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Larry Racioppo: Making Art Out of the Gritty City

by Joann Jovinelly

On this rainy New York day, it's the perfect time to launch the new column, "**Metropolitan Lives.**" We'll take a look at New Yorkers with great personal stories --- many whom have shaped this town or contributed to the City of the past, present, or future.



Smith Street, Brooklyn, 2004

Larry Racioppo is as real a New Yorker as they come. He grew up in Brooklyn, drove a cab in the 1970s, worked as a carpenter, and with a camera in hand, endlessly walked the working-class Italian neighborhoods he knew well, like South Brooklyn and Sunset Park.

Racioppo also served as the official photographer of the City of New York's Department of Housing Preservation and Development from 1989 to 2011. What he thought would be a temporary job led him into a 22-year career and inspired him to photograph old abandoned spaces. He won a Guggenheim fellowship for his work in 1997, but he didn't quit his day job.



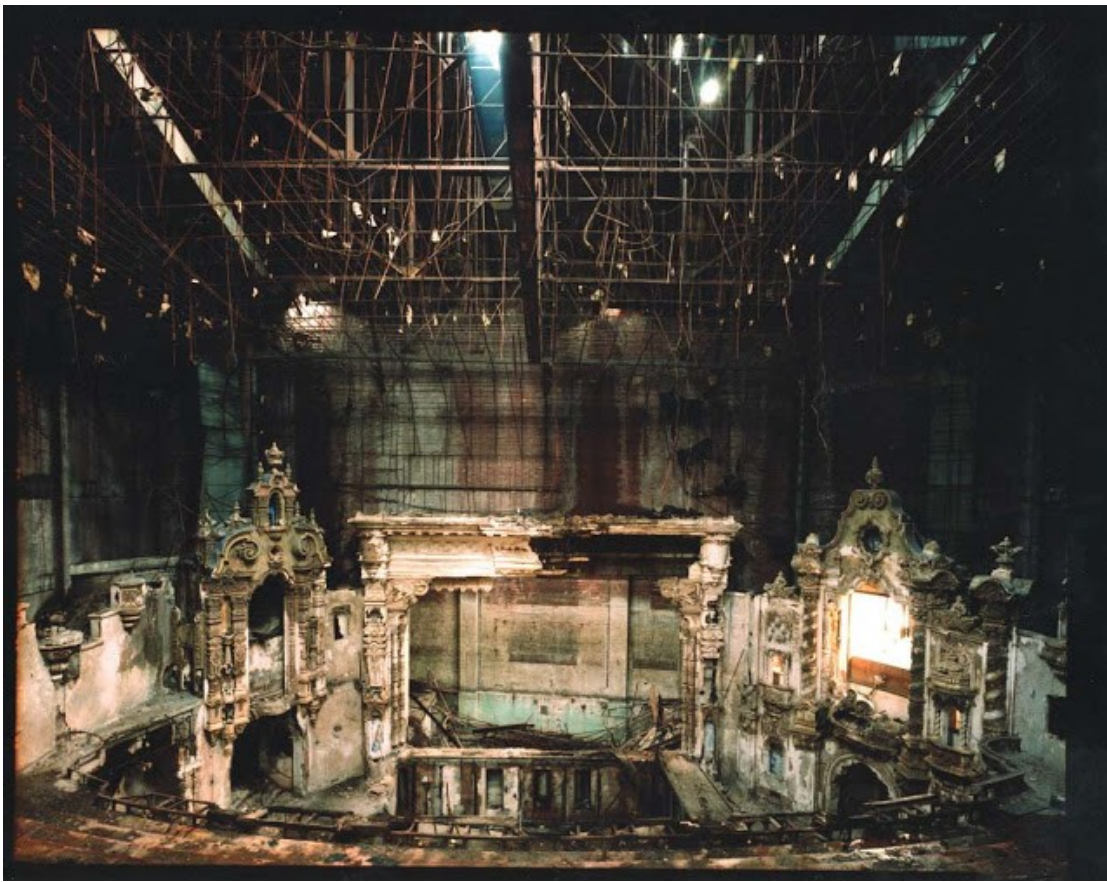
Coney Island, 1990

His photography gave him access to some of New York's finest city-owned buildings, often in serious states of decay. The results were as shocking as they were powerful, evoking an older, more eloquent New York. Racioppo retired from the DHP position last September.



St. Michael's School, Brooklyn, 2005

His large-scale color and black and white photographs, most of which he has printed himself, are a permanent part of many of New York City's most cherished and important archives, from collections in the Museum of the City of New York and the Brooklyn Museum, to the New York Public Library and New York Historical Society. Racioppo's haunting images of the city's grand churches and synagogues to its once exquisite theaters of the early 1900s are both expressive and soulful, reconnecting us with the past and helping to preserve New York's history.



Former Lowe's Pitken Theatre, Brooklyn

Racioppo's images help document the city's most changing neighborhoods, such as those in central and East Harlem and the South Bronx, a neighborhood known in the 1970s and 1980s by its frequently burned-out lots and entire blocks blighted by arson. At the time, when building owners could no longer afford repairs—or when squatters had taken over—the land was usually worth more when the structures were razed by fire.



211 West 148th Street, Harlem

Between 1970 and 1987, the city had lost more than 330,000 housing units in this way. Since then, the HPD has provided more than \$8.7 billion to support the repair, rehabilitation, and new construction of hundreds of thousands of housing units, many of them for working-class New Yorkers.

Racioppo, who is inspired by the works of a vast number of other artists including Ernest Hemmingway, Edward Hopper, and photographers Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, and Harvey Wang, is just as passionate about the work and it shows. There's something impressive about the detail he's captured with his large format 8x10-inch view camera that's just not possible to do with a 35mm, equipment that would for most be considered professional grade. But for Racioppo, it's one that he uses merely as his "sketchbook."



Ellis Island, 1998

"Even when I wasn't really making that many photographs, I always kept my equipment. I always knew I'd return to it. I always loved it," he said.

Many of Racioppo's images of majestic but empty structures in Brooklyn were collected for the shows *Brooklyn Interiors* and *All This Useless Beauty*, two of his most popular to date. In it, he showed the public, often for the first time, places such as the crumbling Bushwick Theater, Loew's Kings Theater, and the forgotten Coney Island Spookhouse. Seeing the images again makes him fondly recall the first time he picked up a camera.



Coney Island Spookhouse, Brooklyn, 1997

"I was in California and a friend of mine lent me his camera," he said. "This was in 1970. Shortly after, I purchased a Nikon for \$35. I had a choice between two, and though I knew nothing about either, I held each in my hands and the Nikon was much heavier, so I bought it. I only took one basic photography course at the School of Visual Arts, but I stuck with it. Nothing else was ever as much fun."



Sunset Park, Brooklyn, 2006

Racioppo is currently culling together photographs of Brooklyn's old basketball courts and other images related to what was once a New York pastime: street games. Even today, children and young adults continue to play throughout the parks, playgrounds, and courts of the five boroughs of New York City. Much in the same way, Racioppo will continue to capture the lifeblood of New York streets and buildings with his large format camera.



Larry Racioppo stands near 151st Street in The Bronx, looking at an old photo of his before the site was rebuilt.

If you'd like to see more of the work of Larry Racioppo, visit his [website](#).

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