

Peep Show:

A Look into New York City's 1920 Call House Style Brothels

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The early 20th century saw the emergence of a new style of brothel known as the call house. They were tightly run businesses, oriented around female success. Traditionally, women and girls were associated with the domestic duties at home while



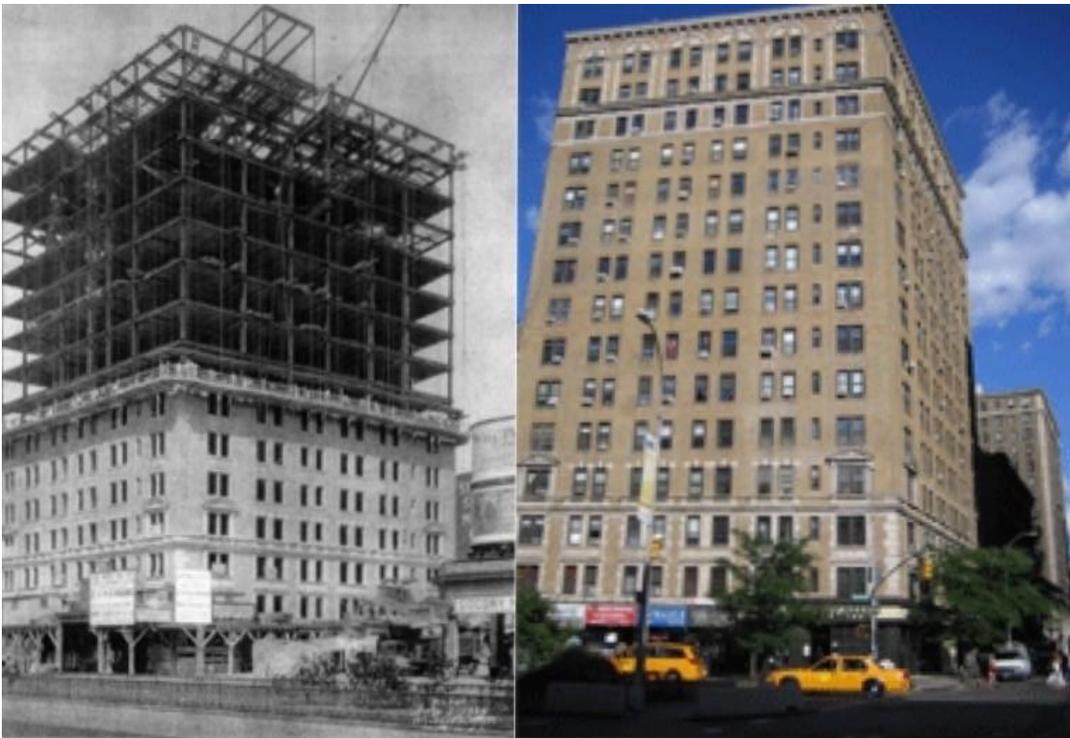
Polly Adler, one of New York City's most notorious call house operators enjoying a day at the beach (from New York Daily News).

“work was gendered as male.”¹ Madams operating call houses capitalized on a market that was meant to benefit men and used it to benefit themselves and the working prostitutes. Madams operated their brothels with the same intentions as any businessman: to succeed. The entire operation succeeded in creating an enterprise where women who craved independence could find an economic means to support themselves within a community of like-minded women.

Operating a brothel was not merely about earning an income; it was about getting wealthy. Madams took advantage of this economic demand for sexual pleasure by building brothels. Historian Timothy J. Gilfoyle cites

¹ Jessica Pliley, “Vice Queens and White Slaves: The FBI’s Crackdown on Elite Brothel Madams in 1930’s New York City,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 25 no.1 (January 2016), 137-167.

that by the middle of the 19th century, “prostitution was a multimillion-dollar business,” which continued to grow into the early decades of the 20th century.² Unlike brothels of the late 19th century, call houses operated exclusively by appointment. Clients wishing to meet with a girl contacted madams, via phone call, who arranged a “date” either inside or outside the house.³ Additionally, the benefit of a limited-access private New York City apartment, coupled with very few women living on the property, typically two to five, made the need to contact the madam all the more necessary and essential.⁴



The Majestic at 215 W. 75th St. once the location of one of Polly Adler’s call houses. At left is an image of its construction in 1924 and at right is an image as it stands today (from www.215w75.com).

² Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 124.

³ Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 114.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The new call house helped deter investigators from reaching within the brothel walls. As stated above, outsiders had limited access to the brothel: “These tactics reduced problems with police because they allowed madams to screen customers more effectively and limited the number of prostitutes in the apartment at any given time.”⁵ Call houses limited foot traffic by no longer allowing people to wander in and out of the brothel, which hindered anti-vice agents from accessing the property. Any investigator who managed to find evidence of a functioning brothel generally welcomed a “traditional” bribe from the housekeepers.⁶ Payoffs kept police out of the brothel and away from the individuals inside: madams, employees and even clientele. One prostitute working in a call house disclosed to an undercover informant that in case of a raid, the



An anti-vice cartoon published in the New York Daily News November 22, 1921.

madams bailed out all their employees.⁷ This greatly benefited the working girls because prostitutes convicted in court conceivably found themselves out of work for weeks or months, severely damaging their income.

The strategic choice of clientele gave control in the house to the madams. This reduced the chance of a drunk, angry client harming a girl or the property. If a client stepped out of line, the women could count on their madam to come to their aid as much

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 193.

⁷ C14, Investigative Reports, November 11, 1930, 3.

as possible.⁸ Madams would resort to forcing a client off the property if he jeopardized the safety of the others inside. Regardless of all attempts to maintain order, there were some things madams could not control and the only thing they could do was apologize to their employees and keep the situation from escalating.

The best benefit of working in a call house was earning a more substantial income. Paying for a prostitute from a madam could cost as little as \$20 or as much as \$200, with the earnings typically split 50/50 between the madam and the girl.⁹ The girls did pay their madams a fee that contributed to a bail fund, medical expenses, food, and rent, all part of the investment in the business to guarantee its success.¹⁰ After the fee, the girls still had the chance to earn roughly \$4,500 a month according to a madam's offer to earn \$200 a day with a \$1,500 monthly fee.¹¹ Employees, too, had the prospect of gaining a significant capital in a short time. The added benefit of a madam as an intermediary aided these odds and supplied a safe space. Women who entered into prostitution by way of desperation or corruption found some haven in a professionally run business.

Prostitutes provided the service and madams kept quality control in the brothel. Due to the high-profile clients frequenting the call houses, many madams instructed their girls to act ladylike when interacting with the customers.¹² A new atmosphere was built in the call house where people came to partake in a social gathering. They played their

⁸ Ibid., 109.

⁹ Pliley, 151.

¹⁰ C14, IR, December 16-17, 1927.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Adler, 112-117.

field correctly: “these women dominated the men in their lives...they accumulated vast wealth while the rest of the country suffered deprivation.”¹³

Although call houses competed with each other, madams created a system of support among the other women to cope with the isolation of their profession. The bond that developed generated not only a social relationship for criminal agents, but also an emotional camaraderie.

They sought friendships with one another, “informally writing one another to request new sex workers, share gossip, and maintain friendships.”¹⁴ One New Year’s Eve in the late



1920s, Adler decided to throw a party for the other madams and their

girls. She said New Year’s was lonely, that the world celebrated until dawn, and enjoyed each other’s company while the social pariahs stayed home. The apartment filled with women and laughter: “it had been particularly enjoyable just because there had been no

Brothel Scene Art Work, Jules Pascin, date unknown.
Photographed by Walter Rosenblum from Archives and Special Collections, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

¹³ Ibid., 165.

¹⁴ Pliley, 150.

men present.”¹⁵ Ironically, it seems that the means to their success was also the cause of their woes.

The practices established in the business were thought out analytically, about ways to add value to the sold product—using what they knew as women, they built capital empires and bent the rules to their bidding. The women were treated as an object that men had a right to because of their social position. The dynamics of the brothel business changed after WWII and the workingwomen adapted with it. The call house gave them a space to practice autonomy over their lives outside the jurisdiction of gender norms.

¹⁵ Adler, 127.