
This unusual book is worth a close read by scholars of urban affairs and by community activists. Scholars will be intrigued by what *Brooklyn Tides* reveals about the historical perspective and cultural atmosphere surrounding grassroots movements for neighborhood protection, affordable housing, environmental justice, and related causes. Activists will find numerous examples of how history, literature, the arts, environmentalism, and urban planning thought can inform and strengthen their work.

The book grows from the authors’ collaboration at the New York City College of Technology, a downtown Brooklyn campus of the City University oriented toward accessible education and social service. Mark Noonan, an English professor at the school, draws upon his research into Brooklyn’s literary and cultural history to provide accounts of the waterfront, labor, literature, the arts, the environment and its devastation, migration, redevelopment, and gentrification. His sections offer a usable past, a set of perspectives on Brooklyn that would motivate and sustain popular activism. Benjamin Shepard, a professor of social services, then draws heavily upon this background in support of his own account—told largely from direct experience and in the first person—of present-day campaigns against rising rents and evictions, oppressive policing, excessively developer-friendly planning and zoning policies, and other manifestations of the pressure that Brooklyn has come under as it has gone from a borough characterized by fraying working-class and ethnic neighborhoods to a fashionable haven for information-age professionals and creative-class types spilling over from Manhattan. To make their book even more vivid, the authors spread through it dozens of photos—mostly contributed by Caroline Shepard, the photographer spouse of the co-author—of the places, people, and events which they have studied or with which they have been involved.

The title draws upon Walt Whitman’s “City of Ships,” in which the image of “glittering” and “gleeful” tides expresses the poet’s exuberance for “proud and passionate” Brooklyn, in his day still an independent municipality, one of the Atlantic basin’s most significant ports and shipbuilding centers. Tides and their aftermath have left their mark everywhere in Brooklyn, the authors explain, “tides of people, tides of development, tides of industry, tides of power, and tides of resistance.” Brooklyn’s story illustrates the “ebb and flow” of modern urban life. The place has always “contend[ed] with waves of people and change” (16–17).

Among the most significant of these historical and economic tides occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when corporate enterprise overwhelmed the waterfront of merchants, artisans, and boatmen that, in Whitman’s verse, became American democracy singing. In the wake of Brooklyn’s corporate industrialization emerged the grimy, mid-twentieth-century borough, the place of neglect and regret that one encounters in Betty Smith’s *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge*, various writings of Norman Mailer, and, famously, Elia Kazan and Budd Schulberg’s film, *On the Waterfront*, along with Schulberg’s even bleaker novel version. Further historical tides—first the urban crisis of the 1950s–80s and then the neo-liberal revitalization of recent decades—swept away this Brooklyn as well, with its waterfront apartments cheap enough for writers, its mob-connected unions, and its class, ethnic, and racial patchwork. From the authors’ perspective, Brooklyn’s current tide of “de-industrialization, gentrification, and transformation” has prompted clean-up and construction but also “displacement of the poor,
foreclosures, ecological damage, pollution, police brutality” (140). The relentless commodification of the borough’s public space, amenities, and communities amounts to a new, disturbing round of betrayal of Whitman’s vision of the city as democracy.

In addition to literature, film, and music, the authors draw attention to a succession of “East River” schools in the visual arts that have expressed Brooklyn’s particular embodiment of modernity and its dilemmas. At the turn of the twentieth century, myriad impressionist and expressionist artists became preoccupied with conveying the feel of the Brooklyn Bridge and the waterfront. In an analogous spirit, recent artists depict environmental and resource waste and cultural “blandification” amid the borough’s transformation into “global commodity” (114).

The latter portions of the book mostly concern Shepard’s encounters and experiences as he moves through Brooklyn, mainly by bicycle. His engagement with the borough weaves together activism and ethnography. Shepard introduces long-time residents and small business owners threatened by displacement, activists in a range of causes, and even street-theater characters such as the Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping, a presence wherever people resist the “monoculture” of “malls, chains, and deluxe condos” spreading through Brooklyn like an “invasive species” (212). Bike lanes and community gardens, Black Lives Matter marches, campaigns to resist the sanitizing of Coney Island amusements, self-organized relief efforts after Superstorm Sandy in October 2012—Shepard presents all these as intersecting movements necessary for preserving Brooklyn for its people amid the economic tide of globalization and the literal tide that looms through global warming.

Brooklyn’s peripheral situation within Greater New York and its limited control of its fate make attention to it even more imperative, since “every global city has a Brooklyn.” Elsewhere, “banlieues, peripheries, suburbs, or shanty towns” fill the niche of New York’s “outer boroughs” (25). The different voices of the two authors, along with the enormous variety of people and themes they introduce, give the book a diffuse, in places incoherent quality that is in fact appropriate to the subject and to the authors’ goals. Although Caroline Shepard’s photos complement the text in wonderful ways, the authors rarely integrate the photos into their prose and make them a direct part of their explanation. That said, every city should have books like this, books that express the life and feel of disparate areas within the metropolitan region, while offering perspectives and tools for making those places better.

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