


## Above and Below

by Jenna Weissman Joselit

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*Unearthing Gotham: The Archaeology of New York City*  
by Anne-Marie Cantwell and Diana diZerega Wall  
(Yale University Press, 374 pp., \$39.95)  
[Click here to purchase the book.](#)

*Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies*  
by James Sanders  
(Alfred A. Knopf, 497 pp., \$45)  
[Click here to purchase the book.](#)

*Manhattan Unfurled*  
by Matteo Pericoli  
(Random House, 60 pp., \$29.95)  
[Click here to purchase the book.](#)

These days gotham is on everyone's mind, and not only for morbid post-September reasons. The stuff of newspaper headlines and television punditry, cocktail-party patter, college courses, and academic symposia, New York City, circa 2001-2002, clamors for attention. Like everyone else I fall in line, reading everything I can lay my hands on and jotting down notes; I am even compiling a scrapbook, something I have not done since I was a small girl. But what keeps reverberating in my head, heightening my sense of New York's old and newfound preciousness, is not the collective wisdom of our contemporary sages, but the lyrics to a song written in 1933 by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. "I've gotta get back to New York," goes the standard, whose pep and buoyancy can break your heart. "I'll climb up the Woolworth and kiss every floor/The subway makes music for me with its roar/I'm dying to feel that I'm living once more/I've gotta get back to New York." These days New York is itself busy getting back to New York.

The song, first heard in a United Artists flop of a film called *Hallelujah, I'm a Bum*, starring Al Jolson, gives voice to the

city's magnetic pull, locating it in New York's most conspicuous characteristic: its verticality. By the time the film was made, towering structures such as the Woolworth Building had begun to dominate the cityscape. Reaching for the heavens--scraping the sky, it was said--they changed the face of Manhattan and so much else besides. A testament to capitalism, the 792-foot Woolworth Building, for a time the world's tallest structure, was known throughout town as its "cathedral of commerce." With twenty-eight high-speed elevators or "vertical streets," a sky-high promenade, and a marble-lined swimming pool, the "Queen of the skyline" epitomized the modern world--and its promise.

New York's celebrated verticality extended downward, too. Fifteen to twenty feet beneath the surface of the street lay the subway, and it dramatically redefined the nature of the urban experience. If nothing else, it transformed New Yorkers, wrote the *Utica Saturday Globe* in 1904, into "human prairie dogs" who would descend in one place and invariably pop up in another. More than the sum of its underground tunnels and electrified tracks, the subway--which was opened in 1904--made it possible for large numbers of New Yorkers to live in one part of town and to work in another part of town. It also made speed an indispensable accessory of modern life, and introduced notions such as "rush hour" and "express" into America's daily vocabulary.

A marvel of early-twentieth-century technology, New York's underground turned out to be a marvel of social engineering as well. In hundreds of whitetiled stations throughout the city, notable for their "fine finish and cheeriness" (or so guidebooks to New York related in 1905), factory workers stood shoulder to shoulder with bank clerks as they waited for the IRT or the BMT during the morning and evening commute. Once inside the trains with their rattan-covered seats, Italian-speakers balancing *Il Progresso* on their laps sat side by side with readers of *The New York Times* and the *Jewish Daily Forward*. More noticeably still, men and women, hitherto segregated as much by space as by gender, were now thrown together on a regular basis, prompting some disgruntled New Yorkers to allow as how the city was being "invaded" by members of the gentler sex. As much an experiment in democracy as a speedy, affordable means of transportation, the subway transformed the Big Apple into a

metropolis.

Up or down, the city's verticality was widely understood to be synonymous with modernity, with progress, with looking forward. Until the wanton destruction of the World Trade Center made a cruel mockery of these associations, transforming verticality from an article of faith into an emblem of vulnerability and a symbol of despair, most New Yorkers delighted in the power and the élan of their tall buildings. "All hail to the New York which comes into being to-day," trilled *The New York Sun* at the turn of the century as the modern city began to take shape. It had the potential to be the "foremost capital of the world in population, in wealth, and in commercial and financial power....All hail the imperial city!" And yet all that verticality came at a cost. Its price was nothing less than the erasure of history.

**T**he continuous press of building, of churning up the earth, of tearing down the old to make way for the new, made for an exciting city, but one with scant vestiges of the past. Where Rome has its Colosseum, New York, the "Imperial City," is left with odds and ends, bits and pieces: china teacups, vials of medicine, pipes from colonial New York, caches of prehistoric flints. In an unusual display of archaeological alchemy, these bits and pieces come alive in the pages of Anne-Marie Cantwell and Diana diZerega Wall's forceful book, which proposes to reframe the way we think about archaeology and, by extension, about New York itself.

Prior to September 11, most people found it "hard to think of archaeology in the context of New York," Cantwell and Wall point out. "Both archaeology and the past are things that happen elsewhere." (Now, of course, we can think of little else: what is Ground Zero, after all, if not one vast and hellish archaeological excavation?) Customarily associated with ancient ruins, archaeology is seldom thought of in connection with the modern metropolis. But Wall and Cantwell hope to change all that. Envisioning the five boroughs of New York as one vast site, they seek to recover its eleven-thousand-year-old "human history." An ambitious undertaking, to say the least, the book covers a great deal of

ground, literally and chronologically. It moves across huge swaths of time, from 11,000 B.C.E. to 1990 C.E., making a point of paying considerable attention to those whose lives, as Cantwell and Wall put it, have been "forgotten or ignored in the written record."

Toward that end, the longest section by far is devoted to an extremely detailed, often plodding account of the "long Native American occupation," where we learn, many of us for the very first time, of such things as atlats, clovis points, spokeshaves, and stone gorgets. When the book turns its attention first to the colonial and post-Revolutionary era and then to the nineteenth-century city, the pace picks up a bit. Here we are on more familiar ground: brothels, taverns, outhouses--and written texts. Digging in lower Manhattan, in an area known as Five Points, where today several of the city's most imposing courthouses cluster together, archaeologists recently discovered a profusion of bottles: perfume bottles, wine bottles, and a bottle of Bristol's Extract of Sarsaparilla, a popular nineteenth-century nostrum for venereal disease. Their curiosity aroused by this oddly companionable assortment of things, they turned to the documentary record--to real estate and census data--and found that the site in question was once a house of prostitution. Eureka! In this instance, as in so many others happily chronicled by Cantwell and Wall, texts and objects are natural allies when it comes to making sense of the past.

The book culminates in a chapter devoted to the much-talked-about excavation of the African Burial Ground, also in lower Manhattan, a block north of City Hall Park. In use for much of the eighteenth century only to be subsequently blanketed by landfill, the "Negros Burial Ground," as a 1755 map referred to it, came to life again in the 1990s when plans for constructing a \$276 million federal office building were put into effect. Archaeologists, hired by the General Services Administration to make sure that the new complex would not adversely affect its surroundings, uncovered several hundred burials, bringing construction to a standstill. In the meantime a number of African American community groups wanted to stop the excavations altogether.

Some worried lest the bodies of the deceased be desecrated or, as they put it, "discriminated against in death" as they had

been in life; others feared that the claims of science would take precedence over the "spiritual aspects of the site." In the end, after considerable to-ing and fro-ing, the GSA got to put up its building (but on a slightly different parcel of land than originally earmarked), while the archaeologists learned a lesson about the politics of their field, and also a great deal about African American burial practice, particularly its similarities with age-old African funerary ritual. Finally the African Burial Ground was designated a National Historic Landmark.

Despite a tendency to get bogged down in detail, the bigger story that Cantwell and Wall tell--the thrill of discovery--is almost as exciting as the tale of King Tut's tomb or the Dead Sea Scrolls. Much like Lord Carnarvon (or Indiana Jones, for that matter), New York's archaeologists needed all the pluck, derring-do, and steadfastness that they could muster. Instead of sandstorms and snakes, they faced down concrete mixers and snarling contractors. But in their race against time and overweening officials, and in their zeal to protect, these folks were very much one with their legendary counterparts.

A mix of professionally trained and weekend archaeologists (Cantwell and Wall prefer to call them "avocational archaeologists"), their ranks included Long Island farmers such as Roy Latham and engineers such as Reginald Pelham Bolton; the Staten Island resident Albert Anderson and his eleven-year-old son, Robert; and NYU Professor Bert Salwen. Some worked on their own; others worked for the New York State Museum and Science Service Bureau. In many instances, their efforts went unnoticed and unheralded--until now. In an honorable act of homage, this book brings these dedicated diggers to light as much as it does the ancient animal bones, shell heaps, and toy tea sets they had excavated years before.