says. "If someone comes in and it's a bit too expensive, we'll knock the price down $10."



By Robert Spencer, AP

Jacob Goldstein, chief chaplain of the New York Army National Guard, prays during a Rosh Hashana service at a synagogue Tuesday in Manhattan. Goldstein has been working at the site of the attack on the Trade Center.

No shortage of support

Part of the reason the city is coping is that it's one big emotional support network.

Starting with Mayor Rudy Giuliani. For the beginning of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year, he came to the Central Synagogue at 55th and Lexington Monday night and stayed for the entire service, which featured *My Country 'Tis of Thee*.

"We were blown away by what he said," recalled Livia Thompson, executive director of the synagogue. "He talked about the pain we were all feeling, how this had, and would, strengthen New York. He asked us, for this 10-day period, to pray for the fallen. He got a 10-minute standing ovation."

Tuesday, at the same synagogue, Rabbi Josh Davidson said, "God knows this is the time we need to be together. God willing, this year will be a better one than the past year. Embrace one another, introduce yourselves to those sitting beside you, so that this will be a better year."

At Davidson's directive, everyone reached out to those around them, the entire congregation coming together.

"It wasn't just Jewish people together," said Jules Silbert afterward. "It was the whole country, in unity."

New York Gov. George Pataki addressed the congregation: "It was not an attack on two buildings, two towers," he said. "It was an attack aimed at taking away our spirits, our freedoms, including the freedom of religion. When the people of New York and the people of America come together, we will not only rebuild, we will rebuild to great heights.

"We will persevere."

Contributing: Debbie Howlett, Jerry Shriver

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