



New York's Soul for Sale: Raising the Rent on Lunch Counters and Counterculture

Benjamin Terrall

Reviewed: Jeremiah Moss, *Vanishing New York: How a Great City Lost Its Soul*, New York, Dey Street Books, 2017, 420 pp.

Vanishing New York is Jeremiah Moss's loving chronicle of the neighborhoods, characters, bars, and corner institutions that have disappeared in the accelerated gentrification of the last two decades. There is room to debate what we should be fighting to create, but Moss captures the New York he is fighting to preserve.

When Jeremiah Moss moved to Manhattan from rural New England in the early 1990s at the age of 22, he felt that he had already missed the greatest days of the city's existence – high points of cultural activity and upheaval from Walt Whitman's 1850s to the punk rock 1970s and '80s. His feelings only deepened over subsequent years as he watched the transformations driven by unbridled greed in his adopted city. His book, *Vanishing New York: How a Great City Lost Its Soul*, describes that trajectory in the life of the city, arbitrarily defined by Moss as encompassing Manhattan and parts of Brooklyn.

For years, Moss poured his frustration and rage into a long-running blog which galvanized activists and made no pretenses toward scholarly detachment or the faux-objectivity of mainstream reporting. Indeed, the *New York Times* called Moss a “curmudgeon” with a “penchant for apocalyptic bombast.”¹ But, as Moss notes, “New York deserves preaching and anger, romance and nostalgia. It deserves a passionate, furious defense.” The author describes *Vanishing New York* as “a polemic, an obituary, a book of lamentations and a bitterly nostalgic look at a city in the process of going extinct.” The tone that animates *Vanishing New York* seems highly appropriate given what the reign of the ultra-rich has done to the city since the 1980s.

Moss provides a solid foundation for his overview of the changes of the past few decades. He describes the battles between neighborhood preservationist Jane Jacobs and the Machiavellian developer Robert Moses; he also examines the 1960s “white flight” from urban America and the trauma of urban renewal, which novelist James Baldwin dubbed “Negro removal.”

But Moss's narrative of the ouster of small businesses and middle- and lower-income residents by what he calls “hyper-gentrification” focuses most heavily on the Giuliani era to the present. Giuliani, who served as mayor of New York from 1994 to 2001, spearheaded a campaign of zero tolerance against squatters and community gardens in New York's Lower East Side. Moss shows how fiercely many New Yorkers fought to preserve spaces under siege from wealthy realtors, but the millions to be made from clearing out undesirable—and underfunded—riffraff from the path of

¹ See: www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/nyregion/a-cranky-blogger-crusades-to-preserve-the-ordinary-in-new-york.html.

development proved to be too much for a sustained opposition that was also decimated by the scourge of AIDS.

New York is a case study in what predatory capitalism, pushing a gospel of free markets, deregulation, and cuts to social services and taxes on the rich is doing all over the planet. The eccentric, edgy, anti-authoritarian life of the city has been commodified to the point where a notoriously wild dive bar was shut down and then memorialized in a fashion show featuring a lanky model in a \$1,050 black PVC dress and \$550 motorcycle boots. As in other cities, this monetization of counterculture feeds a worship of high-end consumption, epitomized by the gelatin capsules filled with gold leaf (three for \$275) the New Museum of Contemporary Art sold in its gift shop. The product actually advertised that it made the recipient's shit "sparkly." P. T. Barnum had nothing on such upper-echelon hustles.

Post-September 11, 2001, tourism in New York City emerged as a new tidal wave feeding displacement and high-end development. Run-down Times Square grind houses that mixed second- or third-run movies with oddball low-budget genre flicks were replaced by corporate themed chains and high-end theaters featuring safe, predictable, and pricey feel-good musicals. The sanitization of the once seedy but always exciting Times Square was pushed through by Giuliani, who continued to crack down on minor infractions that seemed to include walking while poor and black; Giuliani's philosophy of government was encapsulated in an interview where he said "Freedom is about the willingness of every single human being to cede lawful authority a great deal of discretion about what you do."

Moss describes the heartbreakng destruction of traditional neighborhood ties and the eviction of longtime residents and businesses in Little Italy, Harlem, and other areas of Manhattan and Brooklyn. The tidal wave of speculative capital, which destroyed the social fabric of great swaths of the city and replaced it with a bland, chain store-friendly corporate monoculture, went into overdrive during the tenure of Giuliani's successor, the fabulously wealthy Michael Bloomberg. Bloomberg explained to one interviewer, "If we can find a bunch of billionaires around the world to move here, that would be a godsend. [...] Wouldn't it be great if we could get all the Russian billionaires to move here?" Moss points out that the "trickle-down" theory of wealth sharing should have been utterly discredited by the disastrous fallout of Ronald Reagan's application of that program, but the fact that the vast majority of Americans had their incomes and job security decline while the rich got richer has done nothing to change New York urban policy.

At times, *Vanishing New York* turns heavy-handed in its fond recollections of the glory years of New York's sleazier side. Moss clearly wants people to be fighting for something better than what we are stuck with, but that can't happen by going backward. Preservation of remaining non-corporate spaces is essential, but it's also important to acknowledge that not all elements of the past are worthy of deification. Bohemia and vibrant working-class culture has often flourished in cities beset by violent crime, but can't we work for bohemian spaces without romanticizing criminals who victimize civilians? And it's a bit much to bemoan, as Moss does, a porn emporium being replaced by a venue that hosts Chekhov plays; the reader is left wondering if some of the people caught up in the bottom rungs of the sexexploitation industry might have been happier in other work. Moss is right to condemn the shell companies and international billionaires that have driven New York's real-estate boom, but porn profiteers weren't exactly democratic socialists working for the good of humanity either.

That caveat aside, *Vanishing New York* is a bracing, necessary book which should be read and discussed among people who care about what is happening to urban America. The book is also a tribute to Moss's admirable spirit, as he refuses to stop fighting for urban policies driven by something different than greed and mindless consumerism.

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