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New York City adds 720,000 images showing every house and building in the five Boroughs, ca. 1940, to its online collection

NEW YORK, November 1, 2018 — The New York City Department of Records & Information Services announced completion of a long-awaited project that digitized more than 720,000 photographs. The collection consists of individual pictures of every house and building in the five Boroughs of New York City, ca. 1940. They can be viewed in the Archives' on-line gallery: <http://nycma.lunaimaging.com/>.

This comprehensive collection shows where New Yorkers lived, worked, went to school, worshiped, shopped, dined, and socialized. They have unique value not only for the buildings they depict, but for what is incidental to the picture—the cars, trucks, taxis, buses, horse-drawn wagons, movie marquees, billboards, street lamps and signs—as well as the people—on stoops, on the sidewalks and looking out windows at the busy streetscape. In short, an extraordinary panorama of life in prewar New York City.

Known as “tax” photographs, the pictures were taken for the City’s property tax office as part of a program to modernize the assessment process. The City used funding from the Depression-era Works Progress Administration (WPA) to hire the photographers. They worked in teams of two—one photographer using the then-new 35mm format camera, and a helper to place a sign identifying the property by its block and lot number. Although the photographers have never been identified by name, their work will now be more accessible to the public for generations to come.



*1940 Tax Photograph, 33 2nd Street, Brooklyn.
Credit: NYC Municipal Archives.*

Transferred to the Municipal Archives in 1980, the collection has been available for research on microfilm only. Advancements in digitization technology allowed the Archives to scan from the original negatives (kept in frozen storage) for this project. The newly digitized images capture all of the fine details that were not previously visible on microfilm. The collection is available for viewing: <http://nycma.lunaimaging.com/>. Prints from, and copies of, the high-resolution digital files will be available for purchase.

The 1940 collection is complemented by the second City-wide photograph survey completed by the tax assessment office in the mid-1980s. These images are also accessible on the agency’s website.

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