

# An Analysis on Berenice Abbott's "Changing New York": People and Lives of the Heterogeneous City

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## Abstract

From 1929 through the 1930s, the female American photographer Berenice Abbott (1898-1991) devoted herself to her "Changing New York" project: the monumental project of photographing historical, old, and abandoned buildings, in addition to new, gigantic bridges and skyscrapers and the process of their construction. Her project eventually led to the publication of a photographic book of the same name in 1936, making Abbott a celebrated photographer of New York architecture in American art history. However, this achievement has simultaneously overshadowed her interests in various types of people in New York, in particular their lives full of conflicts and contradictions. She believed that not only spectacular modern architecture but also people, regardless of their social status or wealth, were essential in her portrait of New York. Considering her perspective on New York, this paper mainly focuses on Abbott's photographs of people, especially those on the margins of society. Referring to her writing and words on photography, the paper not only examines how people function in her photographs of the city, but also analyzes problems getting *Changing New York* published.

The subjects and techniques in Abbott's photographs of the city are colorful. She photographed masses of anonymous people walking on the streets, which she called the "tempo of the metropolis." Hoping that her project would contribute to documenting old culture and people of the lower-class in the city, both of which were then about to be shunted to the margins of modern society, she captured those who worked and lived anonymously: peddlers and immigrants in the street, watchmen on the pier, and temporary laborers on construction sites. Although New York may appear homogenous from the top of the skyscrapers, a variety of such people and lives surely coexist on the ground. They represent the dynamic and heterogeneous aspects of the city, which Abbott believed was the reality of New York.

And with the awful realization that New York was a city after all and not a universe, the whole shining edifice that he had reared in his imagination came crashing to the ground.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *My Lost City*, 1935-40.

## Introduction

In 1929, when female American photographer Berenice Abbott (1898-1991) came back to New York from Paris after a decade's absence, she witnessed the radical and rapid transformation of the city into the modern megalopolis. She was fascinated by the spectacle so strongly that, although her initial purpose of visiting New York was temporal, she decided to come back and to live in America for the rest of her life.<sup>(1)</sup> About her return to America, she recollected,

I returned to New York in 1929. I had been absent for a decade, so that on my return I saw the city with fresh eyes... After all, I am American and New York was part of me and I was part of it. My absence gave me the objectivity required for a subject much bigger than one's self.<sup>(2)</sup>

From 1929 through the 1930s, Abbott photographed New York City where 19th century buildings had been demolished, altered, or replaced with huge modern buildings. In this project called "Changing New York," she photographed historical, old, and abandoned buildings, as well as huge bridges and skyscrapers and their construction, often juxtaposing these oppositional objects.<sup>(3)</sup> In the 1936 "Rockefeller Center with Collegiate Church of St. Nicholas in Foreground" (1936;

fig. 1), for instance, the old church with a tower stands in front of a building under construction and Rockefeller Center. In the 1938 “Glass-Brick and Brown Stone Fronts” (1938; fig. 2), the 19th century brownstone apartment and the newly built simple building with grass-brick front abut each other. A number of such images lack human figures, which renders the city atmosphere that of a ghost town. Moreover, Abbott’s photographs of people are small in number as compared to those of New York architecture and, as a result, they have received little attention. Scholars such as Bonnie Yochelson, Terri Weissman and John Raeburn have mainly focused on Abbott’s photographs of New York architecture in relation to its cultural, historical, and political contexts.<sup>(4)</sup> However, Abbott was interested in capturing people in New York City. Her 1929 scrapbook—snapshots of New York—includes many figures in the street (1929-30; figs. 3, 4, 5, 6). Her 1939 photography book *Changing New York* includes three human portraits as well as people scattered throughout the photographs, such as “Roast Corn Man” (1938; fig. 7) and “Shelter on the Water Front” (1938; fig. 8). The Museum of City of the New York owns other photographs of figures as well.<sup>(5)</sup> While these pictures have remained in the shadow of her monumental photographs of New York architecture in *Changing New York*, they are also essential parts of her portrait of the megalopolis, which consists of diverse types of people and lives.

### 1. Mass of People and the “Tempo of the City”

Abbott’s photographs of people are often reduced to a mass, as if they have lost their individualities. Her two photographs, “The Tempo of the City I” (1938; fig. 9) and “The Tempo of the City II” (also called “The Tempo of the City” in *Changing New York*; 1938; fig. 10), depict people passing each other without showing any concern with each other. Here, Abbott focuses not on architectures but on the flow of the people. The diagonal composition visually emphasizes the dynamics of the movement. In her “Exchange Place” (1933; fig. 11) taken from the 10th floor of the Adams Building, Abbott captures a mass of dwarfed people walking in different direction in the beautiful canyon of skyscrapers of the financial district. While the aesthetic beauty of the modern architecture—a symbol of capitalism—is praised, people on the street

are reduced to anonymity.

In these photos, not only did Abbott document the New York architecture, but also she attempted to capture the “tempo of the city” that is represented by the flow of the people. In her 1935 proposal to the Federal Art Project (FAP),<sup>(6)</sup> she explains,

To photograph New York City means to seek to catch in the sensitive and delicate photographic emulsion the spirit of the metropolis, while remaining true to its essential fact, its hurrying tempo, its congested streets, the past jostling the present... It is important that they [city vistas] should be photographed today, not tomorrow; for tomorrow may see many of these existing and important mementos of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New York swept away to make room for new colossi... The tempo of the metropolis is not of eternity, or even time, but of the vanishing instant. Especially then has such a record a peculiarly documentary, as well as artistic, significance. All work that can salvage from oblivion the memorials of the metropolis will have value.<sup>(7)</sup>

In this hurrying tempo, the city in the 1930s was incessantly changing and has become disharmonious, chaotic, and heterogeneous. As scholar Gaëlle Morel analyzes, Abbott did not merely document modern buildings and the vanishing old buildings; she interprets the relationship between the two, suggesting that “America’s ideology of progress and reckless erasure of the past, America’s headlong rush to define its ‘culture’ as its mechanization.”<sup>(8)</sup> The city Abbott documents lacks harmony, implying social failure in city planning.<sup>(9)</sup> Abbott herself sensed keenly the disharmony and disparity.

I may feel that the skyscrapers are beautiful and majestic. Or I may feel that they are ugly, inhuman, illogical, ridiculous, pathological growths which have no place in the planned city. Whatever I think and feel about the skyscrapers, I say through understanding of and application of composition.<sup>(10)</sup>

Producing many contradictions, this capitalist city recklessly developed with more and more beautiful

skyscrapers. Yet, on the other hand, people have lost their personalities in this materialist city. Abbott photographed the conflict between people and skyscrapers.

## 2. Abbott's Snapshots and Human Portraits in "Changing New York"

As a photographer who considers human subjects necessary in the portraits of New York City, Abbott took many snapshots of people in the street in the beginning of her project in 1929. Walking around the city with a hand-held camera to find anything that moves her, Abbott photographed multiple aspects of New York, presenting a variety of ethnicities and diverse ways of human lives when the Depression era just began (New York Scrap Books; 1929-30; figs. 3, 4, 5, 6). Her themes are colorful. She took snapshots of unremarkable objects of the city, such as emergency stairs and a trash box. She documented signs and peddlers that are related to various immigrants: a billboard of "CHOPSUEY": a sign of "Palestine Restaurant": and an Asian-looking parent who pushes a cart and a girl with a bobbed hair who gazes at the shop window with her right hand holding the handle of the cart. Abbott made snapshots of street peddlers of the Lower East Side, who concentrate on selling their goods, chat with others, or sit without doing anything. Most of these people may be immigrants, for a number of immigrants came to live in the Lower East Side in the early twentieth century.<sup>(11)</sup> Her scrapbooks also include laborers at the construction and piers.

In most of the snapshots, no drama seems to occur. However, these photos attest Abbott's belief that these ordinary lives are essential parts of a real society. Abbott wrote:

To make the portrait of a city is a life work, and no one portrait suffices because the city is always changing. Everything in the city is properly part of its story-its physical body of brick, stone, steel, glass, wood, its lifeblood of living, breathing men and women. Streets, vistas, panoramas, bird's-eye views and women's-eye views, the noble and the shameful, high life and low life, tragedy, comedy, squalor, wealth, the mighty towers of skyscrapers, the ignoble facades of slums, people at work, people at home, people at play-these are but a small part of the city. Nothing is too humble for

the camera portraitist.<sup>(12)</sup>

Abbott believes New York is not only a city abounding in beautiful architecture but it is also an organic whole, telling a variety of "stories" of people's lives. By photographing various types of people and their lives, Abbott saved from oblivion those who do not live in the dynamic flow of the modern life.

In 1930, she started to use an 8 x 10 Universal Century view camera, which is not suited for human subjects in the street. As the American studies scholar John Raeburn points out, it is difficult to include human subjects that are moving by this view camera, although it could allow Abbott to present subtle tonality, depth of focus, and sharp discrimination of detail.<sup>(13)</sup> As a result, Abbott gradually photographed more and more New York architectures than human subjects.

Yet, Abbott continued to document the lives of people in relation to both the history and politics of the city they live in. For instance, Abbott's 1938 "Shelter on the Water Front" (1938; fig. 8) depicts the watchmen sitting directly on the ground. Their worn-out clothing and shoes, along with a shabby shelter, suggest that the watchmen are disconnected from the modern society symbolized by the skyscrapers in the back. Despite the shabby outlook of the group of men, art critic Elizabeth McCausland stresses in her comment on the picture their heroic role in the past.

Not a Hooverville shanty, but a watchman's home is this shelter on the water front at Coenties Slip. Thirty years old, the shelter has seen death eddy around the pier, for the watchman now in charge is now reputed to have rescued no less than 200 people from drowning.<sup>(14)</sup>

These watchmen were shunted off to the margin of the modern city and would disappear soon. Yet, they are part of the history of New York City, implying a political message. Raeburn points out that the contrast of these seven "bundle stiffs" and the background skyscrapers "dramatizes the glaring inequalities of American Society."<sup>(15)</sup>

Abbott photographed such a strong contrast of people and skyscrapers in a reverse way in "Exchange Place" (1933; fig. 11). Unlike "Shelter on the Water Front" where watchmen are protagonists and sky-

scrapers are only a part of its background, the row of skyscrapers in the financial district in “Exchange Place” plays a central role. Whereas people are so dwarfed by the spectacular buildings that they are indistinguishable, the street and the canyon of the rows of buildings resemble the nave and colonnade of a church. It seems as if New York is a sacred space in the modern era, worshiping the beauty of geometrical structures hidden in its architecture as a new god.

Abbott produced three human portraits, which were then included in her photographic book *Changing New York*—“Hot Dog Stand” (1936; fig. 12), “Traveling Tin Shop” (1936; fig. 13), and “Roast Corn Man” (1938; fig. 7). These street peddlers also lived on the margin of the modern social system in the 1930s. According to McCausland’s caption describing “Traveling Tin Shop,” both wagon peddlers and pushcart peddlers were then “being legislated off the street of New York, as more modern and rigid market ordinances are passed and enforced.”<sup>(16)</sup> Nevertheless, as Raeborn mentions, these merchants look much less depressed than the typical Farm Security Administration’s (FSA) photography of the American South.<sup>(17)</sup> As compared to Walker Evans’s 1936 poignant portrait of the average family of farmers, “Sharecroppers Family—Hale County, Alabama” (1936; fig. 14), Abbott’s images of city dwellers do not clearly reflect despair despite the Depression.<sup>(18)</sup> This can be attested by “Hot Dog Stand” (1936; fig. 12), in which the vendor appears to be confident in his white apron, as well as the man in “Roast Corn Man” (1938; fig. 7), who wears shabby clothing but devotes himself to his work regardless of how he is seen.

Abbott’s New York photographs show the city where the rich and the poor, high and low lives, and old and new buildings coexist. On one hand, the skyscrapers suggest the victory of modern capitalism and materialism that resulted in the prosperity of America. On the other hand, people on the margins are often in the shadow of the skyscrapers. Yet these people surely lived in the 1930s, rendering vitality and vigor to Abbott’s portrait of the city. Although these dualistic aspects are contradictory, Abbott said that these contradictions are “real things.” In the radio interview with Leah Plotkin, she said,

Plotkin: What are the real things today, then, if they are not pretty – not pictures?

Abbott: Real things today are conflict, contradictions, warfare, unbalance, lack of order, lack of reason – contrasts in a rapidly changing civilization.

Plotkin: Would you say then, that reality is the whole sum of the forces of life today?

Abbott: Yes, those forces prevail everywhere. They prevail in the outward manifestations of everything that man has created. They express themselves not only in human faces and homes, but in fireplugs, letter boxes, man-holes, buildings, streets, windows – in every visual aspect, the expression of man is evident.<sup>(19)</sup>

To produce the portrait of New York City, therefore, Abbott captured both a number of spectacular skyscrapers and the real life underneath—the life of people in the street.

Abbott’s belief about reality is connected with her philosophy of modernist photography. Abbott considers that photographs are not documents of the beauty of objects, which usually appear on their surface. They should seek the hidden meanings by looking more deeply into the objects. In the aforementioned radio interview, Abbott explained that,

Documentary photography tries to get at the root of things, at the cause, at the foundations, at the truth. Whereas pictorial photography may show things superficially—or esthetically. It is simply picture making... We cannot go on just looking at things on the surface—we must go deeper. This means getting at things as they really are—which is not always pretty; in fact, almost never pretty.<sup>(20)</sup>

Pictures of “pretty” things that Abbott denied imply her harsh criticism against pictorialist photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz, who made arty and manipulated photographs. In the essays in her book *A Guide to Better Photography*, Abbott puts emphasis on “straight” and “documentary” photography as opposed to pictorialist photography. For Abbott, straight photography means, “using the medium as itself, not as painting or theater,” which should be understood as “a historical movement expressing the interplay of forces.” This movement was “a necessary revolt from the worst follies of pictorialism—manipulation of prints, toning, double printing.”<sup>(21)</sup> In the same book,

she also stresses "the content of documentary photography" that she believes to be the "raison d'être of photography." She believes that "a synthesis of straight and documentary" could best express New York City in her period.<sup>(22)</sup> Abbott's unique principle modernist photography is to document both people and architecture as they really are.

### 3. Other Pictures of People: Labors, Ministry and Families

During her project, Abbott documented two different types of labor: Rockefeller Center construction and fishermen. Thanks to Hardinge Scholle, then the director at the Museum of the City of New York and a supporter of Abbott's New York project, Abbott was permitted in February 1932 to enter and photograph the Rockefeller Center construction.<sup>(23)</sup> While Abbott made powerful and historically important photographs of Rockefeller Center—"Excavation and Skelton of New Building" (circa 1930; fig. 15) and "RCA Building under Construction" (1932; fig. 16), she also photographed laborers taking a rest under a metal frame in "Rockefeller Center" (circa 1932; fig. 17). On one hand, the fabricated frame shows geometrical and mechanical beauty, evoking an image of the magnificence of the building when it is completed. However, on the other hand, the anonymous laborers would be forgotten after the completion.

Not the building but this construction labor in Abbott's Rockefeller Center series attracted the aforementioned art critic Elizabeth McCausland at Abbott's 1934 solo-show at the Museum of the City of New York. McCausland considers Abbott's Rockefeller Center photographs "a terrific indictment" of the building "created at tremendous cost in human labor and intelligence," though she points out that such criticism spontaneously or unconsciously stems from Abbott's life.<sup>(24)</sup> She continues to comment on a laborer at the construction site in Abbott's pictures,

The tiny workman dwarfed by the inhuman steel girder so that he can barely be seen in the photograph, is in itself a devastating criticism of the thing observed and noted down by the artist. And from such photographs the future should be able to read what sort of changing world it was Berenice Abbott saw and sought to record.<sup>(25)</sup>

"Fulton Fish Market" (1936; fig. 18) shows a different type of labor: fisherman. Against a backdrop of the Wall Street skyline, most of the fishermen are quietly working whereas some gaze back to the camera. These fishermen would be also categorized as laborers, but they are different from those at the construction sites. The former type of labor is permanent and has continued even in the modern society; the latter is temporary and when the construction ends, the laborers would be out of a job. Adding these two types of laborers to her portrait of the city, Abbott stresses the heterogeneous aspects of the city that would look homogenous when it is viewed from the top of the skyscrapers.

The presence of humans renders vitality to Abbott's images. When she photographed a church in Harlem, the minister suddenly came out of the building. This was accidental, but she decided to include him in the picture, which unexpectedly resulted in providing preferable effects. About this photograph, "Church of God" (1936; fig. 19), Abbott explains,

There were certain things that were characteristic of Harlem and one was its churches. I didn't ask the minister to be in the photograph; I set up and he came out and that was that. I'm glad he did; it helps the photograph a great deal.<sup>(26)</sup>

Likewise, Abbott photographed certain places and architecture with people living in them, which would bear fruit in the form of her portraits of families in front of their residence. In these portraits, she attempted to capture the rawness of people's lives, which are not only part of the history but also reality of the area. Her "Jay Street, no. 115" (1938; fig. 20), for instance, shows an African American family in Brooklyn: three adults and three children on the front stoop of the entrance of the building living their life during the Depression.

This picture looks contradictory. At first glance, the viewers would easily expect that they are poor because of their race and the era they lived in. However, their appearance betrays such expectation. The man wearing a hat and jacket is in a theatrical posture, looking outward to the picture frame with his left arm on his waist. A woman on the left, leaning against an arm rail, wears high heels. It looks as if she consciously shows her high heels by bending her left

knee. Also, the children wear clean shirts and neatly sit in front of the adults. Regardless of the fact that this photograph was taken in the Depression era, it does not convey poverty or shabbiness. Rather, it shows the dignity of humans living in Brooklyn, although they may have suffered from poverty in reality. What Abbott attempted to capture is the “histories” that are stripped away of “History” written in books under the title of “Depression.”

#### 4. Publication of *Changing New York: Merits and Demerits*

Although Abbott took photographs of people, they have remained in the shadows of her fame as a photographer of New York architecture. This is due to the publication of *Changing New York* in 1939 by E.P. Dutton and Company—a photography book by Abbott and her artistic partner Elizabeth McCausland, the aforementioned art critic who wrote comments about each photograph. McCausland was a progressive art critic influenced by Marxism as well as an idealist in art and politics. Abbott met McCausland after the 1934 exhibition of Abbott’s New York photographs. McCausland wrote a favorable review about the exhibition in the *Springfield Republican*, a small newspaper in Massachusetts. The review, which was sent to Abbott, pleased the photographer. In her letter to McCausland, Abbott expresses her gratitude for this “splendid article” that is the first “intelligent understanding” of her work.<sup>(27)</sup> McCausland soon replied to Abbott, and the following year, wrote an article on Abbott for the art magazine *Trend*, discussing the political meanings present in Abbott’s photographs of skyscrapers that symbolize “vulgar wealth” and Central Park shanties of unemployed.<sup>(28)</sup> After that, they formed a close relationship, living and working in the same building at 50 Commerce Street on the western edge of Greenwich Village for decades.<sup>(29)</sup>

After the success of Abbott’s 1937 exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York, Abbott received an offer from E.P. Dutton and Company to publish her photographs in a book to be entitled *Changing New York*. Although the photographs that were going to be reproduced in the book were limited to those made for the FAP, this business offer pleased Abbott, for she longed to make a photographic book. Moreover, this project was a collaborative practice with McCausland, who was hired to prepare the text. Considering the fact

that McCausland shared similar views of New York City with Abbott, her comments would help improve readers’ understanding of the pictures.

As Terri Weissman argues, however, this publication was problematic. It caused a conflict between the creators—Abbott and McCausland—and the publisher E.P. Dutton and Company, and the latter eventually won its way. From the beginning of the publishing project, the publisher planned to produce a guidebook-like photography book, which could be offered to tourists visiting the 1939 New York World Fair. Thus, E.P. Dutton and Company desired to include in the book captions that are straightforward and factual without the political perspective. Yet, McCausland’s original draft of captions strongly reflects her political leanings, including her leftist sympathies about race and criticism against American commercialism.<sup>(30)</sup> As a matter of fact, in McCausland’s comment describing Abbott’s photographs of the Rockefeller Center construction series, she does not praise the spectacle of the modern building’s construction. Instead, she shows her interest in the tiny, anonymous laborer, stressing that this skyscraper—an icon of capitalism—is built as a result of human labor and intelligence.<sup>(31)</sup>

E.P. Dutton and Company rejected McCausland’s original draft of captions because they were written based on such progressive ideology as that mentioned above. As a matter of fact, McCausland’s original caption of New York’s iconic architecture, the “Flatiron Building” (1938; fig. 21), for instance, predicted the building’s—and probably New York’s—future demise at the cost of the rapid progression, saying that “[t]he emotion generated by its precarious attitude is amusing and also a little terrifying, as if the denizen of the city realized but would not confess the frailty and impermanence of its structure.”<sup>(32)</sup> In the end, McCausland agreed to write new captions.

According to Weissman, these new captions refer to the history of architecture and the different neighborhood of New York, but the image-caption combinations do not succeed in conveying the dynamic of New York. Instead, it stresses the coolness of New York City—the city of “silent lifelessness” in which “all look ghost.”<sup>(33)</sup> Nevertheless, it is ironical that McCausland’s simplified texts met the purpose of Abbott and McCausland to circulate their books among a mass audience.<sup>(34)</sup>

In addition to the captions, Dutton rejected

McCausland's experimental idea of the layout of *Changing New York*. Unlike the traditional photo-book format, McCausland and Abbott's original layout gives an equal amount of space to text as to image. Also, its pages respectively vary in its design to create a montage-like effect. By juxtaposing, contrasting, and colliding images and texts in a surprising way, Abbott and McCausland attempted to produce political and social meanings.<sup>(35)</sup> Yet, E.P. Dutton and Company turned down this idea, setting one photograph on one of two facing pages with its caption on the other page (fig. 22), organizing the photographs geographically as a whole. In order to trace a history of New York, it begins with the picture of Bowling Green, "De Peyster Statue, Bowling Green" (1936; fig. 23)—which is the earliest settlement of the city, and then proceeds northward, showing the city's rapid development.

Although this book was made mainly based on the publisher's plan, it is not successful as a guidebook in that it does not include New York's celebrated sites like Times Square and the Broadway theater district. Moreover, while E.P. Dutton and Company intended to produce a guidebook, the publisher wanted to put emphasis more on Midtown Manhattan than other parts of the city. E.P. Dutton and Company compromised with Abbott on choices of photographs in the book. Yet, it eventually rejected fourteen out of one hundred photographs, ordering Abbott to replace them with new ones. The photographs among the new selections were those of skyscrapers like Rockefeller Center and the Daily News building, and the midtown skyline; the rejected images include those of Lower Manhattan and Harlem.<sup>(36)</sup> The "Church of the God" (fig. 19) was one of the rejected images probably because it may have evoked a racial issue. Most of Abbott's photographs of people were taken in Lower Manhattan, Harlem, and Brooklyn, which E.P. Dutton and Company desired to stress less.

Abbott may have desired to include more of her photographs of people and their lives in *Changing New York*. In her 1934 one-person exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York, her pictures of New York City attracted the attention of critic Lewis Mumford. Mumford wrote that Abbott's instrument, her camera, is appropriate for capturing the spirit of the city. However, he felt slightly disappointed by her New York pictures because they were "all too brief." After the exhibition, Mumford felt that he had "wanted

miles and miles of such pictures, with even more emphasis, perhaps on the human side."<sup>(37)</sup> Considering Abbott's admiration for and strong influence from Mumford, whom Abbott even asked to write the preface of *Changing New York*, it is conceivable that Abbott wanted to include even more pictures of people in *Changing New York* to stress the "human side" of the city.<sup>(38)</sup>

Nevertheless, almost none of those pictures about people and their lives were included in *Changing New York*. Since the book was meant to reproduce Abbott's photographs produced for the FAP, it is obvious that Abbott's snapshots of people were not suitable to be included in the book. It is true that several photographs of street peddlers are reproduced in the book, but they are also not quite as appropriate for the book. E.P. Dutton and Company wanted to publish as those of skyscrapers. This is because these pictures of humans may reveal pre-modern and less majestic aspects of New York City. In the context that *Changing New York* is reflective Dutton's intention much more than Abbott and McCausland, Abbott's photographs of people were much less included than those of skyscrapers.

On the other hand, for her next project—a book on Greenwich Village—Abbott took more photographs of people, including them in the book to be entitled *Greenwich Village: Today & Yesterday* published in 1949 by the publisher Harper and Brothers.<sup>(39)</sup> The publisher wanted the book to include the long text by Henry Wysham Lanier with Abbott's photographs. Before agreeing to the terms, Abbott signed a contract to include photographs of her own choice for the first time in her career.<sup>(40)</sup> In late 1948, Abbott set about photographing the Village, and the following year, the book was completed. Unlike *Changing New York*, Abbott photographed a variety of intimate aspects of Greenwich Village in this book: shops, streets, houses and cafes. Portraits of artists such as Edward Hopper and John Sloan are among the photographs that are now considered the "finest photographs Abbott had ever done."<sup>(41)</sup> In addition to these portraits of the artists, Abbott took photographs of people in their ordinary lives, including two children playing in the park ("Competing with the Sparrows," fig. 24); the nanny cradling the baby within the crook of her arm by the window ("Courtyard Behind the Houses of Washington Square South," fig. 25); the baker carry-

ing a basket full of bread (“Zito’s Bakery on Bleecker Street,” fig. 26); customers and bartender at the bar (“The Bar at Joe’s,” fig. 27); and other photographs of the neighbors that convey how energetic the Village is/was. As a result of these pictures, unlike her *Changing New York* that makes the city look like a ghost town, *Greenwich Village: Today & Yesterday* successfully presents the bustling town filled with vitality.

Yet, Abbott was thrown into the limelight not by this Greenwich Village’s photographs, but by *Changing New York* that received favorable reviews from diverse publications including the *New York Times Book Review* and *New Masses*.<sup>(42)</sup> Most of Abbott’s photographs of people along with her snapshots were not included in this historically significant book. Therefore, these pictures have long been in the shadow of her other achievement—photographs of New York architecture.

## Conclusion

Although Abbott has been well known as a celebrated photographer of New York architecture thanks to her *Changing New York*, she directed her serious attention to various types of people, especially those on the margin, and their diverse ways of living in the 1930s. While photographing the spectacular skyscrapers and old buildings in order to document the radical transformation of New York City, whose appearance would be different in the next breath, Abbott simultaneously photographed those who lived under the magnificent buildings. This demonstrates Abbott’s belief of reality, in which contradictory things exist side-by-side: low and high lives, tragedy and comedy, the rich and poor. In the megalopolis, however, the latter are ruthlessly pushed off to the margins of the society, and they are eventually forgotten. Not only do Abbott’s photographs of people and their lives save them from oblivion, but the pictures also provide lifeblood for New York City that is full of inhuman and heartless skyscrapers. Abbott’s photographs of New York vividly convey the dynamics and heterogeneity of the city.

## NOTE

(1) Abbott came back to New York in order to find a company that would publish a photo book of the French photographer Eugène Atget. Abbott met Atget through Man Ray who hired her as a dark room assistant from 1923 to 25. Among Man Ray and other Surrealists in Paris, Abbott was most fervently

enthusiastic for Atget’s photography. On the death of the photographer, with financial help from her friends including American art dealer Julien Levy, Abbott purchased Atget’s 1400 glass plate negatives and 7800 prints, for fear that his work would be lost in oblivion. About Abbott’s biography, I mainly refer to the following scholarships. Hank O’Neal, *Berenice Abbott: American Photographer* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982); Bonnie Yochelson, *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York* (New York: New Press: Museum of the City of New York, 1997); George Sullivan, *Berenice Abbott, Photographer: An Independent Vision* (New York: Clarion Books, 2006).

- (2) Berenice Abbott, December 1975, cited in New York Public Library, *Berenice Abbott, Photographer: A Modern Vision* (New York: New York Public Library, 1989), 8.
- (3) Abbott started to call her project “Changing New York” in 1935, which would end in 1939 when her photographic book *Changing New York* was published by E.P. Dutton and Company. Yochelson, *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York*, unpaginated.
- (4) Yochelson, *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York*, unpaginated; Terri Weissman, *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott: Documentary Photography and Political Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press; Washington, D.C.: The Phillips Collection, 2011), 121-68; John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 114-42.
- (5) After disbandment of the Federal Art Project, which accepted Abbott’s New York project, Abbott’s negatives were sent from the Creative Assignments of the FAP’s Photographic Division to the museum. See Yochelson, *Changing New York*, unpaginated. These photographs are open to public and can be accessed through the museum’s website. The Museum of the City of New York, “MCNY Collection Portal,” <http://collections.mcny.org/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=Home> (accessed July 18, 2016). About FAP and Abbott, also see footnote 6.
- (6) FAP, a part of Works Progress Administration (WPA), operated between 1935 and 1943. It aimed to employ contemporary artists, providing them with work for the nation in order to financially support them. FAP assigned Abbott a monthly salary along with a staff to carry her heavy photo equipment and then a chauffeur between 1935 and 1939. About Abbott and FAP, see O’Neal, *Berenice Abbott: American Photographer*, 17-18. Abbott’s official paper of the FAP has been stored in New York Public Library. Berenice Abbott Papers, box 9, folio 7, New York Public Library, New York.
- (7) Berenice Abbott, “[Proposal to the Federal Art Project],” 1935, in *Photography Speaks: 150 Photographers on Their Art*, ed. Jonathan Brooks (New York: Aperture, 2004), unpaginated.
- (8) Gaëlle Morel ed., *Berenice Abbott* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 54.
- (9) Raeburn, *Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography*, 128.
- (10) Berenice Abbott, *A Guide to Better Photography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1941), 94.
- (11) Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the*



- Tenements of New York* (1890; repr., Amazon Digital Services), Amazon Kindle eBooks; John Strausbaugh, *The Village: 400 Years of Beats and Bohemians, Radicals and Rogues, a History of Greenwich Village* (New York: Ecco, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2013), Amazon Kindle eBooks.
- (12) Berenice Abbott, "Documenting the City," 1942, in New York Public Library, *Berenice Abbott, Photographer: A Modern Vision*, 25-26.
- (13) Because the view camera requires small lens opening and long exposure, it is suited to take inanimate objects such as buildings. Raeburn, *Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography*, 116-17.
- (14) Elizabeth McCausland, *New York in the Thirties* [formerly titled: *Changing New York*], photographs by Berenice Abbott (New York: Dover Publications, 1973).
- (15) Raeburn, *Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography*, 135.
- (16) In her captions that describe two other photographs—*Hot Dog Stand* and *Roast Corn Man*—McCausland also stresses that these street peddlers are disappearing because of the modern market. McCausland, *New York in the Thirties*, unpaginated.
- (17) See Raeborn, *Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography*, 132-33.
- (18) Evans' portraits in the FSA project were reproduced in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. This book was published based on Evans and James Agee's field trip to American South in 1936. In this expedition, Evans photographed "the daily living and environment of an average white family of tenant farmers," while Agee collected verbal records. The book includes Evans' photographs and James Agee's text. James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, photographs by Walker Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941), vii.
- (19) Berenice Abbott, "The Art of Photograph," radio interview by Leah Plotkin, 1939, Berenice Abbott Papers, box 9, folio 7, New York Public Library, New York.
- (20) *Ibid.*
- (21) Abbott, *A Guide to Better Photography*, 159.
- (22) *Ibid.*, 166, 169.
- (23) Yochelson, *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York*, unpaginated.
- (24) Elizabeth McCausland, "The Photography of Berenice Abbott," *Trend* 3, no.1 (March-April, 1935): 17.
- (25) *Ibid.*
- (26) Berenice Abbott, comment on *Church of God*, cited in O'Neal, *Berenice Abbott: American Photographer*, 146.
- (27) Berenice Abbott's letter to Elizabeth McCausland, October 29, 1934, *Elizabeth McCausland Papers*, Series 2: Correspondence, 1923-1960, box 2, folder 30, Archives of American Art, Washington DC. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/container/viewer/General-Correspondence--280176>, accessed May 6, 2014.
- (28) McCausland, "The Photography of Berenice Abbott," 8.
- (29) Sullivan, *Berenice Abbott, Photographer: An Independent Vision*, 84.
- (30) Weissman, *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott: Documentary Photography and Political Action*, 134.
- (31) McCausland, "The Photography of Berenice Abbott," 17.
- (32) Elizabeth McCausland's unpublished caption of *Flatiron Building* is cited in Weissman, *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott*, 138. Her revised text is "Accident led to the construction of the Flatiron Building. Winfield A. Stratton, a Colorado gold miner, had struck it rich and planned to build 'the most noble' residence in America at Cripple Creek. Going to Chicago to commission an architect, he met Daniel H. Burnham and George A. Fuller, who persuaded him to build the tallest office building in the country at that time, 1902. The triangular site produced a building severely criticized by contemporary writers." McCausland, *New York in the Thirties*, unpaginated.
- (33) Weissman, *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott: Documentary Photography and Political Action*, 140.
- (34) *Ibid.*, 134-35.
- (35) Weissman analyzes that this dynamic layout and flow of the images would produce a visual effect similar to that of filmstrip and investigates that this montage-like layout and design reflect Abbott's influence from John Heartfield of Berlin Dada as well as Russian Constructivists such as Alexander Rodchenko, both of whom Abbott would have known in Europe. *Ibid.*, 149-61.
- (36) Yochelson, *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York*, unpaginated.
- (37) Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries," *The New Yorker* (November 3, 1934): 50.
- (38) Unfortunately, this request was turned down because Mumford had no time to do so. Yochelson, *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York*, unpaginated.
- (39) This book includes seventy-two illustrations by Abbott. Henry Wysham Lanier, *Greenwich Village: Today & Yesterday*, photographs by Berenice Abbott (New York: Harper, 1949).
- (40) O'Neal, *Berenice Abbott: American Photographer*, 23.
- (41) *Ibid.*
- (42) *Ibid.*

**Figures are reproduced in/exhibited at:**

[Figs. 1, 2, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 21, 22, 23]

Elizabeth McCausland, *Changing New York*, photographs by Berenice Abbott (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1939).

[Figs. 3, 4, 5]

Ron Kurtz and Hank O'Neal, eds., *Berenice Abbott New York Early Work 1929-1931*, vol. 1 of *Berenice Abbott: The Unknown Abbott* (Göttingen: Steid; New York: Commerce Graphics, 2013).

[Figs. 6, 15, 16, 20]

Gaëlle Morel ed., *Berenice Abbott* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

[Fig. 9]

The Museum of the City of New York Collections, <http://collections.mcny.org/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=24UAYWRZKAQFP&SMLS=1&RW=1366&RH=626> (Accessed May 14, 2016).

[Fig. 11]

The Museum of the City of New York Collections,

<http://collections.mcny.org/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=24UAYWRZKA8JO&SMLS=1&RW=1366&RH=626>, (Accessed May 14, 2016).

[Fig. 14]

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, photographs by Walker Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941).

[Figs. 17]

“Berenice Abbott & Charles Marville: The City in Transition” exhibition at Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York, from February 27 to April 13, 2014, <http://www.howardgreenberg.com/exhibitions/berenice-abbott-and-charles-marville-the-city-in-transition#46>, (Accessed May 14, 2016).

[Fig. 18]

“Berenice Abbott & Charles Marville: The City in Transition” exhibition at Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York, from February 27 to April 13, 2014, <http://www.howardgreenberg.com/exhibitions/berenice-abbott-and-charles-marville-the-city-in-transition#51> (Accessed May 14, 2016).

[Fig. 19]

The Museum of the City of New York Collections, <http://collections.mcny.org/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=24UAYWRZKBOX8&SMLS=1&RW=1366&RH=626>, (Accessed May 14, 2016).

[Figs. 24, 25, 26, 27]

Henry Lanier, *Greenwich Village: Today & Yesterday*, photographs by Berenice Abbott (New York: Harper, 1949).

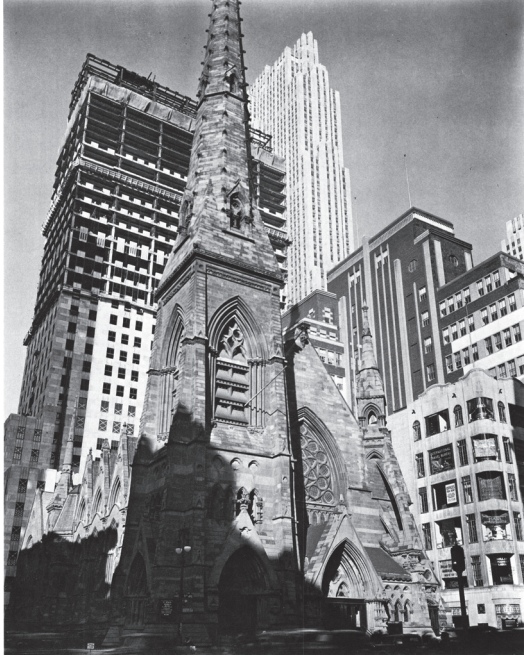


Figure 1 Berenice Abbott, "Rockefeller Center with Collegiate Church of St. Nicholas in Foreground," Fifth Avenue and 48th Street, Manhattan, December 8, 1936.



Figure 2 Berenice Abbott, "Glass-Brick and Brownstone Fronts," 211 and 209 East 48th Street, Manhattan, February 1, 1938.



Figure 3 Berenice Abbott, New York Scrap Books (Lower East Side, New York City), 1929-30.

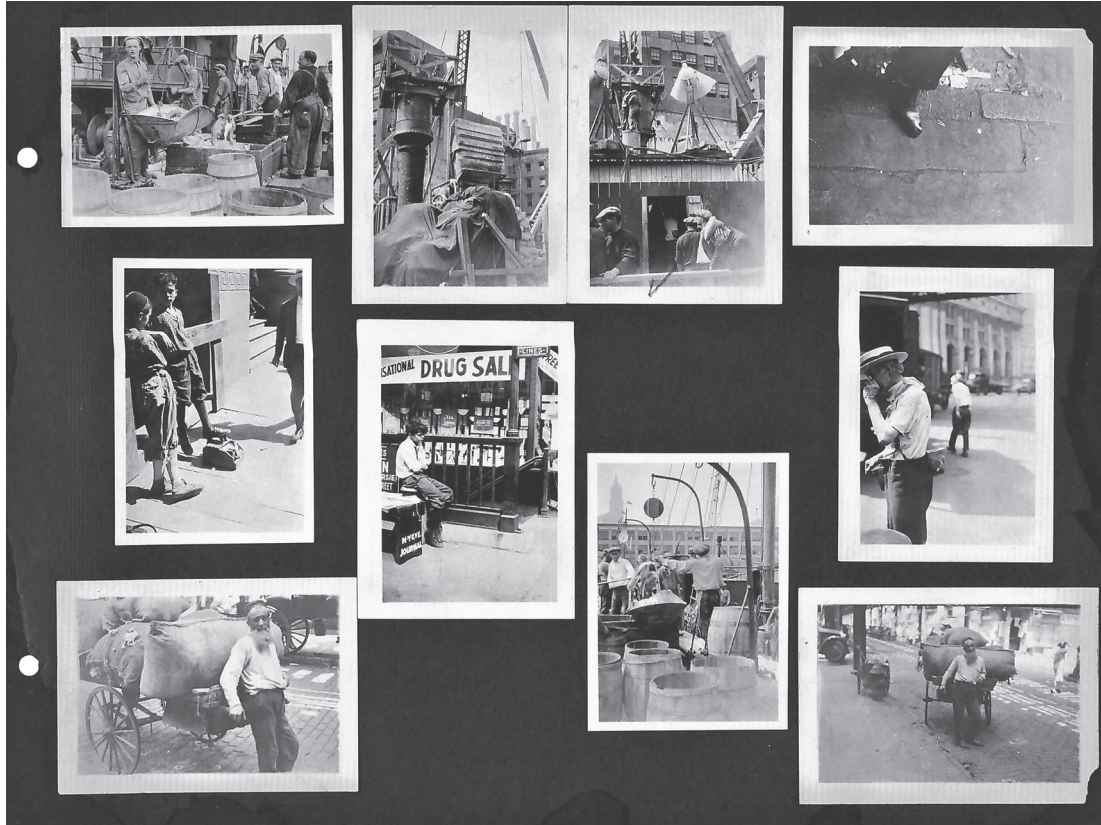


Figure 4 Berenice Abbott, New York Scrap Books (Lower East Side and Waterfront, New York City), 1929-30.



Figure 5 Berenice Abbott, New York Scrap Books (New York City), 1929-30.



Figure 6 Berenice Abbott, New York Scrap Books (Chinatown, New York City), 1929-30.



Figure 7 Berenice Abbott, "Roast Corn Man," Orchard and Hester Streets, Manhattan, May 3, 1938.



Figure 8 Berenice Abbott, "Shelter on the Water Front," Coenties Slip, Pier 5, East River, Manhattan, May 3, 1938.



Figure 9 Berenice Abbott, "Tempo of the City I," Fifth Avenue and 44th Street, May 13, 1938.



Figure 10 Berenice Abbott, "Tempo of the City II" (also called "Tempo of the City" in *Changing New York*), Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, September 6, 1938.



Figure 11 Berenice Abbott, "Exchange Place," taken from the 10th floor of Adams Building, 1933.



Figure 12 Berenice Abbott, "Hot Dog Stand," West Street and North Moore Street, Manhattan, April 8, 1936.



Figure 13 Berenice Abbott, "Traveling Tin Shop," Brooklyn, May 22, 1936.



Figure 14 Walker Evans, "Sharecroppers Family," Hale County, Alabama, 1936, from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941).



Figure 15 Berenice Abbott, "Excavation and Skelton of New Building," New York, circa 1930.

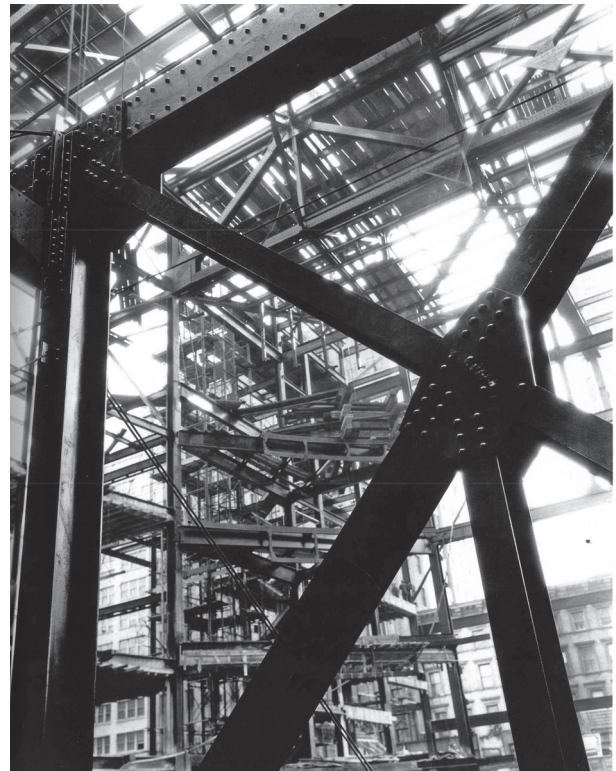


Figure 16 Berenice Abbott, "RCA Building under Construction," Rockefeller Center, New York City 1932.



Figure 17 Berenice Abbott, "Rockefeller Center," circa 1932.



Figure 18 Berenice Abbott, "Fulton Fish Market," June 18, 1936.



Figure 19 Berenice Abbott, "Church of God," 25 East 132nd Street, December 8, 1936.



Figure 20 Berenice Abbott, "Jay Street, no.115," Brooklyn, May 22, 1936.



Figure 21 Berenice Abbott, "Flatiron Building," Broadway and Fifth Avenue between 22nd and 23rd Streets, Manhattan, May 18, 1938.



Figure 22 Page Layout from *Changing New York*.



Figure 23 Berenice Abbott, "De Peyster Statue, Bowling Green," the first page of *Changing New York*.





Figure 24 Berenice Abbott, "Competing with the Sparrows," from *Greenwich Village: Today & Yesterday*.



Figure 25 Berenice Abbott, "Courtyard Behind the Houses of Washington Square South," from *Greenwich Village: Today & Yesterday*.



Figure 26 Berenice Abbott, "Zito's Bakery on Bleeker Street," from *Greenwich Village: Today & Yesterday*.

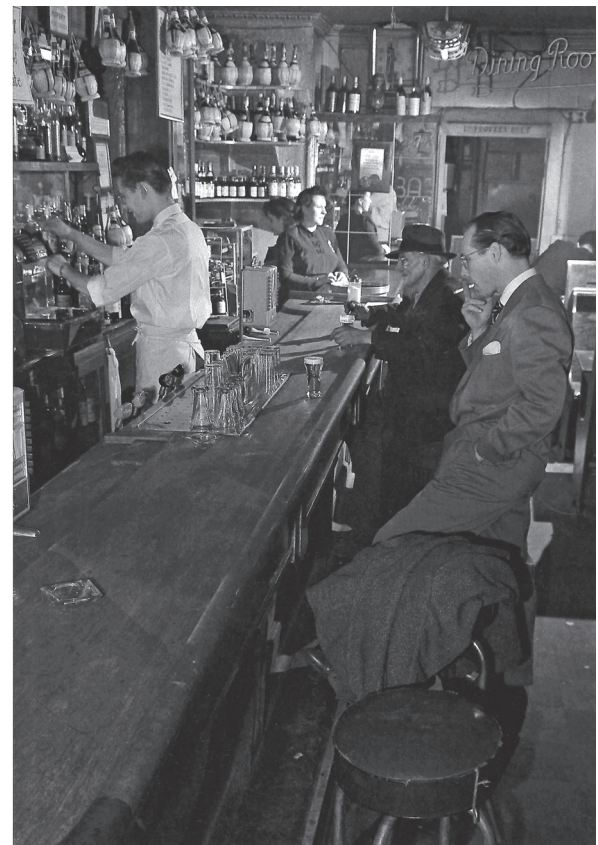


Figure 27 Berenice Abbott, "The Bar at Joe's," from *Greenwich Village: Today & Yesterday*.