

The Harlem River and Associated Neighborhoods: New York's Forgotten Waterfront

Physically and historically, New York City has been shaped by its relationship to its waterfront. While the Hudson and East Rivers are commonly recognized for the grandeur of their scenery and structures, the Harlem River figures less prominently in the collective consciousness of New Yorkers. Despite its important role in the development of New York City, the Harlem River, which is found along the northeastern shore of Manhattan and the southern banks of the Bronx, today stands as an undervalued and marginal civic resource. Primarily as a result of shifting economic trends, the Harlem River no longer endows its attendant communities with the same level of importance that it did in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, we soon stand to lose much of its historic built fabric if preservation measures are not rapidly, strategically implemented.

The loss of historic built fabric along the Harlem River amounts to nothing less than an assault on the identity of New York City. As other parts of Manhattan's waterfront become increasingly homogenized due to real estate speculation, high-income residential development, and a sometimes single minded drive for green space, large tracts of a once diverse architectural landscape are vanishing. The Harlem River, on the other hand, remains a heterogeneous stretch of old industrial buildings, parks infrastructure and residential developments. This diversity has been preserved over the decades by its relative anonymity. Unfortunately, due to negligence on the part of the city, community members and even some preservationists, we have given the Harlem River and its neighborhoods the title "New York's Forgotten Waterfront," a designation that operates as both an asset and a burden for the area.

The Harlem River connects the Hudson River at Spuyten Duyvil and extends to the East River at Hell's Gate. Its shoreline touches upon a wide range of industrial, commercial, recreational and residential developments that have developed over the past century and a half. The river is home to the once-busiest terminal market in the United States, some of New York's earliest potable water infrastructure, numerous nineteenth and early twentieth century residences and industrial buildings, and several notable engineering achievements. In fact, for centuries, the banks of the Harlem River have been filled in, torn out, and re-directed, turning the natural shoreline of the river into a synthetic feature of the built environment.

Despite its current relative obscurity, the Harlem River rivals its neighboring bodies of water in its wealth of historic fabric and onetime profound role in supporting New York's rise to prominence. Although it has been the subject of some attention by city planners, community leaders and non-profit organizations, compared to other waterfront areas in the Bronx and Manhattan, the Harlem River's historic merit and important buildings remain under-recognized. The river today, along with its surrounding parks, bridges industrial landscapes and particularly neighborhoods, possesses a tremendous wealth of largely neglected and comparatively marginalized architecture, much of which deserves greater recognition for its collective architectural and historical contribution to New York City.

The neighborhoods along the river remain connected to and divided by the water, in the sense that the river has played a factor in the growth of each, yet has also acted as a boundary, enabling the development of distinct characteristics. An individual analysis of these communities as well as their relationships to each other and to the river, informs our plan for preserving their historic structures. Through this process, the Harlem River's historic role as an asset and a resource for its neighborhoods and built environments can be revived. But in order to preserve the area's invaluable architectural resources, we must seek to understand the pertinent challenges enmeshed within these communities. Challenges involving the legacy of a departed and waning industrial economy, underserved populations, aging and obsolete infrastructure, access to waterfront recreation and vistas, under-built lots, and unrecognized historic resources all play a role in actively threatening the Harlem River area, while contributing to its marginal status.

Our study area includes portions of the shoreline communities of Mott Haven, the Bronx Terminal Market, Eastern Harlem, Inwood and Marble Hill, including some of the industrial sites and parks in between the established neighborhoods. The specific criteria for defining the boundaries of this study area included:

- Current and historical areas that relate to the Harlem River
- Physical connections to the Harlem River
- Places that contain view corridors relating to the Harlem River
- Historical maritime structures related to the Harlem River including docks, slips, canals, boathouses, rail yards and ferry houses
- Infrastructure such as bridges, railways and subway tunnels that cross or border the river
- Alluvial plains and ecological coastal wetlands
- Recreational areas such as parkland

Within these boundaries, we have identified three geographic regions composed of different communities, but sharing similar development issues and priorities. We organized our analysis of these areas from the south to the north to reflect New York's historic development pattern:

The Southern section of the river includes a mixture of uses on both sides of the water. Since the mid-nineteenth century, this region has been composed of heavy industrial buildings and infrastructure in Mott Haven and the Bronx Terminal Market area on the Bronx side. Tenement housing along with high-rise public housing developments are located directly opposite in Harlem. The decline of waterfront industry, which began in the mid-twentieth century has negatively impacted both sides, resulting in a host of social issues, underutilized historic buildings, and areas threatened by new, insensitive development of under-built lots.

The Central section of the Harlem River includes much of the recreational resources and parkland of the region, including Highbridge Park and Roberto Clemente State Park. Preservation of this area's historic resources is challenged by access to existing parkland, large plots containing functioning municipal and private facilities, which include historic industrial sites carved up among disparate public and private interests, and aging infrastructure in need of upgrades, particularly in the case of bridges.

The Northern section contains the residential communities of Marble Hill and West Inwood, where the preservation of apartment buildings and single-family homes is complicated by a lack of awareness of the valuable historic built fabric, an absence of proper preservation resources, threats from development due to under-built lots and increasing interest in the neighborhoods by higher income individuals and families.

This preservation plan functions as an educational resource intended to raise public awareness of the historic built fabric by identifying significant structures and recognizing potential threats to historic resources. In addition, it recommends proper maintenance techniques and identifies potential financial and legislative tools to facilitate preservation, along with suggesting means of improving outdoor recreational areas. It is designed to promote sustainable economic and community development through the interpretation of historic, cultural and aesthetic resources that we, through our intensive study over eight months, have found to be far more significant than their current circumstances would suggest.

Ultimately, in all areas, we seek to tell the untold story of a New York City resource in the hope of preserving, restoring and celebrating its architecture and built environment. We hope to provide an alternative vision of waterfront development in New York, one that includes preservation of different types of architecture at its core, while encouraging economic development and sensible re-use of existing buildings. Through this process, the Harlem River may once again assert itself as a model of the city's future, while simultaneously maintaining a connection of its architectural past.

Note on research biases: The following document was prepared by students in the Columbia University historic preservation program according to data and information gathered from September 2003 – May 2004. As students of preservation, we are naturally inclined to recommend for the maximum amount of preserved buildings, within the boundaries of our knowledge and certain levels of appropriateness. Information gathered that has contributed to this report includes but is not limited to: photographs, archival research, firsthand experience and observation, interviews and guidance from faculty members in the historic preservation program.