WPA Revisited. 1939...2010

The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930S New York

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Introduction

A look back at the 1939 writers' Project Guide reveals the expectedly quaint details of a former time and place — the mentions of 25 cent haircuts, nickel subway rides and $2.50 rooms at the Chelsea. But more striking are the resemblances to the city of today. The demarcation lines for much of Manhattan's social order had already been clearly defined. Institutions like The Met, MOMA, St. John the Divine, the Stock Exchange, Grand Central and the RCA Building all existed as pillars of their respective neighborhoods. The entry on Greenwich Village defines the once and future paradigm: "large apartment buildings and rents were rising... the Villager had begun to retreat to outlying districts before the wealthier newcomer." Photographs reveal a more rustic outline to familiar buildings, however, and it is in the boroughs where a more profound transformation has occurred. The great spans connecting the island to its surrounding areas were relatively new, so for a while longer Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and the Bronx would remain industrial engines or pastoral escapes from overstuffed Manhattan. Even if the broad lines are familiar, curios and eccentricities of the era abound in

the partuculars: “the gaunt trestle-work of els” (elevated lines) and trolley cars are a common means of transport; trolley cars are a common means of transport; Jewish and Swedish restaurants vastly outnumber Japanese; “Legitimate” Theaters have their own heading. Other details have been buried in history: “The Lower West Side” a designation that somewhere fell into disuse. Names like Goerck Street in the Lower East Side have the permanent ring of obsolescence.

And sadly for those familiar with the ugly patch of industrial buildings near the Brooklyn-Queens Expresway that sits in its place, we learn of the Wallabout Market at Flushing and Clinton, a wholesale farmer’s market, “the quaintness of its buildings inspired by old Dutch prototypes.”

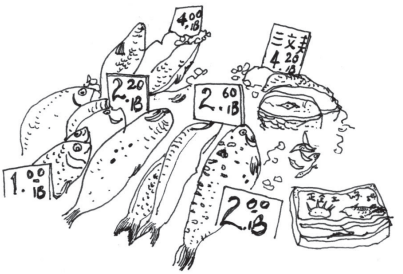
The original is a work of meticulously catalogued time travel. Hopefully this slim but lovingly-assembled addendum will provide future readers similar insight into the early days of a new century.

Chinatown & Little Italy

"The Tongs, Chinese equivalent of American fraternal societies, which for years ruled the quarter with iron discipline and fought each other with hired gunmen, now share influence with newer groups." P. 105 1939 WPA Guide to New York City

The original manuscript argues — somewhat defensively — that the area has restaurants that are "some of the cleanest in the city" and there is "no safer district to be found in New York." MOTT STREET At the corner of KENMARE, loosely divides Italianate upper Mott and lower Mandarin Mott. The blocks below are studded with plywood entrances. Above, patrons can be overheard asking, "How did that end up costing me $20?" The past is legible on the fire escape grates: Lau-N-Son-Co-Inc. in four white on red panels. The present is spelled across the arms and necks of the fashionable cafe-goers. Walking down Mott southward one makes eye contact with sullen goldfish in filthy tanks staring out shop windows. Ancient Chinese iconography is used to sell massages, satellites, extermination and herbal remedies. Jade trinkets,

fresh fish, Buddha statues, clementines, dried mushrooms, beans, ducks (hung and seared) are all grouped into inelegant piles or orderly rows, including, most jarringly, green frogs in large plastic bins, their bulging necks still swelling with breath. After a bend, the street trails off into quiet anonymity, distinguished only by the Chinatown Fair between #8 and #10, a narrow cacophony that is a throwback to the pre-gentrified arcade 80s. At Chatham Square one finds a spectacularly ugly triangle of concrete and stone featuring a statue of Lin Ze Yu, "pioneer in the war against drugs" kept company by grimy pigeons. Around the corner at #11-13 DOYERS sits the Nam Wah, "1st Dim Sum Parlor in Chinatown since 1920". Signs advertise "Man Hair Cut $4" and one gets a sense of the still undisturbed roots of the neighborhood in the tangle of streets and alleys. On ELDRIDGE between CANAL and DIVISION a tenuous-looking outdoor market occurs where once Jewish "schleppers" roamed. 1$ meat skewers and vegetable tables line an elbow-shaped patch of sidewalk, between the Manhattan Bridge and a NY State emission inspection center, its facade a tower of uninviting barbed wire.



Lower East Side & Bowery

"Here flophouses offer a bug-infested bed in an unventilated pigeonhole for twenty-five cents a night." P.120, 1939 WPA Guide to New York City

The flophouses are a memory but even then, the book lets us know that restaurant supply stores were the chief means of trade on the stretch once known as *bouweriej* lane – at one time the only land entrance into the city. Amid all the change sits two stalwart remnants — the Salvation Army at #225 and the Bowery Mission at #227 — the latter passing out cellophane wrapped sandwiches to the unfortunates passing its doors. Further east, the stretch of DELANCEY from Bowery to the foot of the Williamsburg Bridge induces despair. Unbroken beams of sunshine from atop the housing projects across the street beat down angrily on the unprotected pavement. Hands are thrust out in supplication. Racks of cut-rate clothing and rows of quick service restaurants induce visitors to enliven their pace. ORCHARD STREET was once home to a thriving pushcart market, its demise already foretold in 1939. What remains are the signs above shabby storefronts named Rita's, Bellsteins and Fiedler's, a hoarse cry hawking furs, leathers, hats and

shearling. Satellite dishes perch under the decorative cornices of buildings covered in decades of hard-earned soot.

North Brooklyn - Greenpoint

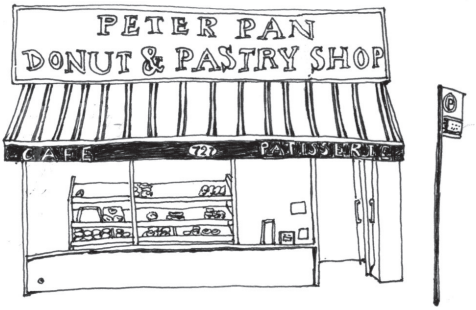
"North Brooklyn is an old, neglected, working-class residential area...Williamsburg and Greenpoint are virtually unrelieved slums." P. 455, 1939 WPA Guide to New York City

The original saw few specific landmarks worth mentioning, save the Russian Greek Orthodox Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord at N 12th and Driggs still standing, now dwarfed by condominium buildings, where once it loomed over the "drab Greenpoint skyline." A shell of the old Eberhard-Faber Company, which manufactured pencils, can still be seen on FRANKLIN STREET. Contemporary Greenpoint's pulse throbs along MANHATTAN AVENUE. Some fading exemplars of its working-class roots remain in evidence. Cato's Army and Navy at #654 is a clutter of denim, plaid and khakis, under rivers of neon light, the terrain out front a distinctive mock-stone mosaic.


ONE DAY
SALE
5.00
EA.
New
Arrivals
GREAT
DISCOUNTS
CLEARANCE
SALE
7.00
EA.

Peter Pan at #727 is a low-brow neighborhood institution, its double signage "Donut and Pastry Shop" above and "Café Patisserie" on the awning below, reflects the area's dual character. Polish delicatessens thrive with kitschy porcelain window displays outside and the stabbing aroma of animal death inside. At #758 the Off-Track Betting parlour attracts a crowd of middle-aged men clutching square papers and flitting around the television monitors like dimmed fireflies.

The Ironworks that launched the historical *Monitor* (West Street between Oak and Calyer) and the Brooklyn Pratt Works of the Socony-Vacuum Oil Company (Kent and North 12th) are empty lots, abandonment seemingly a permanent state. WEST STREET in particular suggests the place's industrial past. It offers an uninterrupted view of the Manhattan skyline, the only sounds the chirp of birds, wind, and the occasional horn blast from a car service limousine or an unseen ship.



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