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Long live the King

by Katrina Gulliver

Brooklyn has long suffered from little-brother syndrome, overshadowed as it is by Manhattan in politics, popular culture, and historiography. Becoming one of the five boroughs rather than remaining its own city only increased this effect. Its denizens seem to have anticipated this fate in their reluctance to join the other New York City counties; the vote for union only narrowly passed in 1897.

Thomas Campanella wants to recover the history of a Brooklyn much older than that. In *Brooklyn: The Once and Future City*, he follows the arrival of Dutch settlers and the early shaping of the landscape that would support the future borough. He limns Brooklyn's multiple identities and the tensions over what the borough was, and to whom—whether it was a respectable dormitory zone for Manhattan's workers, a seaside resort area, a manufacturing entrepôt, or all three. These tensions are reflected in how the borough developed—villages here and early factories there, the growth organic and shambolic before zoning was imposed.

Like all cities, Brooklyn is a spatial palimpsest, with each generation's developments layered on the previous one's. Campanella reminds us of this when he discusses the location of the Battle of Brooklyn (1776) in relation to a branch of the supermarket Trader Joe's. The borough was still rural in parts well into the twentieth century, and there are lingering fragments of earlier phases, like the population of pheasants still found on Sheepshead Bay, descended from game birds on William Whitney's early-1900s estate.

Some of the greatest visionaries of American urban space (Frederick Law Olmsted, Charles Downing Lay, Daniel Burnham, Clarence Stein) left their mark on Brooklyn. It was the target of multiple follies and urban experiments of the wealthy—close enough to Manhattan to be seen as a playground, laboratory, or dumping ground, depending on one's perspective. Development came thick and fast, as the exploding nineteenth-century population brought tract homes and real estate speculators—and the classic Brooklyn brownstone. In the twentieth century, the increased popularity of streetcar suburbs brought new developers, including one Fred Trump in the 1930s. Rows of neat, middle class houses shaped neighborhoods into ideal communities.

Alas, as with all local histories, there is no ending, only many beginnings. Some great cities have their narrative of destruction by an act of God—in Brooklyn's case, this was Robert Moses. Campanella shows us how close things came to being different: Brooklyn was the subject of much mid-century urban idealism, as "City of Tomorrow"–type plans were drafted to recreate the borough, though they did not come to fruition. What Brooklyn did get were the Fort Greene Houses, early exemplars of the Le Corbusier "towers in the park" style of public housing and harbingers of the disaster such projects turned out to be nationwide. They created environments for crime, encouraged welfare dependency (with income restrictions for residents), and, finally, served as symbols of anomie and urban dysfunction.

Campanella sees the Second World War as Brooklyn's glory days, with the Navy Yard launching seventeen new vessels, making it the "greatest war machine" in the United States. Brooklyn also had a navy airfield and was full of servicemen and women. After the jubilation of V-J day, the future seemed bright.

But the pendulum swung quickly after that, as labor unrest was taking its toll as early as the late forties. Campanella identifies 1955–70 as the worst years, during which Brooklyn lost its newspaper, its baseball team, its streetcar network, most of its major employers, and half a million residents. The Brooklyn-born writer Hubert Selby's grim vision of the city was matched by the crime rates, which led frightened residents to hunker down or get out of town.

This book provides a dense and fascinating chronicle of how the borough developed, although the tale peters out after the '70s, in the nadir between the departure of the factories and the arrival of the hipsters. Campanella offers pages on a projected Dodgers stadium in Prospect Park that was never built, but nothing about the Barclays Center. Brooklyn's new developments are barely touched. The few pages about the gentrified communities that have emerged since the '80s serve as a coda.

Campanella, a professor of urban planning at Cornell, is a native son of Brooklyn. His forebears were part of the great wave of Italian immigration that had such an impact on New York—and a generation for whom moving to Brooklyn (from the Lower East Side) was an aspiration. His history is laced with the paths of his own ancestors; he was even able to draw on his own library of photographs for some of the many illustrations of lost scenes. For anyone wanting to peel back the layers of Brooklyn's past, this book is a worthwhile starting point.

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