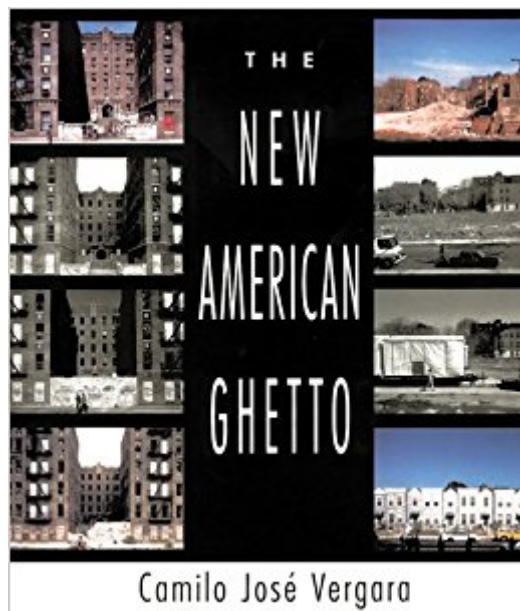


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# The New American Ghetto



## Synopsis

Vergara has chronicled life in poor and minority communities across the United States in the New York Times, Atlantic, the Nation, the Village Voice, and other publications. Following in the footsteps of 19th-century urban reformer Jacob Riis, the author, through the power of photography, reveals the destitution and vulgarities of urban decay. Chicago; Newark, New Jersey; New York; Detroit; Los Angeles; and several other cities are the backdrops for his 400 photographs. Vergara focuses on the physical environment, showing the transformation of particular sites over time. His tour of dilapidated neighborhoods and crumbling downtowns is visually startling. Vergara lays bare the direction of a new urbanness that strips the grandeur from its fabric and lays waste to the cityscape, pointing out that while we have wasted cities, many of the ruins are magnificent. An invaluable resource for urban studies and architecture collections.

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## Customer Reviews

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direction of a new urbanness that strips the grandeur from its fabric and lays waste to the cityscape, pointing out that while we have wasted cities, many of the ruins are magnificent. An invaluable resource for urban studies and architecture collections. Michael A. Lutes, Univ. of Notre Dame Lib., Ind. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Unchanging statistics about life in U.S. ghettos, Vergara argues, hide something quite new: the "crystallization of an urbanism tolerant of ever greater inequality." Chilean-born Vergara began photographing American ghettos when he was a Notre Dame undergraduate; he continued while earning a master's degree in sociology at Columbia University. The 9,000-plus slides he has produced since 1977 document the physical changes ghettos--"as intrinsic to the identity of the United States as New England villages, vast national parks, and leafy suburbs"--have experienced. Vergara has explored the meaning of these changes in such publications as the Nation, the Atlantic, Architectural Record, and the New York Times and in gallery, museum, and university exhibitions; his work has also been the subject of a BBC documentary. The New American Ghetto focuses on ghetto geography and ecology, examining over time specific cities' cityscapes, housing, commerce and industry, and defensive fortifications, as well as gentrification, NIMBY phenomena, the effects of homelessness and drugs, and the images--in ghetto homes, on abandoned buildings' walls, and in fortified neighborhoods' streets--that assert the humanity of these shattered communities' residents. Vivid and troubling; an essential acquisition. Mary Carroll --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Excellent book and I am delighted to be able to share it with my students from both the photography and social justice point of view.

The photographs in this book are gripping. While the narrative is interesting regarding the sociology of the rise (and fall) of the ghetto in several American cities, what is most stunning about this book, perhaps obviously, are the photographs. How many of us have driven by abandoned or decaying buildings and have either reminisced or have wondered about its history? I think most of us have experienced this. Vergara has captured those moments on film. Yet his interests and the style of his photographs reveal life bursting, or seeping, from behind the apparent emptiness and abandonment. Snippets of conversations or ponderings from those who live in the neighborhoods photographed and quotes from various 'experts' give a framework through which the photographs

reveal what is behind the facade. Graffiti reveals insight and inspiration. And there are various characters outside of the mainstream who find meaning and life in what those who have abandoned these buildings called 'decay'. An itinerant preacher, a modern day Noah and her ark and a whole host of other individuals reveal to us that no matter what it looks like on the outside, there is a spark in all of us that hopes and dreams and envisions a better tomorrow. This book succeeds on many levels, a sociological level, a picturesque level, a historical level and, most important in my opinion, a human level. It's a book you can peruse over and over again and find something new with each visit.

Every few years, the US history books are updated. We've added things like the Civil Rights movement, Gay rights, AIDS, Reagan's "War on Drugs," the internment of Japanese Americans, etc. But one thing we haven't included is how our cities crumbled after WWII. In all US cities, be they Detroit, Newark, Chicago, Bronx, or on the West Coast, inner city neighborhoods all declined. Once the "Levitowns" sprang up, people moved out and the buildings emptied. Some towns, like the Bronx, were made worse by highways. Others, like Detroit, were wrecked by factory closings. Vergara's photos are a great primary source for teaching history. It's like one of those time-lapse videos of an apple rotting. This, along with "A Time Before Crack" should be shown to kids in US History class. It's time our kids learned a little "street" history.

Vergara looks at some major American industrial cities that suffered some horrible disinvestment after World War II. He takes an honest look at the people and buildings in some of America's poorest cities (Camden, Newark, Detroit) and how ugly, cheap, security-conscious and modernistic buildings to serve the ghetto's poor residents have replaced fantastic movie palaces, upscale housing and fading remnants of a wealthier, more egalitarian period in U.S. history. Vergara's prose gets a bit preachy and predictable at times, but the real strength in this book lies in its collection of bleak photos that make you wonder why this nation abandoned its industrial past so quickly and so thoroughly. They speak more than any words can ever do on the plight of America's cities. He shines when he looks at how buildings transform over time - some for better, most for worse. The majority of these photos were taken in the early-1990s, as the crack epidemic was at its peak and the double-digit decline in urban crime was just beginning. With crime down and the urban real estate market up, I view these decade-old photos with a mix of sadness and hope. Vergara's later work, American Ruins does an even better job of looking at how the United States has turned its collective back on its cities. If you read this book, make sure you check out American Ruins. They

both make Vergara our best chronicler of urban decay.

This man I applaud for excellent feeling and documentaion of our streets. I think it is wrong to say "something we ignore" written buy another reviewer. I think these cities fell apart because of the people running it and the economy at the time (late 70's) (some of the 80's). I think our economy is very strong and that's why these symbols of decay in america are fading away from it's horizon, however I agree when the author of the book said that "first failing housing projects" what's next "failing town houses" because due to the demolition of well known housing projects in the past 3 years such as Cabrini Green...Many of the poor people are being thrown into the street...people that are old and children as well...so greedy developers can build 300-500 thousand dollar estates in what once was the most "dangerous" "poverty stricken" housing projects. I think changing the physical looks of something has nothing to do with it's success. Crime will still be there no matter what changes are made when it comes to looks. every american should read this book and think twice about saying "something that is ignored" I think if we renovated buildings and stopped the wrecking ball and improved family and education things in this country and our inner cities would be much better. I grew up in the inner city and I remember all of this.

Slums and ghettos are places that most Americans would care to ignore, but Vergara documents these marginalized "communities" with a personal sincerity and social awareness not often found in this field of study. Those who are involved in bringing back to life the urban cores of American cities would be well-advised to study this book and ponder deeply the author's conclusions. I bought this book today, on a whim, and read it in one sitting. I could not put it down. I'd like to see more works by Mr. Vergara.

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