2007–2011 | QUINQUENNIAL REPORT

MY LIFE IN NYC

VOL. 1

The First Five Years

designed and written by

BUMHAN YU

for my grandmother

Background 1
- Timeline 2
- Big Journey 4
- Transit 6
- Five Years and Counting 8

Acculturation 10
- Attitude 12
- Intake & Output 14
- Language Habit 16

Relocation 18
- The Atlas 20
- Manhattan 22
- Brooklyn 24
- Queens 26

Activity Shift 28
- Running 30
- Visual Arts 34
- Music 36

Next Step 38

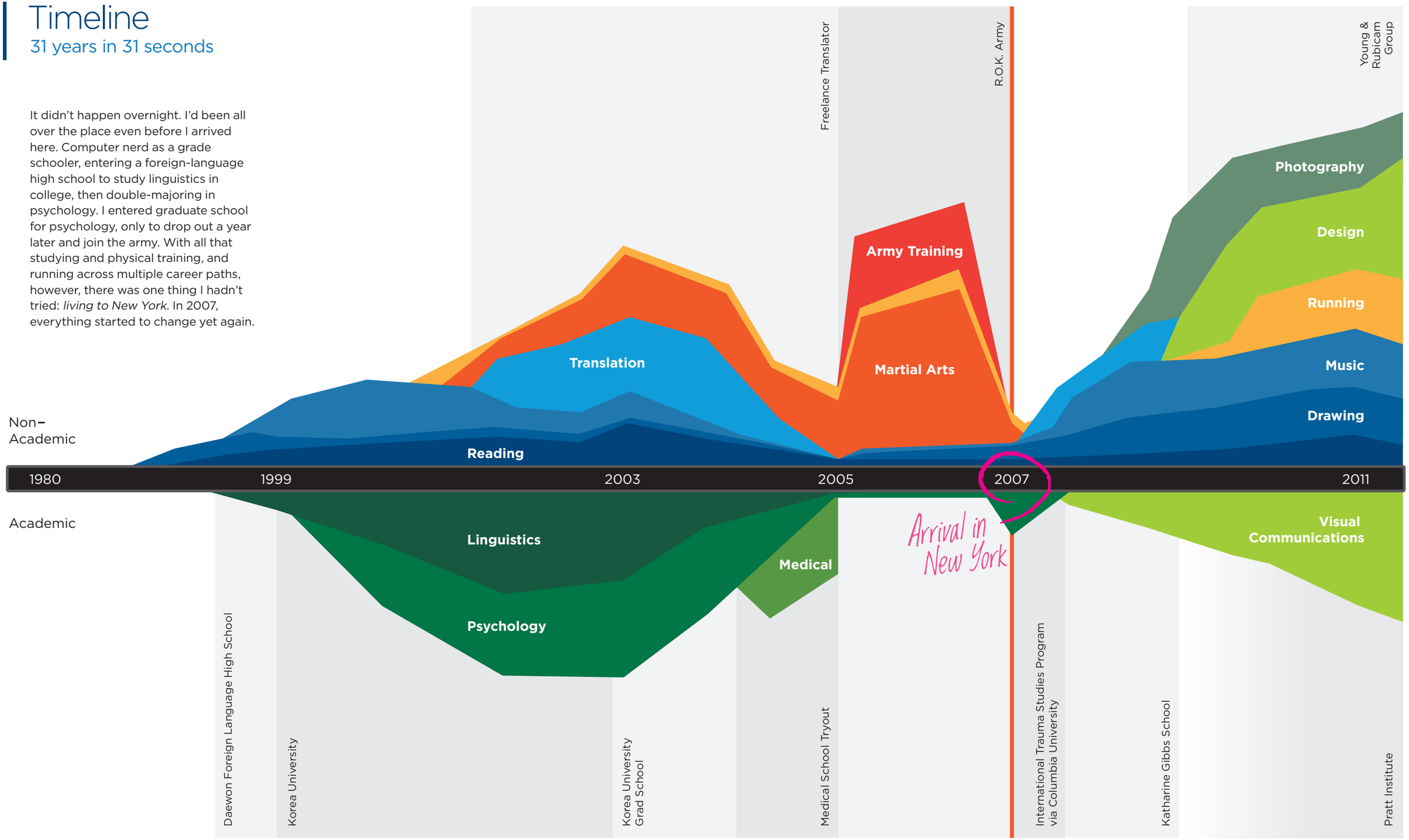
BACKGROUND

how it all started

Timeline

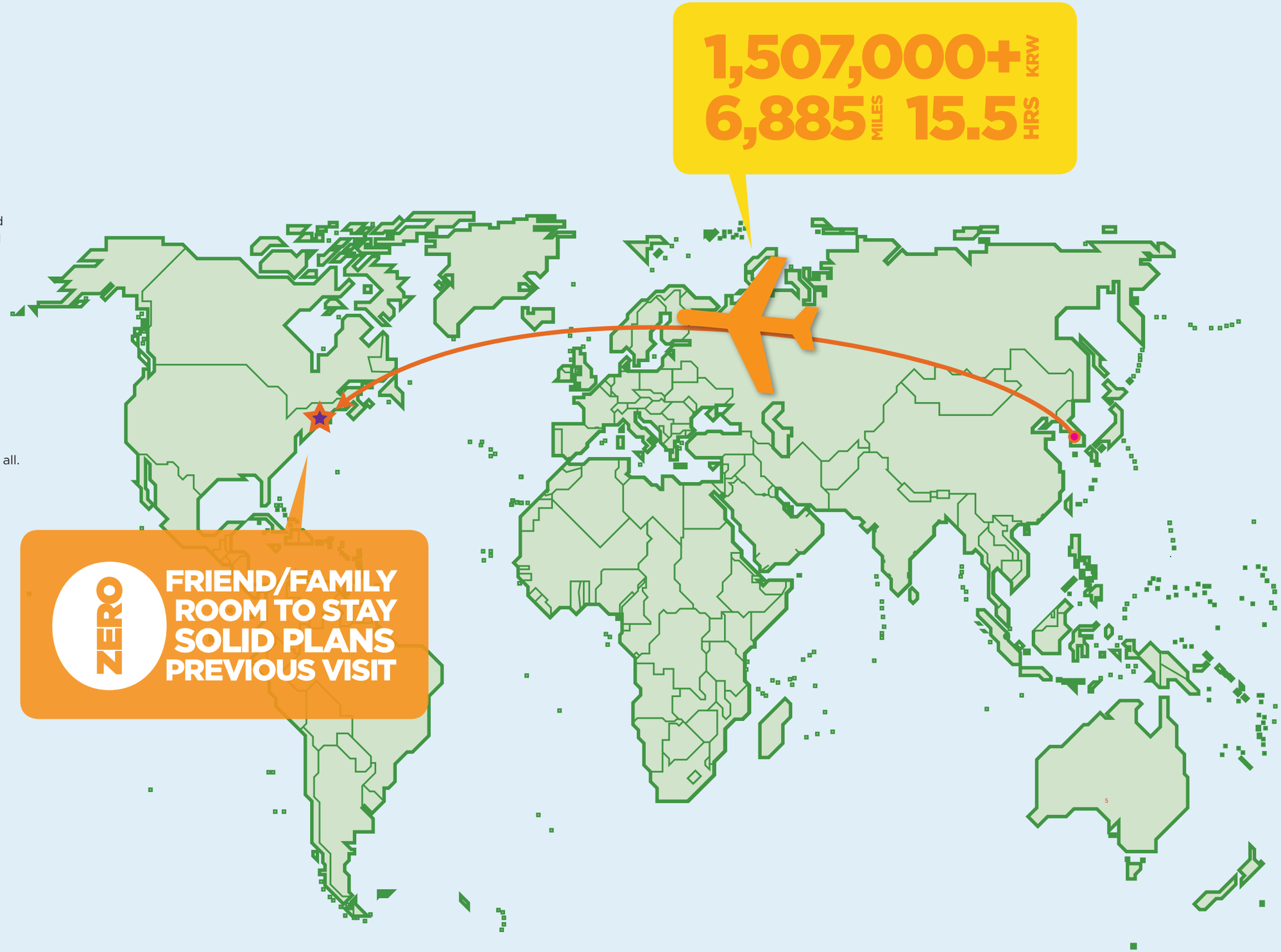
31 years in 31 seconds

It didn't happen overnight. I'd been all over the place even before I arrived here. Computer nerd as a grade schooler, entering a foreign-language high school to study linguistics in college, then double-majoring in psychology. I entered graduate school for psychology, only to drop out a year later and join the army. With all that studying and physical training, and running across multiple career paths, however, there was one thing I hadn't tried: *living to New York*. In 2007, everything started to change yet again.



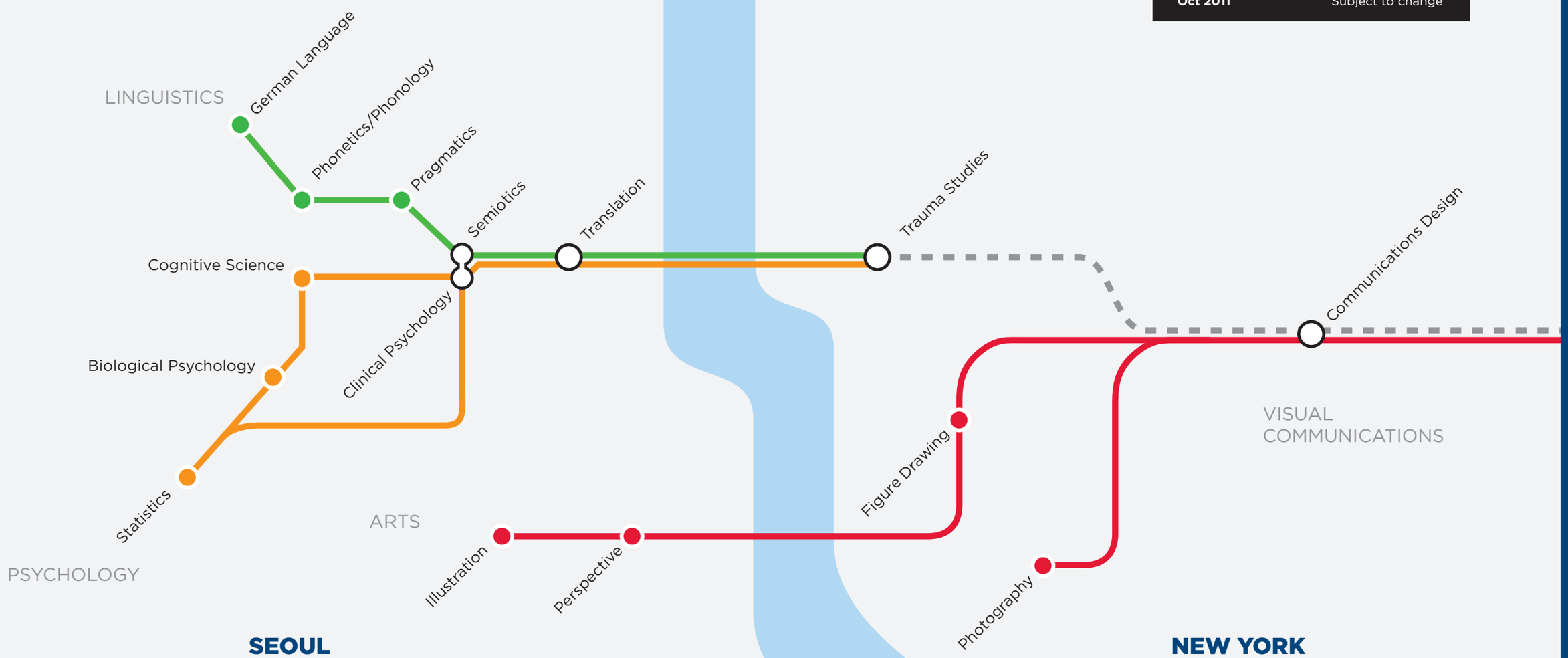
Big Journey
all against sensibility

Friends called me crazy. Grandmother pleaded with me not to go. I have to confess, I myself didn't think it was all that reasonable. Born, raised and educated in Seoul, I had all good reasons not to leave: family, job, savings and, of course, a social status that would never define me as a *legal alien*. There was nothing sweet I could expect from New York, and, yes, I was aware of it. In the plane flying across the globe, I kept trying to think of one good reason for coming here but there seemed none. That night, desperately counting sheep, part of me was thinking maybe I *was* crazy after all.



Transit
constant transition

Raised by parents who are both steadfast scholars, it was inevitable for me to have one foot in academia. Whether training martial arts, growing ambitions in music, or making money non-academically, I had a strong urge to go back to studying. In hindsight, all the paths I stepped along had one thing in common: *communication*. What better career can I ask for than visual communications to combine all the diverse backgrounds to keep studying *and* earn a living? Would there have been a better place than New York to do that? I guess not.



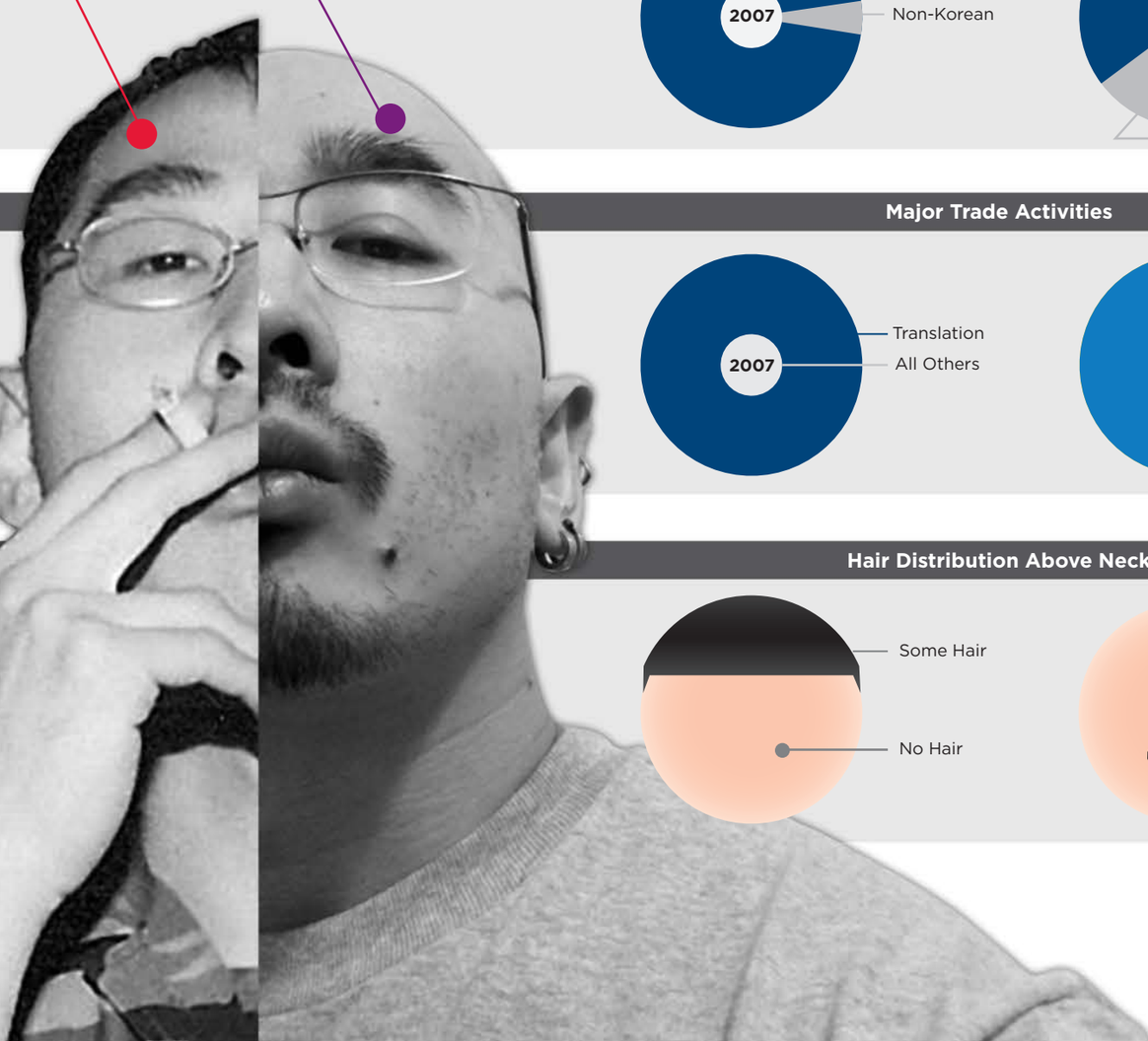
Five Years and Counting

quick contrast between then and now

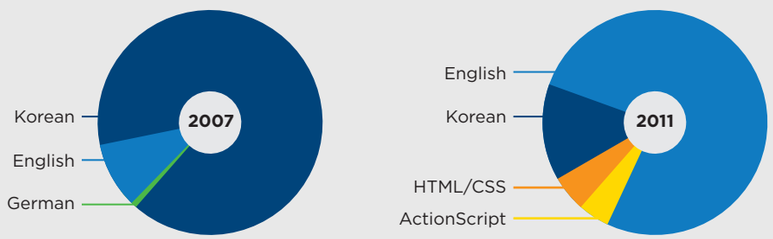
In the five years in New York, so many things have changed in my life that I can almost say there is hardly anything that stays the same as back then. Coming from a megalopolis of Seoul, adapting to the city life wasn't much of a challange for me; it was the total shift of focus in life that made the five years feel swift. The words that used to describe me in 2007—e.g., *liberal arts, clean-shaven, translator*—and those that do now—e.g., *visual communications, mustaches, designer*—don't really overlap. It still sometimes feels surreal to look at myself in a mirror. I've come a long way, yet I'm still acclimatizing.

Sep 2011
Designer,
smoke-free

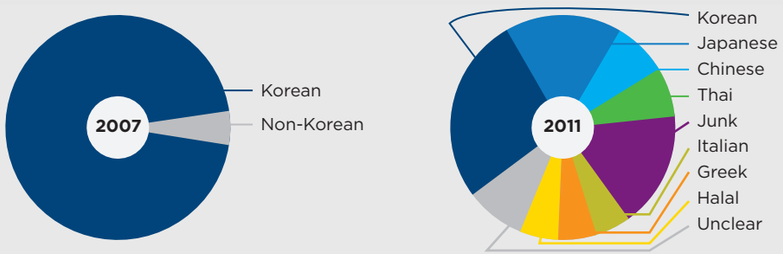
Apr 2007
Army Sergeant,
chain-smoker



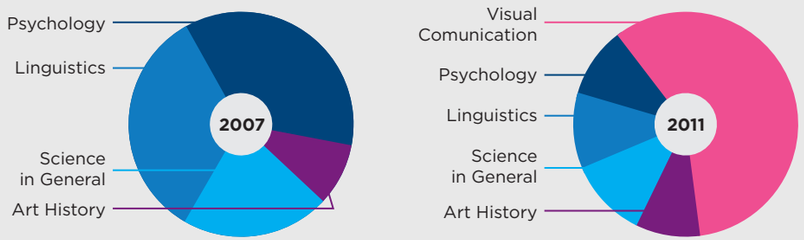
Languages Used



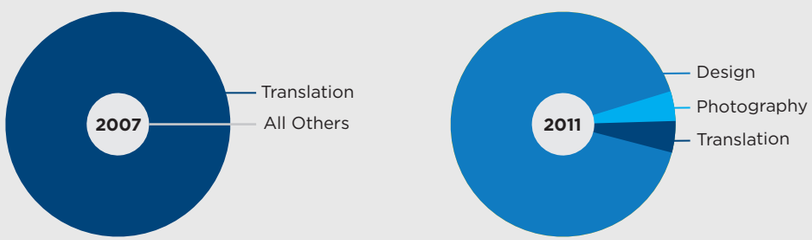
Average Meal Configuration



Major Academic Interests



Major Trade Activities



Friends' Skin Tone Spectrum

Hair Distribution Above Neck

ACCULTURATION

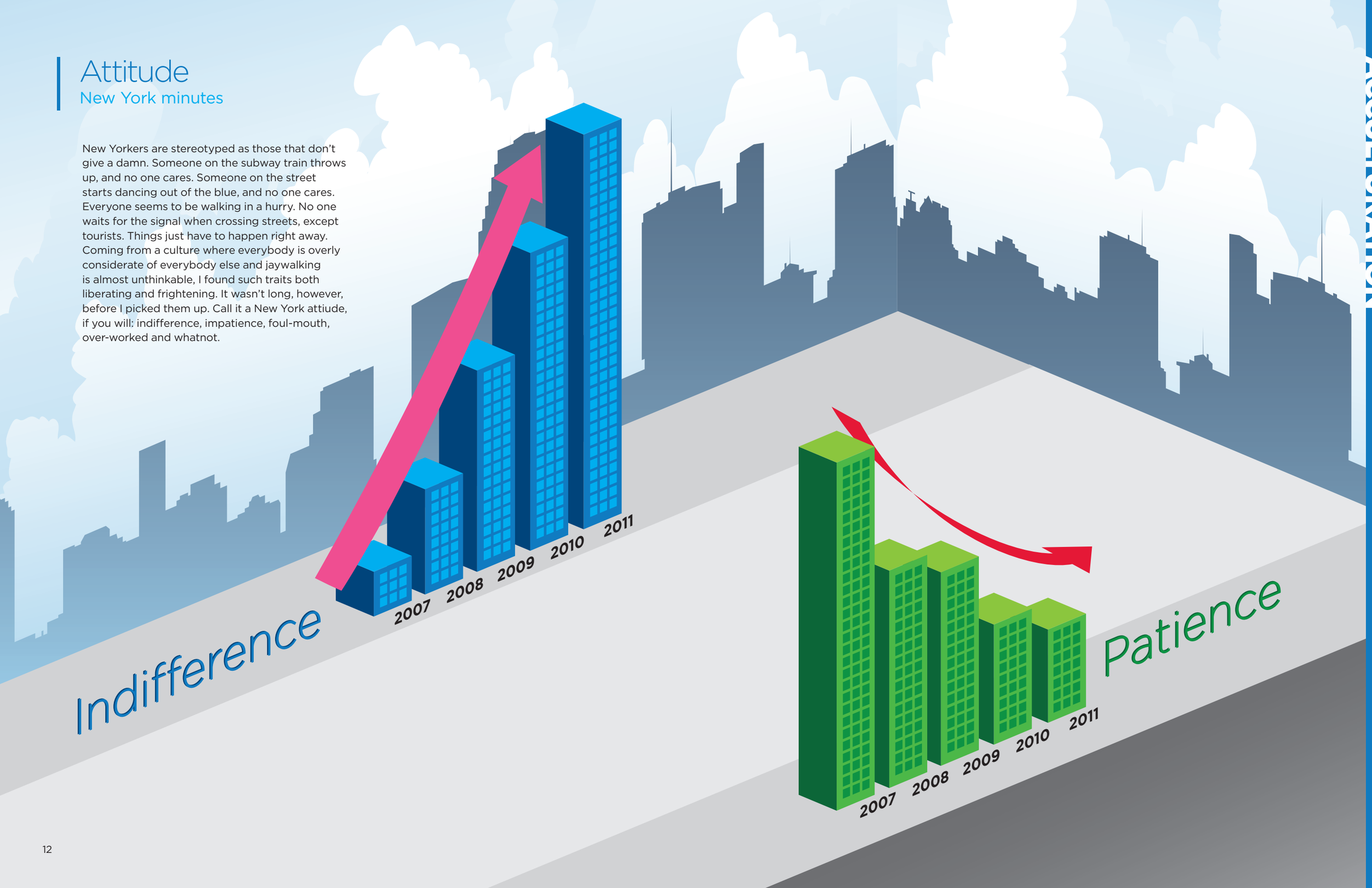
attaining the Empire State of mind

ACCULTURATION

Attitude

New York minutes

New Yorkers are stereotyped as those that don't give a damn. Someone on the subway train throws up, and no one cares. Someone on the street starts dancing out of the blue, and no one cares. Everyone seems to be walking in a hurry. No one waits for the signal when crossing streets, except tourists. Things just have to happen right away. Coming from a culture where everybody is overly considerate of everybody else and jaywalking is almost unthinkable, I found such traits both liberating and frightening. It wasn't long, however, before I picked them up. Call it a New York attiude, if you will: indifference, impatience, foul-mouth, over-worked and whatnot.



Intake & Output

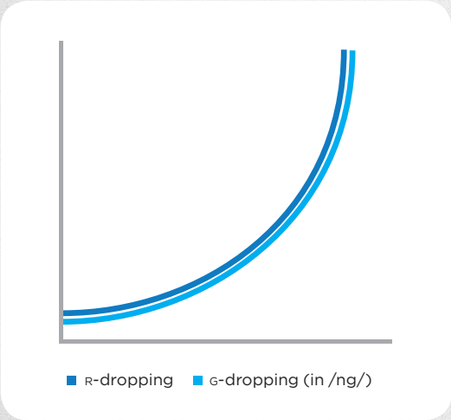
I am what I eat and spit

Really, I didn't drink much coffee, if at all, and didn't even know what exactly a bagel was. Seriously, I mean it when I say I wasn't comfortable swearing in conversation. Even though I admit Hollywood movies exaggerate New Yorkers' tendency toward outbursts of profanity, there is a certain truth to it that they don't mind four-letter words very much. And while I know not all New Yorkers are caffeine addicts, many of my colleagues, if not all, are constant coffee drinkers. It's surprising how such traits become transferred without ever making them feel forced.

Language Habit

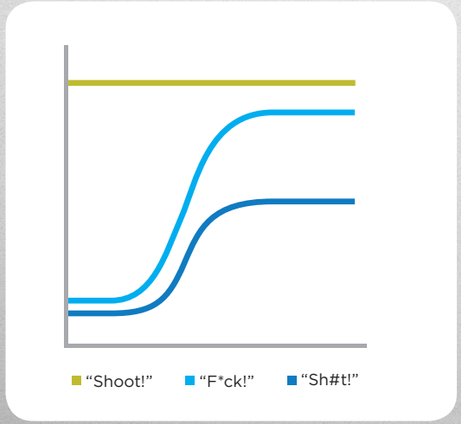
talk like New Yorkers talk

As a linguistic major and professional translator/interpreter, I've always been very keen on language. English being my second language, I'm not super proficient in telling one accent from another, yet some typical New York speech traits are pretty distinct. Dropping /r/ sound at the end of a syllable, pronouncing /ng/ as /n/, and low-back chain shifting of /o/ vowels are a few of those phonetic traits. Also, colloquialism and ethnic vernacularism seem to play a significan role in the New York accent. Interacting with friends and colleagues who are native New Yorkers, I have acquired a handful of features without even realizing it.

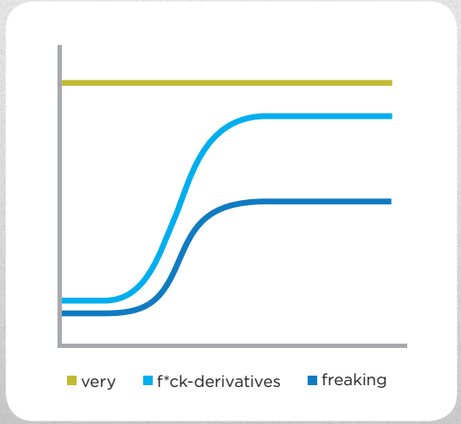


Consonant dropping at syllable's end

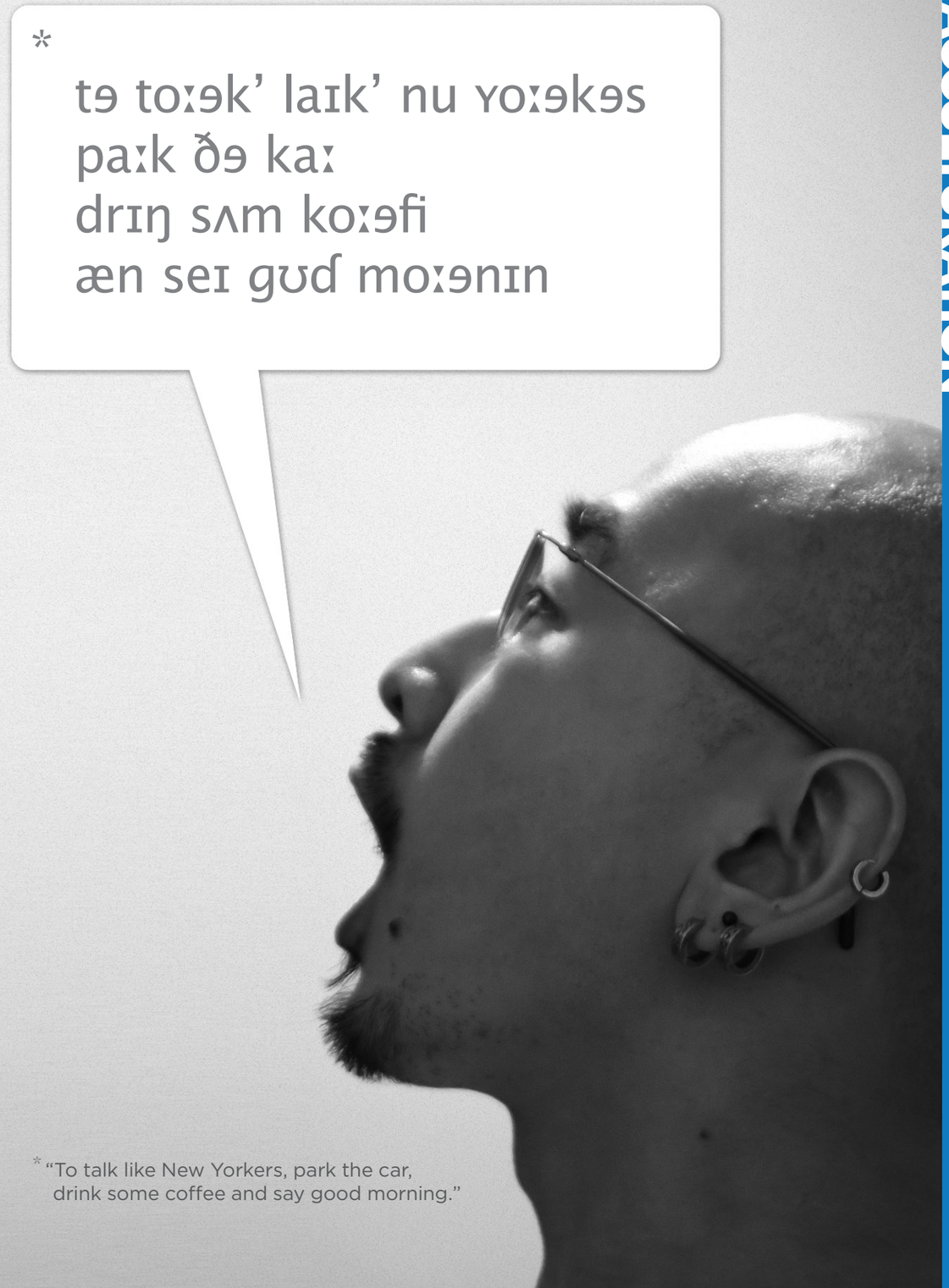
Indication of not having heard something



Frequently used exclamations



Frequently used adverbs



* "To talk like New Yorkers, park the car, drink some coffee and say good morning."

experiencing the boroughs RELOCATION

The Atlas

5 years at a glance

After having lived in Manhattan and Brooklyn for two years each, I moved to Queens in July 2011. Out of the five boroughs of New York City, I have experienced three so far. Getting to live in different neighborhood inevitably meant being immersed in different cultures. Within just a few subway stops, I realized, one will find various unmistakably distinct demographics and ethnic subcultures. Coming from the extremely homogeneous culture of Korea, such opportunities of connecting with diverse people have been a great joy, albeit sometimes bitterly frustrating.

August '07—May '09

B D F N Q R

STUDIO

1 Roommate

Walking for the most part

June '09—June '11

D F N R

3BR (sublet)

3 Roommates

45 minutes to Manhattan

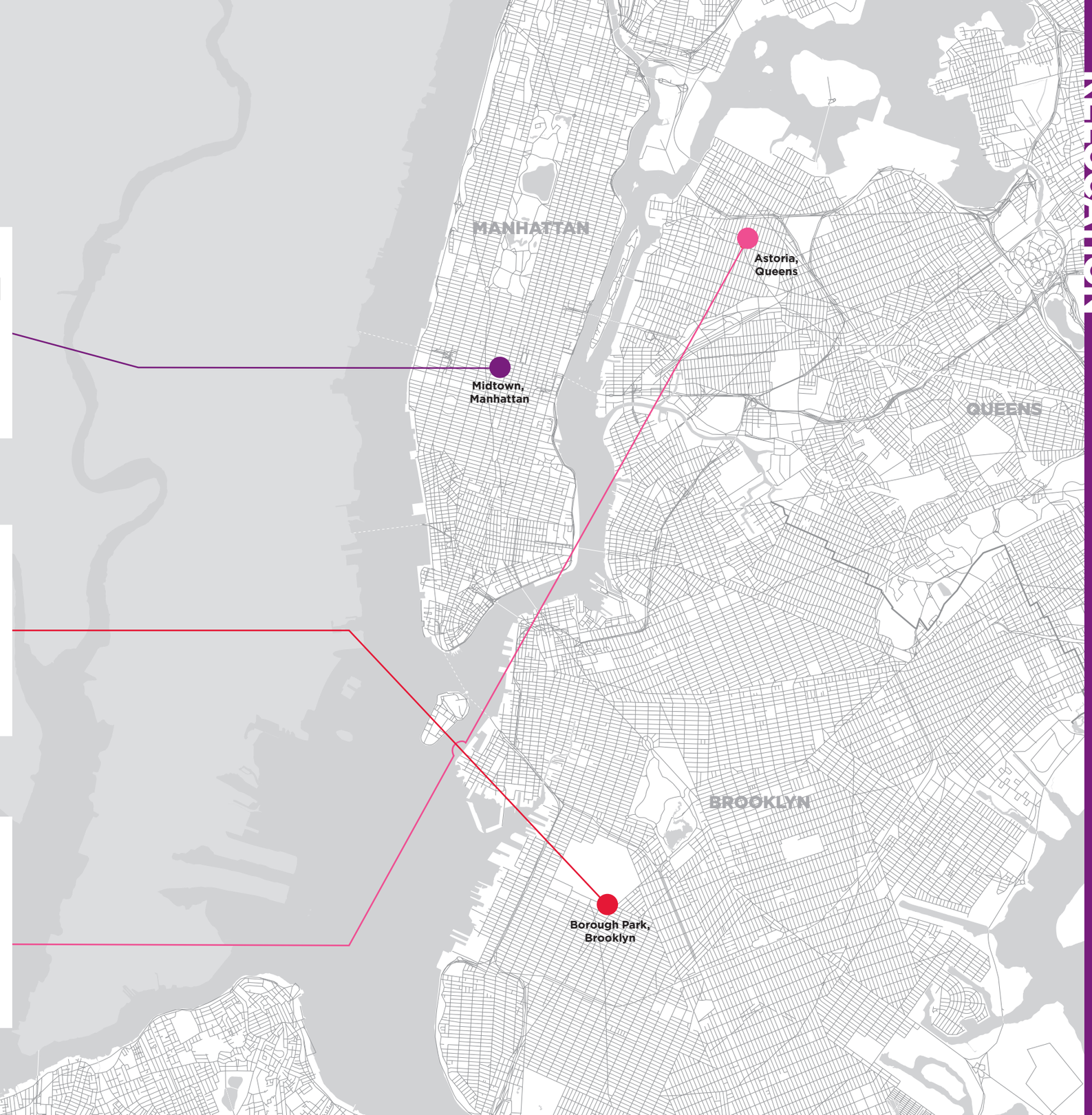
July '11—Present

N Q R

2BR

1 Roommate

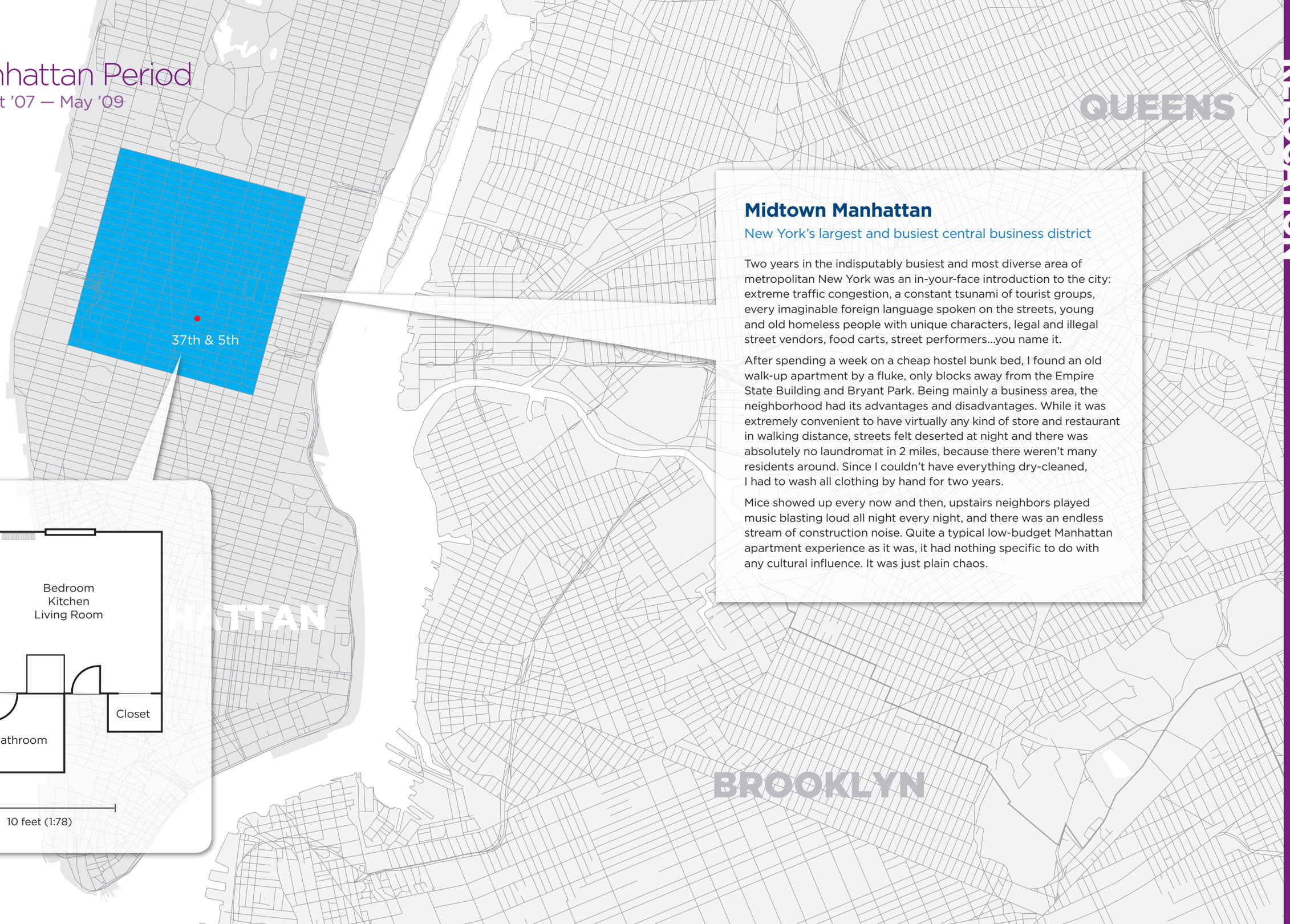
30 minutes to Manhattan



RELOCATION

Manhattan Period

August '07 — May '09



Midtown Manhattan

New York's largest and busiest central business district

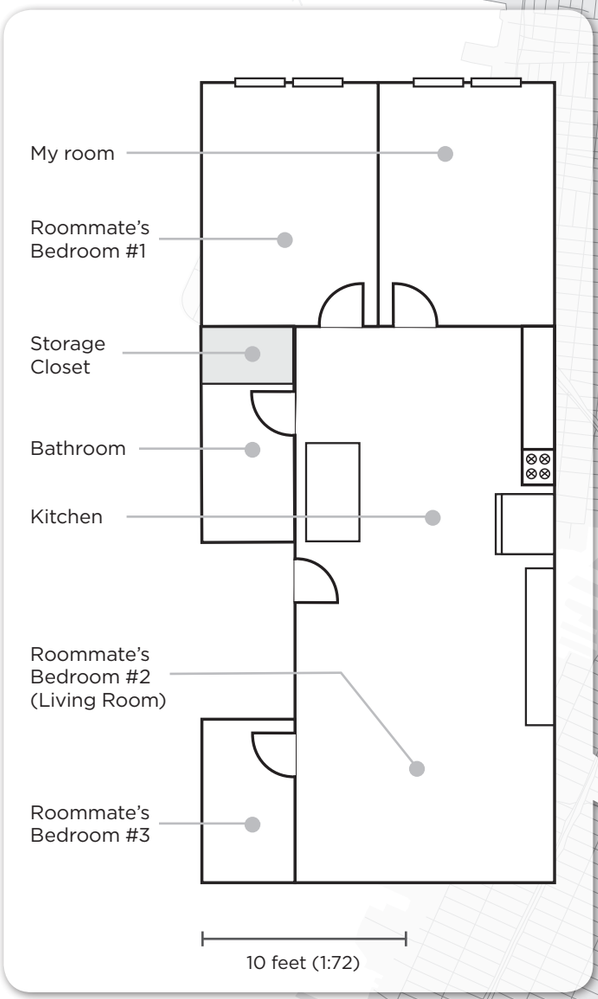
Two years in the indisputably busiest and most diverse area of metropolitan New York was an in-your-face introduction to the city: extreme traffic congestion, a constant tsunami of tourist groups, every imaginable foreign language spoken on the streets, young and old homeless people with unique characters, legal and illegal street vendors, food carts, street performers...you name it.

After spending a week on a cheap hostel bunk bed, I found an old walk-up apartment by a fluke, only blocks away from the Empire State Building and Bryant Park. Being mainly a business area, the neighborhood had its advantages and disadvantages. While it was extremely convenient to have virtually any kind of store and restaurant in walking distance, streets felt deserted at night and there was absolutely no laundromat in 2 miles, because there weren't many residents around. Since I couldn't have everything dry-cleaned, I had to wash all clothing by hand for two years.

Mice showed up every now and then, upstairs neighbors played music blasting loud all night every night, and there was an endless stream of construction noise. Quite a typical low-budget Manhattan apartment experience as it was, it had nothing specific to do with any cultural influence. It was just plain chaos.

Brooklyn Period

June '09 — June '11



Borough Park

world's largest Orthodox Jewish community outside Israel

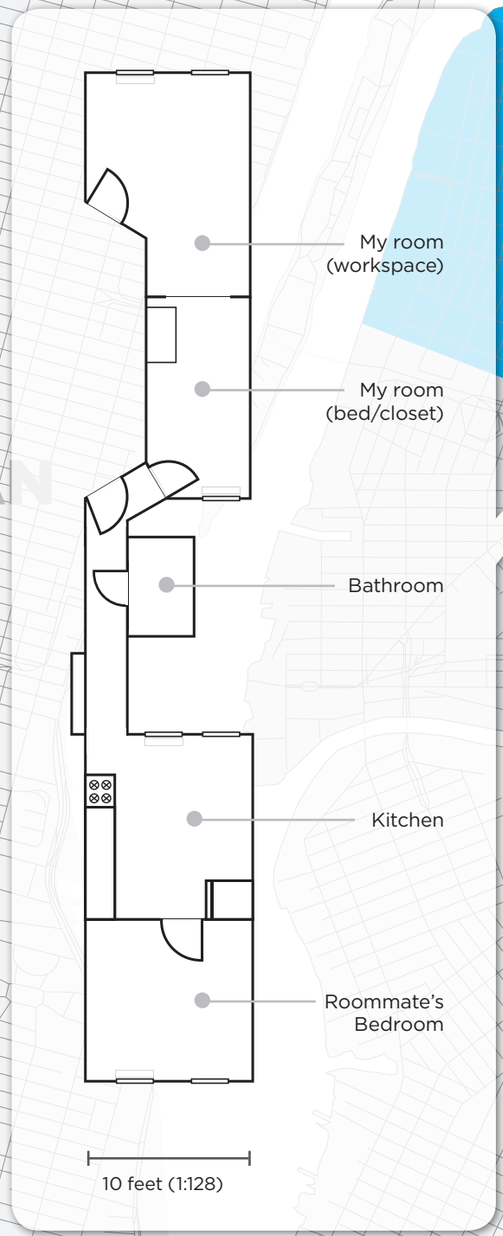
Brooklyn is home to a large Jewish community, and Borough Park is the biggest Jewish neighborhood in the borough. One could always find people in black Hassidic coats and hats on the streets and in the subway. My Japanese roommates and I were among the few Asians in the district. The first several weeks in Borough Park seemed almost like moving to a different country altogether; such a strong demographic trend was never seen in Midtown Manhattan.

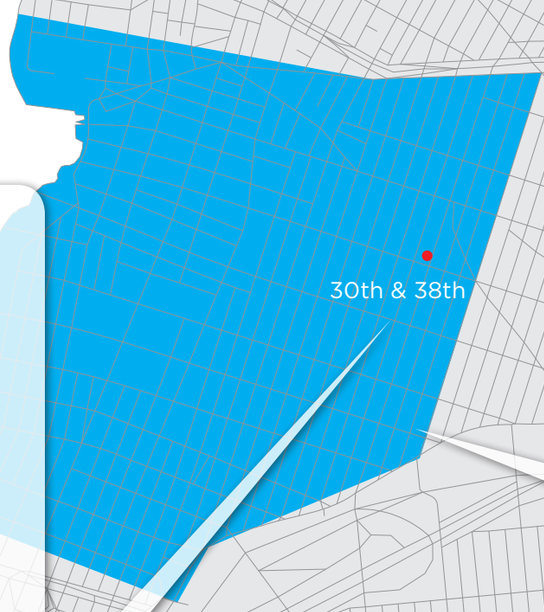
Long and boring subway commute aside, Brooklyn life wasn't all that pleasant. A total of four people shared a three-bedroom apartment with only one bathroom and one overcrowded refrigerator, and there sporadically occurred dramas over small things: fights over shower and toilet use, growing sulky and estranged over food stolen, extensive battles over house chores, and such. One thing I personally disliked was when my roommates started speaking Japanese in front of me. Even though I understood they weren't discussing anything about me, it felt like being segregated within our small community, which was already somewhat segregated from the whole neighborhood, which was yet somewhat set apart from New York City in general.

It was this period when I started running regularly and finished my first marathon ever. With Green-Wood Cemetery across the street from home, and no bar or cafe to spend time at, Borough Park was a perfect environment to be addicted to running.

Queens Period

July '11 — Present





QUEENS

BROOKLYN

Astoria

the Greek capital of New York, and home to Little Egypt

My landlord Chris is Greek, almost all the other tenants are Greek, and so are over half the neighbors on the block. Along the avenues are quite a few Greek tavernas and Mediterranean restaurants. My first impression of Astoria was that, unlike Borough Park where things appeared to be always serious and quiet, everybody looked lighthearted and was talkative. Similarly demographically uneven, this Greek neighborhood for some reason seemed much more easy and approachable than its Jewish counterpart. (Disclaimer: I'm not suggesting that anyone actually treated me differently in Brooklyn because of my ethnicity.)

The commute to Manhattan became much more convenient and quicker, and practically everything turned out to be more convenient and quicker too. Restaurants and grocery stores that open early and close late, five laundromats in a few blocks, 24-hour convenient stores around the corner—what's there not to like?

At the time of this writing, I haven't explored the area very much, but I'm very much expecting new surprises to be discovered.

RUNNING

Kicking the asphalt

Running Urge

scored and unscored races

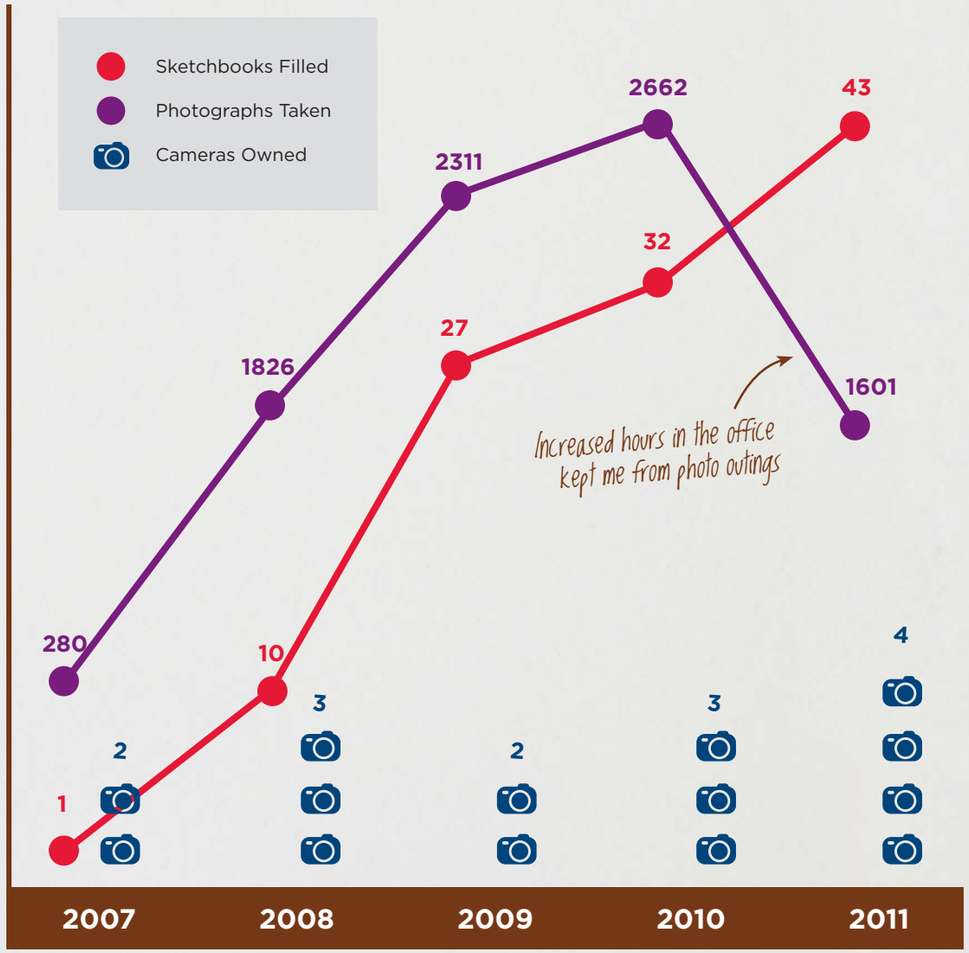
While I have two black belts—Taekwondo and Haedong Gumdo—and always loved physical training, I had not been a big fan of running. As mentioned in the previous chapter, I started to run in 2009 in Brooklyn. Obsessive thinking habits paired with an introverted personality often drive me to become my own worst enemy, harassing myself to death, and I learned by experience that any physical activity helps release the negative energy. Back then, I was desperate to find a job not to return to Korea. With no spare money to spend at a martial art dojo, I started running around the cemetery. It didn't take too long until I got hooked; it was only three months from my first run that I finished my first full marathon in life.

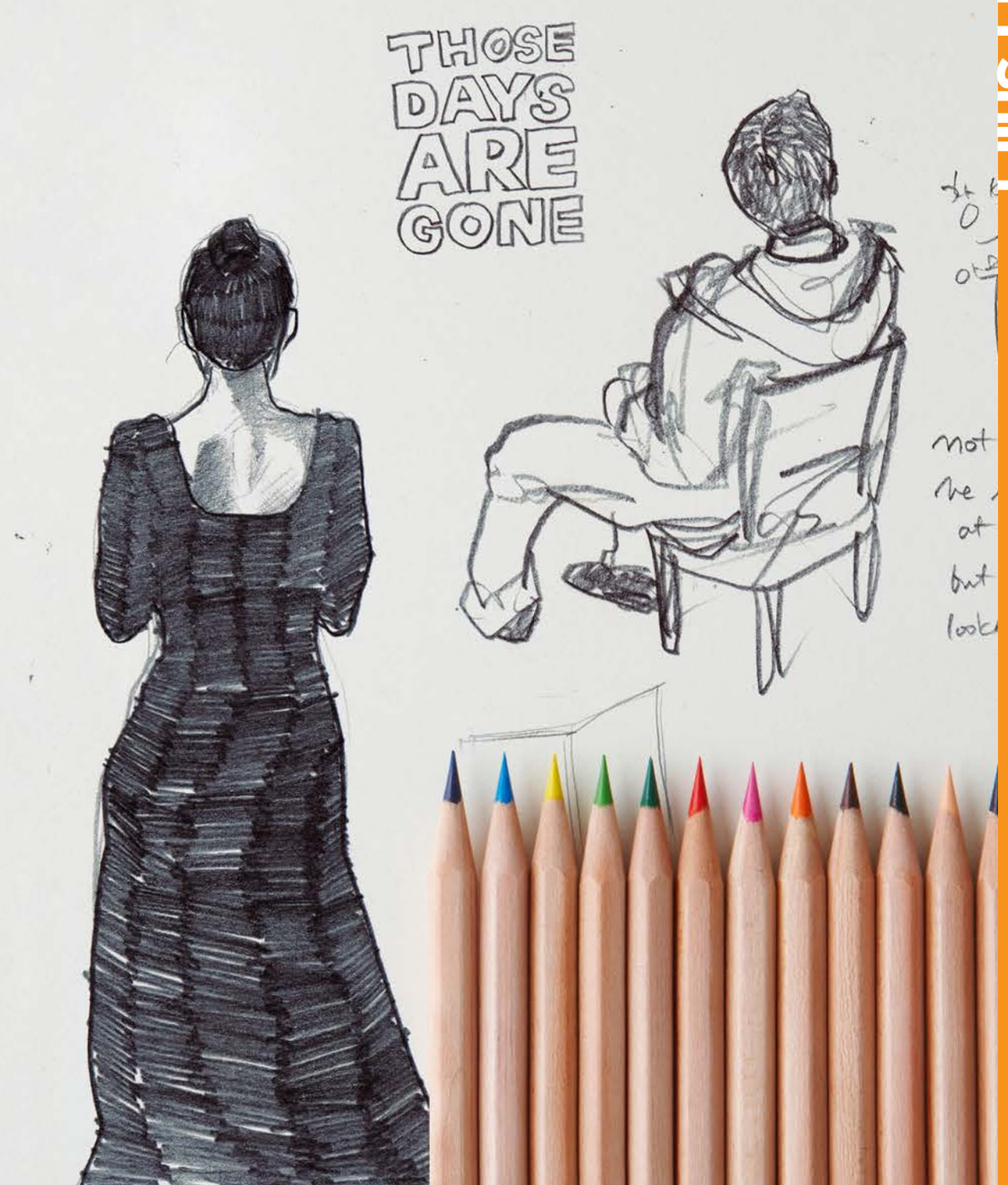
The Brain FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

Visual Arts

passion for excellence

Since I was a kid, drawing has been such a natural part of everyday life that I wasn't even aware of it. At school, at work, in business meetings, on travel—wherever I went, I always had a pencil and a pad ready to draw and write. Looking back, however, it is not surprising that I had not once considered visual arts as a career, for I've always felt urged to become an academic. Living in New York, I finally began more earnestly and openly to hone my skills in the arts without having to worry about expectations from family and friends.





Music
private investment

In fact, I had much bigger ambitions in music than in visual arts. Making beats and writing short songs since high school, I even performed onstage as a guitar player and singer in college. Soon I realized I didn't have an outstanding talent in music and practically gave up the dream, and put my enthusiasm aside for a long time. As things settled in New York, the inventory of instruments slowly grew as well, as I could afford more time and money in the hobby.

Handmade Flamenco Guitar
purchased August 2002

Electric Guitar and 10W Amplifier
purchased November 2008

MIDI Keyboard Controller
purchased November 2009

Portable MIDI Keyboard Controller
purchased September 2010

Travel-size Electric Guitar and 2W Mini Amplifier
purchased April 2011

Acoustic Steel-string Guitar
purchased November 2011

NEXT STEP

The first five years in New York has been an arduous journey, full of expected and unexpected troubles. Challenging myself to start all over again from scratch was an overwhelming task in itself, not to mention in a foreign city with no one to rely on.

To evaluate the period myself, it has been overall successful in many regards: I painlessly switched from linguistics and psychology to communications design, started to work on Madison Avenue, entered the graduate program at Pratt Institute, and most importantly and subjectively, got to feel comfortable with the life in New York. At least I'm not struggling anymore to find a reason to have left Seoul.

Now that I have become fully accustomed to a new life and new role in New York, I would consider myself well warmed up and ready to run full speed. I'm sure there will be further challenges to come, but I'm also sure that I'm better equipped to handle them. Hey, I'm playing on my home ground, for New York is my home now.

NEXT STEP

*photographed, illustrated, designed and written by

BUMHAN YU

*except photographs from Getty Images®
in pages 10, 14, 28, 30, 32, 33, 34 and 36

December 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With linguistics and psychology as major academic backgrounds, Bumhan Yu has been on a new adventure in visual communications since he arrived in New York in 2007. Although pathetically obsessive and perfectionist in everything, he is surprisingly easygoing with people. As he likes to say, he is *quiet, not unfriendly.*

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