

BQ Borderlands

In New York City, most boundaries are distinct. They feature rivers and islands, oceans and estuaries, bridges and tunnels, States and continents. However, the boundary separating Queens and Brooklyn traces a hidden path, as the borough divisor meanders unseen through the landscape.

The border has evolved over time to accommodate the changing city. Britain formed the counties through royal decree in 1683, and Queens achieved its current shape in 1768 with the addition of the Rockaways. In 1898, Brooklyn and Queens became boroughs of the City of New York, though continued to function as counties.

Amid the many political and jurisdictional changes, the border has remained an indistinct proposition. The towns of Bushwick and Newtown engaged in a century-long dispute over their borders, which was temporarily resolved by a 1769 survey and the marking of three boundary rocks. Originally the border took form amid farmlands and villages, and so traced a meandering path across fields, marshes, forests, and hedgerows. The US Geological Survey Map below shows the complex condition of the



borderlands in 1891--evident as a swath of land running diagonally across the middle between Newtown Creek at top left and Jamaica Bay at bottom right.

As the built-up city expanded, the border had to be adjusted to accommodate the grid. One of these moments is captured above in the 1922 Hyde Desk Atlas. The map shows the grid of East New York in Brooklyn as it runs up against the boundary of Jamaica, Queens. The border cuts across streets and property lines, creating havoc for city services. The city was expanding much more rapidly than the political process could accommodate.

Faced with many such anomalies, the City finally moved to fix the border in its 1931 Administrative Code. Today, the border zigzags through the grid, running down the middle of streets and dividing blocks, but keeping property lines intact on either side. Nevertheless, without any major features or markings, the BQ Borderlands remain a place of strangeness, liminality, and enigma.



Auto Glass, 2012.

The border areas just to the east of Newtown Creek are home to dozens of small industries, such as auto repair, that benefit from the low cost of marginal land. As this was once a marsh, the water table remains very high and drainage is a problem.



Viaduct, 2013.

New York City is awash in gross spaces created by viaducts, bridges, and overpasses, particularly as they wind through flood-prone tracts. This photo depicts the space beneath the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in the old 'Bridgewater' area.



Creek, 2013.

The border traces an invisible line down the middle of Newtown Creek. Heading west from the point shown here, it hits the center of the East River; heading east, it makes landfall at the intersection of Metropolitan and Onderdonck.



Dock, 2013.

Hunter's Point was heavily industrialized by the early twentieth century, with lumber yards, factories, and docks. Manufacturing and shipping activity along the creek dwindled in the decades after World War II, though a few docks and piers remain.



End, 2013.

It is challenging to commune with the waters of Newtown Creek. Access points are few and far between. Even at such hard to find overlooks as the one depicted here, piles of rusted material and debris dominate the surroundings.



Hydrant, 2013.

Lindenwood sits in the Spring Creek Basin, fed by Jamaica Bay. Since most of it is below sea level, residents have learned to cope with the constant presence of water as it periodically washes over the streets and scowers the landscape.



Machine tower, 2013

This disused conveyor sits just upstream from the Kosciusko Bridge. For most of the 20th century, the creek provided both convenient water access for industry and a ready-made dumping site for toxic effluent. It is still used for industrial discharge.



Warehouse, 2012.

The dominant activity along large stretches of the border is warehousing, with all of its related commercial and architectural forms. This large facility on Metropolitan Ave. specializes in the distribution of household goods to 99¢ stores and bodegas.



No parking, 2013.

The marginal conditions of the border enable a wide range of makeshift, temporary creative urban practices. Why purchase a No Parking sign when you can spray paint it in bright mustard yellow letters on a rust-coated gate?



Smile, 2013.

Many borderland properties sit behind fences, gates, and razor wire, surveilled for criminal activity and off limits to passers-by. While not unusual for NYC, the sheer concentration of bastioned lots along the BQ border gives it an air of mystery.



Stack, 2013.

A mighty remnant of the industrial age rises above the low-slung factories, train tracks, scrap yards, auto shops, and vacant lots of the borderlands. The stack, an old blast furnace vent, sits in the indistinct area where Hunter's Point shades into Maspeth.



Tracks, 2013.

The tips of the 59th St. Bridge and the Citibank Building are among the only clues that you are in New York, rather than any other post-industrial badland. The BQ border describes both a distinct place and a generic region of marginality.