

Raymond Charles Rauscher  
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# Brooklyn's Bushwick – Urban Renewal in New York, USA

Community, Planning  
and Sustainable Environments



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*Cover image:* Renewal in Brooklyn Neighborhoods: Bushwick row houses (Cedar Street, 1982)

Photograph courtesy of Ray Charles Rauscher

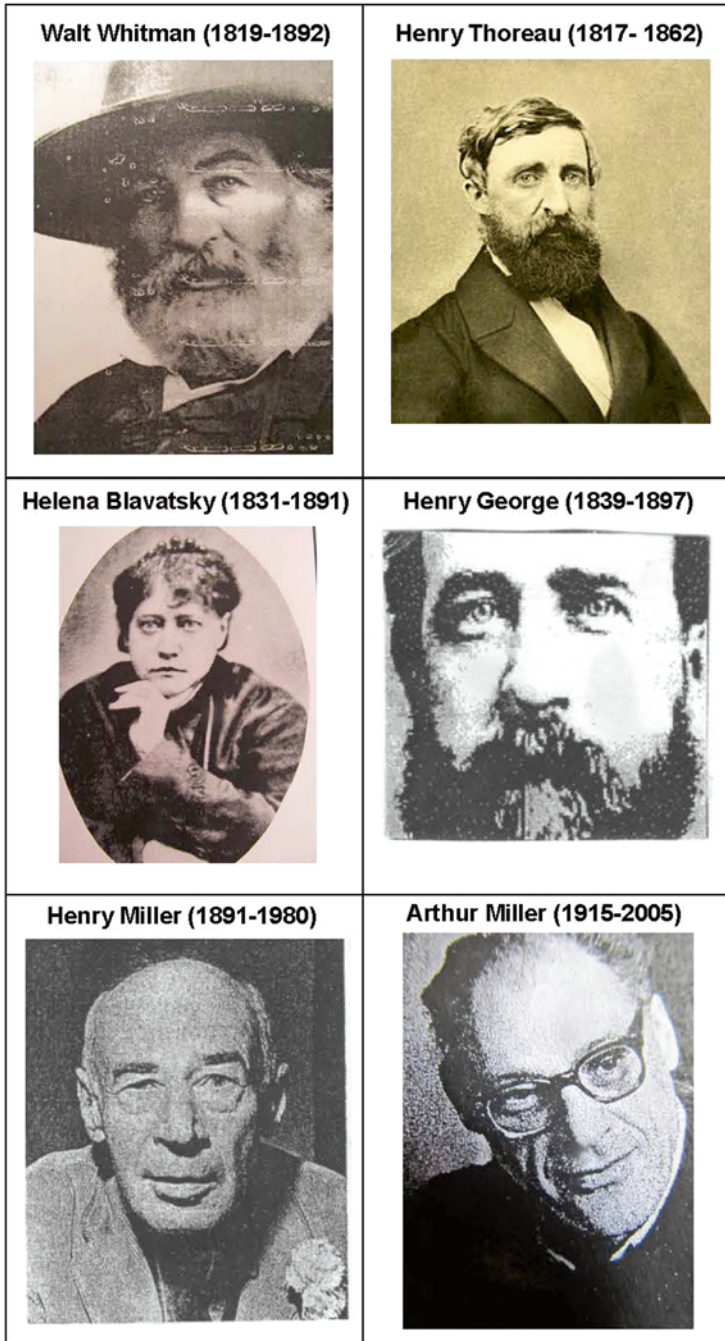
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*This book is dedicated to six universalist writers spanning nearly 100 years (birthdays between 1819 and 1915). These individuals were either born in, or lived part of their lives in, New York City, including: Walt Whitman, Henry Thoreau, Helena Blavatsky, Henry George, Henry Miller, and Arthur Miller (Plate 1). Universalist thinking promoted liberating philosophies and environmental perspectives within their writings.*

*Walt Whitman (1819–1892) was born on Long Island (now the Walt Whitman Center, West Hills, Long Island). He was educated in Brooklyn and lived there for a number of years. He was editor of the Brooklyn Eagle in 1846 and published his famous Leaves of Grass in 1855. He also wrote Drum-Taps (1865), Democratic Vistas (1871), Passage to India (1872) and Specimen Days (1882). Whitman also lived, until his death, in Camden, New Jersey (1873–1892).*

*Whitman, were he alive, would have covered the September 11, 2001, terror attack on the World Trade Centre in Lower Manhattan (Plate 2). Whitman at one stage*



**Plate 1** Universalist Writers Associated with New York City. *Left to Right:* Sources: Mark Van Doren, Ed.; Theosophical Society; Henry George Society, NYC; Encyclopedia Britannic; Wikipedia

Whitman walked Lower Manhattan observing the American resilience after the terrorist attack 9/11  
Whitman's heart always burned for the City of mixed national groups forging new destinies  
He walks today as he reminded us in his poems he would be there a thousand years later  
Today he sees his New York flickering with candles and grasping to regain its lost heart

Whitman tapped the spirit of people in their intimate life and work engagements  
He saw the fireman, office worker, street vendor and boot maker as the City itself  
Whitman spoke of the brisling muscle and misty eyed romantic hearts filling New York  
New York for Whitman was the crucible of all America fusing into one

Whitman inspired all Americans to see their deeds as a national tune in stepping forward  
Irving Berlin reflected this gift in his embodiment of national pride in God Bless America  
Arthur Miller translated humankind's constant search for sanity and compassion  
As Easter follows Good Friday, America will see the Whitman spirit fully regained

**Plate 2** Walt Whitman Looks On (Source: Ray Rauscher, Sydney, 2013 (unpublished))

*of his journalism life worked in Lower Manhattan not far from what is now seeing new buildings rise at Ground Zero. The New Yorker's and American's resolve to heal and understand the impact of such a tragedy would have impressed Whitman. Out of the rubble with nearly 4,000 lives lost, the idea of 'fortress' America as impenetrable was also lost. Whitman was always the observer of the American spirit and its democratic ways. He championed equality and justice as everyone's birth right, a reminder of the gift Whitman gave to America. A poem to Whitman is a thank you for his contributions.*

*Whitman would have admired Henry Thoreau's writings. Thoreau studied and wrote about nature and its relation to the human condition, especially in his famous book Walden (1846). He lived for several years in Staten Island, New York City, where*



*he stayed with fellow writer Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) who wrote Nature (1836). Thoreau associated with the idealist philosophies advocated by Emerson, Fuller, and Alcott. They held high the beliefs of an ideal state of life going beyond the physical and empirical, with personal intuition as vital to life's decisions.*

*While Whitman was working in New York City (middle-to-end 1800s), Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891) (Russian domiciled in New York City for a time) launched the progressive thinking Theosophical Society in the City (1875). The Society's three principles (popular with many New Yorkers at the time), being to: form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color; encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science; and, investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in humanity.*

*In New York City at this time (middle-to-end 1800s) there was Henry George (1839–1897) (spent early years in Pennsylvania), a seer and philosopher of urban land use reform. George wrote about people's right to a better share in the prosperity that urban areas were creating. He saw degradation forming as affluence grew, and thus wanted to find out why this happens. Whitman would have been aware of George's work Our Land and Land Policy (1871). Here George examines land speculation in cities, showing there was too little return to governments (the people) in land transactions. He later wrote his popular*

*work Progress and Poverty (1879), considered one of the greatest works of the English language (translated into almost every language). The perplexing question George struggled with in his life (poverty co-existing with abundant wealth) was ever evident in New York City. The forthrightness of George (bearded and sharp of eye) would have presented a formidable figure challenging those in city government to address poverty and land use reforms . He ran for mayor of New York City, polled second and ahead of Theodore Roosevelt (mayoral race was won by Abram Stevens Hewitt). The Robert Schalkenbach Foundation based in New York City ([www.schalkenbach.org](http://www.schalkenbach.org)) (13 May 2013) claims “the men who believed in what George advocated called themselves disciples.” George is buried at Green-Wood cemetery, Brooklyn.*

*The fourth person, who came later, within the universalist writers was Henry Miller (born 1891, New York City). Miller was brought up in Brooklyn and wrote about his childhood experiences in Black Spring (Miller 1936). He was always ready to speak in candor about the urban condition and injustices midst the chaos in places such as New York City. Miller had a gift of comedy in writing about people facing the challenges of city living, especially the cost in human terms of mechanization and commercialization. Henry Miller wanted to get to the roots of the American nature and experience, so he travelled across the country to gain the knowledge of American life. The Air-Conditioned Nightmare (Miller 1945) proved an excellent discourse*

*on American life at that time. This work was reflective of the other greats of liberal thinking and writing noted above, Whitman, Thoreau, Blavatsky, and George. History proved there would be many other writers on these subjects along writers' footsteps on the streets of New York City.*

*The fifth and final person who would have had a good deal in common with all those above, though from a different era, is Arthur Miller. He was born in New York City in 1915. Miller had a social awareness growing out of his experiences of the Depression years (1930s). He could thus portray the insecurities of human existence within urban settings, and did so in *Death of a Salesman* (Miller 1949). Here was a book that focused on the urban man, facing the challenges of a struggling family in hard times (reflective of many Brooklyn families in the 1940s–1950s).*

# Book Overview

The book offers a case example model of the urban communities of Bushwick and Northeast Brooklyn, New York City. The story of Bushwick is the central starting point, given its recovery from decades of decline. The book commences (Chap. 1) by examining the urban history of Bushwick and Northeast Brooklyn up to the 1960s. Topics include: famous people in Brooklyn's past; disappearance of native American Indians; significance of the Battle of Long Island (1776); Old Brooklyn's Towns pre-1854; the emerging of the City of Brooklyn (1850s); and, finally Bushwick's changing street patterns, and rise of industry, institutions, commercial areas, services and churches.

Bushwick planning, from 1970s to current times, is reviewed in Chap. 2. This period includes the demise of Bushwick that culminated in the catastrophic Bushwick arson fires and looting in the New York City blackout of 1977. In this incident, a large section of Bushwick housing was lost as well as scores of businesses (extent of loss examined in Chap. 2). The reader is introduced to the recovery of Bushwick, including results of research coming from author's field trips to Bushwick and Northeast Brooklyn over several years. The recovery of Bushwick, particularly, in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s is reviewed. Finally, examples of 'green design' within developments and newly emerging principles of 'sustainable urban planning' (SUP) are commented on.

Chapter 3 steps back from the immediacy of Bushwick and Northeast Brooklyn to examine urban change from a theoretical perspective. The chapter first examines the movement of urban planning from early practices to current applications of sustainable urban planning (SUP). The advances in sustainable urban planning (SUP), and how it could be applied to Bushwick and Northeast Brooklyn (and wider New York City, or anywhere) is examined. The chapter covers: defining sustainability; reviewing changes to urban planning practice; introduction to ecologically sustainable development (ESD); and, the adoption of sustainability criteria within urban planning. To understand sustainable urban planning (SUP), the chapter reviews the historical changes in urban planning schools over more than

half a century; three schools are examined. Finally, a critique is completed on ESD and its application within urban planning, from international level to local.

With an awareness of sustainable urban planning (SUP), the next chapter (Chap. 4) examines New York City planning instruments and the innovative structure of local community boards. A key urban planning tool used by the City of New York (the administration), the 197-a Plan process, is examined. This planning process is a community planning system established by the City of New York in 1975. The 197-a Plan process was created to assist planning and revitalization of areas like Bushwick and Northeast Brooklyn. In addition, the urban planning roles of local City of New York chartered 'Community Boards' (CBs) are examined, especially around the planning instruments as the 197-a Plan process.

The application of the brownfields development planning and the 197-a Plan process (including engagement of Community Boards) to urban renewal projects in Bushwick and Northeast Brooklyn are examined in Chap. 5. In addition, to gain a comparative look at urban planning beyond these areas, the chapter looks at two prime Brooklyn neighborhoods. These are Brooklyn Downtown and Southeast Brooklyn (incorporating Brooklyn's historical recreation area of Coney Island). Conclusions are drawn on the applications of these urban planning instruments (and role of Community Boards), including whether principles of sustainable urban planning (SUP) (Chap. 3) were applied.

A vital ingredient in successful urban planning (local, regional, city or state) is the education of citizens in how planning works and how citizens can be involved in that planning (Chap. 6). This education encompasses, for example, students understanding neighborhoods and how they function. Education authorities are increasingly aware of the value in exposing students to the theory and practice of urban planning, especially as that planning affects the neighborhoods those students live in. This chapter thus looks at a number of innovative education programs, using the Bushwick neighborhood as a case example of changing education approaches.

A select number of high schools experimenting in teaching urban planning as a subject, including practical student work within neighborhoods, is examined. The chapter examines aspects of this education approach and comments on exposing students to urban planning experiences. The chapter reflects back (in examining the relevance of today's classroom in preparing students for an urban future) on: a. lessons from the history of urban planning in Bushwick and Northeast Brooklyn (Chaps. 1 and 2); b. theory and practice of the emerging sustainable urban planning (SUP) (Chap. 3); and, c. structures and applications of the City of New York planning instruments (i.e. 197-a Plan process) and Community Boards (Chaps. 4 and 5). Conclusions are reached on the value to students to exposure to new education experiments. This includes the value of students' engagement in practical exercises in neighborhoods. Finally, the value of these education experiments to students' academic futures is commented on.

Chapter 7 looks at common themes identified and conclusions reached within the chapters presented. The chapter, from these conclusions, examines future directions of urban planning (with hindsight of Bushwick, Northeast Brooklyn,

Downtown Brooklyn and Southeast Brooklyn planning). Finally, the directions of sustainable urban planning (SUP) and the means of advancing SUP are commented upon. The reader, in pursuing further studies of the subject, is reminded of the availability of web-based reference resources on matters raised within the book and generally on the subjects of sustainable urban planning (SUP) within Appendix 3.



# Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the contributions of residents of Bushwick and Northeast Brooklyn, past and present. The resilience of all Bushwick residents and workers contributed to the compiling of this story. To gain a historical perspective of changes in Bushwick through the 1950s and 1960s that may have flowed into the 1970s, We set up a research based group email. The group (seven in all and living in different parts of America) were from the Bushwick High School Class of 1961 (see Chap. 6 and Appendix 1). We also liaised with Bushwick High School (which in 2003 became three schools in one campus, including the Academy of Urban Planning and School of Social Justice) (Chap. 6). *The Bushwick Brooklyn USA Story* (Rauscher 2010, unpublished) (CD copy) was personally presented in 2010 to: Monique Darrisaw (Principal), Adam Schwartz (Lecturer), and Josh Lapidus (Program Manager) from the Academy of Urban Planning; Amanda Eyrich-Daly (Director of Education, Brooklyn Center of Urban Environments) (center ceased in 2009); Leilani Dawson, Education Unit, Brooklyn Historical Society; and, Dr. Guy Hehner, Dir of Education, Henry George School of Social Science, 30th St. Manhattan.

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Governments are always working behind the scenes and results of efforts can take decades to see. The City of New York's Dept of Housing and Preservation played (and continue to play) a major part in Bushwick's and Northeast Brooklyn's recovery. Behind good planning is usually good elected officials and staff. Thus all City of New York's past and present mayors, Brooklyn Councilors, Brooklyn Borough controllers, and staff deserve acknowledgment for efforts to face the tough urban challenges that renewal of Bushwick and Northeast Brooklyn present. Mayor Lindsay, in the 1960s, was one of the Mayors of the City of New York to see the problems looming in Bushwick and Northeast Brooklyn. His successors, including immediate past Mayor Bloomberg and all concerned, continued the work that sees an ever emerging renewal in this part of the City. We wish the new Mayor (109th for the City) Bill de Blasio, new Councilors and the administration the best of luck in their dedicated work ahead.

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