



"Henry Street, 1935: Henry and Market Streets, Looking West."

PHOTO HISTORY

Take Two

In *New York Changing*, Douglas Levere reshoots America's largest city from Berenice Abbott's 1930s vantage points, and proves that time doesn't always stand still in photographs.

By Russell Hart and Krissa Corbett Cavouras



"Tempo of the City I, 1938: Fifth Avenue and Forty-fourth Street."



"Henry Street, 1998."



"Tempo of the City I, 1997."

In 1996, when Douglas Levere was living on Broome Street in New York's trendy Soho district, he attended an art auction that would change his photographic life. One of the items for sale, a vintage black-and-white print by Berenice Abbott titled "Broadway near Broome Street," transfixed him. Levere realized that he was looking, essentially, at the view outside his building—only six decades earlier. "I could not help but compare and contrast," he writes in the introduction to *New York Changing: Revisiting Berenice Abbott's New York* (Princeton Architectural Press, \$40). "And before long I was imagining what my camera would see."

Levere's new book completes a six-year project in which he rephotographed many of the New York City scenes—including the view of Broadway near Broome Street—that Abbott had shot in the late 1930s on commis-

sion from the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Though the pictures' first published form, 1939's *Changing New York*, was marketed as a guidebook for tourists visiting that year's World's Fair, Abbott's purpose was more high-minded: to document the massive architectural transformation of America's largest city in a decade that began with the Empire State Building rocketing to the sky. Abbott's artful images present a riveting mix of traditional structures that have long since been razed and modern buildings, some of which remain to this day. In precisely duplicating Abbott's chosen vantage points, and as much as possible matching the photographs' quality of light, time of day, time of year, and even depth of field, Levere created a dramatic yet detailed record of more monumental change wrought by the intervening years.

So that readers can scrutinize that record



"Manhattan I, 1936: From Pier 11, East River, between Old Slip and Wall Street."

in its every detail, *New York Changing's* handsomely-reproduced images are displayed side-by-side on facing pages, 81 pairs in all, with Abbott on the left and Levere on the right. In a few cases, the difference is surprisingly slight, with old buildings spared by the caprice of urban renewal. In some cases, though, it's so dramatic that the eye finds a single common reference point—the landmark spire of the Woolworth building, once the world's tallest, peeking over row-houses, or a decorative sewer grate left over from an old street's cobblestone days. In a few cases, the viewer must take the photographer at his word that he is standing in the same place that Abbott set up her tripod and mounted an 8x10 view camera.

Leveré, who was born in a New York City suburb and graduated from SUNY Buffalo with a degree in design, had early misgivings about his undertaking. "Rephotographing is

a tricky idea," he writes. "I grew up believing that inspiration had to come from within." But he found reassurance in *Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project*, a much-admired 1984 book that paired 19th-century photographs of the American West, mostly by William Henry Jackson and Timothy O'Sullivan, with late-1970s views taken from the same vantage point by Mark Klett and a team of four others. Just as Klett's experience as a landscape photographer informed his project, Levere's interests drove his effort. "I had always had a passion for American architectural history and city planning and was especially curious about how buildings age and serve different purposes throughout their lives," writes Levere. "In a sense I would be collaborating with Abbott on a continuing document of New York City—a heady thought. At the same time, by embracing her work, I might discover a vision uniquely my own."

Anyone familiar with Klett's Rephotographic Survey knows how meticulously he and his colleagues attempted to match the 19th-century originals. After locating a view's precise coordinates by referring to a copy of the original print and shooting test Polaroids, the process often revealed the actual swings, tilts, and other adjustments the 19th-century photographers had applied to their large-format cameras. Levere's approach was no less exacting—he even adjusted his composition with transparent overlays of Abbott's prints placed on his view camera's ground glass—but he started with one advantage provided by fellow photographer Todd Watts. Watts, who for many years had been printing Abbott's work for the fine-art market, offered Levere the use of a Century Universal 8x10 field camera, the model with which Abbott had created *Changing New York*. In fact Watts had once offered the very same camera



"Manhattan I, 1998."

to Abbott. "She asked for it to be painted black with salmon fittings," says Levere, who calls the camera a "totemic object." "But she died before he could give it to her."

The main technical problem Levere faced in trying to match Abbott's pictures was one that Abbott herself had griped about when shooting the original project: not enough lenses. Abbott historian Bonnie Yochelson recalled that Abbott had remedied the problem by "removing something" from her lenses. Levere immediately realized that his muse had been shooting with convertible lenses—optics that can be changed in focal length by detaching a portion of the lens itself. Levere promptly unscrewed the front element of his 9½-inch Goerz Dagor, a venerable brand he'd been buying since learning that Abbott had used it, instantly doubling its magnifying power. As it had for Abbott, that practice more or less doubled the number of focal lengths at Levere's disposal.

The other difficulty Levere faced was the degree to which New York City had become an even busier, more densely built place in the intervening decades. This was the lure of the idea, of course, but it was partly why Abbott herself had abandoned a 1954 plan to rephotograph her own original project. What had for Abbott been wide-open corners to shoot from had often erupted into subway entrances. The spot from which she shot a long view downtown from Manhattan's South Street had become an on-ramp for the perilous FDR Drive. In Levere's rephotograph of Abbott's visually complex take on the Brooklyn Bridge from a now-defunct railyard, the bridge itself is almost entirely blotted out by an overpass—making the picture fascinating in its comparative power but nondescript on its own.

A busy Manhattan street scene bisected by the stanchion of an ornamental clock proved to be one of Levere's trickiest re-shoots. Abbott

had made the shot from the top of a double-decker bus at 1:10 P.M., according to the clock. "The city said there was absolutely no way they'd allow me to stop traffic to re-create the shot," Levere says. Instead, the photographer befriended the driver of his rented double-decker bus, who willingly feigned engine trouble at just the right time and place so that Levere could make his match.

Above all, Levere's ambitious project gave him an acute awareness of the organic nature of cities such as New York. "I realized that I had been living in the illusion of a permanent now," the photographer explains. "My ultra-happening Broome Street would look quaint and dusty six decades into the future." And with that realization came a more fundamental discovery about the nature of photography. Says Levere, "A single photograph gives the illusion that time stops. A rephotograph lifts this illusion." ■