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MERYL MEISLER

# Ruin and Reinvention in a Transforming Brooklyn

By DAVID GONZALEZ September 6, 2017



In a generation, Brooklyn has gone from being the Borough of Homes and Churches to the Land of Hipsters and High-Rises. Neighborhoods like Williamsburg and Bushwick went from ruin to reinvention, with gleaming towers and millennial-friendly hotspots. Even East New York, once the city's homicide capital, is being [touted as a hot neighborhood](#) as real estate speculators swoop in for bargains.

Elizabeth Ferrer has witnessed this transformation since arriving in New York in 1980. As a vice president at BRIC Arts in downtown Brooklyn, she has seen the blocks around the Fulton Mall change seemingly overnight as another new luxury building sprouts up. That tension, between the old and new, the past and the present, runs through “[Brooklyn Photographs](#),” an 11-person group show Ms. Ferrer organized that opens Thursday at BRIC Arts.

“I’m interested in that dynamic and I have seen so many bodies of work that I wanted to see if there was a way to put them together to tell this broader story of Brooklyn,” she said. “It’s not meant to be a nostalgic show. It’s meant to be about how Brooklyn continually changes. Some good, some bad, but part of that urban dynamic of how a city evolves.”



“Making faces.”  
GEORGE MALAVE

The show covers a half-century, although for perspective Ms. Ferrer included a postcard of long-gone wooden buildings at the intersection of Fulton Street and DeKalb Avenue. The show’s images include a range of vintage and new, among them [George Malave](#)’s loving look at kids in his neighborhood playing on a

bombed-out urban block, Meryl Meisler's point-and-shoot images of pre-gentrified Bushwick, Yolanda Andrade's color-soaked photos of stores and fast food joints, and Sergio Purtell's lonely cityscapes in Gowanus and Greenpoint. Some of the artists, like Russell Frederick and Larry Racioppo, spent years documenting neighborhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant or South Slope before they became popular.

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All share one thing.

"Everybody in this show loves Brooklyn," Ms. Ferrer said. "They want to portray it in a very honest way."

For Mr. Malave, 71, the show features his earliest work, done when a teacher told him to photograph his neighborhood in the late 1960s. There is a human warmth to his images of children at play that transcends the grim-looking streets and challenges the usual portrayal of poor neighborhoods.

"I went through what these kids did when I was their age, on the very same street," he said. "I knew their brothers and mothers because we all grew up together. I wanted to show the joy of childhood and focus on the positive things. They don't see the environment the same way we do. They see the activities that they are doing in it."



Eve Laramee.  
STEFANIE APPLE

[Ms. Meisler](#)'s work consists of images she took with a cheap point-and-shoot film camera when she taught art at a Bushwick school in the 1980s. She would photograph what she encountered on her walk to and from school, in an area that still bore the scars from the destruction of the 1977 blackout. Although she did not realize it at the time, she was looking for life-affirming images.

“They are the photos they are because I wasn’t there for a day or on assignment,” said Ms. Meisler, who spent 14 years teaching in Bushwick and is now retired. “Looking back, I always photographed very upbeat things. I was not there for the short term.”

Ms. Ferrer hopes that these bodies of work will show that change is constant, whether you like it or not.

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