

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Twenty-Three Years Later: Two Moments on New York's Lower East Side [Portfolio]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2264p6gk>

Journal

Places, 16(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Rose, Brian

Publication Date

2004-04-01

Peer reviewed



OPTICIANS
118
WITHIN ONE HOUR
Prescriptions Filled

GLASSES FITTED
PRESCRIPTIONS FILLED
1 HOUR SERVICE

SOL MOSCOT
SPECIALISTS SINCE 1920
118

SOL MOSCOT
OPTICIANS
ENTRANCE 118 ORCHARD ST.

BOSTONIAN

CHILDRENS

BOUTIQUE OPTICS
New York
OPTICIAN DOB - OPTIL - PLEASE CARDEN
OPTICIAN TENTA & PUGO

1HR. SERVICE

OPTICIANS

COMPLETE PAIR
9.95
MEDICAID
ACCEPTED
BRING AIDS



Delancey Street 1980



Twenty-Three Years Later: Two Moments on New York's Lower East Side

Brian Rose

Immediately across Avenue D from the projects is what I call the war zone. Though the area is much smaller, it is crumbling and burning just like the South Bronx. It's in this area, however, that one finds groups of people attempting to renovate buildings themselves. The residents of one famous building on 11th Street attempt to supplement their electricity with a windmill on the roof. Below Houston Street in this zone the neighborhood is equally run down, but still there is an amazing array of shops along Orchard Street and Delancey Street.

On Sundays, this area is jammed with tourists looking for good deals, and for many it is a pilgrimage back to the oldest Jewish neighborhood in America. The Lower East Side has been an entry point into mainstream America for its entire history. Even now, low rents bring students, artists and young people from middle-class backgrounds here to make their start in the Big Apple. But now, the pressure of gentrification is on. No one wants to discourage the development of a healthier neighborhood, but will the process force the present residents out to Brooklyn or Queens? Our pictures are being made at a critical juncture. What will this place look like in ten or fifteen years?

That was written in 1980 when I was photographing the Lower East Side of Manhattan with Ed Fausty. After he and I graduated from nearby Cooper Union, we began a yearlong documentation of the neighborhood. Our project was an experiment in collaboration, as well as a sensible way of approaching a sometimes dangerous environment. We used a view camera for its descriptive quality, but also because it provided a means for us to work together, taking turns looking at the ground glass, one or the other of us grabbing for the shutter release to capture a spontaneous moment.

New York City had hit bottom in the 1970s, and by 1980 parts of the city, like the Lower East Side, had become frightening tableaux of abandoned buildings and rubble-strewn lots, while many street corners bustled with milling crowds of the drug trade. As bad as things were at that time, however, the Lower East Side remained a vibrant and colorful place full of expressions of hope and the visible seeds of rejuvenation.

After 1980, Fausty and I parted amicably, convinced we had done something special, but not necessarily repeatable. It is now 23 years later, and I have begun making photographs of the neighborhood again. Phase two of the project is a work in progress, but I have spent enough time on it to offer a selection of new photographs. The obvious questions have to do with the passage of time. How has the neighborhood changed or remained the same?

Photographing the Lower East Side—and most of Manhattan—requires an acceptance of the street grid and

the generally continuous street wall. One can stay visually aligned to the grid, or one can work against it at angles, but the rigor of this armature remains a constant. There are instances, however, where the basic pattern opens up—across vacant lots, parks, etc. In 1980 there were many such moments created by destructive urban forces. Today, some of these gaps have been filled or show evidence of a repaired urban fabric—neighborhood gardens, for instance, or new construction. Much of this change stares one in the face, but I guard against reading things into the cityscape that may not, in fact, be there. It is a mistake, I think, to see everything iconically—to believe that a broken window represents decay while a new door represents rejuvenation.

The Lower East Side, now as in 1980, is dominated by tenements and postwar housing projects. The tenement lots—25 x 100 feet—establish the basic scale, and the stoops and storefronts open out to the street. The housing projects, forty to fifty years old at this point, still represent a discontinuity on the landscape, not so much because of their height as because of the tenuous way they meet the ground. The present streetscape includes more and more infill construction—often minimal brick boxes, but every now and then something more conspicuously designed. Even a bit of suburbia encroaches here and there, as in the Pathmark supermarket just beneath the Manhattan Bridge.

Historic photographs of the Lower East Side typically show large crowds of people in the streets, kids playing, and pushcarts lining the curbs. Now on Sundays, when Orchard Street is closed to cars, there is a momentary sense of déjà vu, but the throngs shopping there, and on Delancey Street, tend to display a more middle-class mien. Chinatown, perhaps, still has the density of the old Lower East Side, and its burgeoning population spills increasingly across Roosevelt Park into the traditional Jewish part of the neighborhood. The collision of ethnic groups, and the different ways in which they make use of the same streetscape, remains a constant fascination for me.

When I first approached the Lower East Side with Ed Fausty, I had the sense of it as a rather separate part of Manhattan, off the main avenues and in the shadow of Wall Street's towers. Today, I feel that it is more integrated into the city. Barriers have come down over the past couple of decades. Some of that can be attributed to gentrification, but the Lower East Side is still a gritty, economically precarious place. Locating its unknown qualities goes to the heart of why I am photographing it anew.

Cherry Street Manhattan Bridge 1980



Allen Street 2003

Cherry Street Manhattan Bridge 2003

Houston Street 2003



YONAH SHIMMEL.. *Original*
..KNISH BAKERY SINCE 1910

The Original
YONAH SHIMMEL
KNISHERY

KNISHES
PIZZA
BAGELS



Houston Street 1980





Stanton Street 1980

Ridge Street Williamsburg Bridge 1980



Rivington Street 1980
Eldridge Street 1980



Norfolk Street 2003

