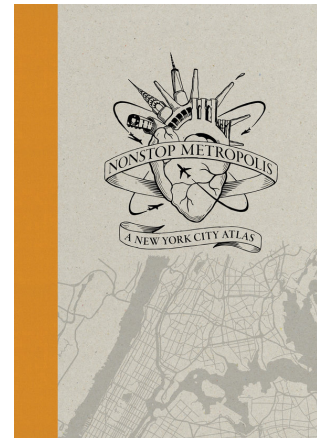


Nonstop Metropolis
A New York City Atlas
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New York maps are always interesting, and we have enjoyed dealing with them for work. In Manhattan, the daily use of maps is often unnecessary, as the grid makes it easy to navigate, but the creation of detailed and visionary maps, that determined planning and development and building, were a necessity over the four centuries of the city's existence. To this day, builders often have to consult old maps that showed the location of streams and springs to properly plan building foundations. When one of the reviewers (Dan) worked researching property in Manhattan, he loved checking the old maps at the cartography division, and uncovering the history that these maps held. Many of the current battles of political life are annotated with complex maps describing zoning, school catchment zones, and planned developments that are reshaping the economy of the city, along with the quality of life of its residents.

Compared with these high-stakes maps, the maps in *Nonstop Metropolis* are extremely artistic, in some cases downright beautiful. They seem to be almost whimsical. Their purpose is not to give specific details about the city, although they often do that, but to highlight interesting issues, comparisons, and contradictions. In some cases, the combination of information shown on one map seems illogical: the history of publishing is paired with the history of whaling; community gardens with animal abuse. Why do these things need to be shown together, and what does it do to help us understand New York?

This book's purpose isn't to tell the history of New York, although it often does that. It isn't to highlight interesting places to see and to visit, although it does that as well. While you may learn more about the landscape of political power in the city, it doesn't purport to describe that either. It doesn't provide a contrary or revisionist argument, although some of the essays do give a contrary perspective. It certainly won't help you get from point A to B. In all these cases, there are numerous other books that give more detail, paint a clearer picture, and importantly, provide more useful maps.

Yet this book is compelling and fascinating to look through. There is no e-book version, and it is clear that it is designed for print. The major maps are on two-page spreads, with vibrant colors and interesting accompanying essays related to the map's subject, though not necessarily its content. The shape of the book lends itself more to browsing than to detailed reading. You linger on the illustrations, look at all the details, and try to absorb all the information. In an era of Google Maps and the numerous geographical information systems (GIS) that allow people to generate maps for multitudes of questions and issues, we still appreciate the artistry that went into creating this book.

The problem arises in trying to understand what this book says about New York, and cities more broadly. Is New York a collection of stories, events, interactions, and circumstance, thrown into a pot or heaped together-

er with some broad themes, but with little need to tell a coherent story? Obviously many of these stories are interesting and informative, but what conclusions do we draw from them? How do they help us understand the current problems and issues that New York is facing today?

Because cities are extremely dynamic, with people, goods, and industries coming, going, and being remade, they often adapt to suit new needs and circumstances. The title of this book, *Nonstop Metropolis*, captures a piece of how New York, perhaps more than most cities, has done this. The pace can be jarring, and to the people who are caught in the currents, it can feel like they are being swept out to sea.

By the vast majority of metrics, New York is significantly better than it was just twenty years ago. Crime has dropped to historic lows. The economy is much larger, and the outflow of people has reversed itself as New York has become a center for jobs, and a much more enjoyable place to live. Compared with many American cities, not to mention rural areas, the unemployment rate is low. While there is still a surprising amount of manufacturing located in the five boroughs, the economy has successfully shifted to a post-industrial base. And it is perhaps unique among American cities for not having a dominant industry.

The problem is that these shifts have left many residents less well-off. Authors like economist Joseph Stiglitz [have identified](#) the rise of the financial sector as a cause of lackluster economic growth for the past fifty years. In New York, it has fed a real-estate boom. One of the reviewers, sitting on a property that has exponentially increased in value, has clearly benefited. For the other, it has led to increased housing costs.

As two New Yorkers who have lived collectively over a half century in Brooklyn, Mel, in his 70s, and Dan, in his 30s, have congruent and divergent experiences of the neighborhoods. One of us has observed the shift of East New York, a section of Brooklyn, from a diverse working class area to a much poorer area which is primarily the home of blacks and Hispanic residents. Both of us observed Park Slope gentrifying in the late 1990s. One of us lives in Sunset Park, where gentrification is in progress. Finally, both of us are observing how residents in the above-mentioned East New York are trying to shape the future of their community. These shifts are part of our daily experiences. We see neighbors change, favorite shops replaced with new stores, and the regular sound of construction machinery as buildings are renovated, demolished, and built.

Maps, however, can play an important role in explaining these shifts to an outsider. Some institutions, like the [Furman Center](#) at NYU, make maps to track New York real estate. The [NYC Planning Department](#) allows you to view maps for both demographic data and information about zoning and land use. There is a proliferation of these types of maps, as governments and other organizations have opened their data for researchers, activists, and ordinary citizens to integrate into readily available mapping systems. This marrying of big public datasets with GIS has many positive uses. Activists, and quite a few not-in-my-backyard advocates, are able to re-evaluate and display data that supports their causes in a way that was previously available only to those that had the money to produce these reports.

The maps found in this book are very different from these instrumental maps. They possess a level of artistry that no harried and overworked activist would ever put into their presentation maps. These maps are not designed to take a mass of information and display it in a way that is easy to comprehend, but are instead meant to interest the reader.

Many of the chapters discuss events that we remember well, and played a large role in shaping the city that we live in today. One of us (Mel) remembers the desolation that some neighbourhoods like the South Bronx and East New York experienced in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Mel watched as violence broke out after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that destroyed numerous buildings in the neighborhood. With the exodus of the white working and lower middle class from these neighborhoods, many buildings became uninhabitable and were set on fire in riots, or by landlords claiming insurance. Still others were demolished

by the city, leaving large vacant spaces.

Luc Sante, in his essay *The Violence of Inequality*, discusses the central role of race in the history of New York riots. In 1991, a car accident that killed a young black boy sparked a riot in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights, a community where the ultra-orthodox Lubavitcher Jewish sect lived right next to a large Caribbean community. Racial animosity, an ever-present undercurrent in all New York politics, turned an unfortunate incident into a race riot, and significantly contributed to the defeat of the city's first (and only) black mayor, David Dinkins, by Rudolph Giuliani.

Crime continued to rise in the 1980s. In 1990, the 75th police precinct, which encompasses the East New York section of Brooklyn [had 109 murders. In 1993, homicides totalled 126](#), by far the highest number in the city. We remember walking around the neighborhood and seeing the signs of drug use and sale, prostitution, and other illegal activities around us. Dan played in parks that had crack vials and hypodermic needles scattered on the ground.

A few years later, the situation improved substantially. There were 41 murders in the 75th police precinct in 1998. In 2016, there were 23. While living in East New York is still harder than most other parts of the city, it is impossible to deny the improvement. Eventually, residents worked to improve their community by building housing and [creating community gardens](#) on the cleared land. The population, [which stood at 161,350 in 1990, has grown to 182,896 in 2010](#). Both of us see it when we walk in these communities: with fewer abandoned houses, more gardens and businesses and amenities for residents. The clearest indication of change is that people are walking in the streets and parks again, and spending time in the neighborhood.

These improvements have brought new challenges to our communities, something Jonathan Tarleton discusses in the *Makers and Breakers* chapter, where he describes three important shapers of the New York landscape. Frederic Law Olmsted built Central Park & Prospect Park, beautiful oases for residents, but these projects uprooted and demolished poor black communities in the process. Robert Moses is responsible for most of the bridges and highways in the city, but their construction devastated communities like the South Bronx & Sunset Park. Jane Jacobs organized to resist Moses, and was able to prevent some of his most devastating projects, but she also laid the groundwork for a form of community activism which has prevented improvements and led to communities which are worn hollow by gentrification.

In East New York, Mayor De Blasio [proposed to rezone](#) an area in the north of the community to increase population density and build an additional 1,200 affordable units as part of a larger [plan](#) to build 200,000 new affordable units across the city. While the city desperately needs more places for people to live as the economy and population grow and housing costs increase, residents are concerned that they will not be the beneficiaries of these new units.

This dilemma is at the heart of all the development battles occurring in the city today. How do you balance the needs of the city for more housing against the desires of the local community to shape their neighborhood? How do residents that participated in the revival of their communities benefit now that the city is a desirable place to live? Should the grand planners (Robert Moses), with large visions of what the city needs, be able to enact their plans over the objections of the preservationists (Jane Jacobses)?

Gentrification, therefore, has become a controversial issue across the city as urban policy is being called upon to address the results of national economic policy that has benefited a few and left many others behind. Census generated maps detailing racial and economic segregation are the best examples. Another revealing map shows the disparate impact of the criminal justice policies, which have repercussions for residents' future employability (especially black & Latino males) and the community's ability to maintain connections and provide mutual support. The prison population of NYC comes from an extremely small portion of the

city, mainly from five neighborhoods including East New York and neighboring Brownsville in Brooklyn.

The city has experienced a substantial renewal, but that renewal has not been evenly distributed, and the effects are now causing problems for many residents that are an important part of New York City, but have been pushed to the margins. This book does not have many maps that clearly show this divide, nor does it discuss the recent proposals and plans to address it.

The way we characterize that New York City as a Nonstop Metropolis is that it is continually changing, re-shaping, and reinventing itself. Industries rise and fall, shifting the economic base of the city. Neighborhoods that had a majority of one ethnic group shift as new people move in, and then shift again. But should residents view this as part of the inevitable change that happens, or should they take a more active role in making sure the changes benefit them as well.

This book, and the series of which it is a part, provide interesting and varied portraits of the cities that they seek to describe. It allows many people to tell their stories and add their recollections, providing needed context, often portrayed with fascinating maps. Those looking for a systematic approach, however, will be disappointed, as will those who want a technocratic or political guide to addressing the new challenges that New York City faces.