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The Territory of the Edge: History, Planning, and New York City's "Sixth Borough"

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Kevin Bone, ed., *The New York Waterfront: Evolution and Building Culture of the Port and Harbor*, revised and updated edition. New York: The Monacelli Press, 2004. \$40.00. ISBN 1-4379-5080-9.

Ann L. Buttenweiser, *Manhattan Water-Bound: Planning and Developing Manhattan's Waterfront from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, 2nd edition. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999. \$19.95. ISBN 0-8156-2801-3. City of New York Department of City Planning City of New York, *Vision 2020: New York City Comprehensive Waterfront Plan*. \$35.

Kathleen Eagen Johnson, *The Hudson Fulton Celebration: New York's River Festival of 1909 and the Making of a Metropolis*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009. \$45.00. ISBN 0-8232-3021-X.

Phillip Lopate, *Waterfront: A Journey around Manhattan*. New York: Crown, 2004. \$26.00. ISBN 1-4379-7467-8.

Betsy McCully, *City at the Water's Edge: A Natural History of New York*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2007. \$24.95. ISBN 0-8135-3915-3.

In March 2011, Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced the official release of a comprehensive waterfront plan for New York City. Called *Vision 2020*, the plan is broad in scope, seeking to address the potential for new economic, ecological, and recreational uses along the more than 520 miles of shoreline within city limits. The Mayor and planners have dubbed this vast and diverse territory the "sixth borough." This essay explores how the subject of waterfront history, broadly defined, may be viewed in light of recent land use transformations along the city's edge and new planning initiatives like *Vision 2020*.

The waterfront, particularly in lower Manhattan, has been subject to nearly continuous change and transformation over more than 300 years. In this long process, from the first dock-building activity in the 1700s through the mid-twentieth century, but especially in the nineteenth century, city builders repeatedly prioritized port development to the exclusion of other waterfront uses. Property owners, real estate speculators, governmental entities, and business interests reshaped the edge to facilitate maritime-industrial uses, trade, and railroad linkages, with increased economic activity and urban prosperity defined as paramount concerns. However, as port activity declined due to containerization and other forces, city builders have sought to redefine the relationship of the city as a whole to its edges. A distinctly different type of waterfront focus, prioritizing residential and recreational development as essential to economic growth and urban progress, has emerged. As urban, environmental, and planning historians begin to narrate these urban landscape transformations, bringing contemporary planning efforts, real estate developments, and sustainable design approaches into New York's urban history, it seems an appropriate moment to reflect on writing about the waterfront. This review includes two recent classics of waterfront building and planning history, Ann Buttenweiser's

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Manhattan Water-Bound and *The New York Waterfront* edited by Kevin Bone, and three recent works, published since the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center: Phillip Lopate's *Waterfront*, Kathleen Eagen Johnson's *The Hudson Fulton Celebration*, and Betsy McCully's *City at the Water's Edge*.

Waterfront events, themes, and settings abound in urban histories of New York. Indeed, the city's historic development patterns, evident in its spatial structure and urban form, have been deeply intertwined with the repeated remaking of its shorelines. Whether one looks to the tidal strait known as the East River, the Hudson River, Jamaica Bay, Coney Island, or Newtown Creek, shorelines or waterfronts are everywhere in New York. As the city's waterfront plan notes, of the five boroughs, only one is not on an island. But even The Bronx, which sits on a peninsula, is surrounded by water and includes the Bronx River. Conceptualizing and framing the New York waterfront as a single territory and as a distinct city area requiring its own planning, from Hell's Gate to Kill van Kull, from the Hudson to the ocean, opens up a new challenge to urban, environmental, and planning historians.

In particular, the explosion of new works on sustainable development and "green cities" coupled with concerns about sea-level rise and/or storm surges, disaster planning, and urban resilience, brings attention to the waterfront as well as new ways of framing waterfront space. Not only does the waterfront "grow" to encompass all city shorelines, it also expands thematically to include habitat and harbor, estuary and edge, port and park. Or, as *Vision 2020* describes, the Natural Waterfront, the Public Waterfront, the Working Waterfront, the Redeveloping Waterfront, and the Blue Network (the plan's term for new opportunities, particularly the proposed expansion of water-based recreational activities, water-based public transportation, and renewable energy).

Before considering the plan, however, it is useful to revisit two classics of Manhattan's waterfront development history. In *Manhattan Water-Bound*, Ann Buttenweiser provides an historical overview of planning and development decisions from the 1600s to the 1990s with three themes in mind: "the importance of individual and group pressure, the ad hoc nature of government intervention, and the unforeseen consequences of changing technology" (p. 2). Throughout the book, she uses the term *the wall* to refer to physical as well as social and political barriers between the city and the water. She aims to explain the emergence of this divide historically while simultaneously noting the negative consequences of New Yorkers' separation from the shoreline. Implicitly, it is recreational opportunities that underlie this critique, rather than ecological or other values, and the benefits that public waterfront access could provide for health and relaxation, including psychic relief from the strains of city life for all socioeconomic groups.

Buttenweiser's narrative is also explicitly action-oriented, focusing on physical plans and improvement projects. Indeed, the notion of progress strongly informs the telling of the story. As Buttenweiser notes in the Introduction, "The search for a better urban shoreline is an old one." Of course, who defines better for whom, how, and when is what the story is all about. Put another way, we might say that the author herself favors intervention, shaping the shoreline to better meet human needs. As such, she regards planning initiatives, real estate investment, and redevelopment agency projects with an eye toward getting good work done for New Yorkers.

It should be noted that Buttenweiser devotes little attention to ecology or the natural features of these sites; the text is almost entirely devoted to questions of development and planning in a narrow sense. The explanation of the decline of docks is handled in a very brief statement on containerization, a topic left for other authors to address. In more than a few instances, local landscape knowledge is assumed, revealing both a deep understanding of Manhattan and a willingness to let readers not as familiar with the city consult a map or look up the references. The final section of the text reviews several projects of the period, including a highway and urban redevelopment project along the Hudson River that became known as Westway, the proposed Trump City at railroad yards located between 59th and 65th Streets along the Hudson River, and South Ferry at the southern tip

of Manhattan. This section is detail-laden and assumes a familiarity with planning jargon and project-opposition tactics, exhibiting an insider's perspective. It will not be accessible to some readers. She concludes, "After years of false starts and piecemeal rewards, we must search assiduously for the means to give Manhattan's waterfront back to its people" (p. 276).

Buttenweiser's analysis at times jumps from episode to episode, organized around key moments in essential locations. The book also changes tone when Buttenweiser turns to the planning history of Riverside Park, and its many rejected or unsuccessful redesign schemes. The earlier sections have shorter chapters that characterize overall patterns of development; they are less wedded to geographic area or project analysis. In contrast, the long Riverside Park chapter discusses organizations and politics in great detail. The author's personal perspective and planning values (a pro-park, pro-access stance) are also evident. Readers interested in a particular episode or era of waterfront development may not find this unevenness a problem, however, and the book can be quite useful in its parts or as a whole.

Buttenweiser's waterfront development and planning history offers much of great value to planning historians, particularly in her attention to how urban actors framed the "problem" of the waterfront from one era to the next. As the layers of the story build up, so does the "concrete rim" (p. 200) edging Manhattan. Although the 1990s projects she discusses at the end are no longer current, and certainly not where the "cutting edge" is spatially located as of 2012, *Manhattan Water-Bound* remains an indispensable source for understanding Manhattan's waterfront planning history.

The edited volume *The New York Waterfront* emerged from a multiyear, collaborative project including archival research, courses, and an exhibit at Cooper Union. Originally published in 1997, a second "revised and updated" edition appeared in 2004. Packed with photographs and illustrations, the book is organized around six major essays from seven different authors dealing with topics ranging from natural systems to the history of municipal administration and engineering practices of dock construction and maintenance. The notion of an historic "building culture" is a major theme, and by extension the special significance of a nearly forgotten archive (once the collection of the now-defunct Department of Docks) documenting in John Jay Iselin's words "the city's proud building heritage." Editor Kevin Bone in his own essay entitled "Horizontal City" argues that the "sheer quantity and pace of building, combined with advancing technologies, created a resourceful building culture unique to New York Harbor" (p. 87). Stanley Greenberg's original photographs, commissioned for this project, are another highlight, offering a unique perspective on the condition of waterfront landscapes (often characterized by derelict infrastructure) in the 1990s.

The authors acknowledge "Buttenweiser's. . . enormously valuable history of the waterfront" as well as a 1917 study titled *Wharves and Piers: Their Design, Construction and Equipment* by Carleton Greene. A few points of contrast with Buttenweiser's history are worth noting, however. Perhaps obvious already is the edited volume's architecture and engineering focus (rather than planning). Readers interested in the built environment of the wharves and piers themselves will find the book a treasure trove of information on structural design, building technologies, and architectural character (particularly Bone's essay). Less explicit, and perhaps more interesting, is the manner in which the two books approach the edge. While Buttenweiser sees a wall separating New York's denizens from their natural environment, Bone and his fellow authors see engineering ingenuity and design acumen in the structures that defined it and, in social terms, *an urban world unto itself* (p. 135) on the working waterfront. Indeed, the authors display an appreciation, even reverence, for the past, commenting repeatedly on how this remarkable decade-long building and construction undertaking has been overlooked and deserves more scholarly as well as popular attention than it has received.

In this regard, *The New York Waterfront* approaches the present and future waterfront with a spectrum of issues and questions in mind. With the port's historic development patterns and "building culture" in mind, the authors frame its future in terms of innovation and the potential for high-quality design. For example, Bone acknowledges material and cultural loss as well as creative interventions made possible

by the destruction, noting that the “disappearance of the harbor’s industrial roots has made available incredible opportunities for urban change (Preface).” The revised second edition also includes an essay from Gina Pollara. She assesses “Waterfront Development at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century,” arguing that waterfront redevelopment trends evident in 1997 had accelerated and intensified by 2004. Indeed, she declares a “new era” in waterfront development (p. 265). She observes a profound cultural and attitudinal shift in city builders’ approach to the waterfront, writing that the “growing awareness that the waterfront is one of New York’s most valuable assets and that its reclamation contributes invaluable to the quality of urban life galvanized civic commitment to change” (p. 265). However, the social character of this future “change,” and its purposes and beneficiaries, are left largely unexamined (two exceptions being the potential for great architecture to positively shape the image of the city and the benefits of public waterfront access in the form of parks and promenades). A review of projects and redevelopment sites concludes the book, including Hudson River Park, Riverside South Park, Manhattan’s East Side, the Brooklyn Waterfront, Governor’s Island, Staten Island, Olympics-related proposals, and lower Manhattan.

The strength of *The New York Waterfront* is its remarkable historical data and varied perspectives (textual as well as visual). It successfully delivers in its “intent. . . to offer a perspective” and “to inspire a quest” by introducing readers to a unique historical archive that offers potential for future research and by staking out a distinctive intellectual approach emphasizing the role played by structural engineers and architects in waterfront design and construction (p. 13). For these reasons, planning and urban studies students, as well as architectural historians, will likely find much of use in this volume for years to come.

In *Waterfront: A Journey Around Manhattan*, Phillip Lopate provides insightful comments on the changing waterfront’s meaning with regard to city form. Lopate engages with a broader set of urban issues, skillfully articulating to a popular audience what the edges may tell us about the whole. On the waterfront itself, he argues that “from a working port, to an abandoned, seedy no-man’s-land, to a highly desirable zone of parks plus upscale retail/residential, each new metamorphosis only incompletely [sheds] the earlier associations” (p. 5). The past lurks among us, he suggests. “We may think of Manhattan’s shoreline as a golden opportunity,” he continues, “a tabula rasa for leisure and luxury development, but the ghosts of stevedores, street urchins, and shanghaied sailors still haunt the milieu” (p. 5).

Lopate’s focus is on the present, but he brings in the past to make sense of what he sees on his “journey”: a series of short essays organized around place rather than theme or chronological period. He walks us through the West Side in Part One, from The Battery to Washington Heights, then the East Side in Part Two, from Pearl Street to Highbridge Park. Interspersed throughout are various essays labeled “Excursus.” In Chapter 23, for instance, he offers “Robert Moses, A Revisionist Take.” While Lopate is certainly not alone in this endeavor, as urban historians Joel Schwartz, Kenneth Jackson, Hillary Ballon, and Samuel Zipp among others have recently authored new perspectives on Moses, a brief excerpt from the opening paragraph illustrates what’s refreshing about Lopate’s prose, as well as his ability to weave together ideas of narrative, history, interpretation, and planning:

This Manichean tale [of] how Robert Moses ruined, or tried to ruin, New York. . . has proven extraordinarily useful, as master narratives often are, and has only two drawbacks: (1) it may not be true—or true anywhere approaching the extent that people now believe; (2) it prevents our interpreting New York’s history with greater accuracy and nuance, not to mention developing more sophisticated narratives that might better suit our planning for the city’s future.

A more succinct statement of how and why planning history matters could hardly be found. Lopate’s waterfront essays exhibit awareness of both historic scholarship and popular belief, while weaving in

deft description of the everyday built environment. The result is an exceptionally well-written book, accessible and engaging to planning historians as well as a general audience.

Unlike other histories that aim for an overview and often end up with an episodic recounting, Kathleen Eagen Johnson's *The Hudson-Fulton Celebration* allows us to ponder a moment in the evolution of the waterfront: a river festival held in September and October 1909. The changing port and the transformations in water-based transportation provide the background for the story, connecting the natural features of the harbor to the emergence of the powerful metropolis. Johnson skillfully examines the cultural milieu and the political context surrounding this rather bizarre historical pageant. As she explains, many civic elites saw the river as a powerful symbol and a potential vehicle for highlighting the history of New York City. They cemented together disparate but selected elements from a distinctly unpatriotic past (particularly in comparison to Boston), seeking to forge an American identity for a city with an increasing percentage of foreign-born residents. The organizers hoped to instill civic values and pride, particularly in the city's newest residents.

Like Eric Sanderson's *Mannahatta*, published the same year, *The Hudson-Fulton Celebration* invites the reader to reflect on anniversaries and timelines, as well as the future city, invoking the series of dates 1609–1909–2009. Johnson sketches an image of New York in 1909 as a city on the cusp of greatness, not yet the “world city” of 2009, but facing many of the same challenges New Yorkers would recognize in their own time: “. . .the United States' uncertain standing in a conflict-ridden world, the effect of new technologies on personal and community life, the integration of immigrants, and the resilience and reliability of the city's infrastructure” (p. 25). These connections and reference points enliven the text, which has a popular rather than scholarly tone, but also invite the criticism of presentism, that the author is reading too much 2009 into her account of 1909. Overall, this tendency is counterbalanced by sustained attention to the cultural dynamics of the period.

The strength of Johnson's book is the way that it directs our attention to the cultural, rather than physical, making of the waterfront. The lavish illustrations in this coffee table-sized book, many of them showing souvenirs and other popular ephemera, provide ample evidence as well as suggesting the commercial opportunities created by the event. Festival organizers produced and distributed particular types of images such as romanticized scenes of Native Americans along the river or heroic portraits of Henry Hudson and Robert Fulton. They sought to produce historical associations by juxtaposing the two figures in a tableau of greatness. They aimed to inculcate patriotism in spectators by staging parades intended to be instructional as well as entertaining, on land as well as on water. While often comically strange, and perhaps for that very reason, these devices suggest the manifold ways in which New Yorkers' view of the waterfront is mediated and how urban actors seek to influence those perceptions towards various ends. In this regard, *The Hudson-Fulton Celebration* is an intriguing work, offering a unique take on New York City's waterfront history.

The brief introductory essay in Betsy McCully's *City at the Water's Edge: A Natural History of New York* is the strongest part of the book. Titled “Coming Home,” this personal reflection relates the author's changing perception of New York City and its relationship to nature. She views the city in human terms, writing, “When I came to New York City. . . my vision of a vibrant, magical city with a glittering skyline soon gave way to an ugly reality of ubiquitous garbage, a crumbling infrastructure, and the sense of crowding that creates tension, even violence. Yet, I chose to affirm this urban landscape as my home ground . . . as a human community that is part of a bioregion” (p. x). By rejecting metaphors of the city as a machine or an organism and instead emphasizing human agency, the essay offers food for thought for city planning and urban studies students when considering the cultural construction of city and nature as well as the power of metaphor.

However, the rest of *City at the Water's Edge* disappoints. Despite the great potential implied in its title, its blend of personal account and historical detail fails to cohere. While McCully incorporates a wide variety of geological, anthropological, hydrological, botanical, and zoological facts into

this set of thematic essays, inspired by what the book jacket labels “twenty years of nature exploration,” it suffers from a formulaic approach to the organization of each chapter and a lack of synthesis. Individual chapters tend to begin with a well-written and thoughtful personal anecdote placing the author in a natural place in New York City, walking along the beach or shoreline, but then quickly assume a different voice, dryly relating historical or scientific information. The book also would have benefited from a concluding essay to tie the material together. It abruptly ends with an essay titled “Weathering” that could have appeared anywhere in the volume.

In the current period of rapid transformation along the waterfront, with parks and luxury housing springing up everywhere, and with widespread acceptance of sustainability as a planning goal, planning historians will find much of interest in the city’s latest waterfront plan. *Vision 2020* is an ambitious 192-page document, covering all five boroughs and the entire 520 miles of waterfront in New York City. The bulk of the text is devoted to “citywide strategies,” eight broadly framed goals, and “neighborhood reach strategies,” a breakdown of projects and initiatives by borough in the form of maps and charts. The eight waterfront planning goals are increase public access, enliven the waterfront, support the working waterfront, improve water quality, restore the natural waterfront, enhance the Blue Network, improve government oversight, and increase climate resilience. The document contains four chapters, three appendices, and introductions by both the Mayor and the City Planning Director. It is lavishly illustrated with color photographs, maps, and charts.

The primary failure of *Vision 2020* is that it does not articulate how its goals interrelate, spur trade-offs, or present opportunities for synthesis. It implies that New Yorkers can have it all and that myriad land use combinations and user groups are compatible. It also obscures how public processes have produced private benefits, especially in the area of real estate development. Relentlessly upbeat, *Vision 2020* rarely discusses the problems that one imagines it is meant to address. The plan says nearly nothing about waterfront history or how we got to where we are today: notably, with regard to pollution and contamination histories. Two brief references to recent history fail to provide any more than the most cursory sense of historic context: a three-paragraph summary of the decline of the port since 1955 and, sprinkled throughout, city “achievements” since the adoption of the 1992 plan. As a result, the plan suffers from a lack of historical perspective, offering a free-floating sort of enthusiasm and seeming at times to say: “We can only make things better.”

Nevertheless, one may discern a legitimate, if flawed, civic purpose in the pages of *Vision 2020*. I would summarize this approach as planning-as-constituency-building, or making a plan to get people to care. Employing high-quality graphic design, avoiding controversy, and framing information as neutral, *Vision 2020* seeks to lightly persuade without burdening the reader or politically disrupting any ongoing initiatives. It creatively uses marketing slogans and branding techniques such as labeling water-based transportation and activities as a new “Blue Network.” It presents the waterfront as a policy and planning issue worth considering and provides information on how one might get more involved. It’s more guidebook than policy document, reflecting both Mayor Bloomberg’s leadership style and an example of early twenty-first century media-savvy planning communication.

Vision 2020 captures (and maps!) a new, expanded notion of waterfront in New York City. And it imagines these urban-natural landscapes as a territory of their own: the Sixth Borough, a term suggesting in equal measure a dedicated planning focus on the part of the city and the proverbial opening of a new frontier for real estate activity and gentrification. By looking to the past, we might raise new questions about this process of transformation, the character of these changes, and the values they reflect. The New York City waterfront histories reviewed here suggest the ongoing challenges presented by pollution, greed, bureaucratic, and legal wrangling, and injustice, but also mark the significance of this transformation for the lives of New Yorkers, reshaping landscapes of work, play, health, and home in the city.