



Volume 34  
Fall-Winter  
2008

# Voices

The Journal of  
New York Folklore

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## DOWNSTATE

# City of Memory BY STEVE ZEITLIN

The memory map of Manhattan was twenty feet long. The Bronx and Brooklyn were small in comparison. Staten Island was only two feet wide. We hauled it all down to Washington in a pickup truck and mounted the styrofoam maps on a chain link fence at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. We tracked down a stationery store for a few boxes of sharpies and some acetate paper, which we cut into three-inch squares. For two weeks former New Yorkers jotted their memories on the squares and thumbtacked each to the precise address where the story took place. By the end of the two weeks the maps were filled with memories. Strips of acetate were piled high beneath a single pin, creating miniature tenements and tiny skyscrapers with multiple stories. It was the summer of 2001, just before 9/11 changed everything.

The map's designer, Jake Barton, helped mount our styrofoam city at the festival. Before he left, we talked about how these renditions of memory would work so well online. The notion of cultural projects on the web was new to us back then. A year later, in a sweet act of fate, we received notice that the National Endowment for the Arts was opening a special initiative for arts and technology. We were so excited when we received the funds, confident that we would put up the site in one year. Like many of our projects, we must have been thinking of dog years, because it took almost seven. The programmer was diagnosed with cancer, a second programmer didn't work out, and the effort proceeded in fits and starts—after all, we were inventing it as we went along.

It was a long, strange trip, but what was even stranger is what happened when the site began to function. Science fiction is filled with stories of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein or the Jewish legend of the Golem: human beings create a larger-than-life form that comes to life and wreaks havoc on the world. City of Memory began to feel like a creature with a life of own, but with life-affirming instead of life-effacing strengths. We came to think of [cityofmemory.org](#) as a giant brain, encompassing memory and humanity in ways that constantly surprise its creators—and the stories and memories are accessed in multiple ways, like synapses in the brain. Google memory extends my recall several times each day as it is, and online memory is, perhaps, part of the brain's evolution.

Throughout its creation, Jake and I talked about trying to capture the cognitive maps of the city each of us carries in our brain, so we envisioned stories being linked together as "tours," connected by a dotted line on the site. Some of these evolved into our new immigrant tours, where spokespeople lead us on a tour of Places that Matter to their community. There is, for instance, a Russian Jewish tour of Brighton Beach led by Rita Kagan. But the site also includes a Local Character's Hall of Fame tour linking disparate elements from different parts of the city and different points in time: a scene from a Rob Maas documentary of the Polar Bears from the late '90s, Dave Isay's work with the Brooklyn Elite Checker Club, a club that we included in our City Play exhibit twenty years ago.



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Photo: Martha Cooper

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We included “ghost sites,” places whose absence from the landscape leave a dramatic, gaping hole. These places continue to have a palpable existence in the virtual city: places like the house under the roller coaster made famous in Annie Hall and the Dorothy Day cottage in Staten Island, both razed by real estate interests, in 2000 and 2001, respectively. And visitors to the site create their own tours of ghost sites. Kathryn Adisman created her own “K’s New York: Going Going Gone,” which includes her favorite places in the West Village that are no longer there: the Vegetable Garden, Moondance Diner, Bleeker Luncheonette. She calls it “the world of things disappearing.” Visitors have used the site to post evanescent details of memory: Stan Solomon recalls bringing heavy wooden folding chairs to sit out on the sidewalk on summer nights on Leggett Avenue in the Bronx, circa 1950. And even the contemporary places on the map, such as the Federation of Black Cowboys in Howard Beach, exist virtually in relation to a changing city, and the simple statement in the upper left-hand corner—Date Posted, viewed whenever—speaks to a metropolis in a constant state of change.

In life, it’s always seemed to me that the true gift that each of us is given is consciousness. Our quest is to use that consciousness to create meaning. “Our greatest desire, greater even than the desire for happiness, is that our lives mean something,” writes psychologist Daniel Taylor. “This desire for meaning is the originating impulse of story.” In this world, we develop relationships as we come to share memories and experiences and traditions. People who are close often have a visceral sense of one another’s memories. Knowing her so well, I have a picture in my mind, for instance, of what my wife Amanda was like as a child, although I didn’t know her then.

City of Memory creates a series of interlocking memories, chronicling the city’s inner life. Place-based, it links stories and memories in ways that transcend chronology and time, sparking connections and enabling visitors to rediscover the city through the memories of others. Our hope is that New Yorkers from many walks of life and cultural backgrounds will be able to find themselves on the map and garner a deeper appreciation of the shared experience of urban life. As the site’s wide-eyed creators, Jake and I watch in amazement at how the new web technologies enable us to use computers in ways that are profoundly human, extending the boundaries of consciousness and memory.

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**The Downstate column was published in *Voices* Vol. 34, Fall-Winter 2008. *Voices* is the membership magazine of the New York Folklore Society. To become a subscriber, [join the New York Folklore Society now.](#)**

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