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Lost City: Portraits of New York Before 9/11 Changed Everything

Liz Ronk @LizabethRonk | March 9, 2014

George Forss' pre-9/11 photographs of New York City are both a celebration of, and an elegy for, a lost world.

Of all the world's cities, New York is likely the most photographed. The Brooklyn Bridge; Times Square; Central Park; Coney Island; Harlem; the Lower East Side; the library's lions; the Chrysler, Woolworth and Empire State buildings. It sometimes seems as if we've seen every possible view of the city—taken from [every conceivable angle](#)—and that there's no way to really experience such a familiar place anew.

And then, out of the blue, we encounter a fresh way to appreciate the greatest city on earth—and we're reminded, again, how variegated, how *beautiful*, New York really is.

In the early 1990s, at the urging of his long-time friends and gallerists, Phyllis Wrynn and Mitch Freidlin, a Bronx-born photographer named George Forss began to photograph New York from places—rooftops, towers, private balconies—to which very, very few people had access. Over the next decade, Forss created a remarkable chronicle of an unseen New York—a *new* New York—captured from unique vantage points. The resulting pictures, collectively known as “The Access Project,” offer unexpected glimpses of sights that we thought we knew, while re-envisioning and, in a sense, reinvigorating the world's most iconic cityscape.

[This LIFE.com gallery features 15 of the “Access” photos. [Find more here.](#)]

Finally, it's worth noting that Forss took his last “Access Project” pictures a year before the 2001 attack on the Twin Towers. Not only has New York been physically transformed in the decade and a half since Forss stopped seeking out singular and secret places from which to shoot, but the entire atmosphere of the country has changed. There is simply no way, for example, that Forss would be allowed to shoot from the air traffic control tower at JFK Airport simply because an acquaintance who worked for the Port Authority invited him up to check out the view.

In more ways than one, New York City—and America as a whole—is less free than it was 15 years ago. Seen in that light, George Forss' pictures are both a celebration of, and an elegy for, a lost world.

Ben Cosgrove is the Editor of LIFE.com

George Forss (b. 1941) lives and works in Cambridge, New York. Visit him online at [ForssBlog](#) or at his [Ginofor Gallery](#), and see and buy his work at Brooklyn's [Park Slope Gallery](#).
