

MYLES ZHANG: Urban history in the suburban age



Springfield Avenue (1916 and 2016) in my visual comparison of 200 locations over 100 years, exhibited in the Newark Public Library: <https://newarkchangingsite.wordpress.com/>

I grew up among the decayed buildings of Downtown Newark. Weeds and bushes grew in the Westinghouse factory where thousands of laborers once earned a family wage. Nearby, the now vanished labs of Thomas Edison and other inventors once fueled the American Industrial Revolution. Empty buildings stood for the glory of this former regional shopping center. Inspired by Camilo José Vergara’s MacArthur Prize winning photographs in *The New American Ghetto*, I reflected on Newark’s urban renewal through my history, photography, and art projects.¹ Guided by my mentor Professor Clement Price, a beloved Newark historian, I explored the city’s “main street,” Springfield Avenue. Philip Roth’s words about this urban-suburban corridor in *Goodbye, Columbus* echoed my own experiences commuting as a child from the inner city to my suburban middle school:

Once I’d driven out of Newark [...] the night grew cooler. It was, in fact, as though the hundred and eighty feet that the suburbs rose in altitude above Newark brought one closer to heaven, for the sun itself became bigger, lower, and rounder, and soon I was driving [...] past houses where no one sat on stoops, where lights were on but no windows open, for those inside, refusing to share the very texture of life with those of us outside.

From Newark’s forbidden landscape, however, I found a life inspiring and rewarding. Among people dedicated to a downtown revitalization, I learned about historic preservation, city planning, affordable housing,² and, above all, a Sisyphean worldview. Working three summers in the Newark Public Library’s map archives, I learned to visualize the depth behind drastically changed cityscapes. Identifying locations from the postcard collection, I created matching photographs to capture stories over 100 years – civic pride from the City Beautiful era, glories during industrial heydays, deteriorated streets after white flight, and arduous recoveries of urban fabrics. Records about John Haviland’s jail led me to climb through the abandoned complex of prison cells and masonry walls, which witnessed violence against under-classes for two centuries. My innocent comments in planning hearings caught the attention of Michael Graves, who invited me to his studio and home. During the lunch, the maestro, 62 years of my senior, shared his admiration for Palladio and love of cities.

¹ Reflections on Newark’s urban renewal: <https://www.myleszhang.org/2015/04/01/vanishing-city/>

² My activism: <https://www.myleszhang.org/category/newark-activism/>

The wealth of my formative experience has long convinced me for a dedicated life about urban history and built environment. Springfield Avenue traverses ten miles between urban decay and suburban decadence: from the hulk of Newark Macy's to the affluent suburban Mall at Short Hills. Over three hundred years, this old colonial road through farmlands witnessed America's birth, industrialization, immigration, the Great Migration, racial unrest, urban decay, and suburban growth on subdivided homesteads. With Clement and Michael Graves' encouragement, this "main street" with its spirit has led me through thousands of miles to Columbia, Oxford, Cambridge, and, hopefully, Michigan.

For more of my projects and publications, visit: <https://www.myleszhang.org/>



Columbus Park in Manhattan Chinatown, a space of Everyday Urbanism. Ink and watercolor, 40 by 26 inches
<https://www.myleszhang.org/2019/05/14/architecture-of-exclusion-in-manhattan-chinatown/>