



The Archaeology of Home: An Epic Set on a Thousand Square Feet of the Lower East Side

Katharine Greider

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When Katharine Greider was told to leave her house or risk it falling down on top of her and her family, it spurred an investigation that began with contractors' diagnoses and lawsuits, then veered into archaeology and urban history, before settling into the saltwater grasses of the marsh that fatefully once sat beneath the site of Number 239 East 7th Street. During the journey, Greider examines how people balance the need for permanence with the urge to migrate, and how the home is the resting place for ancestral ghosts. The land on which Number 239 was built has a history as long as America's own. It provisioned the earliest European settlers who needed fodder for their cattle; it became a spoil of war handed from the king's servant to the revolutionary victor; it was at the heart of nineteenth-century Kleinedeutschland and of the revolutionary Jewish Lower East Side. America's immigrant waves have all passed through 7th Street. In one small house is written the history of a young country and the much longer story of humankind and the places they came to call home.

The Archaeology of Home: An Epic Set on a Thousand Square Feet of the Lower East Side Details

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From Reader Review *The Archaeology of Home: An Epic Set on a Thousand Square Feet of the Lower East Side* for online ebook

Nancy says

People who live in or know New York City might enjoy this more than I did. It is the history of an apartment house at 239 E. 7th Street in NYC. It is the history of the place, starting as a salt marsh known by the native Indian tribes and also the brief stories of the people who settled the land and lived in the building. The author researches all this after her family had to give up the apartment when it was condemned by the city for being structurally unsound. The life stories suffer from there not being enough information, the narrative on home and place suffers from being over written and too unfocused.

Andrew says

How would I react to the news that my home was structurally unsound and was to be condemned? That is probably an unanswerable question, but I'm reasonably certain that I wouldn't be inspired to research the entire history of my property. However, that is exactly what the author has done in response to the demolition of the place she called home, a co-op building on East 7th Street in the East Village of New York City. The result of that (obviously intensive) research is this book, which is a weird hybrid of social history of the New York's Lower East Side, personal memoir of home ownership and philosophical musings on the meanings of place and home.

I suspect that what you get from this book will depend greatly on the expectations you bring to it. I was looking for a history of a place, and for me, those portions of the book that explored the history of this corner of New York were the most effective parts of the narrative, touching on the greater history of New York City (including a fair amount of details about the Dutch colonial period that I was largely unfamiliar with), and spotlighting the immigrant experience of New York that has shaped so much of that City's personality and culture. The stories of the subsequent waves of immigrants who came to New York in search of a better life showed how their experiences were both similar in many ways, but how each story was unique in its details.

On the other hand, the other characteristics of this book struck me as less compelling. The memoir aspect included some interesting insights into the issues involved in owning a co-op and dealing with the structural demise of a home, but the tone felt whiny and self-centered, and I simply didn't care enough to feel any great empathy. And the exploration of the meanings of place and home, while interesting at an abstract level, simply felt distracting in this context and didn't really add anything to the story. Ultimately, this is a bit of a mixed bag, and it is hard to say for sure if the strengths outweigh the weaknesses.

Alison C says

This review was written for LibraryThing Early Reviewers.

I received an Early Reviewers copy, courtesy LibraryThing, of *The Archaeology of Home: An Epic Set in 1000 Square Feet of the Lower East Side*, by Katharine Greider, due to be published in March 2011 from PublicAffairs press, a publisher of whom I'd not previously heard. The book bears some similarity to Bill Bryson's mega-seller *At Home* in the sense that it uses the author's home as a stepping stone to wider

discussions of what "home" means, how it came to be and other philosophical inquiries; but in Greider's case, the focus is on a particular building in NYC's Lower East Side, # 239 East 7th Street, in which she and her husband bought a majority share (it was a coop building, wherein tenants own their own flat and form a building association that deals with issues of public space in the building, maintenance and taxes) in the mid-1990s. This particular piece of real estate was built in the 1840s, the first time that particular land had been built upon, and the building basically reached a state of collapse during Greider's tenancy, in 2002. As she tells the story of the building, Greider tells the story of the people who lived there before her - as much information as she could find from public records and other archival sources, which turns out to be a fair amount of information; she also spends a great deal of time describing in detail the difficulties she and her husband encountered there, the aftermath of the building condemnation and How It All Turned Out In the End for their family. Greider has poetic sensibilities (at one point, she mentions that she was enrolled in a graduate poetry program) and these stand her in good stead here; some of her imagery is wonderfully evocative, very poetic indeed. But honestly, I would have preferred more about the earlier tenants and the lives that they lived and the world in which they lived them, rather than to be given so very much information, blow-by-blow, of her own personal and family travails with respect to the house. At another point in the book, she recognizes that she and her husband were wealthy arrivistes, in terms of being stock-market-invested yuppies during the dotcom boom; that cohort is especially known for self-involvement to the point of narcissism, and that definitely shows in this narrative. That said, the historical information is fascinating, and the use of a single dwelling to describe the overall shifts in culture, ethnicity, activism and reality of NYC from its beginnings to the present is a remarkable, and well-drawn, concept. So, if you're interested in US small-h history or NYC or how houses can be homes, or not, I'll still recommend this one.

Linda says

An absorbing, thoroughly researched yet personal slice of American social history. I received this advance copy through the First Reads program and was very grateful to get it, because I had already seen reviews of the book. It took me a while to get to it, because I was tied up with other projects. I notice that some people found it heavy going. Personally, I am reading it slowly because I am savoring it. I am a professional historian, so I appreciate the thoroughness of the author's research and her attention to detail. I would be glad of more detailed maps and illustrations.

Janelle says

I received a review copy of this book through goodreads' first reads program. As I relished Bill Bryson's latest book *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*, I looked forward to a narrative about an American home. The premise of this book - exploring the history of a single home (239 E. 7th St in Manhattan) through time - is promising. However, the execution is muddled.

At times, the author's poetic voice is in step with her narrative. When it works, it works. Early on, she says "All of us walk over the abandoned maps of generations past" (p. 20 in the ARC). This alluring statement drew me to want to know more about the history of a specific place - not just what happened in early NYC, but what happened on that very doorstep. Greider tries to take me there, but she careens in that general direction rather than leading me firmly. In the chapters encompassing the earliest history of the island, her voice is constantly interrupted by quotations and footnotes, which keeps the stories of the previous tenants from coming alive. These sections would have been much stronger if the author had striven for historical

fiction informed by the (sometimes scant) historical evidence rather than the strict accounting of every single detail (seemingly) turned up by her research. I found this condition to improve in the chapter about tenement life, perhaps because her source material grew? I'm not sure, but I noticed a big difference.

Also, the book would have been greatly enhanced by a more liberal use of maps and illustrations. There is only one map in the entire volume, and it is a modern one. I longed to see Viele's 19th century water maps! Perhaps copyright permissions were not available...?

Greider weaves her family's present-day dilemma (the house is condemned and they are forced to leave) in and out of the historical exploration. Sometimes this works. Certainly her narrative voice is strongest when she is telling her own story. However, I felt jolted as she moved from one story to another - often not in chronological order. The ancient history sections (Jordan, Turkey, Konya Plain) felt extraneous, and the final chapter summarizing the memoirs of more recent residents feels tacked on, for example.

Greider's family's personal drama - and the co-op story IS a drama worthy of a soap opera or reality TV show - was vividly expressed, but lacked the kind of reflection and introspection I usually find in memoirs. So many poor choices were made (by an array of persons) that it's difficult to form an opinion about which mistakes were the fatal ones. Housing security is a ripe topic for today's reader, and I expected more contextualization. In the end, the author breaks even on the sale of the house - a real estate conclusion that seemed impossible through most of the book.

In the end, I'm left wondering why exactly this couple was so attached to 239 E 7th St. They weren't native New Yorkers but moved there as adults. They lived in the house only a few years. Why, when in financial ruin, did they try to remain? Frankly, the Virginia farm looked like a viable refuge to me - but it didn't serve that function for them at all.

In the end, I suspect that this book needed more time in development to become the best version of itself possible. I still adore the premise, but the result didn't feel finished.

Aimee says

I received a copy of this via First Reads, and I was very excited about it. I love the concept, looking back through history to see how the place you call home was shaped, basically Basin and Range on a much smaller level.

However, it's proving to be a very difficult read. I consider myself a quick reader, but I've been working on this for over two weeks now, and I'm only 58 pages in. It's very well researched, but feels somewhat disjointed. The plethora of footnotes, though required, make it feel like a textbook from that class you had take, so you resented all of the work you had to do in it.

I wanted to really like this book, but I think it's going to go unread for a while.

Cheryl says

I selected this book from Mt. TBR because the January reading theme was buildings. It took me a little bit longer to finish it, since I also started grad school in January and had a heavy reading load there. But I am glad to have read it. The beginning was a bit slow to capture my interest, but I became hooked as I went

along and enjoyed this microcosm of American history. I am not a huge fan of NYC, but I am tempted to visit this neighborhood if I ever get a chance, even though the aspects of it that I enjoyed most are long past. It would be like visiting the grave of a famous historical figure, to pay respect to what was and the legacy left behind.

Alicia says

I got this book as an advanced reading copy. It is a very interesting read. Quite factual and all over the place. She jumps from person to person. To her own story. To facts about a specific subject matter. There is individual stories thrown into all of it. Lots of names & dates. A new paragraph can start a whole new subject that has nothing to do with the one before but slightly with the chapter heading.

I am enjoying it quite a bit though. Very interesting information.

I like facts, though. Kind of a fact junkie if I am being honest.

I enjoyed reading this book. It is not necessarily the best writing I have ever read but I enjoyed her style. She was able to throw all of that info at you and still weave it into the semblance of a story. And there was definately a LOT of info. I learned a ton about the NY area and it was quite fascinating to learn about the history of such a landmark city. It read like a research paper to me and if you like that, I think you would really enjoy this. I would read another of her books. I liked how well researched everything was.

Debbie Smith says

After reading the description of this book I was immediately intrigued. Having taught U.S. History, English and Literature for over 30 years I am always drawn to books that might give me a fresh perspective on events in our history. Winning a copy of this book from Goodreads was great! It took me a week or so to find the time to begin "The Archaeology of Home" and at first I was reading it out of duty. It read very much like a textbook and although the descriptions Katherine Greider gave of the area were very vivid I didn't really find them compelling. Then somewhere just before the Revolutionary War began I suddenly realized I was enjoying this book and even looking forward to the times I had to read. Ms. Greider was especially adept at bringing the various people who had lived in her "neighborhood" to life for me.

Overall, although I did ultimately enjoy this book, I found myself wishing she would have spent a little more time on the people and the effects history had on them and a little less time on overly detailed facts that times seemed a little random and out of place. This said however, I gained an entirely new perspective of New York City and the people who have inhabited its less upscale neighborhoods for over 300 years and would like to thank Katharine Greider for turning what could have been a paralyzing life event into a teaching experience for the rest of us.

Karen says

The author gets a late-night phone call in January 2002 telling her the coop she lives in is falling down around her ears and she and her family better move soon. This startling revelation sends her on an investigation of the history of 239 7th street between avenues C and D in New York City. It's a fascinating look at the history of a neighborhood, especially one in one of our most interesting cities. Dutch farmers first

settled in the meadow which became 7th street and the row house was built in the mid-1800's. Germans first inhabited the neighborhood, then Jewish immigrants, then a mixture of Italians, Hispanics, and gentrification came along. Ms. Greider has the stories of the individuals living in her house and tells them with affection. The reader also gets to learn how she and her husband and children deal with the expulsion from their home. It makes a great discussion of what "home" is to people.

I loved the history aspect, especially. Didn't care so much about the details of the lawsuits and how they got out from under the expense of the house, but for anyone interested in NYC, this might be worth a look at. The immigrant stories were gratifying and horrible all at the same time.

Melissa Ooten says

Reading a book about a house literally falling down and being condemned by the city (while families are actually living in it and paying mortgages on it) really isn't the best pick when you think that your very own shower/bathtub may be descending into your kitchen. My own anxieties aside, I especially enjoyed the neighborhood sketches as you get a real sense of how this lower east side street evolved in terms of its occupants from the mid-1800s to the present. I also could relate to Greider's struggles in that it must be hugely stressful to have this happen to one's home. However, her privilege is clear in that they are able to sell their officially *condemned* building for over a million dollars. Oh, the wonders of NYC real estate. Anyway, it was engaging in parts and slow in other places, but overall enjoyable.

Elizabeth says

I love used book stories not just because I'm cheap, but because I can find books I never would have found otherwise.

This is a memoir/history about Katharine Grieder and her family who owned a home on 7th Street in New York City between C and D. It was a very up-and-coming neighborhood and should have earned them a huge amount of money on their investment. However, the inspector did them a favor and told them on Friday that he would report the house as uninhabitable on Monday and the city would make them get out. They had the weekend to pack up and find a place to live.

What Greider has done, which is a little confusing, is look at the experience of home owning and the history of that particular block. She recounts the history from the Lenape Indians, through the Dutch (the land belonged to Delancey), the erection of the building in 1845 and as well as she can, the history of the individual families who lived there. From a brand-new dwelling, it becomes a multi-family house, and goes through various changes. The ethnicity of the neighborhood changes and the economy of the city as well.

She also writes about her own legal adventures in trying to get out from under the ownership and responsibility of the building. It is a co-op with three owners, which creates other problems. This is interesting only inasmuch as it gives a look at the confusion of New York City Housing.

She visits the cemetery plots of as many of the inhabitants of the house and she can. It's an interesting look at cemeteries and a thoughtful essay on life and death.

She ends with a description of the block in the 1970s and 1980s when drugs took over, buildings were burned down, and the neighborhood seemed to be ready for total collapse. As anyone who lived in New York knows, its renewal was something of a miracle.

If you like New York or urban history, give it a shot. The writing is somewhat uneven, but I found it very worthwhile.

Joan says

The author's co-op building was in the throes of rehabbing when she received a call in the middle of the night saying that everyone had to leave, that the house, which dated from the early 1800's, was likely to collapse at any moment. In trying to discover what went wrong, structurally, Greider delved into the history of the house, and, making lemonade from the lemon life handed her, wrote a book about the house, the history of the place where it stood, and the people who had preceded her there. Unfortunately, she intersperses this history with often incoherent philosophical musings on the nature of "home", and with descriptions of her aggravating co-owners and the trauma of not being a millionaire anymore (although still having a very large family home in a high-toned Virginia suburb to which to escape). Had she left the latter portions in a private journal, where they belong, this would have been a much better book.

Stella says

I really, really love this book.

I can't believe it's only at 2.5 stars! What is wrong with you people?

This book was epic and personal. It was historical and poetic. Greider played into many of my own tiny personal interests, thinking about place, space, landscape, home, tribe, migration, and the great play of history, from micro to macro. So many times when reading this book over the past couple of weeks, I've exclaimed to my partner, "HA!" and then proceeded to read whole paragraphs to him aloud.

This is perhaps one of my favorite books. I can't wait to recommend it - I hadn't told anyone about it because I have the only copy from my university library, with the "new books" sticker still on the spine! I didn't want it to get recalled. But I have to share it, because it was a joy to read.

Dawn King says

While this book is about a particular brownstone in NYC, the title is a bit misleading. This is partly a book about how New York City developed. Also it's about how a family develops and deals with a major life problem. I enjoyed the rich visual history that Greider paints with words. You can envision how the city developed in a historical sense. However, the parts about dealing with the other building shareholders, lawyers, and with the building contractors, etc. got old. The building had major structural problems and many people had to "buy in" on how/when to solve the problems. This dragged on for years in their lives and for too many pages in the book. I wanted to say enough already! I do however look forward to reading another book by Katherine Greider.

