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## Excavation: Recent Photographs by Stanley Greenberg Exhibition Catalogue

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# EXCAVATION: RECENT PHOTOGRAPHS BY STANLEY GREENBERG



EXCAVATION: RECENT PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY STANLEY GREENBERG

April 12 - June 14, 2013



Fairfield University

THE BELLARMINE MUSEUM OF ART



East 6th Street at Third Avenue, New York, 2011

[T]he city did not grow, as the economists taught, by quasi-natural laws, but was a willed artifact, a human construct in which many conscious and unconscious factors played their part ... [t]he principal document and witness to this process [is] the physical fabric of the city.

~ Joseph Rykwert

As the eminent architectural historian Joseph Rykwert so eloquently reminds us in his *The Seduction of Place: The History and Future of the City* (2002), cities are wholly man-made constructs. There is nothing pre-determined or natural about urban agglomerations: It is we who determine their shapes, their essences, and, ultimately, their destinies. But it is they that bear witness to our existence. It is the cities themselves, then, that hold the key to unlocking the secrets of humanity's forgotten pasts, which in turn affords its inhabitants a more nuanced understanding of their present and, in an ideal world, a more purposeful vision for their future. This fundamental precept lies at the heart of *Excavation: Recent Photographs* by Stanley Greenberg.

The brainchild of critically acclaimed photographer Stanley Greenberg (b. 1956), *Excavation* unveils vestiges of New York City's many incarnations by entering into an intimate dialogue with this commanding city. By mindfully walking every street in Manhattan and documenting his discoveries, Greenberg has created a photographic record of an urban history whose co-author - Manhattan itself - has an indisputable pedigree. The resulting works are as visually compelling as they are intellectually challenging, as historically important as they are critically relevant.

Such imagery is entirely characteristic of Greenberg, whose photography explores that which is hidden in plain sight: from metro New York's intricate water systems to urban construction projects frozen in time by his lens, the photographer consistently provides us with new tools for engaging with the built environment. *Excavation* continues in this rich line of visual and cultural inquiry, revealing for the viewer the vestiges of a now-lost Manhattan, which in turn informs how we interact with the city as we know it today. Greenberg's evocative photographs lend credence to his conviction that "...the city is a huge organism, only some of it visible, and we inhabit it, change it, get changed by it."

Stanley Greenberg has authored four photography books: *Invisible New York: The Hidden Infrastructure of the City* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); *Waterworks: A Photographic Journey Through New York's Hidden Water System* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2003); *Architecture Under Construction* (University of Chicago Press, 2010); and *Time Machines* (Hirmer Verlag, 2011). His honors include a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the New York

State Council on the Arts, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. Greenberg has exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. He is a native of Brooklyn, New York, where he lives and works today.

The Bellarmine Museum of Art is indebted to Stanley Greenberg for his willingness to share this rich and engaging body of work with us. We are equally grateful to our sponsors - the Robert and Mercedes Eichholz Foundation, Fidelity Investments, Moffly Media, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and Whole Foods Market - for making exhibitions like this possible in the first place. Thanks are also due to the Robert Lehman Foundation, Morris Media, and to Maritime Motors (Fairfield), whose support helped to underwrite our programming. Last but certainly not least, we thank the faculty and administration of our parent institution, Fairfield University, for their ongoing commitment to the arts.

Jill Deupi, J.D., Ph.D.  
Founding Director and Chief Curator



Church Street between Barclay Street and Park Place, New York, 2011

# Finding Mannahatta in New York City

“Could but thy flagstones, curbs, façades, tell their inimitable tales”  
~ from Walt Whitman, “Broadway”

Since the 19th century, authors like Balzac and Baudelaire, Whitman and Dickens, have created works that explore walking and reading the text of the city, ways to build, own, and control the urban setting, in a dance of movement and stasis. The desire to know a city, to capture and preserve it – in words, in images – and thus to create it, informs aesthetic production, no more strikingly than in depictions of New York City. Whitman in particular walked the streets of New York and invoked the original island, Mannahatta, as he crossed the East River on the ferry or wandered the narrow lanes downtown. The photos of Stanley Greenberg from his *Excavations* series participate in this process of urban observation and invention: as we read his images, we find surprise and delight with the unexpected, the unseen, perhaps because the photos display the plainly visible and seemingly familiar.

Excavation: we do the same with the photos, digging under the surface, seeking meaning in the fragments, finding signs and symbols in the details. The city is repeatedly (de)constructed, a site of raising and razing, becoming a con/struct that the viewers erect and dismantle, navigate, shape. New York is both intentional and unintentional in the process of evolving and changing: “As usual in New York, everything is torn down/Before you have had time to care for it” (from James Merrill, “An Urban Convalescence”). With that destruction, past layers come to light, Mannahatta and the other islands beneath the city, the rock and forests, flora and fauna, which emerge in traces and reclaim the seemingly empty spaces.

Where are the rivers, the waters that surround and thread through the islands? “I too walked the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters around it” (from Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”). Now we see water towers on top of buildings, iconic landmarks in the city, and traffic signs pointing the way to bridges over the rivers. Primarily, the photos remind us that, as my students observed, the city is indeed the “concrete jungle.” “As if we were beasts evolving toward a sentence/That breaks and disperses before we arrive/At the city we promised to build” (from Phillis Levin, “Out of Chaos”). Concrete, iron, sky form patterns for us to discern, investigate, and most of all invent with our imaginations: ladders up and down, scaffolding on which to build our own city.

## *The Eyes of the City*

As we gaze at the excavated cityscape, it looks back at us, even as the images create a vision of emptiness and impersonality. Urban landscapes in literature beginning in the 19th century lent themselves to detective fiction and to the awareness of constant surveillance

by both strangers and the police. The anonymity of the crowd and the subtle uneasiness of being watched by multiple eyes emerge in Greenberg’s photos as possible witnesses behind the blank window panes of multi-storied buildings. A cop car sits curbside, and one sign instructs residents and passers-by to anonymously report ... mandating surveillance. “It is impossible to be anywhere in the city without seeing the NYPD” (Megan Kuzniewski ’14). Absent landmarks and people, the eye becomes more active, moving across a canvas of concrete and sky to limn messages and unearth meanings.

## *Writing on the City*

The blank sides of buildings form that surface, such that “[the spaces] have their own character and tell a different story” (Sandro Iannuzzi ’14) from that which we are accustomed to reading in more familiar cityscapes. Some of those messages appear literally scripted on the walls, graffiti that present urban visions and record clamoring voices. Columns of words list categories including Christian and American, telling a tale of power, struggle, politics, and dreams. Further, “graffiti designs are placed like flowers and weeds on the side of abandoned buildings” (Adavia Thornton ’14), creating intimations of nature’s resilience even in the most desolate corners. Puzzles to decipher: an elaborate metal gate encloses moss-covered rocks; a tall grill-work fence climbs along the top of a rock outcropping. “And all these streets leading ... so painfully to this countryside, this graveyard, this stillness ... where all Manhattan that I’ve seen must disappear” (from Allen Ginsberg, “My Sad Self”).

## *Excavating (to) Mannahatta*

The photos reclaim deserted spaces and open them to our gaze, offering “a visual representation of change” (Lindsey Petronella ’14). Empty lots and piles of broken concrete serve as reminders that “cities are almost always under construction” (Allie McCourt ’13). The obvious deconstruction indicates the ever-impermanent quality of the city, even as nature contends with the manmade environment. Empty pots for plants sit desolate as greenery creeps lusciously over the ground. Metal pilings rise abandoned in grass, while plants thrive on window sills and narrow ledges outside apartments facing an empty lot. “Concrete has become natural” (Salvatore Trifilio ’15), while nature refuses to be subdued or obliterated – rocks, green of weeds and grass and trees, blue of sky. Remarkably, in this New York it never rains or snows, clouds do not float through the sky, and the pavement remains dry.

Stairs, ladders, steps, and fire escapes follow a descending movement, as if exhuming the city’s past, all the way down to the rock of the island. This downward movement provides a counterpart to the ascent of man-made structures, as well as exposing surfaces that offer traces of what no longer exists. Delving down balances the up-rising of the cityscape. One unique stairway into a dirt pit leads the imagination to conjure the past, images of cows reminiscent of the farms of the island, as the city slowly grew northward from the Battery. Trees surround the lip of yet another dug-out space, another descent into Mannahatta – the lower layers, the rock of the foundation, the island beneath the metropolis.



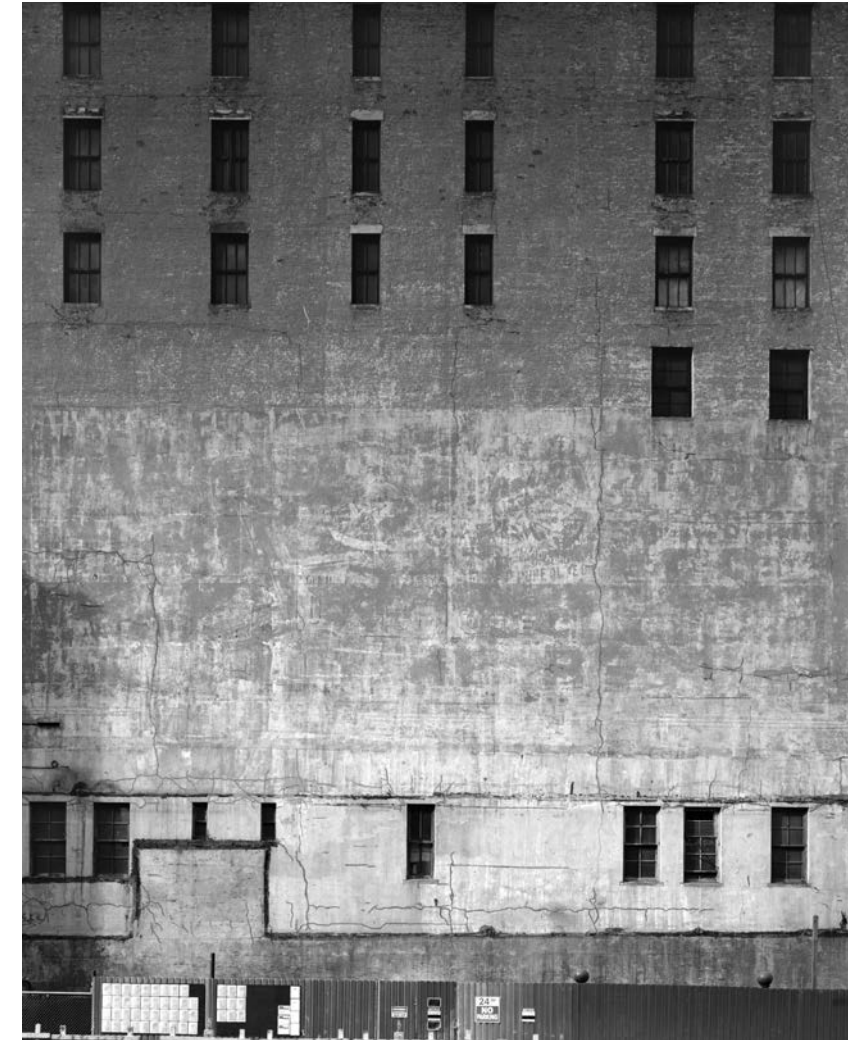
### *Sacred Spaces*

Exploration leads unexpectedly to ritual, in spaces that become meaning-laden and sacred, memorials to change, testimonies to invention, and realms of imagination. Iron supports resemble flying buttresses, turning a collapsing building into a cathedral. New York is also a cemetery where we can see "the skeleton" of the city (Elena Gabriel '13). We might recall the unearthing of an African burial ground near City Hall, just as a photo reveals tomblike enclosures and hidden layers usually unnoticed or forgotten, the rocky underworld of the city.

Rambunctious, cavorting figures and brilliant colors proclaim a faith in peace and love, spelling out messages of hope: Peace and Unity; World Peace; End Racism; We Are the Dream. From apparent emptiness and loss rise signs of renewal, inviting the eye to dance and the heart to open into possibility.

Johanna X. K. Garvey, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of English, College of Arts and Sciences (and students in EN 377, Urban Texts & Contexts: NYC)



*Sixth Avenue between Franklin and White Streets, New York, 2011*

## A Walk through the City: Excavation by Stanley Greenberg

New Yorkers are known for their fast, aggressive walking style. Manhattan seems to encourage people to stride block after block amidst an icy blizzard or in asphalt-melting heat, from Alphabet City to Columbus Circle to Morningside Avenue. Swept along by flocks of busy lunch breakers and tourists, you are bound to bump into someone as you turn the corner of a block. Busy pedestrians navigate their way around like a spaceship in a classic Atari video game. This is a picture of an ordinary day in Manhattan. Stanley Greenberg, a native of Brooklyn, began this “ordinary” activity of walking the city in October 2011; the result, from about 31 days during a period of seven months, was over 6,000 photographs. Equipped with a small digital camera, or occasionally a larger view camera, Greenberg transformed what many busy New Yorkers see as the ordinary physical features of Manhattan’s streets into an archive of typologies to be observed, examined, and enjoyed.

Greenberg’s document is the product of a flâneur’s walk, reminiscent of a late nineteenth-century Parisian wanderer mesmerized by the changes wrought in the city by modernity. Greenberg, however, was methodical, planning his walk on Google Maps and traveling with map printouts. Greenberg initially embarked on walks having noticed empty spaces and their views in various blocks. He was soon taken by the repeating physical features he encountered, and the unexpected ‘types’ into which they could be categorized. He also researched an area’s former residents, focusing on artists and writers, including Willem de Kooning, Marcel Duchamp, Diane Arbus, and Jack Kerouac.

Documenting New York’s infrastructure and water system in photography collections published in 1998 and 2003, Greenberg created close visual studies of physical typologies. As he walked the streets of Manhattan, Greenberg was again drawn to urban typologies, as the open spaces and irregular planning began to reveal the physical structure of Old New York. He photographed Manhattan from early morning until sunset. Pushing his digital camera through fences, Greenberg created color photographs that show what appear to be mundane urban features, especially when viewed individually: off-grid streets, empty lots, little streets, buttresses, and rocks. Yet grouped under these typologies, the old, new, and usually undistinguished features of the city are reframed, as the photographs encourage the viewer to look at “ordinary” urban elements with more attention.

The photographs in this series excavate common urban structures, features, and patterns that tend to go unnoticed. The photographs of buttresses, for example, invite the viewer to scrutinize the city’s capricious real estate market and volatile construction industry. The buttresses never have the same shape or size: whether suspiciously, and comically, small (fig. 1); solid and overpowering (fig. 2); or



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

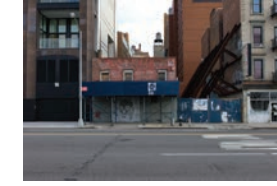
just odd (fig. 3). Some testify to the speedy raising of large buildings downtown, while others suggest interrupted or halted work. These photographs thus speak to the continuing effects of the global economic crisis of 2008. Although this slowed down many construction projects, ongoing real estate developments are conspicuous throughout the photographs of Lower Manhattan.

Arranged according to typologies, Greenberg’s 11” x 14” color photographs tempt the viewer to try to identify the location of each individual subject and to discern the subtle differences and similarities between those grouped in the same typology. The boulder that sits in a vacant lot where a building once stood on 126<sup>th</sup> Street appears much more peculiar as the subject of a photograph than when one walks past it. After all, when does a New Yorker have the luxury of paying attention to such features? Yet under the typology of rocks, this boulder resembles others in the photographs grouped in the same “class,” even when each individual rock is distinct in its relationship to its surroundings and the resulting topography. No one explicitly asks the viewer to examine, compare, and differentiate one subject within a group from another, but there is a certain pleasure in doing a rigorous visual assessment within and between typologies. This is the spell that only photography can cast upon us. Despite daily interactions with views like those captured in *Excavation*, it is in the specificity of Greenberg’s images that we are fulfilled to a point of aesthetic pleasure.

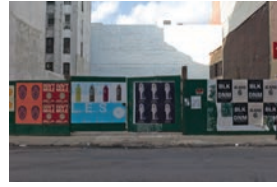
The permutation of typologies in the urban fabric Greenberg presents recalls the work of the German collaborative duo Bernd (1931-2007) and Hilla Becher (1934- ). The Bechers’ photography of Germany’s disappearing industrial buildings and structures, particularly their method of typology, is the legacy of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. However, it takes a Deleuzian turn in *Excavation*’s sense of immediacy. By ‘zooming in’ on physical elements of the urban fabric, *Excavation* reintroduces Manhattan – a place generated, deprived, and regenerated by the everyday activities of over 8.2 million residents and visitors going on and off the island – as the product of organic bonding.



Butresses



Empty Spaces



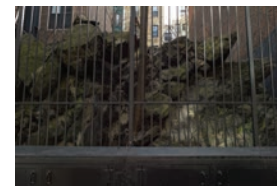
Little Streets



Off Grid



Rocks





An awkward, irregular space created by an off-grid block; a tiny street in the back of a building with flower pots and garbage bins; a "Peace and Unity" graffiti on the wall of an abandoned construction site: these are rhizomes, as described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, that connect life in the city. These rhizomes (or underground rootstocks), signified in Greenberg's photographs, are also part of semiotic chains inherent in the system of visual language: the viewer reads signs in the picture that signify the real. In Greenberg's typologies, they ceaselessly establish "...connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstance relative to the art, sciences, and social struggles."<sup>1</sup> Beyond re-presentations of different places in Manhattan, Greenberg's typologies require the viewer to make these connections between signs, especially signs of change; a socio-historical pattern of such changes, and through this, the politics of the urban fabric. Greenberg surveys and maps these connections as a flow of energy. The individual photographs within each of his typologies establish connections rather than disjunction, inquiries rather than assertions. His survey of every block in Manhattan, then, creates a meta-topology, which embraces the smaller ordering systems of these rhizomatic interactions.

The rhizomatic experience extends to the visual experience of *Excavation* itself, as it is repeated and renewed, tongue in cheek, on the city's skin. Where the color photographs lead the viewer to read the city, the 30" x 40" black-and-white prints in *Excavation*, taken with a 4 x 5 view camera, urge the viewer to feel the surfaces of the city. The richness of the tonal range highlights and aestheticizes the city's texture, from the hearty, solid roughness of bricks to the recalcitrant touch of metal skeletons at a construction site, or the prickliness of temporary particle board barriers covered with posters and bills. The prints accentuate each distinct surface, in some cases to the point of abstracting the subject, amplifying and provoking a visceral response to one's visual experience of the texture.

The color and black and white photographs provide a contrasting yet complementary visual experience of Manhattan. As Greenberg's typologies showcase the city's individual physical features, the urban fabric intricately captured in his black and white photographs wraps them under its skin, connecting each one of them. Here, the whole experience of typology itself becomes rhizomatic. The city begins to feel like a gigantic, animate being that holds and protects us in its folds, but is also capable of letting us get lost in the whirlwind of anonymity. That is what Manhattan feels like: a place of dynamic rupture. In this way, *Excavation* reveals the connection between the city and the people in it, inspiring new walks in which we will map ourselves out in the city.

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7. Emphasis added.

Jung Joon Lee, Ph.D.  
Visiting Curator, Thomas J. Walsh Art Gallery



Washington and Rector Streets, New York, 2011



Renwick Street between Canal and Spring Streets, New York, 2011

## Recent Photographs by Stanley Greenberg "Excavation"

In search of a visible past, Stanley Greenberg has walked every street on Manhattan Island with his camera at the ready. His photographs document the geology and the grid as well as hidden byways that even longtime New Yorkers may never find.

### *Rocks*

Today we take Manhattan's soaring skyline, with its tall buildings crowding Wall Street and the soon to be completed Freedom Tower commemorating the tragedy of 9-11 and the destruction of the World Trade Center towers, for granted. To the north, the Empire State Building stands alone on 34<sup>th</sup> Street while in Midtown, skyscrapers fill the streets from the Hudson to the East Rivers. Hidden from view, providing the foundation for these majestic buildings is the solid bedrock of the city, the "Manhattan Schist." Created billions of years ago, the schist lies below ground at varying depths.

Greenberg's photographs illustrate places on the island where the bedrock breaks the surface or excavations left a wall of schist visible in the light of day and not hidden below ground.

A recent article in *Mass Transit* magazine described a massive excavation 16 stories under Grand Central Terminal, to create the East Side Access for Long Island Railroad trains to bring commuters to Grand Central. Blasting the schist will create a new concourse with more floor space than the New Orleans Superdome, a project that would be simply impossible if Grand Central were not resting on Manhattan's bedrock.

### *Empty Spaces*

By 1880 over one million people lived in Manhattan, filling the streets and byways from the Battery to Midtown. Multi-story residential buildings crowded the side streets on the 30' x 100' lots created by the Grid, which was established in 1811. To maximize the use of each lot, builders left no space between four- and five-story brownstones and tenement buildings in a frenzied rush to meet the insatiable demand for residential space.

The city's relentless development and then redevelopment creates, for a moment, empty spaces between buildings as one form of urban use replaces another. On the Lower East Side below 14<sup>th</sup> Street, the decline and destruction of the 60s and 70s led to the literal abandonment of hundreds, if not thousands, of tenement buildings. The City of New York took possession and, without any market for the buildings that once housed generations of immigrants, razed the buildings creating open spaces between the walls of the adjacent structures.



Greenberg captures these newly created open spaces wedged between the past on both sides. To the left and right, the remaining buildings need to be supported with a web of braces so they do not cascade into the void. Some of the photographs present a nexus of supports that resemble the medieval “flying buttresses,” which so dramatically support the stone walls of the great cathedrals. Here in New York the supports are much more mundane: a few pieces of steel in a weed-choked yard or a graffiti-covered wall. In two photographs the buttresses reach up almost to the roofline, suggesting that the whole building would collapse in their absence.

### *Little Streets*

The little street photographs stand in sharp contrast to the broad avenues that run north and south from one end of Manhattan Island to the other or the uniform, numbered cross-streets above Houston. One photograph shows the dogleg of Chinatown’s Doyers Street, named for a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch settler whose farm bordered the Bowery. Thousands of tourists find their way to Doyers Street each year, unaware that at one time it was considered one of the most dangerous places in New York as Chinese immigrant gangs battled for control.

At the corner of Minetta Street and Minetta Lane in Greenwich Village, one glimpses a quiet, tranquil refuge apart from the bustle and noise of 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue, a short distance to the west. Greenberg’s photograph of Minetta Street without cars and people suggests a place apart, a special place from a New York of long ago. In stark contrast, in 1893 Stephen Crane published a short story, “Minetta Lane,” with a subtitle: “Its Worst Days Have Passed Away, But its Inhabitants Still Include Many Whose Deeds are Evil.” Crane describes a dangerous place: “Minetta Lane and Minetta Street, which leads from it southward to Bleecker Street, were, until a few years ago, two of the most enthusiastically murderous thoroughfares in New York.” As with Doyers Street, Minetta Lane experienced a troubling past.

Greenberg includes a number of photographs of peaceful city alleys with no through traffic, just charming one- or two-story homes. These are in fact the few remaining “Mews,” the back alleys for the homes of wealthy New Yorkers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century whose horses and carriages were housed in the stables opening onto the mews with their grooms and coachmen living above.

### *Off Grid*

In 2012 the Museum of the City of New York presented a masterful exhibition detailing the creation of the Manhattan grid: “The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan, 1811-2011.” From Houston Street to 155<sup>th</sup> Street, ignoring the topology of the island, the city superimposed a uniform grid forever shaping the character of the urban environment. Below Houston Street the street pattern is confusing as one leaves the grid and encounters a street pattern, in some places, dating back to the Dutch settlement. North of Houston Street, the one major exception to the grid is Greenwich Village where streets often intersect at non-perpendicular angles.

Greenberg’s photographs of the “angles” present a variety of ways buildings “fit.” In some cases a narrow wall fills the space to the sidewalk; another is used for a park. The most striking photograph is the Northern Dispensary: a triangular building that fills the space between Waverly Place and Grove Street two blocks from Washington Square. For over a century and half the Dispensary, which opened in 1831, provided free healthcare to the poor living in the Village.

Stanley Greenberg’s photographs capture the magic of Manhattan’s streetscapes and byways, an ever-changing panorama of urban form.

Kurt Schlichting, Ph.D.

E. Gerald Corrigan Chair in Sociology and Anthropology, College of Arts and Sciences



From *Off Grid* typology, 2011



West 37th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, New York, 2012



West 184th Street and Overlook Terrace, New York, 2012





*Third Avenue between St. Mark's Place and East 9th Street, New York, 2012*



*East 56th Street between Park and Madison Avenues, New York, 2012*

## Exhibition Checklist

*Church Street between Barclay Street and Park Place,  
New York, 2011*

Gelatin silver print, mounted to museum board  
27 x 34 ½ inches

*East 6th Street at Third Avenue, New York, 2011*

Gelatin silver print, mounted to museum board  
27 x 34 ½ inches

*Renwick Street between Canal and Spring Streets,  
New York, 2011*

Gelatin silver print, mounted to museum board  
34 ½ x 27 inches

*Sixth Avenue between Franklin and White Streets,  
New York, 2011*

Gelatin silver print, mounted to museum board  
27 x 34 ½ inches

*Washington and Rector Streets, New York, 2011*

Gelatin silver print, mounted to museum board  
34 ½ x 27 inches

*East 56th Street between Park and Madison Avenues,  
New York, 2012*

Gelatin silver print, mounted to museum board  
34 ½ x 27 inches

*Third Avenue between St. Mark's Place and East 9th Street,  
New York, 2012*

Gelatin silver print, mounted to museum board  
34 ½ x 27 inches

*West 37th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues,  
New York, 2012*

Gelatin silver print, mounted to museum board  
34 ½ x 27 inches

*West 184th Street and Overlook Terrace,  
New York, 2012*

Gelatin silver print, mounted to museum board  
34 ½ x 27 inches

### Typologies

Buttresses - 9 images

Empty Spaces - 18 images

Little Streets - 6 images

Off Grid - 9 images

Rocks - 6 images

Pigment prints

9 ¼ x 14 inches

All works are from the collection of the artist.  
Photographs © 2011-2012 Stanley Greenberg

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