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## Reviving the Tin Ceiling

### Design

By [ROBERT SIMONSON](#)  
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Until recently, walking into a bar or restaurant in New York City with a decorative tin ceiling above meant entering one of the metropolis's timeworn gathering places, such as the Old Town Bar & Restaurant on East 18th Street or the White Horse Tavern on Hudson Street.

These days, tin ceilings are being installed in new and renovated businesses and residences throughout the city. "Today, when they build a new building, they make it look like it's a 100 years old," the third-generation owner of the tin ceiling dealer AA-Abbingdon Affiliates in Brooklyn, Sheldon Gruber, said. "What's old is new."

A Manhattan homeowner, James Pugh, recently covered the ceiling of his residential loft in a cast-iron building in NoHo with tin panels, which make the space look "a lot more expansive," Mr. Pugh said.

Metal ceilings have become so attractive to the 21st-century eye that it's easy to forget they were once thought to be merely utilitarian. Almost exclusively a North American phenomenon, they were quickly adopted from the 1860s onward because they were both fire-retardant and an inexpensive alternative to expensive hand-carved plaster surfaces. But the metal shortages brought on by World War II dealt the industry a crippling blow. Business in the decades afterwards came mainly from savings-minded landlords. Tin ceilings are popular now for some of

the same reasons they were all the rage back in the late-19th century: They're inexpensive, attractive, and they last virtually forever. One thing they weren't 100 years ago, however, was readily accessible; today, they're widely available at chains such as Home Depot, which gets its panels from the 112-year-old Shanker Industries of Elizabeth, N.J.

One of the owners of the Amsterdam Billiards club near Union Square, Greg Hunt, said he had two motivations for installing a tin ceiling in his pool hall, which opened in its new location last year. "One, we were going after the look of a place that had been there for many years. Two, the panels hid a lot of blemishes that were on the ceiling. So the reasons were aesthetic and practical."

And the chef behind the Original Soup Man chain, Al Yeganeh, also had a historical perspective in mind when he decreed that every one of his restaurants — there are seven in Manhattan — would have a new tin ceiling. "Al Yeganeh is all about New York," John Rorick, a spokesman for the chain, said, "so he made that a requirement at all the franchises. He wanted to recreate as closely as possible that old New York experience."

National restaurant chains such as T.G.I. Friday's and Ruby Tuesday also feature metal ceilings. The owner of Chelsea Decorative Metal Company, a one-time Manhattan outfit now located in Houston, Glenn Eldridge, thinks public perception of his product is what injected the industry with new life. "When we were in New York, we were doing it for

the landlords," he said. "They wanted to stop plastering. When I moved to Houston, it became a decorative item, not an economic item." He added that there are now artists who paint and frame tin panels and sell them as art. "Americana, they call it."

Now that tin ceilings are art, there is, naturally, some squabbling as to who the true artists are. Mr. Shanker is quick to point out that he, unlike some of his competitors, uses original dies that have been in his family for decades, while newcomers are trafficking in recreations of classic designs. "It's just like a photograph," he said. "If you take a negative, that photo's going to look a lot better than if you make a copy of a copy. Having the original dies, having the original press, makes a difference in quality."

Tin ceilings, for the record, are not typically made out of tin. Most are tin-plated steel. They also come in copper, aluminum, copper-plate, brass-plate, chrome, and even plastic (much less expensive, and looked down on by most tin men). They can be ordered bare or pre-painted in white, a myriad of other colors or, for a little more cash, hand-painted designs.

Industry leaders don't see the trend toward tin slowing down at all in the coming years. The way things are going, a 22nd-century New Yorker may find more old tin around town than citizens do today. "The thing is, they last forever," Mr. Gruber said. "The joke in this business is they last too long."