

JAMAICA BAY PROJECT PROPOSAL

During the fall of 2004 and winter of 2005, I photographed the island of Broad Channel, Queens. I was attracted to the unusual character of the island and the insular community of people living there. Almost every home has some form of watercraft parked nearby: motorboat, sailboat, canoe, kayak or Jet Ski. A series of backyard canals and docks allow residents access to the waters of Jamaica Bay. Some public streets are stilted boardwalks constructed over grassy saltwater marshes. At the end of these streets, structures are clustered together to form small blocks of houses. Within each block there are abandoned buildings and year round residences. Many of the island's dead end streets give way to views across the complex of saltwater bars, marshes and boat channels that make up Jamaica Bay. In the distance, the densely packed skyscrapers of Manhattan are visible just above the horizon. The northern half of the island is designated as The Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge; migratory birds rest here on their northerly and southerly travels while nearby subway trains transport commuters to and from Manhattan.

Broad Channel and Jamaica Bay are part of a complicated environmental system that is both subtle and extreme. This system, which exists within metropolitan New York City, strikes a balance between urban and natural.

All of New York City has history shaped geography that has evolved according to its previous use, often configured because of industrialization and development. This evolution can be seen in Jamaica Bay. Broad Channel was originally a series of islands that have been connected using landfill and dredging from the bay. Dead Horse Bay and Barren Island, both on the southwest shore of Jamaica Bay, were named for the horse rendering and garbage burial industries that settled there. The buried garbage was used to connect Barren Island to mainland Queens and in the 1930's the property was converted into Floyd Bennett Field, a military airstrip. Though it was heavily used during World War II, today the runways have been transformed into shared parkland used by the US Naval Reserve, the Coast Guard, the NYPD, model airplane enthusiasts and community gardeners. Rockaway oysters and clams were once an economic staple of the bay. During the 1910's and 1920's, millions of gallons of untreated waste were dumped into the bay. As a result, the water became so polluted the department of health abolished shell fishing, a ban that continues today. JFK International Airport occupies 4,930 acres of land adjoining the bay. In 2003, 280,032 planes moved 31,732,466 passengers to and from New York via runways that protrude into the waters of the bay.

While the land was abundant it was misused; the evolution of the city and population growth has forced a balance between the natural and urban environments. This unique area of New York City is worth continued documentation. I propose to spend one year photographing Jamaica Bay and its surroundings, recording the unusual landscapes and the people who populate area. I intend to focus on the coexistence of the urban industrial environment, the preserved natural environment and the seasonal changes that transpire. The photographs will reflect the state of Jamaica Bay in 2006, while revealing the awkward history and the complicated habitats that exists there.

Travis Roozée - September 2005