A Hidden History

By Katia Czartorysky
Photographs taken in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn
Boerum Hill is one of the most historic neighborhoods in New York City, originating from 1645. Located in South Brooklyn, it is today rated as one of the best areas in the city, however it did not start out that way (New York Daily News). The photography of Boerum Hill reveals the hidden history that would not be in existence if it were not for the great efforts of dedicated brownstone and row house preservationists. Such architecture represents the progression of the area, its influences, and its beauty. It is important to understand this neighborhood’s development to truly appreciate how far it has come and why the preservation of its historical architecture is necessary.

The brownstones and row houses that give Boerum Hill its reputation for beautiful real estate show the historical and cultural influences in the neighborhood. Most of the homes still standing today were built in between the 1840’s and 1870’s. Their styles are striking due to the mixture of architectural approach. Many of them show the styles of Queen Anne, Greek revival, and Gothic revival. Over time they developed Italian and Victorian characteristics as the population of European immigrants grew. In the 1930’s Mohawk Indians immigrated to New York City from Canada to work on the construction of skyscrapers, bringing with them their uniquely beautiful decorative ironwork (Boerum Hill District Report). Each house, although sharing commonalities with the others, is unique either with its brick type or decorative Mohawkan ironwork.
The restoration of these houses not only beautifies the neighborhood but also attracts much attention to those looking for cheaper real estate. In the 1970’s, after a period of a loss of good reputation, Boerum Hill was revived to its middle-class appeal by urban preservationists. The historical beauty of the houses was brought back to life, and within several decades the value of these homes shot up and its population grew drastically. Today, Boerum Hill ranks 7th in the list of New York City’s nicest neighborhoods, the first on the list to not be in Manhattan (New York Daily News). Before the restoration process, DUMBO had its place, but since the area’s climb in popularity the row houses beat DUMBO by ranging from 1-2 million in value (and still climbing).

A push for the construction of modern apartment buildings puts the historical architecture and its appreciation at risk. As most other parts of Brooklyn are being modernized, the historic appeal is losing its popularity in the eyes of some. In a New York Times article posted in July of 2012 arguing against Brooklyn’s uneven gentrification, states, “Shuttered factories in DUMBO remind them of lost jobs rather than expensive lofts that beckon from glossy advertisements ... fashionable Brooklyn spots like Park Slope of Boerum Hill might as well be a foreign country”. With the value of the historical housing rising and rising, modern and commercial newly built apartments are becoming favorable. With an increasing demand for apartment buildings, parts of Boerum Hill are being replaced with new architecture. Although listed in the National Register of Historic Places since 1983, being considered historical landmarks does not protect the individual houses.
Although new homeowners are moving with the commercial and economic progression of New York’s real estate, gentrification should be limited to not only preserve historic houses but also protect their owners. An article from the Business Insider argues, “…condemning the influx of new residents as the reason for the displacement of low-income renters, who were now increasingly forced to leave the neighborhood.” Vincent Mazzone, a storeowner in Boerum Hill made the statement, “But there were people who looked at what they had paid for their property, and what they could now get for their properties, and they said ‘Let me take the money and run.’ And then you had the next generation, who now couldn’t afford to buy in the community that they would like to stay in.” Overall the article presents the controversy in the trend of the “out with the old, in with the new” policy that is affecting homeowners in South Brooklyn. If this continues, within a hundred years it is debatable that most of the historical remnants that lie within Brooklyn architecture would be lost, and in their place, a “new Manhattan” shall stand.
The photographic representation of Boerum Hill not only shows the beautiful houses, but also their hidden yet still existing historic significance. Lowered levels of saturation, higher contrast, and the occasional ghost-like figure or translucent historic symbol exaggerate the neighborhood’s past. My goal as a digital artist was to maintain the beauty of the shot as much as possible, while still showing a strong connection to the underlying message. I focused on row houses, ironwork, and an old inn from the 19th century. Each has historical significance even though it may not be apparent at first glance. That is why the ghostly feel was pushed, to remind the viewer that the purpose is to not merely show a “nice looking house”, but rather something more that is becoming more commonly overlooked.

New York City’s past is rightfully recognized in many of its regions, but smaller details, individual stories, significant years, historical figures, are not always seen so clearly, especially in quiet neighborhoods. Each and every neighborhood has a unique story and tie to history. Just as it is important to know facts such as presidents, wars and their victors, it is important to know why places are the way they are, how they came to be, who lived there, and what is left. To live somewhere and not think about what may have happened there whether it was 50 years prior or 200 is a terrible loss. That is why preservation, restoration, and acknowledgement of history in neighborhoods such as Boerum Hill is necessary, for so much of it is already disappearing and may cease to exist within the next 100 years to come.
Works Cited:

