

## Finding the People's City

Benjamin Holtzman

**Reviewed:** Carolina Bank Muñoz, Penny Lewis and Emily Tumpson Molina, *A People's Guide to New York City*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2022.

*In A People's Guide to New York City, Carolina Bank Muñoz, Penny Lewis and Emily Tumpson Molina provide an engaging exploration into sites throughout the city. The authors expose complicated histories, of both iconic and lesser-known sites, that highlight change from below while also demonstrating how powerful institutions have shaped New York in the face of grassroots resistance.*

There is no shortage of guidebooks to New York City. There are guides designed to assist visitors in exploring the standard tourist destinations as well as guides for more particular interests, such as the city's landmarks, galleries, landscapes, natural environment, markets, and wildlife. There are numerous guides just for the city's food, including high-end fare, cheap eats, and historic restaurants as well as guides specifically pitched to kids, history buffs, book lovers, rock 'n' roll fans, and even those obsessed with espionage. The genre is as crowded as a Midtown sidewalk at rush hour.

*A People's Guide to New York City* stands out in this crowd. It offers tourists and New Yorkers alike something distinct and significant: a guide that illustrates how “the life and landscape of New York are products of social power and its attendant struggles” (p. 5). The book highlights individuals, places, and events from across the city that showcase where and how New Yorkers fought to improve their working lives, support their communities, and claim their place.

*A People's Guide to New York City* is primarily for a popular, rather than scholarly, audience; it is the marvelous result of an immense intellectual and labor-intensive endeavor, however. Carolina Bank Muñoz, Penny Lewis and Emily Tumpson Molina note in their acknowledgments that the book “proved to be a much longer project than we'd anticipated, spanning three presidencies, [and] two mayoralities” and it's easy to see why (p. 353). Their herculean effort—covering 135 sites, giving eight walking tours, with over 170 color photos, 18 original maps, and several short essays organized across six chapters (one for each of the five boroughs plus a sixth that includes the thematic tours)—is a deeply enriching guide for residents and tourists alike.

The first five chapters begin with a borough map marking each chapter's sites as well as a concise overview of the borough. Chapters then move neighborhood by neighborhood through each borough with site entries that are typically two to four paragraphs long (Manhattan's chapter features the most sites (57), while Staten Island unsurprisingly receives the fewest (11)). Most entries are followed by listings of nearby “sites of interest” or favorite restaurants. Several chapters conclude with a breezy but edifying essay on a topic that transcends the chapter's geographic boundaries: the drinking water system; New York's many islands; the public transportation system, and bridges, tunnels, and expressways.

The site entries are the heart of the book. Some sites are well known, but their entries—written clearly but authoritatively for general readers—highlight parts of history that are typically less

understood. The entry for the Statue of Liberty, for instance, informs readers that “the statue was to celebrate the abolition of slavery, not immigration” and that suffragettes chartered a steamship and used bullhorns to protest the exclusion of women from the 2,500-person celebration at its unveiling in 1886 (Liberty Island would remain a site of protest, as the entry notes, including the 1970 Women’s Strike for Equality and recent activists protesting Trump’s immigration policies (p. 173)). Readers will be less likely to know other sites, but entries link them to larger historical moments. The entry for the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn Heights, for instance, ties the church to the larger anti-slavery movement in Antebellum Brooklyn.

Because the guide predominantly covers sites that are connected to the existing built environment, they largely address the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; however, the book spans precontact and Native–colonial relations to 21<sup>st</sup>-century additions to the cityscape, such as the activist organizing space Mayday in Bushwick and the recent labor struggles at the JFK8 Amazon warehouse on Staten Island.

Not all sites follow the traditional “People’s History” model of uncovering social, cultural, and political change from below. Several address powerful institutions, such as Columbia University and its domineering relationship to the largely lower-income community of color surrounding its Manhattanville campus. Similarly, the entry for the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment Armory on the Upper East Side highlights how the federal government developed massive, imposing, and highly defensible armories in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century so city militias could put down strikes and riots. The guide thus provides a more nuanced historical perspective by highlighting the “interplays and contradictions” at work throughout New York’s history (p. 15). Indeed, grassroots resistance is, of course, embedded throughout New York’s history, but the city has equally been transformed by the prerogatives and wills of the powerful—as well as bitter contestations *between* marginalized populations, as sites like the Draft Riots help illustrate (pp. 107–108).

The thematic tours of the final chapter extend the predominant focus on often-neglected aspects of New York. Absent are the typical tourist destinations like Times Square and Museum Mile. Indeed, the book’s Lower Manhattan tour does include not the Freedom Towers—an immensely popular destination, if the flood of tourists exiting the southbound trains at the Cortlandt Street station is any indication—but instead illustrates sites that connect the area to labor struggle, political protest, slavery, and Indigenous life. It is difficult to imagine that tourists will embark on some of these tours—such as the polluted sites of Greenpoint, Brooklyn—but curious New Yorkers who do will likely come to see that popular area in a new light: not simply as a former Polish neighborhood turned hipster enclave, but also as a district ravaged by environmental harm—a legacy for which community members have spent decades trying to hold industries and officials accountable. Other tours include the three major Chinatowns, environmental-justice tours of Gowanus and Brooklyn Heights, and a tour along the 7 train of immigration in Queens. (Local academics may find these tours—like the guide as a whole—well suited for use in a range of courses).

New Yorkers could quibble—and quibble they will; they are New Yorkers, after all!—with some of the selections and omissions. But the authors have done an excellent job curating their sites, with entries effectively illustrating how each was “emblematic of the social forces they put in motion or continue to propel” (p. 15). The guide is compelling and insightful throughout, even when covering familiar history, and readers will likely be delighted with unexpected insights. (One standout for me was learning that the theater in which I saw *Barbie* is the last remaining structure of the four original Yiddish theaters on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue).

But the guide does much more than compile interesting facts. It gives readers a means to reinterpret the city around them—to recognize the injustices embedded in the cityscape as well as how, in every borough and neighborhood, New Yorkers have enlivened the city by coming together to challenge them. Indeed, *A People’s Guide to New York City* is ultimately not just about the city’s past, but also its future: a guide for finding stories of inspiration and hope to fight today for a stronger New York.

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