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Bonnie Yochelson. *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York.* New York: The New Press, 1997. 399 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56584-377-6.

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The New Deal Takes Manhattan's Picture

From 1935 to 1939, Berenice Abbott, with the support of the Federal Arts Project and the Museum of the City of New York, produced more than one thousand photographs New York City. *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York*, organized under the direction of Dr. Bonnie Yochelson, former Curator of Prints and Photographs for the museum, reproduces the 305 photographs Abbott selected for printing. This publication also contains a Catalogue with a significant amount of research that adds artistic and historic context to these pictures. An analysis of one of the major federally-supported Art projects undertaken during the New Deal, *Changing New York* is an important resource for students of New York history. *Changing New York* strengthens our understanding of the changing architectural profile of New York City through Abbott's pictures, which juxtapose the early twentieth century city with its nineteenth century antecedents. In addition, Yochelson's Introduction places the Abbott's project within the New Deal's art program, contributing to the existing literature on the New Deal's impact on American art, and, more specifically, the rise of the "documentary impulse" in American photography.

Born in Springfield, Ohio, Abbott gained fame during the 1920s as the photographer of Paris' cultural elite. In Paris, the Introduction explains, she also participated in the rise of the "documentary style" of photography. Documentary photographers argued that "modern" photographic techniques could capture the reality of urban life and reveal what Yochelson calls "the mystery lurking just beneath the surface of ordinary experience."

Abbott came to New York City in 1929, determined to apply these new techniques. Her timing was not the best, however, as the Stock Market crashed ten months after her return. New York's artists, having lost the support of their Wall Street patrons, were scrambling to survive, not thinking of grandiose new ventures. Abbott's intentions dovetailed with the goals of the Museum of the City of New York, an institution created in the early 1930s to document and preserve the history of the city. However, despite support from the museum, until the creation of the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Art Project (FAP), Abbott was unable to undertake the project.

The New Deal represented the first serious involvement of the federal government in support of American culture. Over ten thousand artists were employed by government programs between 1933 and 1943. The goals and activities of the programs varied widely by agency (as well as within each agency), as did their philosophies. Several agencies, most famously the Farm Security Administration, used the photographs of Dorothea Lange and others as propaganda, depicting suffering and struggle of rural families, to support of the FSA's program of resettlement and reorganization.[1]

The primary objective of the FAP was the provision of economic support to struggling artists, but FAP Chief Holger Cahill and his administrators had additional motives and goals. Cahill wanted to use New Deal Arts programs to bring "culture to the masses," and educate Americans about the value of painting, sculpture, poetry, theater and other art forms. Cahill, a follower of John Dewey, also believed that art had the power to enhance democracy through the connection of human beings to each other and to nature. "Art also renders men aware of their union with one another in origin and destiny," Cahill argued.[2] In addition, FAP administrators supported the use of art to preserve American traditions and artifacts, and to create what Van Wyck Brooks called "a usable past."

Abbott's proposed project conformed to the objectives of the FAP. Through her photographs, Abbott hoped to preserve the architectural and social history of New York, while at the same time interrogating the relationship between old and new buildings. Abbott also wanted to use photography to examine the social impact of architecture. While Abbott's photography was reserved, her

pictures provide strong social commentary on the economic and environmental consequences of New York's development. In her own analysis of the project, Abbott stated her desire to examine "areas where peculiarly urban aspects of human living can be observed: city squares where the trees die for lack of sun or air: narrow and dark canyons where visibility fails because there is no light: litter blowing along a waterfront slip."[3]

Abbott had a project outline and plan for capturing New York City as a whole, but because of time and financial constraints (the projects was canceled before completion in 1939), the focus of "Changing New York" is Manhattan below 59th Street. While the exhibit has some photos from other areas of Manhattan and at least a few from each of the four other boroughs, more than two thirds of the photographs are from this area. While clearly limited by external factors, the focus of this work also represents the artists aesthetic values. Like many other artists, Abbott believed that Lower Manhattan *was* New York.

Abbott's selection of subjects was eclectic, but several themes emerge from these photos. The most important theme is the comparison of old and new Manhattan and, more specifically, the impact of the skyscraper. For example, in plate 42 (Wall Street Section) Abbott contrasts a tobacco warehouse and former prison along the South Street Seaport with 120 Wall Street, one of the tallest buildings in the world in 1935. Similarly, in plate 8 (Lower East Side) Abbott captures the tenement squalor of Henry Street (home of the Jacob Riis Settlement House) on the Lower East Side in the shadow of the Woolworth Tower.

New York's transportation infrastructure is another important theme in Abbott's work. More than two dozen photographs capture the piers, railroad depots, elevated lines, bridges and other modes that made Manhattan the commercial capital of the world. Among the most interesting of these pictures is a series of six different railroad freight depots along the west side piers. None of these piers exists today, and all of the railroads are defunct, a major commentary on the decline of this mode of transportation. In general, Abbott focused on the structures themselves, not the activities they supported. Railroad depots were photographed without traffic, piers were pictured without longshoremen. Abbott felt that trying to show activity in these photos would detract from the significance of the structures themselves.

A third theme in Abbott's work is the role of small business. Several pictures portray the hardware stores, barbershops, repair shops, bakeries, restaurants and other small businesses that are the basis of the city's economy. While Abbott is certainly concerned with New York as an industrial and financial giant, her focus on these small proprietorships reveals her perspective regarding the important role of these businesses.

Abbott was also interested in the architecture of New York's housing, and this book has several photographs of Lower East Side tenements and experimental working-class housing. The mansions of Fifth Avenue, the historic houses of Greenwich Village, and the European-style planned developments surrounding Washington Square also receive attention. In addition, the pictures in the section entitled "Other Boroughs" focus on historic houses, particularly those on Staten Island and in Brooklyn Heights. These photographs reveal the wide variety of housing design and quality in 1930s New York.

Abbott produced a voluminous body of work on 1930s New York, but there are several major omissions, and these exclusions compromise her goal of presenting a social portrait of the city. In general, Abbott neglects the public life of the city. There are few pictures of parks and other places of recreation, of children playing on the streets, of social events such as concerts, fairs and flea markets. New York is known for being a large city with small neighborhoods–Chinatown and Little Italy are only two of the more famous examples–but the Abbott's pictures do not reveal the vibrant social life of the city. In her original outline, Abbott had planned to picture "People and How They Live" but, as Abbott herself lamented, she did not fulfill this aspect of the project. Her choice was part aesthetic, and part technological. Given the equipment available, it was difficult to capture "action shots," and Abbott did not want to sacrifice her compositions to "solely documentary" (her terms) ends. As a result, "Changing New York"'s contribution is in revealing the city's architecture, not its people.

In accordance with the FAP's goal to document America's heritage, Abbott was assigned several researchers to assist in the analysis and recording of her subjects. These researchers examined the history of the buildings, their architects, their occupants and other relevant information, putting together large folders on several of the pictures. "Changing New York"'s Catalogue provides a description of each picture in the book, using the original research and adding current information on each structure. Many Catalogue entries also discuss Abbott's methods and goals in photographing the subjects. The catalogue is probably the most useful aspect of this book for historians, revealing how Manhattan's redevelopment has been unabated throughout the past two

centuries.

The subject descriptions are extremely interesting, full of trivia on individual buildings and analysis of New York's architectural history. Through the Catalogue, we discover the history of the Department of Docks Building, once the gateway to the city, and we read the story of "Sandy" the mascot for an Orchard Street snuff shop. We learn about the redevelopment of the Lower East Side, and the replacement, during the 1940s and 1950s, of most of that district's warehouses and tenements with modern housing projects. The Catalogue also describes the techniques Abbott used to capture Wall Street's dark canyons. In addition, the Catalogue notes tell us which buildings have been demolished and which remain, discuss their historic importance, or lack thereof, and tell us which pictures would be impossible today because of new structures.

My major criticism of the Catalogue is that more discussion of Abbott's philosophy in selecting her subjects would have enriched these descriptions. Abbott had strong views about New York and its buildings, and I wish they were given more attention. The Catalogue is well-researched, and I observed no inaccuracies. There are no footnotes for the Catalogue, which is unfortunate because there are several interesting insights that one might like to explore further. In addition, it is difficult to determine which parts of the Catalogue are taken from the original research and which parts are the result of additional analysis. But these are small criticisms of an important work that will add to our understanding of the development of America's largest city.

Notes

[1]. James C. Curtis, "Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mothers, and the Culture of the Great Depression," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Winter 1986, pp. 1-20. Also Pete Daniel, Merry A. Foresta, Maren Stange and Sally Stein, *Official Images: New Deal Photography*, (Washington, D.C.: The Smithsonian, 1987).

[2]. Richard McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 130.

[3]. Francis O'Connor, *Art For the Millions: The Federal Arts Program*, (Washington, D.C.: The Smithsonian, 1972), 158.

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