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A Chance to See the City Change, Site by Site

By [SAM ROBERTS](#)

At the start of the 20th century, [Henry James](#) pronounced New York “a provisional city,” a phrase echoed decades later by [Le Corbusier](#). The architectural historian Max Page suggested that “creative destruction” — the intentional razing and rebuilding of New York — represented “a crucial dynamic of urban life.” O. Henry summed it up more succinctly. “It’ll be a great place,” he said, “if they ever finish it.”

The city’s physical evolution is vividly illustrated in photographs, and a rich trove of them has been made available to the public. Between 1938 and 1943, about 700,000 stark, unsentimental black-and-white pictures of properties in every borough — known as tax photographs — were taken for the city, to make assessments and as an employment program for the federal [Works Progress Administration](#). They have been available to the public for 20 years.

In the 1980s, the city commissioned a second set of photos for another round of assessments. That time, 800,000 properties were photographed (like the first set, each photo carries the property’s block and lot number), and the curious now have access to that set, too. Photographs from both batches can be [purchased from the city](#). A property’s block and lot number can be found by [entering the address at webapps.nyc.gov:8084/cics/fin2/find001i](#).

A New York Times photographer returned to several of the sites this year, capturing in some cases the kind of transformation and mutation that has been a constant in the life of the city, but in other cases showing how some spots have been strangely immune to change.

“Many of the earlier photos are possibly the only existing ones of certain properties,” said Brian G. Andersson, the city’s commissioner of records and information services. “Some properties are no longer there, some have changed drastically, some barely at all,” he said, and virtually every one evokes memories from people who lived or worked at those sites or remember them as passers-by.

“A single photograph gives the illusion that time stops,” Douglas Levere wrote in “New York Changing” after photographing the same sites in the 1990s that the photographer Berenice Abbott chronicled on film and published in books and elsewhere in the 1930s. “A rephotograph lifts that illusion.”

More photographs and the history of specific properties are [available at nytimes.com/nyregion](http://nytimes.com/nyregion).

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