The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn

GENTRIFICATION AND THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY IN POSTWAR NEW YORK

Suleiman Osman

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For my parents

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The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn

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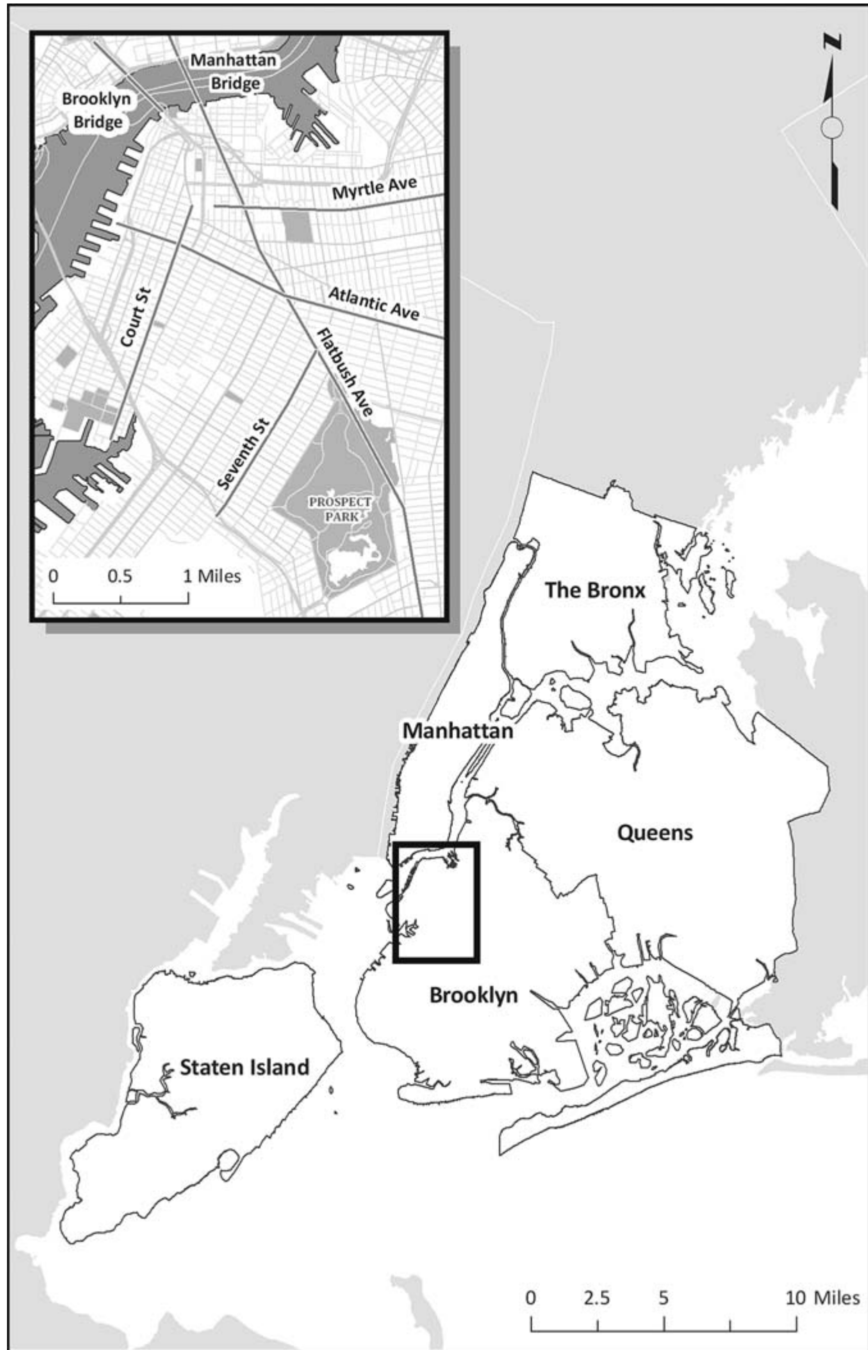
Introduction

On November 22, 1966, a small group of city construction workers arrived at the corner of State and Nevins streets in Brooklyn with orders to raze an abandoned brownstone. Having recently gained possession of the dilapidated four-story building through nonpayment of taxes, the city had become concerned that the empty townhouse was a gathering place for homeless men and drug users and decided to demolish it. For local residents, the sight of helmeted workers and bulldozers was a common one. Although only a few blocks away from the borough's downtown, North Gowanus, as some locals called it, was a struggling inner-city district hit hard by the same trends affecting most American cities in the 1960s. A once thriving industrial economy centered around the Gowanus Canal and waterfront was fading as firms left for the suburbs or the South. Working-class white residents anxious about the changing racial composition of the area and declining work opportunities fled for Staten Island, New Jersey, or Long Island. African American and Puerto Rican migrants arrived on the heels of departing white ethnics in search for work, but soon found themselves trapped in decaying tenements surrounded by abandoned townhouses. To stem the spread of blight and urban decay, ambitious city planners hoped to raze and rebuild, replacing outdated Victorian housing with modern high-rises, open space, and green parks. A few blocks away, the city had recently blasted several square blocks of brownstones and would soon complete the enormous Wyckoff Gardens low-income housing project.[1]

On this morning, however, workers were confronted with the unexpected: a group of thirty members of the Boerum Hill Association stood in front of the building protesting with placards, bullhorns, and pamphlets. An organization of young homeowners who recently moved to the area, the BHA demanded that the city halt demolition of the building. An abandoned lot would scar the



Manhattan Bridge
Brooklyn Bridge
Myrtle Ave
Atlantic Ave
Court St
Flatbush Ave
Seventh St
PROSPECT PARK
0 0.5 1 Miles
N
The Bronx
Manhattan
Queens
Brooklyn
Staten Island
0 2.5 5 10 Miles

townhouse-lined block. Some sat in front of the equipment. Others held signs saying "Don't Destroy Our Neighborhood" and "People Need Homes—Not Parking Lots." Two housewives sat at the entrance holding infants. Another group of mothers lined up five strollers bumper to bumper in front of the stoop, forming a "baby-carriage brigade" of protest. Hanging on another stroller, a sign invited spectators to attend a house tour organized by the new group. "Care, don't clear!" cried one of the protesters.

As the construction workers watched the protesters, they were likely taken aback. Most surely had not heard of Boerum Hill. While some referred to the area as North Gowanus, for most Brooklynites in the 1960s the block was an indistinguishable part of South Brooklyn, a vaguely defined zone consisting of two congressional districts that extended about two miles from the docks and factories by the East River inland to majestic Prospect Park. Perhaps, too, the workers were struck by the accents and dress of the protesters. While South Brooklyn was primarily a white, working-class district with a growing number of African Americans and Puerto Ricans, the members of the BHA were young white-collar professionals. Robert T. Snyder, the president, was a Columbia-educated labor lawyer. David Preiss, the spokesman at the protest, was an editor of the magazine *American Artist*. The protesters spoke confidently and articulately. Their speech, with all the shibboleths of Manhattan's educated class and no trace of Brooklyn brogue, seemed incongruous with their surroundings.[2]

They called themselves "the brownstoners." They had first begun to appear in Brooklyn Heights in the late 1940s. Artists, lawyers, bankers, and other white-collar workers migrated to the aging Gold Coast district, restoring old townhouses and moving into run-down tenements. By the 1960s, white-collar professionals priced out of Manhattan flooded into surrounding areas in search of cheap housing. "More and more people now are packing up, moving out of their aseptic uptown apartments," explained *New York* about "brownstone fever" in 1969, "making new homes out of old, forlorn but solid and roomy brownstones, restoring them to pristine glory." As brownstoners spilled past the boundaries of Brooklyn Heights, they created new names for revitalizing blocks. Cobble Hill was named in the late 1950s. Boerum Hill and Carroll Gardens soon followed. By the mid-1970s, few people remembered the name South Brooklyn. In brochures, newspapers, and real estate guides, the area had become "Brownstone Brooklyn"—a constellation of revitalized townhouse districts including Clinton Hill, Park Slope, and Prospect Heights.[3]

Brownstoners, however, believed they were involved in something more than a renovation fad. Brownstoning was a cultural revolt against sameness, conformity, and bureaucracy. In a city that was increasingly technocratic, Boerum Hill was a "real neighborhood," a vestige of an "authentic community"

lost in a modernizing society. "Many enthusiastic brownstoners, particularly those recent escapees from 'the boring sameness of suburbia,' emphasize the social value of their decision to live in the city," explained the *Brownstoner*, a local newsletter, in 1969. Where midtown Manhattan and the suburbs were atomizing and mass-produced, Boerum Hill appeared "historic" and "diverse." "On Wyckoff Street, an eccentric block of three-story workmen's cottages have been rescued by young homemakers and turned into a happy, house-proud community," described the *Boerum Hill Times* in 1974. "Indeed it's quite possible to feel, while walking tree-lined streets, that one has broken through the time barrier and landed smack in the middle of the 19th century. Gentle ghosts of ladies in hoops skirts and gentlemen in frock coats can almost be seen among the leafy shadows." "My children can grow in a stimulating atmosphere and be exposed to many new experiences," explained a brownstoner about his move to Boerum Hill. "They will know and understand people of all economic backgrounds, and they will have the cultural, educational, and institutional facilities of New York City at their doorstep."[4]

Brooklyn's young white-collar émigrés moved there with a sense of zeal. They started block associations, organized street festivals, and opened food cooperatives to foster a sense of community, place, and history. As they planted trees and dug community gardens in abandoned lots, they described themselves as "greening" the city and echoed the themes of a nascent environmental movement. They avidly renovated houses, stripping away paint and aluminum siding, as well as symbolically ripping off the trappings of mass consumer society to return to an older, more authentic form of life. But as their poorer neighbors warily eyed them hammering and planting, some brownstoners had a gnawing sense of doubt about their project. "I wonder . . . are my own home improvements and those of my neighbors . . . are the friends that are brought in to buy that decrepit rooming house down the street . . . are our civic activities . . . and our walking tours," wondered one brownstoner in 1969, "all part of a trend that is turning our own neighborhoods into suburban-like middle-class ghettoes?"[5]

By 1980, Boerum Hill had dramatically changed. Fifteen years after they demonstrated on State Street to protect the fledgling enclave, the members of the BHA found themselves the targets of a new wave of protests. In August, *The Displacement Report*, a pamphlet produced by Acción Latina and the Tenants Action Committee, began to circulate around the neighborhood. Revitalization, the group complained, was resulting in the displacement of low-income renters from the area. Greedy speculation by real estate agents and middle-class homeowners was leading to the eviction and harassment of longtime residents of color. Local bodegas and storefront churches were pressured to close.

A 1980 map of “brownstone neighborhoods” from the *Brooklyn Phoenix Brownstone Guide*. Many of these neighborhood names were coined by brownstoners in the 1960s and 1970s. (Courtesy of the Brooklyn *Phoenix*)

Most striking, though, was a new word that the pamphlet had adopted from headlines in the media: "gentrification." The members of the BHA perhaps read the pamphlet with a sense of defensiveness. Had they not arrived in Boerum Hill with the fresh idealism of the 1960s? How had they become villains? Some perhaps read the pamphlet more wistfully. Decades ago, they had arrived in search of an authentic community not available in Manhattan and suburbia. But had they ironically destroyed the authenticity they once craved?[6]

Whether referred to as "gentrification," "brownstoning," "neighborhood revitalization," or the "back-to-the-city movement," the influx of white-collar professionals into low-income central city areas has been one of the most striking developments in postwar urban history. Once redlined by banks and slated for large-scale urban renewal in the 1950s, Brownstone Brooklyn's enclaves by the 1980s had some of the most expensive real estate in the nation. A Brooklyn brownstone, once considered a symbol of blight in the 1940s, today is de rigueur for New York's wealthy and educated. With hip bars and cafés, used-book stores, yoga studios, and renovated townhouses, Brownstone Brooklyn is no longer regarded by the public as blighted, but instead is both celebrated and reviled as a site of cultural consumption for a new middle class. Once dismissed by sophisticated Manhattanites, Brownstone Brooklyn since the 1990s has even begun to eclipse its neighbor as an intellectual and cultural center. "Manhattan: The New Brooklyn?" asked a local magazine in 2002, playfully inverting the relationship between province and metropole.[7]

Brooklyn's brownstone belt was not alone. An early version of brownstoning was already occurring in Chicago's Towertown and New York's Greenwich Village as early as the 1910s and 1920s. While gentrification tapered off in most cities during the Depression, Washington, D.C.'s, Georgetown experienced an influx of white-collar government employees working for a newly expanded federal government during the New Deal. After World War II, the trend resumed on the periphery of aging Gold Coasts and silk-stocking districts such as Boston's Beacon Hill. In New York City from the 1950s to the 1970s, a new middle class expanded from older gentrified Gold Coasts into SoHo, the Upper West Side, and other newly named enclaves surrounding Manhattan's midtown and downtown central business districts. Washington, D.C.'s Dupont Circle, Capitol Hill, and Adams Morgan, New Orleans' French Quarter, Boston's South End, Atlanta's Inman Park, Chicago's Lincoln Park, and San Francisco's Castro and Haight-Ashbury are all famous examples of areas gentrified in a pattern similar to Brownstone Brooklyn. In 1972–73 alone, the National Urban Coalition reported the beginnings of gentrification in Houston's Montrose, Cleveland's Ohio City, Seattle's Capitol Hill, New Orleans' City Park, San Antonio's King William, and dozens of other inner-city districts.

Even smaller cities experienced the phenomenon: Bridgeport's South End, South Bend's Park Avenue, and Albuquerque's South Martineztown, for example. By 1976, an Urban Land Institute study found versions of brownstoning in a majority of the nation's 260 cities with populations exceeding 50,000. In cities with populations of 500,000 or more, three-quarters were experiencing gentrification.[8]

American urban historians have largely overlooked gentrification.[9] Focusing on the postwar urban crisis in cities such as Detroit and St. Louis, historians for good reason have focused on examining the political and social consequences of urban industrial decline. The declension narrative they told is important and powerful. As industry migrated to the suburbs, southward, and overseas, white residents after World War II fled landscapes such as Brownstone Brooklyn for the suburbs, leaving depopulated and decaying neighborhoods in their wake. African American migrants moving north for work and to escape Jim Crow found themselves closed off from the suburbs by discrimination, relegated to deteriorating and segregated housing, and unable to find unskilled work in factories, which were being shuttered. Misguided city leaders eager to revive the center city bulldozed fragile neighborhoods and built massive highways, alienating public housing projects, and sterile civic centers. By the late 1960s, cities from Boston to Oakland had become terminally ill. The racial uprisings of that decade provided an incendiary conclusion to the city's slow economic death, the fires lit by rioters only cremating an already withering urban corpse.

More than just telling a tale of economic collapse, historians of postwar cities describe a political death. The decline of the industrial city also marked the demise of postwar liberalism. Once the bedrock of New Deal Democratic politics, Detroit, Chicago, and other fading cities were torn apart by racial clashes over housing and competition for increasingly scarce manufacturing jobs. Destructive urban renewal programs led to growing disenchantment with government planners. As young African Americans increasingly disillusioned by the meager gains of racial liberalism turned to black power politics and a hostile white ethnic working class turned to conservative backlash politics, a once cohesive Democratic coalition crumbled. The ghetto of the 1970s with its boarded-up homes, empty stores, and impoverished schools surrounded by conservative suburbs marked the denouement not just of industrial urban America but of a once powerful liberal coalition.[10]

Brooklyn experienced many of the same shocks after World War II.[11] But economic crisis and political backlash were only part of the story. While white working-class residents from most of the borough moved to the suburbs, brownstoners enthusiastically moved into old townhouse districts

surrounding the central business area. Rather than laborers in declining industries along the waterfront and Gowanus Canal, Brooklyn's new residents worked in finance, law, publishing, education, and the arts. Instead of celebrating the suburban ideal of a single-family tract home and private lawn, Brooklyn's new residents championed a new urban ideal of close-knit housing, street life, and face-to-face contact. Rather than seeking race and class homogeneity, middle-class beatniks, radicals, settlement workers, and gay men pushed into poor districts in search of "diversity." Rather than rejecting the aging dilapidated housing stock of the inner city, brownstoners sought to purchase, restore, and preserve the "historic" architecture of the urban core.

Rather than simply declining, Brownstone Brooklyn made a transition to a landscape that has been labeled with a cornucopia of "posts": postindustrial, post-Fordist, post-reform, post-Keynesian, postmaterial, and postmodern.[12] While New York City's industrial employment dropped by 49 percent between 1950 and 1975, the city's employment in finance, insurance, and real estate increased by 25 percent, in services by 52 percent, and in government by 53 percent. Even during the economically depressed 1970s, when the city was losing 50,000 manufacturing jobs a year, it saw continued growth in banking, media, and services. Some dismayed commentators at the time pointed to the drop in the number of Fortune 500 headquarters from 128 to 90 between 1966 and 1976 as evidence that New York's days as an office center were limited as well. But as old industrial headquarters left, the city gained more dynamic firms with an increasingly international orientation. During the 1970s, six new Fortune 500 firms relocated to the city and twenty smaller ones expanded onto the list. These, along with the other Fortune 500 companies that stayed in the city, on average made over 50 percent of their sales overseas. Foreign banks with offices in the city nearly doubled, from forty-six to eighty-four, between 1970 and 1976. New York was no longer an industrial headquarters town. Instead it was becoming a command-and-control center for a global economy.[13]

The intention here is not to question the history of urban crisis, to exaggerate the limited extent of gentrification before 1980, or to downplay the broader troubles faced by industrial cities after World War II. But by examining the postindustrialization rather than the deindustrialization of Brooklyn, this book hopes to contribute to a growing body of scholarship that has begun to complicate the narrative of urban decline in order to examine the roots of the subsequent post-1980 revival of cities such as New York, Boston, and San Francisco. Rather than a unidirectional narrative of decline, the book describes a landscape shaped by multidirectional trends as manufacturing contracted and corporate and financial services expanded. Brownstone Brooklyn was

simultaneously reviving and declining in the period under study. Rather than the site of a bipolar conflict between black and white, Brownstone Brooklyn was a multiethnic, multiclass, and polyglot landscape with multiple and shifting conflicts and coalitions. Rather than simply dissolving, liberalism in Brownstone Brooklyn, San Francisco, and other similar cities transformed from an older industrial type to a newer postindustrial version. Rather than a flat space, Brownstone Brooklyn's deindustrialized landscape was a layered landscape that retained the imprints of previous eras of economic structuring. This palimpsest of empty factories, waterfront piers, and Victorian townhouses was a repository of symbolic value for white-collar enthusiasts, black power activists, white ethnic homeowners, and a variety of neighborhood groups. Brownstone Brooklyn's symbolic landscape was crucial in shaping its political and economic landscape. Finally, the book offers a slightly different periodization than the narrative of urban decline. Rather than the denouement of the industrial city, the 1970s were a dynamic decade of transition that formed a crucial bridge between the participatory movements of the 1960s and gentrification and urban revival in the 1980s.[14]

A comprehensive history of the "post-" city is certainly beyond the scope of this book.[15] The impact of post-1965 immigration, the rise of Sunbelt cities, sprawl, and the formation of edge cities, for example, are also part of this larger national urban story. Brownstone Brooklyn from 1945 to 1980, though, is an instructive case study for several reasons.

The history of brownstoning is the story of the formation of a new postindustrial middle class. Brownstoners represented a new labor force working in expanded administrative services in the central business district, and they dramatically reshaped the cultural and political landscape of American cities. A 1976 survey of the Brownstone Revival Committee, for example, found that the eight professions most represented in their membership were law, writing, teaching, editing, architecture, banking, psychology, and psychiatry. Close behind were accounting, computer technology, construction, interior design, art, medicine, engineering, finance, acting, insurance, photography, and library work. Brooklyn's new middle class was not alone. Another poll that year revealed that 60 percent of Harvard's class of 1968 was engaged in home restoration.

In 1971, a local civic group conducted a survey of 326 new brownstone owners in Brooklyn and Manhattan. The respondents were overwhelmingly whiter, wealthier, and more educated than the average New York resident. Whereas 30 percent of New Yorkers were nonwhite, brownstone renovators were 99 percent white. While only 17 percent of New Yorkers earned more than $10,000, 98.3 percent of respondents had higher incomes. But more

than financial capital, what distinguished Brooklyn's new brownstone middle class was its cultural and social capital. In a city where just over 50 percent of people twenty-five or older were high school graduates, 99.9 percent of respondents had high school diplomas, and a striking 60 percent had attended graduate school. Surprisingly, historians have not paid much attention to this powerful urban constituency.[16]

Because brownstoners do not fit easily into a binary of rich and poor, or bourgeoisie and proletariat, scholars and journalists since World War II have struggled to come up with a label for them. Names have ranged from "new class," "new middle class," and "professional-managerial class" to "white-collar proletariat," "knowledge workers," and "intelligentsia." Some names, such as "creative class," emphasize new forms of production. Others, such as "bohemian bourgeoisie," refer to taste and consumption. For some New Left theorists in the 1960s, the "new class" represented a possible revolutionary vanguard in a country in which the industrial working class had become increasingly conservative. Disillusioned old left and neoconservative intellectuals in the 1970s used the term with unveiled contempt for a new elite. The most recognizable term today, however, was coined by *Newsweek* in 1984: "yuppie," or young urban professional. This book will use the term "brownstoners" interchangeably with geographer David Ley's "new middle class."[17]

Although theorists debated how to define them, brownstoners themselves had a strong sense of identity as a new and distinctly urban bourgeoisie with shared forms of consumption and lifestyle patterns that distinguished them from their suburban counterparts. Moving to Brooklyn was an integral step in developing this class consciousness. A local newspaper found that brownstoners used an alphabet of adjectives to describe their move: "adventurous, avid, bargain-minded, brave, city-loving, courageous, dedicated, determined, enthusiastic, fervent, gutsy—all the way down to young-at-heart, zealous, and even zany." "[We are] an almost superhuman group known as Brownstoners," explained a young renovator in 1969 with the self-assuredness of the emerging young urban professional class.

> There is something unique coursing through his veins which makes him unique among homeowners. . . . He is a man dedicated to escaping the stagnation and boredom of suburban living, and while he is apt to spend just as much time on his small 20×30-foot garden as the suburbanite on his "grounds," he has given up the vast glories of nature in order to surround himself with the vast glories of humanity. The Brownstoner becomes accustomed to living in peaceful coexistence with all manner of men. . . . The Brownstoner is often a man who wants his children to grow in a mentally

> stimulating atmosphere, exposed to many cultural, educational, institutional outlets, and most importantly, to people of all heritages and economic backgrounds.[18]

As a new middle-class landscape, Brownstone Brooklyn provides a new spatial context to the social and cultural revolts of the 1960s and 1970s. Just as brownstoners refashioned and renovated new enclaves, Brooklyn's brownstones and tenements helped spark the political awakening of postindustrial workers. A new middle class, this book argues, moved to aging Victorian districts as part of a search for the authenticity they felt was lacking in the new university campuses, government complexes, and corporate skyscrapers they worked and studied in. As brownstoners absorbed ideas from the grassroots movements of the urban poor and struggled with city bureaucracy, they joined calls for community planning boards, reform politics, participatory democracy, and democracy in the streets. The new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s—the New Left, the counterculture, the environmental movement, and the student movement—all emerged on an imagined urban frontier along a belt of Victorian housing surrounding the expanding central business districts and university campuses of cities such as New York and San Francisco.[19]

The story of gentrification thus is also a political history that can contribute to the work historians have done to explain the collapse of New Deal liberalism. While historians have detailed well the tensions between white ethnics and African Americans in declining working-class residential districts, few have examined the "silk-stocking rebellion" of white-collar professionals, artists, and students in neighborhoods such as Park Slope and Brooklyn Heights. Brownstoners forged a "new politics" and formed a new reform wing of the Democratic party that imagined itself in a battle against the two machines that made up the older New Deal liberal coalition. First, young reformers engaged in acrimonious battle against an old machine of aging ward bosses in neighborhood clubhouses. At the same time, brownstoners described an existential battle against a new machine—the New Deal progrowth coalition of real estate agents, planners, business leaders, politicians, civic groups, and directors of nonprofit institutions, who since World War II spearheaded a program of urban redevelopment in cities around the country. Brownstoners fought against urban renewal and expressways, using their financial and political clout to promote neighborhood conservation. Whereas earlier middle-class reformers fought to centralize city government in the hands of a scientific, impartial city manager, they championed the decentralization of municipal power, replacing the ideal of a regional, integrated city system with a diverse mosaic of local participatory democracies.

Rather than the death of liberalism, this book analyzes the emergence of a new postindustrial version spearheaded by white-collar professionals. By the 1970s, Brownstone Brooklyn formed a powerful wing of a national, interracial "neighborhood movement" that expressed a deep distrust of large institutions, expertise, universal social programs, and private-public consensus. Suspicious of the metanarratives of highways and urban renewal master plans, brownstoners and their allies championed voluntary service, homeownership, privatism, ethnic heritage, history, self-determination, and do-it-yourself bootstrap neighborhood rehabilitation. Rather than an example of right-wing politics, the new localism of the 1970s contained both progressive and conservative strains as white-collar reformers formed complex coalitions with angry white ethnics, black power activists, small business owners, and other members of a new slow-growth coalition. By the late 1970s, this new localist version of liberalism unintentionally dovetailed with a national conservative movement that was similarly hostile to government regulation and regional planning. The result was a new type of anti-statist politics with origins in both the right and the left. To say that the origins of neoliberalism were in Park Slope and Haight-Ashbury rather than Orange County and the suburban South might be overstating the case. But as many recent works by historians have shown, conservative thought emerged in unexpected places.[20]

More than a political and social history of a postindustrial middle class, the history of gentrification in Brooklyn also charts the evolution of a new type of postmodern urbanism. Rather than a scheme by developers and real estate agents (who were uniformly hostile to brownstoning in the early stages), Cobble Hill, Carroll Gardens, and other gentrified enclaves were the spatial expression of a broader cultural revolt against urban modernism. Gentrification in its early years was a form of white-collar urban romanticism with links to the counterculture and New Left. Describing themselves as "urban Thoreaus," Brooklyn's new middle class recast brownstones and industrial lofts as an organic and authentic "middle cityscape" lodged between overmodernized skyscrapers, suburban tract homes, and the "wild" ghetto.[21]

Brownstone Brooklyn represented a radical postindustrial reimagining of a declining industrial landscape. Where modernist city planners and union leaders hope to rebuild the borough's decaying infrastructure of industrial lofts and townhouses, Brooklyn's new white-collar residents commemorated its historical value. While a growth coalition of city planners and businessmen looked hopefully to new highways, airports, and automobiles to create a kinetic, open city, brownstoners celebrated Brooklyn's aging Victorian street grid as a site for walking, face-to-face contact, and intimacy. Modernists hoped with science and top-down planning to integrate spatially and racially

a disparate megalopolis. Brooklyn's new middle class instead championed unplanned mixed uses and diversity. Rather than renewal, neighborhood groups talked of preservation: preserving old buildings, preserving ethnic identity, and preserving authentic communities. By the 1970s, Brownstone Brooklyn had become the template for a new postmodern school of planning that rejected large-scale development plans and instead called for "mini-planning," festival marketplaces, and neotraditional architecture. When developers began to build large-scale, neotraditional luxury developments in the 1980s, brownstoners debated whether the postmodern landscape was a sign of the movement's success or failure.

Finally, the history of brownstoning analyzes the formation of a stratified postindustrial racial landscape in which white-collar professionals lived in uneasy proximity to the nonwhite poor. The trajectory of gentrification in many ways ran counter to broader pattern of white flight described by historians. White brownstoners moved into older districts alongside African Americans and Latinos. In some cases, white-collar professionals offset their anxiety about racial mixing with their desire for attractive, affordable central city housing. In other cases, white liberal activists and countercultural artists actively sought to live in neighborhoods with African Americans and Latinos. Brownstoners, African Americans, Latinos, and white ethnics also formed political alliances to battle urban renewal and redlining (the practice of banks, insurance companies, and other lenders refusing to provide mortgages or other financing for homes within a poor, and often largely nonwhite, area). But the book does not present a Pollyannaish view of race in the city. Brownstoning was from the onset a movement rife with racial and class conflict. While some new arrivals sought to progressively engage locals in political and community organizations, the relationship with existing residents was tense. Some brownstoners described themselves as urban pioneers building settlements in the wilderness and drew comparisons between poorer residents and hostile natives. Others sought to rid neighborhoods of "inauthentic" rooming houses and blocked modern public housing and affordable supermarkets. Brownstones clashed with politically conservative white ethnics already established in the neighborhoods and shared an uneasy coexistence with poorer blacks and Puerto Ricans who had migrated in. Revitalization led to high rents and at times the eviction of poorer residents.[22]

Was the migration of white-collar professionals to Brooklyn something to be condemned or celebrated? This book has tried to avoid the Scylla of lionizing a creative class and the Charybdis of yuppie bashing. But in exploring the complexities of the question, this history of gentrification may appear to be a frustrating example of fence-sitting. Brownstoning, however, was a

bundle of contradictions. Rather than modeling themselves after pernicious developers or city bureaucrats, gentrifiers drew from the language of Jane Jacobs, C. Wright Mills, Herbert Marcuse, Saul Alinsky, the student revolts of 1968, the civil rights and environmental movements, and the counterculture. The early history of gentrification is less a story of rapacious real estate speculation and more a tale of dashed idealism, contradictory goals, unintended consequences, and at times outright hypocrisy. But if gentrification is a saga of mixed intentions, sincere racial idealism mixed with disdain toward the non-white poor, and class populism blended with class snobbery, that is what makes it so rich a way to describe the cultural and social complexities of the nation's new postwar middle class.

1 Urban Wilderness

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately.
—Henry David Thoreau

In 1958, a decade before new middle-class residents would invent the name, Harrison Salisbury entered the wilderness of Brownstone Brooklyn. Investigating the city's rising gang problem, the young *New York Times* reporter crossed the East River to explore an impoverished waterfront district with one of the highest juvenile delinquency rates in New York. As the subway rumbled through the subterranean darkness, Salisbury apprehensively contrasted the familiar bustle of midtown Manhattan with the untamed dangers of the periphery. The distance was short but the gulf between the two regions enormous. "The subway ride from Times Square to Brooklyn costs fifteen cents. It is a quick trip, just eighteen minutes from Forty-second Street to Smith-Ninth station in Brooklyn. No visa and no passport are required."

The train soon emerged from the dark tunnel onto a sunlit elevated track. As "the train climbed the steel trestle high over the forest of red and brown buildings that tumbled across the landscape," Salisbury was presented with a panoramic view of Brownstone Brooklyn. The area appeared an incoherent jumble of old buildings, tenements, and factories, and the reporter tried to make sense of the area by drawing boundaries and referring to place markers. "Close at hand loomed two great black gas tanks. A block away the tubular monstrosity of Gowanus Super-Highway bestrode the city like a giant's trampoline. . . . Here and there among the row houses and tenements rose eight- or ten-story plants and warehouses of reinforced concrete, once painted white but long since chipped and fading." Gazing at the horizon from the elevated Smith/Ninth Street station, Salisbury compared the elegant harmony of the Manhattan skyline to the sorry scene below him. "From the platform I looked back—dim in the foggy distance was the gleam of Wall Street's spires and the lacy East River bridges. I looked down in the tenement back yards, the rubbish piles and paper tatters brightened by wash lines of blue and pink, purple and

yellow. Here and there I saw the scraggly green of Brooklyn back-yard trees, dwarfed by soot and sickened by cinders."[1]

Perched atop the elevated platform with a bird's-eye view of Brooklyn, Salisbury initially felt overwhelmed by the slum's amorphous vastness. But as he descended to the street, he saw that the wilderness in fact had form. No more than incoherent markings from afar, a rich graffiti text covered the walls. "The platform and stair wells of the Smith-Ninth station are covered with what first appears to be an embroidery of white chalk, red paint and black crayon. The tracery of lines is everywhere but it is not embroidery. It is a living newspaper of the streets." Brooklyn was not a no-man's land but a violently contested local place. "Here are the threats and taunts of rival gangs, the challenges and defiances. Here is word of neighborhood romance, old flames and new loves. Here bids are staked for leadership. Here bulletins are posted on rumbles."[2]

"Brooklyn wilderness." View from the Smith–Ninth Street Station looking northeast. Photograph taken December 15, 1958. (Courtesy of the Brooklyn Historical Society)

Where is Brownstone Brooklyn? Middle-class townhouse renovators invented the term in the early 1970s to describe an amorphous belt of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century housing and industrial buildings surrounding the borough's central business district. Brooklyn's new residents used the name interchangeably with other place labels. Some referred to the district as "Old Brooklyn." Others simply described themselves as moving to Brooklyn, a synecdoche for a small collection of gentrified districts across the river. Many of the individual names of Brownstone Brooklyn's enclaves were similarly created by middle-class migrants in the 1960s and 1970s: Boerum Hill, Carroll Gardens, and Cobble Hill. Much of the area did not have brownstones. Other impoverished blocks with townhouses did not appear on middle-class neighborhood maps. Brownstone Brooklyn had no distinct characteristics that distinguished it from the surrounding cityscape, as it sat on a broad ring of Victorian tenements and townhouses that ran from Brooklyn across to Manhattan's Greenwich Village, midtown, the East and West Sides, and lower Harlem. Brownstone Brooklyn remained a powerful repository of symbolic value, however, and the new middle-class enthusiasts in the 1970s who coined the name passionately described a distinct sense of local place.

If Brownstone Brooklyn was an invented landscape, what was really there? What landscape existed before a new middle class began to migrate to the area in the 1950s and renovate brownstones and tenements? What place names existed before middle-class professionals invented names such as Cobble Hill and Boerum Hill in the 1960s? How well did the label "Brownstone Brooklyn" correlate to the existing people and built environment of Brooklyn's declining industrial landscape? How much was a product of middle-class imagination? The new middle-class migrants of the 1960s and 1970s who coined the name were similarly preoccupied with what constituted the real and invented Brownstone Brooklyn.[3]

Brownstone Brooklyn had no real neighborhoods. When new enthusiasts created the name in the early 1970s, they were not using a preexisting place name. Some residents in the 1940s and 1950s referred to the area generally as "South Brooklyn" or "downtown." Others oriented themselves by using city district lines or Catholic parish boundaries. Those who did use enclave names could rarely distinguish where the area began or ended. Early attempts to locate Brooklyn's authentic neighborhoods were not by local residents but by two groups of outsiders with very different motives: community organizers and real estate agents. In 1941, Herbert J. Ballon of the Brooklyn Council for Social Planning drew one of the first maps of Brooklyn's enclaves. Dismissing political, school, health, and police district maps as too abstract, Ballon hoped to locate a more organic and historic sense of place. Upon interviewing

residents, however, he found a mishmash of approximately one hundred overlapping neighborhood names with inconsistent borders, ages, and sizes. Further dismaying Ballon, a large number of names had been cynically invented by real estate agents. Ballon picked twenty-two names, many of which are still used today.[4]

Institutional maps from the 1940s and 1950s were just as inconsistent. Consolidated Edison in the 1940s used the name Old Brooklyn for the entire meter area between the East River and Prospect Park. A 1955 study by the Protestant Council of the City of New York referred to "downtown Brooklyn" as consisting of Fort Greene, Old South Brooklyn, and Park Slope. A census study from 1959 subdivided the area into smaller regions: Park Slope, Brooklyn Heights–Fort Greene, and South Brooklyn–Red Hook. In his 1958 youth gang study, Harrison Salisbury offered a sprawling definition of South Brooklyn: "a crowded territory, jammed between the white limestone towers of Borough Hall, the jagged steel fretwork of Navy Yard and the sawtooth of Red Hook, Erie Basin and Greenpoint." The New York City Youth Board offered expansive boundaries for the "high-delinquency" area of South Brooklyn with borders stretching from Prospect Park to Red Hook and the Navy Yard. "Park Slope, Gowanus or South Brooklyn. All three of these names are used to describe the area between Red Hook, Atlantic Avenue, Prospect Park and Green-Wood Cemetery," explained a social worker in 1944. No map had an area marked "Brownstone Brooklyn."[5]

Middle-class pioneers who combed maps in the archives were similarly hard pressed to find any historic neighborhoods in Brownstone Brooklyn. "While official records contain verbal descriptions of many of the [original] village boundaries, the landmarks by which the boundaries are identified have long since disappeared," lamented Herbert Ballon in 1941. "Not even official Borough cartographers have made the extensive research necessary to trace these boundaries on a map." Clear neighborhood borders in Brooklyn never existed. From the moment developers laid down the nineteenth-century street grid, labels were always elastic and contested. "South Brooklyn is a term which has grown to be somewhat vague," explained the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1886, "owing to the extraordinary rapidity with which this city has grown. . . . [It] ought to be termed West Brooklyn, if indeed any special name is needed. . . . The name South Brooklyn has not had a good favor with some Brooklyn people, especially those who were so fortunate as to have houses on the Heights or Hill." "It is amusing to see the attempts made to fix upon a name for the rapidly growing part of Brooklyn near Prospect Park," complained residents in 1889. "Some call it Park Slope, some Park Hill Side, some Prospect Heights and others Prospect Hill. . . . Yet some people are trying to fasten upon

it the name of Prospect Heights, a name which is never used in common conversation, and which smacks a little of affectation."[6]

Brownstone Brooklyn cannot simply be dismissed as an "invented" landscape, though. In fact, what makes Harrison Salisbury's 1958 description of Brownstone Brooklyn so vivid is that it belies the most common images of Brooklyn before gentrification. First, the area was not the non-place often described by both proponents and critics of gentrification. Although initially incoherent from a bird's-eye view, Salisbury's Brooklyn was not a terra incognita or a formless ghetto inhabited by racial Others into which brave middle-class pioneers would later heroically venture to cultivate new neighborhoods. At the same time, however, the area was not a blank backdrop against which yuppies and developers perniciously "imagineered" a simulacrum of a historic place. When a new middle class coined the label "Brownstone Brooklyn," they were describing something that was really there. But Salisbury's description of Brooklyn also did not resemble the urban place just as often commemorated by both proponents and critics of gentrification. Brownstone Brooklyn before gentrification was not a premodern gemeinschaft with aging Brahmins and Old World ethnics shielded from mass consumer culture. No authentic communities or traditional neighborhoods sat ready to be discovered—or, alternatively, destroyed—by young urban professionals. Brownstone Brooklyn offered a rich sense of place and history. But it was a landscape that was perpetually changing, fluid, polycentric, and hybrid.[7]

Brownstone Brooklyn was neither completely real nor invented. Rather like the graffiti-covered walls of Smith/Ninth Street station, Brooklyn was a text that Salisbury and other middle-class migrants creatively read and rewrote. Some middle-class arrivals commemorated the area's narrow streets, brownstones, aged surfaces, and wooden piers. Others relished the ethnic restaurants, foreign-language signage, street festivals, and elderly stoop dwellers of the area's second- and third-generation immigrant enclaves. Some scoured old maps for neighborhood names to revive historic places real and imagined. Others established farmers' markets and planted gardens to hark back to a lost agrarian landscape. Some, dissatisfied with their upbringing in assimilated suburbia, imagined a site of ethnogenesis where they could return to "find their roots" in the shtetls and barrios of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers.[8]

What made this text particularly legible for new middle-class migrants? From a bird's-eye view, Brownstone Brooklyn prior to gentrification seemed a rather uniform inner-city district, typical of older American cities. Brownstone Brooklyn in the 1940s and 1950s was home to about 300,000 largely poor and working-class white immigrants and their descendants, living in ramshackle

nineteenth-century tenements and townhouses surrounding the borough's downtown. According to the 1948 Con Edison study, Old Brooklyn had the oldest housing in New York City, with more than 65 percent built before 1899 and almost 90 percent before 1920. It was also the most dilapidated, with about one in three buildings needing major repairs or lacking a private bath. Furthermore, like many inner-city districts after World War II, Brownstone Brooklyn was undergoing a rapid racial transition as in-migrating African Americans and Puerto Ricans replaced whites departing for the suburbs.[9]

Upon a closer look, Brownstone Brooklyn, like most inner-city districts of older American cities, did have distinctive zones in the 1940s and 1950s around which new middle-class arrivals could draw boundaries and place neighborhood labels. Several Gold Coasts gave the area a sense of aristocratic heritage. South of Brooklyn Bridge sat the borough's oldest district, Brooklyn Heights, which after years of decline still had a core of high-rent housing surrounding Montague Street. In the northeastern section of Park Slope, magnificent luxury apartment buildings and large brownstone mansions overlooked Prospect Park. West of Fort Greene Park, a small cluster of high-rent townhouses and apartments sat between Willoughby and Lafayette avenues. Surrounding the Gold Coasts sat a sprawling landscape of subdivided brownstones and railroad flats home to largely Italian and Irish Catholic immigrants and their descendants, as well as increasing numbers of Puerto Ricans and African Americans. Brooklyn's rapidly growing African American population lived in an expanding black belt that ran along Fulton Street into the growing district of Bedford-Stuyvesant. The city's oldest Puerto Rican community clustered along the waterfront and Atlantic Avenue. A waterfront belt of piers, light industry, shipyards, and warehouses formed Brooklyn's thriving industrial district. Warehouses and light industry also clustered around the Gowanus Canal. Along trolley, bus, and elevated train lines, strips of small stores and small apartments formed the area's commercial thoroughfares: Montague, Smith, and Court streets, Atlantic, Myrtle, Seventh, and Fifth avenues. Surrounding city hall at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge sat Brooklyn's central business district, with government office buildings, hotels, and major department stores.[10]

But Brownstone Brooklyn was too messy to be split neatly into flat, horizontal zones. What made the area such a legible and rewritable urban text were its multiple layers. With the borough's oldest street grid and an assortment of buildings dating back to the colonial era, Brownstone Brooklyn was a tectonic cityscape with the architectural and social imprints of multiple economic stages: a Dutch agricultural economy, a mercantile port city, an immigrant industrial city, and an administrative office city. Remnants of past

and present lay atop one another, the sediment from each historic cityscape seeping into the others. The city "is changing," explained sociologist Daniel Bell in 1961, "but enough survives, as does something of the city's early history . . . [its] faces exist as on a palimpsest. To understand New York, one must know all the faces."[11]

Brownstone Brooklyn was also a palimpsest of memories, symbols, and imagined places. In response to previous waves of development, earlier generations penned nostalgic accounts of Brooklyn's Dutch, Native American, and Brahmin past, protected individual buildings, invented historic place names, developed legends about fecund natural landscapes, and established romantic-style parks to re-create a green past. Along with excavating remnants of farms, industrial piers, Victorian brownstones, and turn-of-the-century apartment buildings, Brooklyn's new middle class drew from rich layers of imaginary places created by writers such as Washington Irving, Edith Wharton, Walt Whitman, Thomas Wolfe, and Beat writers. An invented neighborhood such as Cobble Hill was a landscape collage, with the scars of modern development intertwined with sites of nostalgia.[12]

Brooklyn's people and institutions formed just as multilayered a landscape. If one asked a Brownstone Brooklyn resident in 1950 where he lived, he or she would most likely not refer to a neighborhood name like Park Slope. Instead he would refer to a variety of places, each overlapping, partially intersecting, and in some cases contradictory. Based on the context of the question, he would likely have selected from a series of local affiliations. He could describe himself as part of a union local, refer to a social club, or delineate the turf boundaries of the gang he belonged to. He might point to a playground where friends gather to watch their children play. He might describe the area as being Italian or Irish or Arab, or simply as white. He might cite a neighborhood name—South Brooklyn, Park Slope—but the sense of place would likely be much more focused, concentrated on a block or even a single household. Part of the "borough of churches," Brownstone Brooklyn was largely Catholic, and a resident might locate himself by referring to the parish boundaries that divided the landscape. He might name the local bar that acted as a center for political organizing and socializing. Candy stores, bars, and other storefronts were important place markers and centers. Race and class too provided a sense of place. He might live in the "nice section," the projects, or the slum.

To invent Brownstone Brooklyn, the new middle class literally and figuratively excavated the landscape. As they sandblasted paint and pulled off cheap siding from townhouses, brownstone renovators symbolically stripped layers off the built environment to restore a seemingly authentic past. As they dug through the earth to plant trees and urban gardens, green activists imagined

themselves clearing away industrial debris and other traces of modernity to expose a pastoral landscape. As they started block associations and food cooperatives, community organizers sought to recapture the intimacy of older village life. As others converted rooming houses to single-family buildings, at times evicting the residents, they imagined themselves restoring the buildings to their former aristocratic grandeur. Particular layers were commemorated and exaggerated; others were ignored. Like an archivist using an X-ray to recover text from a parchment, Brooklyn revivalists peered through "inauthentic" rooming houses, gang graffiti, and public housing. Postwar buildings, particularly modernist and institutional ones, were universally reviled. Highways were seen as artificial impositions on a natural cityscape, something to be stripped away. Black and Puerto Rican residents were at times celebrated as sources of anti-bureaucratic authenticity and at other times studiously avoided.[13]

Brownstone Brooklyn thus was a bricolage of images. And to describe the invention of this landscape, one must, to paraphrase Daniel Bell, first know all of Brooklyn's layers—layers that were both "hard" and "soft."[14]

When middle-class migrants described a "sense of place" in the 1960s and 1970s, they first looked to the area's hard landscape of buildings, streets, and waterways. With almost 80 percent of its housing built before 1920, Brownstone Brooklyn was for new arrivals a vestige of old Brooklyn. The area's antiquated architecture and street grid gave it a historic gestalt that distinguished it from its surroundings. What layers of Brownstone Brooklyn's hard landscape did middle-class brownstone renovators regard as authentic?

Some dug symbolically underneath the city to uncover a green landscape. When coining neighborhood names, middle-class enthusiasts assigned labels such as "Gardens," "Hill," and "Heights" that harked back to Brooklyn's preurban topography of hills, valleys, and brooks. Others planted sidewalk trees and started gardens in abandoned lots. Some described themselves as heading into Brooklyn's wilderness like pioneers in covered Conestoga wagons. Other community activists fighting development projects borrowed the imagery of Native American tribes in a defense of indigenous soil.[15]

Brownstone Brooklyn did have a distinct topography, with several slopes that rose to as high as 100 feet. Brooklyn Heights, Fort Greene Park, and Carroll Park were peaks that ranged from 65 to 100 feet above sea level. Park Slope rose from Atlantic Avenue to about 150 feet near the park. But much of this primordial landscape described by brownstoners in the 1960s and 1970s was also richly symbolic. The handful of early American maps in city archives had limited detail about Brooklyn's historic Indian trails, Dutch trading posts, and natural wetlands. Jaspar Dankers and Peter Sluyter's *Journal of a Voyage to New York and a Tour in Several of the American Colonies, 1679–1680*

had only a few sentences about Brooklyn's topography. Some place names referred to a completely imaginary natural terrain. Boerum Hill, for example, was a name invented in the 1960s and 1970s to describe an area that had always been flat.[16]

Brownstone Brooklyn's pre-European landscape was not the only layer that middle-class pioneers excavated. As they started farmers' markets and food cooperatives, neighborhood revivalists also looked longingly to the borough's former agricultural landscape. At the end of the eighteenth century, Kings County was still mostly rural and divided into plantations owned by farmers most frequently of English and Dutch descent. With large numbers of African Americans working the land, Kings County in the early nineteenth century had the highest ratio of slaves to slave holders in the North. While few farm buildings existed by the 1940s, the memory of the old landowners could be found in street names such as Bergen, Schermerhorn, Remsen, and Boerum. To situate renovation efforts in an imagined tradition of land settlement and homeownership, new maps of Boerum Hill made for house-and-garden-tour brochures in the 1960s included outlines of these old farm boundaries.[17]

"Brooklyn as palimpsest." A 1969 Boerum Hill Association house tour brochure contains an 1849 map with overlaying maps of eighteenth-century farm boundaries and the nineteenth-century street grid. (Courtesy of the Boerum Hill Asssociation)