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Bones, Skin and Spirit of a City

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When the Brooklyn Bridge was finished in 1883 Brooklyn was the third largest independent city in the U.S. Strategically located between the farms of Long Island to the east and New York harbor to the west, it had its own vibrant downtown — with shops and grand buildings and theaters. However, it was consolidated into greater New York in 1898, and ever since, as a borough, it has had to struggle for recognition in the shadow of its more famous neighbor, Manhattan.

Today, the Manhattan Bridge and Brooklyn Bridges spill their constant traffic out two long blocks away from each other onto broad avenues that diverge like the start of a V. The streets nestled between these avenues, and bound by Atlantic Avenue to the south, make up downtown Brooklyn. It is a snarl of five-cornered intersections and dead-end streets — abrupt endings tacked onto old street patterns, the stubborn imprints of earlier ages. Within this area are stops for almost every NYC subway line and a terminus for the Long Island Railroad. Buses begin and end their routes at the Fulton Mall here. And until 1941 the elevated trains started here, too, heading out to new “suburban” communities along Myrtle and Flatbush Avenues.

Because of its history, downtown Brooklyn is a hub, but today it also remains something of a no-man’s land. To its west, just beyond the courts and government buildings, is the wealthy, relatively stable enclave of Brooklyn Heights. And around its other margins are the bustling neighborhoods of Fort Greene, Cobble Hill, and Boerum

Hill. To call the new activity and investment in these areas “gentrification,” however, seems to recognize only the tip of an iceberg. Plans are afoot in downtown Brooklyn for a stadium (designed by Frank Gehry), a performance-art library (designed by Santiago Calatrava), and a skyscraper office building and park on top of a parking lot. Sooner or later people will come to claim that this area is ready for a new life. And in a way, it is.

But still it lives. For years I have walked through downtown Brooklyn — largely to get from one side to the other. But I have also been drawn to the mix of old and new signage, the fashions and music on the street, and the noble dis- or mis-used buildings (not to mention the funky, boarded-up, flimsier ones hung with flags for fast-food joints, and wearing as scars the names of their former incarnations). The Underground Railroad passed through some of these streets, though there’s scant evidence of it. And a set of four, older residential buildings designated as landmarks appears incongruously against a backdrop of commercial blocks, having been transplanted from two blocks away to make room for just such brooding anonymity.

How do you find the life in a place like this? Is it best seen in the architecture, the colorful advertisements, the people hawking wares or passing through? It must be some combination — the bones, skin and spirit of the city — all there, ready to be reborn.





Above: Intersection of Flatbush Avenue, Nevins Street, and Fulton Street.
 Right: Johnson Street Houses (now Duffield Street).
 Opposite: Hoyt Street, north to Fulton Street (through parking structure).



Milford / Bones, Skin and Spirit of a City







**THAI CHEONG
SALAD PLUS**

**THAI CHEONG
SALAD PLUS**
GOURMET DELI HOT & COLD SALAD

RadioShack

Salad Bar

CHINESE FOOD
OPEN

Bus Information

PACKAGE OF WAXES
PACKAGE OF WAXES
PACKAGE OF WAXES
PACKAGE OF WAXES

457

Fulton Street facade (with sunglasses vendor).



ALL TRAFFIC ↑



Fulton Mall

BOND ST

NO STANDING
7 AM - 7 PM
MON - FRI
EXCEPT
AUTHORIZED
VEHICLES
←
DEPT OF FINANCE

SPEED LIMIT
15

THE DIME SAVINGS BANK



Intersection of Fulton Street, Bond Street, and Dekalb Avenue (Dime Savings Bank building).