The American city underwent unprecedented transformations after World War II. As middle-class populations shifted to the suburbs and new highways cut through thriving neighborhoods, many cities began to experience economic and social disintegration, especially in Black, Latino, and working class communities. Down These Mean Streets: Community and Place in Urban Photography unites the work of ten artists who critically reflect on the state of urban America primarily between the 1960s and early 1980s, when government initiatives that sought to address the needs of cities in crisis sparked public debate. The title is drawn from Piri Thomas’s classic 1967 memoir, Down These Mean Streets. Like Thomas, their work challenges perceptions of embattled cities and explores the human narratives that unfolded in communities across the United States.

This exhibition examines how Latino photographers, many of whom came of age in urban neighborhoods, frame their environment. They approach the street not as detached observers but as engaged participants by turning to porrature, urbanscapes, serial photography, or unconventional manipulations of the photographic image. Many contribute to a long tradition of socially driven documentary photography. Others adopt conceptual strategies or use color photography to capture a less romantic image of the American city. Their work reexamines neighborhoods often viewed as places of social decline and affirms the strength of community in urban America.

Featured Artists

- Manuel Acuña
- Oscar Castillo
- Pelfa de Leon
- Frank Espada
- Anthony Hernandez
- Hiram Maristany
- Ruben Oshana
- John Valadez
- Winston Vargas
- Camillo Jose Vergara

The Latino Initiatives Pool of the Smithsonian Latino Center provided generous support for the new acquisitions featured in this exhibition. The Bernie Stadem Endowment Fund supports the installation and programs.
Deciphering Urbanscapes
Urban neglect was especially visible in the deteriorating condition of city streets. Rather than simply document blight, the photographers gathered here draw out the stories embedded in the physical environment in transformative ways. Frank Espada and Winston Vargas reinterpret abandoned buildings, empty lots, and graffiti as gateways to the memories and experiences of local residents. Oscar Castillo focuses on the purposeful ways residents rebuilt and beautified their communities. Manuel Acevedo and Ruben Ochoa deliberately alter existing images to draw our attention to the features of public space that shaped the lives of local residents.

**Untitled (Chair in the snow, Manhattan Valley, New York)**
1981
gelatin silver print
**Frank Espada**
born Utuado, Puerto Rico, 1930–died San Francisco, CA, 2014
An armchair, typically an object of domestic comfort and warmth, is cast off onto a cold and barren lot. Frank Espada’s poetic photograph sheds light on a difficult chapter in New York history. It was taken in a neighborhood where arson-for-profit had destroyed buildings and displaced residents.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center 2015.22.13

**Hartford Re-visions Project I, II, and III**
2004, printed 2012
inkjet prints
**Manuel Acevedo**
born Newark, NJ, 1964
Acevedo combines photography and drawing to proffer an ambivalent account of life in America’s inner cities. This triptych captures views of an abandoned lot in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in Hartford, Connecticut. To execute these works, the artist drew architectural structures on three versions of the same photograph and enlarged the prints to magnify their scale. Acevedo’s visionary constructions can appear optimistic, as if the empty lot were finally being repurposed. The structures can also resemble high fences that separate this community from a more prosperous downtown, seen in the distance.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by William W. W. Parker, the R. P. Whitty Company, and the Cooperating Committee on Architecture 2013.53.1a-c

**No Parking (Williamsburg, Brooklyn)**
1974, printed about 1995
inkjet print
**Frank Espada**
born Utuado, Puerto Rico, 1930–died San Francisco, CA, 2014
Both Winston Vargas and Frank Espada used their cameras to examine the urban landscape. Vargas’s angular perspective of a street in Brownsville, Brooklyn, invites viewers to contemplate the political message of graffiti. Espada pauses at a particularly inhospitable site where cinderblocks, plywood, and padlocks block off, rather than welcome, residents into neighborhood buildings. These structures, once homes, no longer serve their intended purpose.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center 2015.22.10
Altered Sites #7
1998, printed 2016
inkjet print
Manuel Acevedo
born Newark, NJ, 1964
At left, a “Do Not Enter” sign turns away passersby from a deteriorating street corner. Meanwhile, a structure drawn by the artist on the photograph rises up to the heavens and welcomes birds. Manuel Acevedo reimagines the streets of his hometown of Newark, New Jersey, a city shaped by periods of unrest and urban renewal initiatives that tore down existing housing to erect massive housing projects. “I drew on top of the photograph,” Acevedo reflected, “to transform the bleakness of underutilized landscapes into visionary architectural proposals.” His photograph unleashes the potential of derelict public spaces.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center 2016.45

On the Sidelines
Anthony Hernandez has devoted his career to examining the landscape of his native Los Angeles. In the late 1970s, Hernandez started using a large format camera to capture a detailed and panoramic view of people in their milieu. His Public Transit Series explores the daily life of urban commuters who rely on public transportation in a region that is dependent on cars. Would-be passengers wait, suspended in time, for a bus that, it seems, will never arrive. These serial and repetitive photographs—each includes a wide street with no bus in sight—emphasize the perpetual nature of waiting. People stand or sit, separated from the open road, as symbols of physical and social mobility. Hernandez’s subdued approach reveals the impact of Los Angeles’s car culture on inner city residents.

Piri Thomas
born New York City, 1928--died El Cerrito, CA, 2011
Down These Mean Streets
Published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1967; first edition
Publicity photograph of the author, provided by publisher
Piri Thomas was born in 1928 to a Puerto Rican mother and Cuban American father in New York’s El Barrio, a historic Puerto Rican neighborhood that was also known as Spanish Harlem. His acclaimed autobiography Down These Mean Streets remains one of the best known books by a Latino writer in the United States. The book chronicles the ups and downs of Thomas’s early life and his emerging Afro-Latino identity in the years before the civil rights era. It unflinchingly captures the poverty and discrimination that many Latino and African American urban communities experienced in the mid-twentieth century. Thomas later reflected: “I was one of the first Puerto Rican writers in the United States to write about the conditions that we were living under. I wrote about what was happening to us—or at least to me—and our surroundings in these years.”

“Born Anew Each A.M.”
Included in Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Café
Edited by Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman
Published by Henry Holt and Company, 1994
After writing Down These Mean Streets, Thomas also published poetry. “Born Anew Each A.M.” is one of his celebrated poems. Like many of the photographs presented in this exhibition, the poem contrasts the conditions of city life with the innocence of young children who lived in these environments.
Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe at Maravilla Housing Project, Mednik Avenue and Brooklyn Avenue, East Los Angeles  
early 1970s, printed 2012  
inkjet print  
**Oscar R. Castillo**  
born El Paso, TX, 1945  
Oscar Castillo’s photograph of the ruins of the Maravilla Housing Project casts murals as miraculous apparitions that suggest hope rising from destruction. Castillo documents two murals by David Lopez that had become a popular community shrine. The murals were so valued by local residents that they were saved during the demolition and reinstalled at another site. The artist’s detailed title, which identifies the cross streets where the original shrine was located, conveys his intent to record a community memory.  

What if walls created spaces?  
2007  
lenticular print mounted on aluminum composite  
**Ruben Ochoa**  
born Oceanside, CA, 1974  
Ruben Ochoa deliberately tampers with the appearance of the I-10, a freeway that runs through East Los Angeles. He created a lenticular print that interlaces two different views of a freeway wall. As viewers walk past his photograph, the wall partially disappears, opening up a portal into an imaginary verdant landscape. Ochoa’s playful gesture alludes to the communities located on the other side of freeways. Starting in the 1950s, freeways like the I-10 were built through many working class neighborhoods in Los Angeles, despite community protests. These massive roads connected suburbs to major metropolises, yet isolated Chicano and African American neighborhoods from the social and economic fabric of the surrounding region. Ochoa’s title poses a question that invites viewers to ponder the impact of the built environment on inner-city residents.  
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center 2015.42a–d

East Los Angeles Doctor's Hospital on Whittier Boulevard, 1970s, printed 2012  
Plaza de la Raza, 1970, printed 2012  
inkjet prints  
**Oscar R. Castillo**  
born El Paso, TX, 1945  
Oscar Castillo frequently documented how activist artists and civil rights leaders transformed the landscape of Los Angeles. His photographs contrast the gritty streets of the city with views of murals and Mexican American cultural institutions. East Los Angeles Doctor's Hospital on Whittier Boulevard focuses on two works of art: John Bene’s ceramic murals and David Botello’s Aztec-inspired sculptural planter. Plaza de la Raza documents improvements being made to an abandoned boathouse in the Lincoln Heights neighborhood. Chicano leaders successfully petitioned the city to convert the space into a cultural center, which still exists today. Castillo’s photographs not only reveal how the cultural dimensions of the civil rights movement were tied to improving urban life, but they also highlight a community shaping its neighborhood.  
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghhausen Endowment 2013.51.8 and 2013.51.10
Picturing Activism
Photographer Frank Espada was also a respected activist who fought for improved living conditions in African American and Puerto Rican neighborhoods across New York City. The sharp contrasts that he witnessed inspired a series of informal portraits that emphasized the humanity of urban residents. His young subjects, who often pose in front of burnt-out buildings or stand on garbage-ridden streets, smile at the camera, play with complete abandon, or present a veneer of toughness. Espada’s photographs shift between conveying hope and social critique, as they capture the beauty and individuality of children growing up in harsh environments.

**Untitled (Boy in front of condemned building, East New York)**
about 1960–64
gelatin silver print

**Frank Espada**
born Utuado, Puerto Rico, 1930–died San Francisco, CA, 2014

Frank Espada probably focused his lens on abandoned buildings because they were directly related to his activism. In the early 1960s, he founded East New York Action, a grassroots organization that fought for better housing conditions in the neighborhood where Espada lived with his young family. Like the South Bronx, East New York was peppered with abandoned buildings, many vacated due to both accidental fires and arson. His photographs highlight the irreconcilable: the beauty of young children in these harsh surroundings.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center 2015.22.3

**Untitled (Two boys, East New York)**
1964
gelatin silver print

**Frank Espada**
born Utuado, Puerto Rico, 1930–died San Francisco, CA, 2014

Some of Espada’s photographs of children take on a psychological dimension. One boy smiles at the camera as his playmate assumes a tough demeanor and holds a toy gun in his left hand. Their body language demonstrates two different responses to Espada’s presence and their environment.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center 2015.22.8

**Untitled (Three boys, Sheldon Cafe, Hartford, Connecticut)**
1981
gelatin silver print

**Frank Espada**
born Utuado, Puerto Rico, 1930–died San Francisco, CA, 2014

In the 1970s, Frank Espada began *The Puerto Rican Diaspora*, an ambitious exhibition and book project that documented Puerto Rican communities across the United States. Espada followed the trail of migrants who had settled in cities, ranging from the Midwest and East Coast to Hawaii. This picture was taken in Hartford, Connecticut, where many migrants arrived in the 1950s and 1960s to work for the tobacco industry. Despite their depressed surroundings, the three boys depicted here display energy and life. Espada’s photographs function both as loving portraits and strident critiques of the social conditions in which Puerto Ricans lived.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center 2015.22.15
**Untitled (One boy pulling another in a wagon, Long Island City)**  
1956

**Untitled (Two boys in a wagon, Long Island City)**  
1956

gelatin silver prints

**Frank Espada**  
born Utuado, Puerto Rico, 1930–died San Francisco, CA, 2014

These photographs depict the same pair of boys. One picture sets them against a stone wall to suggest the vulnerability of children who live in big cities. The other is a close-up shot where they smile eagerly at the camera, indicating their awareness of Espada’s presence. Unlike traditional street photography, which relies on the spontaneity of the quickly taken picture, Espada directly engaged his subjects in order to capture their unique personalities.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center 2015.22.1 and 2015.22.2

**Rising Above**  
Communities targeted for urban renewal were often labeled slums, a characterization that many local residents and activists contested. Hiram Maristany often took to rooftops, fire escapes, and windows to capture a dramatically different perspective of his El Barrio neighborhood in New York City. His pictures of children playing on the streets or adults roasting a pig in an alley—a tradition transplanted from Puerto Rico—portray a community teeming with life and culture. Maristany’s photographs transcend the media’s image of the inner city as a place of decay and crime. Like Frank Espada, Maristany married his photography with his activism. In 1969, he became a founding member and official photographer of the Young Lords, a radical youth activist group dedicated to improving urban life and fighting for Puerto Rican rights.

**Kite Flying on Rooftop**  
1964

gelatin silver print

**Hiram Maristany**  
born New York City, 1945

The rooftops of tenement buildings, often called tar beaches or playa negras, were community gathering spaces from which Maristany took many photographs. He was drawn to scenes that evoked Puerto Rican cultural traditions recreated in New York. Here he focuses on a young man flying a kite against the El Barrio skyline. While not unique to Puerto Ricans, kite making and flying was a competitive pastime that was passed on from generation to generation.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center 2016.30.5

**Casa Evita**  
1965

**Night View**  
1961

gelatin silver prints

**Hiram Maristany**  
born New York City, 1945

Hiram Maristany’s street photographs of El Barrio are an ode to his beloved neighborhood. Titled after a store where shoppers could haggle over merchandise, *Casa Evita* captures the hustle and bustle of the street life beneath tall tenement buildings, whose open windows and billowing curtains themselves show signs of life. Signs in Spanish and English language pepper the streetscape. Taken from high above, *Night*
View records a dramatic evening sky over 111th Street, where the chalk patterns of street games provide evidence of active community life.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center 2016.30.6 and 2016.30.1

Young Man with Roses
1971

Hiram Maristany
born New York City, 1945

Maristany’s photographs of young people playing or hanging out on 111th street celebrate a sense of community in the neighborhood where Maristany grew up. The relaxed intimacy of pictures like Young Man with Roses stems in part from Maristany’s personal relationship with his subjects. The people he photographed were friends and neighbors.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center 2016.30.4, 2016.30.11, 2016.30.12, and 2016.30.8

Community Portrait

Inner-city neighborhoods are communities where human narratives unfold. Births, marriages, and friendships take center stage in the photographs gathered in this section. Perla de Leon’s poignant photographs of the South Bronx in New York—an iconic blighted neighborhood—place into sharp relief the physical devastation of the neighborhood and the lives of the people who called it home. Winston Vargas documented family milestones and cultural landmarks in his New York City neighborhood, which welcomed new immigrants in the years surrounding the unrest of the 1960s and 1970s. John Valadez’s casual yet monumental street portraits of East Los Angeles residents celebrate the optimism of young people going about their daily lives.

Destroyed Housing, Brownsville, Brooklyn
1972, printed 2016

Family in Brownsville, Brooklyn
1972, printed 2016

gelatin silver prints

Winston Vargas
born Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic, 1943

The South Bronx was not the only blighted neighborhood in New York. Winston Vargas documented Brownsville, Brooklyn, where arson and urban renewal projects demolished existing buildings and contributed to a major housing shortage. His photograph of a young family living in a temporary mobile home puts a human face on the urban crisis.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center, and through the Frank K. Ribelin Endowment 2017.9.15 and 2017.9.13
Pepe and Me (Parts 1 and 2)
1980
gelatin silver prints
Perla de Leon
born New York City, 1952
These photographs were taken after a conversation between Perla de Leon and a South Bronx resident. After learning about de Leon’s intent to capture a community portrait, the resident asked her to photograph two pages in her diary that offer a heartfelt personal account of the decline of the South Bronx. Her narrative reflects on the “ruins of today and the thoughts of yesterday.” Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center 2016.16.8 and 2016.16.9
Left to right, top to bottom:

Caribe Village
1980
gelatin silver prints
Perla de Leon
born New York City, 1952
Perla de Leon documented the South Bronx around the time that activists were protesting the making of the 1981 film Fort Apache, the Bronx, which presented a degrading view of the neighborhood. Her photographs offer a counter-narrative that portrays the resilience of the neighborhood’s predominantly African American and Latino residents. Amidst the rubble of buildings, children play on the streets and adults walk briskly to work. Caribe Village depicts a casita (or little house) that was erected on a razed site. Casitas were built in the South Bronx and other parts of New York as local residents reclaimed abandoned lots and turned them into community gathering sites.

New Addition, Washington Heights, New York
1970, printed 2016
gelatin silver prints
Winston Vargas
born Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic, 1943
During this period of urban decline and unrest, many inner city neighborhoods welcomed new immigrants. Winston Vargas emigrated from the Dominican Republic to the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York while still a child. When he became a photographer, he documented the daily life of his immediate community. His scenes of burgeoning Latino businesses and people socializing on sidewalks show a community setting roots in a new environment. Upon closer inspection, political graffiti tagged on walls conveys the fraught social context in which their lives were unfolding.
Tracking Time and Change

Since the early 1970s, Camilo José Vergara has chronicled the shifting fate of urban communities across the United States. As an immigrant settling in New York, he was first drawn to neighborhoods that were transitioning into Latino enclaves. He later adopted a time-lapse approach, photographing the same site year after year. Vergara used color photography to emphasize the grittiness of the streets and the history embedded in public spaces. *65 East 125th Street, Harlem* focuses on a store front that was once the Purple Manor, a thriving jazz venue in this historic African American neighborhood. The series shows the slow erosion of the past and the resourcefulness of residents and business owners during periods of economic decline. This ongoing series now tracks how gentrification and globalization are changing Harlem.

*Lower East Side, Manhattan*, from the series *Old New York*
1970

*Puerto Rican Wedding, East Harlem*, from the series *Old New York*
1970

inkjet prints

**Camilo José Vergara**
born Santiago, Chile, 1944

Camilo José Vergara visited many parts of the city, including the Lower East Side, a neighborhood associated with European immigrant communities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He also traveled to neighborhoods in Manhattan and Brooklyn where Latinos were transforming the culture of the city. While he had yet to develop his signature time-lapse approach, his focus on aging white populations and youthful Latino residents hint at his developing interest in tracking change—in this case racial, ethnic, and cultural shifts—in urban America.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist 2015.55.2 and 2015.55.4

Selections from the *East Los Angeles Urban Portrait Portfolio*
about 1978, printed 2016

inkjet print

**John M. Valadez**
born Los Angeles, CA, 1951

John Valadez is best known as a photorealist painter, yet photography has always played a central role in his art making. Valadez often traveled around Chicano neighborhoods taking pictures of people going about their daily lives. His *East Los Angeles Urban Portrait Portfolio* vividly captures young people who have carefully composed their public persona. For Valadez, his street portraits counter stereotypes of urban youth and instead celebrates their creativity.


*The streets got life, man,*  
*like a young tender sun,*  
*and gentleness like*  
*long awaited dreams to come.*  
—Piri Thomas, 1994