

THE URBAN MEMORY PROJECT, 2008

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New York City stands on a precipice. Extensive development, unrestricted gentrification and urban renewal on a scale unseen since the post WWII building boom are transforming the city's social, economic, cultural, and physical landscape, erasing layers of history. Whether we feel positively or negatively about these changes, the fact is that NYC of recent memory is disappearing before our eyes.

For the past three years, the Urban Memory Project (UMP) has worked with Brooklyn high school students, introducing them to current changes in their borough. These students (ages 14 - 19) come from a variety of Brooklyn communities, are primarily first and second generation Americans, and are still discovering their own New York. Most had not heard of the term "gentrification," though felt some of its effects, and were unaware of large-scale development projects happening in Brooklyn's famous Coney Island and its contentious Atlantic Yards. They never knew factories once lined the waterfront, nor imagined a pre-subway, pre-concrete rural Brooklyn. In short, like many Americans, young or not, they see their lives as a starting point rather than part of a continuum. UMP is designed to challenge that understanding. Our goal is to take students out into the Brooklyn they know and reveal to them the borough history that shaped their world, including the current events that are daily erasing the Brooklyn these students may imagine to be permanent.

UMP devotes extensive classroom time to researching and discussing issues and formulating opinions. At the Project's heart is a photography documentation piece wherein students examine and capture Brooklyn now, to be preserved for posterity. The students' photographs capture the borough as it is physically changing today; its development projects, its gentrification, and sometimes, its deterioration. The photographs also capture landscape elements students predict might soon disappear; ranging from abandoned lots, to graffiti-covered warehouses, to Coney Island's Astroland amusement park. All images have accompanying labels and text panels that question the changing of Brooklyn, and posit student's well-formed opinions.

The following photographs and text primarily depict structures that are not on the Historical Register, nor whose histories have been recorded and saved in the local libraries, but they do tell the story of the borough and the people who have lived, worked and played in these neighborhoods, including the students and their families. These are personal landmarks, and have thus been saved, at least in the students' photographs, for posterity.



This photograph is showing the inside of Coney Island theme park. From behind the gate, the park looks deserted and clean. I framed it this way to demonstrate the decline of Coney Island over the years. This photograph preserves the image of Coney Island before it undergoes changes next Fall. There will be new development of hotels, condos and new rides that will revive Coney Island as a resort for people to relax at. Coney Island was a huge tourist attraction and a place for fun that attracted people of all races and classes. In its current rundown condition, it cannot attract as much attention as it did before. The new development coming to Coney Island will hopefully bring new life to the amusement park.

Jermaine Babb 1989 -
Coney Island Theme Park
Brooklyn, NY 2007
Photograph

83 83



Rebecca Lopez 1991-
The future of Plating
Brooklyn, New York, 2006
Photograph

The Imperial Plating Co building stands on Metropolitan and Wythe at a merely three stories tall. This dull gray colored building is a retired plating factory. The business has been closed down and the building has been turned into residential facilities. It seems that factories are becoming part of the past for Williamsburg. The transformation of this building represents the high demand for apartments and living quarters. Factory owners are closing down shop and selling these large spaces to contractors for millions of dollars. And these factories are where the newer generation calls home. Even though graffiti is tagged up along the building it's still popular with a heavy flow of residents entering and leaving. This new generation definitely seems to be pushing out the old and building the new.



Carlos Mesquita 1989 -
Looking
Brooklyn, NY 2006
Digital Photograph

This photograph shows a pole with a pamphlet posted on it that advertises an apartment. In the background, what seems to be right across from the poster, lays a reality company. The two objects, the pole in the foreground, and the reality company in the background, work together to convey the idea that Park Slope is being covered by gentrification, development, and other common trends taking place in the area. I took this picture to emphasize the idea that Park Slope is changing. The pamphlet in the foreground portrays a perfect example of someone who is in desperate need to move in with someone; perhaps because he can no longer afford high rent charges.