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Manhattan's "Dirty Urban Landscapes"

Alessandro Busà

Abstract

This photo essay can be read as a little impromptu itinerary of some of New York City's still standing "Dirty Urban Landscapes". It celebrates the streets of New York City as chaotic, anarchic palimpsests of overlapping cultural signs and traces of human enterprise. It celebrates the "messy vitality" (Venturi 1966) of everyday life in a city whose built landscape seethes with meanings.

This photo essay celebrates the streets of New York City as chaotic, anarchic palimpsests of overlapping cultural signs and traces of human enterprise. It celebrates the “messy vitality” (Venturi 1966) of everyday life in a city whose built landscape seethes with contradictory meanings. These pictures portray a city where historical layers accumulate and overlay. It is a traffic-congested city cluttered with people, cars, posters, billboards, grungy facades and rusty water towers. It is a city whose grittiness is at times overwhelming, and yet profoundly human.

The New York City I portrayed in these images still exists behind the orderly facades of the gleaming condos, luxury high-rises and corporate retail outlets that have come to dominate the urban landscape in the years of Michael R. Bloomberg’s mayoralty (2002-2013).

However, these dirty urban landscapes are doomed to disappear. The pace and scale of urban development efforts carried on during the last decade have contributed to the production of a brand new physical, social and symbolic urban space in New York City. From 2002 to 2013, the Department of City Planning has rezoned over a third of the area of the city, covering about 11,000 blocks and re-engineering immense swaths of the city’s underperforming property markets as prime real estate, facilitating the rise of a postindustrial, F.I.R.E.-dependent and consumer-oriented city. The consequence has been a fluid, fragmented production of brand new residential and commercial geographies across the five Boroughs—a process that has often resulted in the displacement of long-time residents and small independent businesses (see Busà 2012), and that has revolutionized the urban fabric, whose landscape is dominated by a new aesthetic and functional order.

The speculative fever encouraged by a political agenda prone to subsidize luxury development has resulted in the widespread multiplication of overpriced, exclusive condominium buildings. New mixed-use developments have emerged across the Five Boroughs, bringing about new landscapes of entertainment, leisure and consumption in areas that were once underserved or peripheral. Manufacturing districts along the waterfronts are being transformed into pricey residential enclaves, while stunning flagship architectures are mushrooming all over the city. Also the commercial streetscapes are being transformed, as new developments generally host expensive storefronts that allow only for large operators to lease: while more and more neighborhood stores shut down, New York City’s streets are gradually succumbing to the homologating force of generic corporate retail’s aesthetic.

Slowly, the disarray of New York’s “dirty urban landscapes” is surrendering to a new aesthetic order. This new aesthetic and functional rationality is Lefebvre’s “abstract space”—a homogeneous and hierarchically organized space that

“informs, instructs, and flattens distinctiveness (Lefebvre 1991[1974], 50). In this alienating space, users become passive consumers of a space that has been produced for them by technocrats, urban planners and city officials (Kipfer 2008).

For as long as the places portrayed in these pictures will withstand the fury of development, this photo essay can be read as a little impromptu itinerary of some of New York City’s still standing “Dirty Urban Landscapes”.



1. Great Jones Street / Lafayette Street, Manhattan © 2013 Alessandro Busà



2. 242 Canal Street, Chinatown, Manhattan © 2013 Alessandro Busà



3. Great Jones Street / Bowery, Manhattan © 2013 Alessandro Busà



4. East Houston Street between Broadway and Lafayette Street, Manhattan © 2013 Alessandro Busà



5. East Broadway / Eldridge Street, under the Manhattan Bridge Roadway, Chinatown, Manhattan
© 2013 Alessandro Busà



6. West 72nd Street and Amsterdam Avenue, Manhattan © 2013 Alessandro Busà



7. 34th Street and 8th Avenue, Manhattan © 2013 Alessandro Busà

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About the author

Alessandro Busà has carried out research in New York City between 2006 and 2009 while on a visiting scholar appointment at the Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation of Columbia University. He has been a doctoral Fellow at the Transatlantic Graduate Research Program Berlin / New York of Berlin's Center for Metropolitan Studies. His research is centered on the impact of institutional policies of socio-spatial restructuring in working-class and ex manufacturing neighborhoods of post-industrial North American cities. His dissertation, entitled "City Producers, City Consumers. The rezoning and branding of New York City under the administration of Michael R. Bloomberg", evaluates the social impact of institutional re-zoning and city branding policies in low-income and marginalized communities in the years of Bloomberg's mayoralty. The results of his work have been disseminated in numerous conferences talks and papers in peer-reviewed journals, which have mainly addressed contextual investigations of rezoning plans adopted by the Bloomberg administration from 2002 to 2013 and their impact on local residents and businesses. Busà has been awarded the *Erwin Stephan Preis* of the Technical University of Berlin and has lectured in the U.S., Canada, and Europe.