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Place Moments

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

“Unwittingly,” writes *New York Times* reporter Somini Sengupta, “I have turned into a student of light. The August light that envelops the beaten-down old streets of Red Hook, I have learned, is more melancholy than the morning light during lilac season in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. The sun sparkling on the crown of the Chrysler building is whimsical, “like a woman dressed for a party at high noon.”

Lawyer Stephanie Silva describes the way “on most days my city protects herself from the sun. But for those few days, when the sun lines up with the crosstown streets, she rests like an ice cube in a glass to the west.” On May 31, 2010, City Lore’s inveterate blogger Caitlin Van Dusen sought out “Manhattan-henge,” as it’s called, at Tudor City Place:

... a tiny thoroughfare between First and Second avenues whose virtually traffic-free overpass directly above 42nd Street offers an unobstructed view west across the island. . . . At 8:17 p.m., the full sun . . . slid into full, blinding view, limning the edges of buildings and casting the Hyatt hotel flag, a fire escape, and even the Chrysler building’s fierce plumage into shadow.



Photo: Caitlin Van Dusen

Each semester, I ask my students to jot down their own favorite places, not as they exist in the real world, but as they existed for them in their own moments. These descriptions evoke the experiential qualities that transform space into place—not just the steeple of Trinity Church, but as Cara da Silva writes, the way light plays on it at sunset; not just the Cloisters, but its medieval garden on a summer day when, for the imaginative, the aroma of its plants can turn the clock back six hundred years.

“There is a tree on East Seventieth Street between Park and Lexington avenues rooted in front of a creamy colored Victorian mansion,” writes Susan Sorenson. “I always walk home via East Seventieth, stopping to remember being kissed beneath the tree one midnight when street noise gave way to an indigo air solely resplendent with windy sighs of springtime leaves.”

Robert J. Flynn writes of “Kissena Park and the old Chinese ladies who do their Tai Chi Ballet at dawn listening to an inner music that cannot be resisted. Set against the ancient Asian Flowering Dogwoods in April, they bloom and bend to salute an inner Spring.”

And Jill Bressler recalls “the Coney Island boardwalk on a cold November day, when a bundled few seek their solace by the shore while they stroll silently down the wooden path, past concession stands and amusement rides that have been put to bed until summer. Once I listened to a man play trumpet to the waves.”

I was first struck by the concept of “place moments” almost two decades ago, when folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett shared with me a piece in which she had jotted down her favorite New York City places. She wrote of “watching bakers at the D&G Bakery (45 Spring Street) slide loaves shaped by hand into a turn-of-the-century

coal-fired brick oven in a tenement basement on Mulberry Street at midnight.”

Expansive place moments extend over time. Jacquelyn Coffee writes about her years in the Chelsea Hotel, “The Victorian Gothic flophouse will always embody the pure essence of New York for me. . . . Its status in my personal pantheon is insurmountable . . . ; it has no competitors because, you see, I pissed away the most bacchanalian ten years of my youth at the Chelsea in Room 505. No excuses. No regrets (except for the cat).”

Even eras in New York assume the quality of place moments. In *Kafka Was the Rage* (1993), Anatole Broyard writes about Greenwich Village in 1946, following the war. “Though much of the Village was shabby, I didn’t mind. I thought all character was a form of shabbiness, a wearing away of surfaces. . . . I was twenty-six, and sadness was a stimulant, even an aphrodesiac.” You had to be exactly that age in 1946 to fully appreciate the scene.

In place moments, the sites we care for come to life. But places are deaf, dumb, and blind. They leave it to us to speak for them. They rely on folklorists, historians, and preservationists to find ways to capture those evanescent moments and find ways to share them. Our tools are text and signage, imagery, oral histories, first-person narratives, historical interpretation, landscaping, and preservation.

Sense of place is in the details, in the layers of history and lore and perceptions that comprise what philosopher Edward Casey calls “place memory.” Places, perhaps, are baskets to hold the perishable fruits of memory and experience. ▼

Steve Zeitlin is the founding director of City Lore in New York City. Portions of this essay were adapted from *Hidden New York* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers, 2006), edited by Marci Reaven and Steve Zeitlin.



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