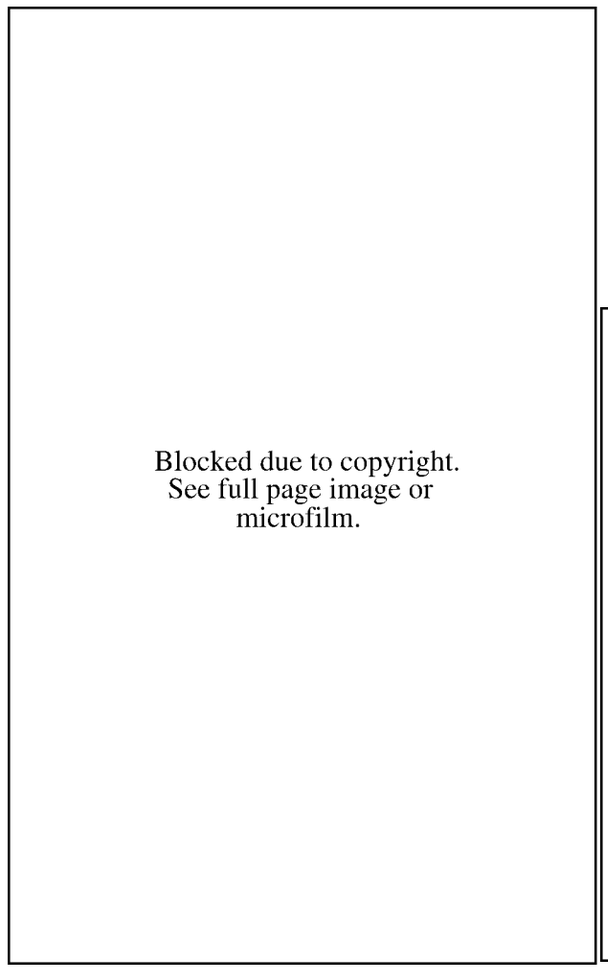
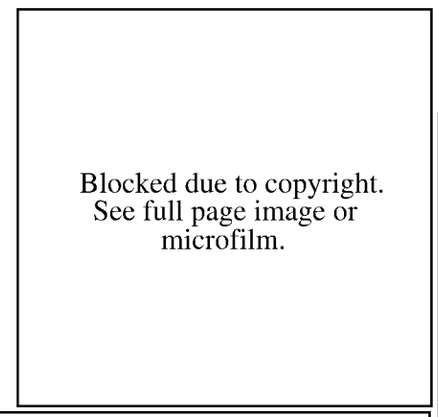
Design Notebook

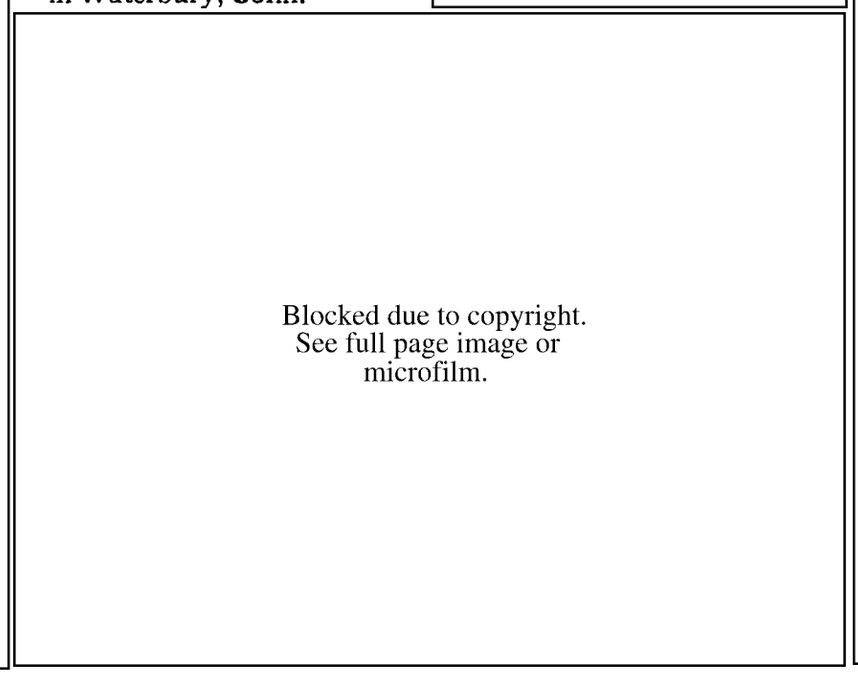
Ada Louise Huxtable

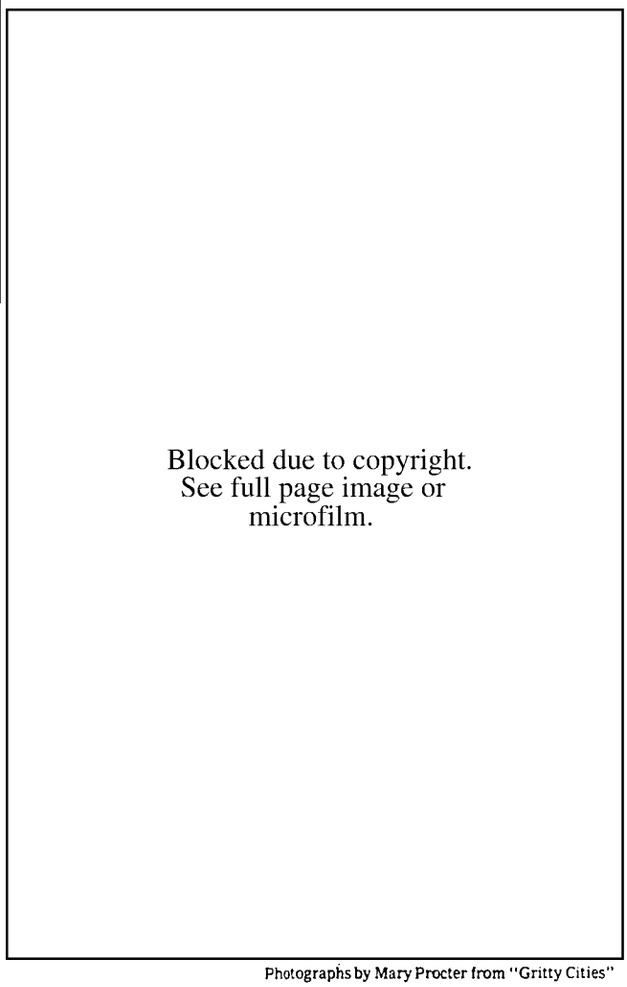
'Gritty Cities' of America's industrial past.



Former post office, far left, and Passaic County Courthouse, left, both in Paterson, N.J. At right, Benedict and Burnham Mills in Waterbury, Conn.







Photographs by Mary Procter from "Gritty Cities"

ONE of the nicest book titles to come along in quite a while is "Gritty Cities." You don't have to read very far between the lines to recognize this collection of photographs and essays as a love letter to America's smaller industrial cities, with their manufacturing beginnings overlaid by modest vernacular building in patterns of use and style never taught by planning schools or studied by aspirants for the Prix de Rome.

They have become unfashionable cities, hard-hit by 20th-century changes, bemused and often corrupted by the superficial face of progress, unaware of, or unable to flaunt, their not always obvious charms.

But they have their admirers. Conspicuous among them are Mary Procter and Bill Matuszeski, who have visited 40 of these older centers of the industrial Northeast and written about 12 of their favorites. "Gritty Cities" (Temple University Press, 1978, now in paperback) is subtitled "A Second Look at Allentown, Bethlehem, Bridgeport, Hoboken, Lancaster, Norwich, Paterson, Reading, Trenton, Troy, Waterbury and Wilmington."

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As weekend refugees from their home city of Washington, Miss Procter and Mr. Matuszeski first discovered Baltimore's older neighborhoods. Intrigued by the richness and diversity of that city's mixed waterfront, manufacturing, and ethnic and architectural heritage, they walked miles of streets of red brick row houses and explored canals and rivers lined with parks and abandoned factories. Hooked by unexpected urban charms, they moved on to Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. For every city they saw, dozens of others beckoned.

What these gritty cities all have in common is an industrial heritage and an affluent past characterized by Yankee invention and optimism, and a shared belief in the future in the face of adversity and change. The phrase is wonderfully expressive of the smoke and grime of their 19th-century manufacturing past and their determinaton to survive and prosper in the present. It is one of those additions to the language that will characterize the Newarks and Springfields from now on.

The book is clearly not the work of professional architectural historians, nor does it make any claim to comprehensive documentation. The authors have relied on a good eye and sound instincts and a basic reading list heavy on social and industrial history. The building forms produced by that history are obviously what they like most, and although the identification of period and style is reliable, the basic fabric of the city gets tantalizingly short shrift.

What is conveyed successfully, however, is an impression of a rich heritage of mills and factories, rivers and harbors, plain and fancy housing in working class and elegant neighborhoods shaped by need, taste and topography, for a panoramic view of architectural fashions and indigenous details.

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The classic book on the historic industrial city of the Northeast remains John Coolidge's superb study of Lowell, Mass., "Mill and Mansion," published by The Columbia University Press in 1942. Although it set the standard in the field, it is not in the "Gritty Cities" bibliography. In fact, anyone looking for that kind of substance in "Gritty Cities" will be disappointed.

This is a graceful presentation and a bit of splendid special pleading for the subject, consisting of very brief, charmingly written essays of limited information and largely anecdotal history, with condensed and generalized descriptions. The introductory summary is particularly good.

The pictures, while outstanding, tell more about the photographer's excellent eye for pattern and intriguing detail than about the cities themselves. Unless one knows these places, no clear image of any single one emerges. The authors state that they were drawn to their choices by these "strong and consistent visual images." They also explain that they hope only to convey the special character, in a general way, of the places that have inspired their admiring affection. That is a valid objective, and they have carried it out very well. But the results are likely to frustrate anyone who likes these cities as much as they do.

The book could not have come at a more opportune time than this moment in the late 1970's when the whole perception of our cities is changing. It has taken about 30 years, including a quarter of a century of urban-renewal disasters, for the popular belief that these communities represent backwaters of blight to be replaced by the growing realization of the remarkable urban and architectural resources of their organic accretions of use and style.

One of the most delightful things about "Gritty Cities" is that it is an optimistic book, its basic premise is that these smaller cities are places where "living, working and visiting can be attractive in the most modern terms amid many visually interesting reminders of the past." This philosophy coincides with the waterfront revivals, revitalized downtowns, and rehabilitation and "gentrification" of in-town neighborhoods quietly taking place in many older communities today.

It is a rebirth occurring in spite of pessimistic professional analyses of their problems and in defiance of the predictions and prescriptions of the computerized apostles of the new.

The book also has a moral that should be emblazoned on billboards in any community with an identity and a past. "Such cities do best when they grow and change by building on those things that give them their character," the authors write. "Pat solutions imported via big-city consultants, no matter how bold and costly, never seem to succeed as well as carefully thought-out approaches that use the unique mix of existing structures and neighborhoods, traditions and industries that comprise a city's legacy."

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The appalling price paid to the urban expert-carpetbaggers delivering patent-medicine renewal in the 1960's can never be calculated in terms of the loss of unique and irreplaceable assets. It took acres of bulldozer desolation to teach us that a living organism was being destroyed.

Some of the cities visited by Miss Procter and Mr. Matuszeski still bear urban renewal scars. They list 26 continuous blocks in Wilmington only beginning to be filled in around the edges, 12 empty blocks in downtown Reading, and desolate vacant land in the hearts of Paterson and Waterbury. They show how interstate highways bled and bisected cities until they were stopped; how parking lots decimated the downtowns they were intended to serve; how textbook plans substituted denatured formulas for local character.

But the book is gentle in tone; no time is wasted on dead horses. The authors' main thesis and most welcome point is that, contrary to conventional wisdom, most of these cities are in surprisingly good shape. Many were lucky enough to escape radical renewal completely. In spite of persistent rumors of their death, they are alive and well and restoring themselves at a remarkable rate.

The study of their gritty pasts has been raised to the level of respected scholarship as industrial archeology. Lowell, Mass., has been designated the first National Urban Park, with plans for preservation of its mills and canals as a valued part of urban and industrial history. The Great Falls of Paterson, N.J., site of Thomas Jefferson's Society for Useful Manufacture, have been declared a National Natural Landmark, and 119 acres of the Paterson mills and raceways are now listed as a National Historic District. And in the most clearly visible and encouraging development of all, countless neighborhoods are being revived.

"Compared to bigger cities," Miss Procter and Mr. Matuszeski tell us, "the gritty cities remain places where traditions are better remembered, the scale is more human, and urban problems seem less intractable. They are entering a period when their attributes are again valued."

This book, with its sensitive and caring eye for their unusual beauties and eccentricities, will do a lot to foster an understanding of where the heart of urban culture really lies.