


Spring 2012

This Must Be the Place: a Return to the Borscht Belt

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Recommended Citation

Glenn, Ezra, "This Must Be the Place: a Return to the Borscht Belt" (2012). *Senior Projects Spring 2012*. 318.

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This Must Be the Place: a Return to the Borscht Belt

The Borscht Belt is a region in and around the Catskill Mountains, primarily in Sullivan and Ulster counties, which was once home to over 1,100 resorts, country clubs, golf courses, hotels, and bungalow colonies.

Shortly after the beginning of the 20th century, the first waves of Jewish immigrants arrived from Eastern Europe to New York City in droves. Small Jewish farming colonies that had sprung up in the mid-19th century began opening their doors to vacationers from the city as makeshift boarding houses, in order to supplement their earnings. Thus these communal farmhouses began their development into the resorts and communities that comprise what became known as the “Jewish Alps,” or Borscht Belt. Beginning in the 1920s, the resorts became increasingly popular among city-dwellers for their all-inclusive, affordable, easily accessible, and community-based recreational potential. As they expanded, many of these resorts began to offer 3 communal kosher meals per day, indoor and outdoor pools and sports facilities, and nightclubs boasting performances by some of the most celebrated Jewish musicians and comedians of the time.

It was at some of these resorts where I enjoyed the Passovers and ski-trips of my youth. Despite looking largely identical in the 1990s to their 1960s and 70s-era selves, the resorts had fallen on difficult times. As operating costs soared in the 1980s, air travel became increasingly affordable, sending much of the former railroad tourism of the Borscht Belt away to new destinations with warmer climates. Many of the Catskills’ largest resorts closed before I was born and very few remained by my tenth birthday. Today, one single resort remains in operation under the same name as when it opened in 1907.

While the majority of the empty resorts have been demolished, either by fire or with intent to build casinos and spas (though almost none of these projects have been realized) some remain standing, vacant and unattended to. Most have changed hands at least a few times and remain on the market, but these

properties, with millions of dollars in back taxes, have proven to be a tough sell. Though these resorts have fallen into total disrepair and have been victim to endless looting and vandalism, visual clues to their thriving histories linger in the rubble.

In my photographs of the Borscht Belt, the divergent realities of the past and present collide to show what was in what remains. This is a project about time, about the history of a place that has weathered varying degrees of preservation and destruction. The echoes here of long-faded glory ring far louder than what functional presence remains. This work is about the present— how the landscape, heavily peppered with rot, has and has not adapted. In almost every case, I was terrified while I made these pictures. I explored territory far from my comfort zone; I treaded unknowingly on barely-supported floorboards, under roofs that, only weeks after they'd creaked in long, low frequencies above me, I'd revisit and find collapsed.

In my return to the Catskills, I've found the area fallen on much harder times than when I vacationed here as a child. I wasn't even born until after Grossinger's, which was so large that it had its own zip code, had shut its doors and emptied its rooms. That was 1986. Today, only the golf course remains in operation. I only ever caught the tailwind of the region, the very end of the thriving, kosher joyride. Much of the time I did spend in the Catskills as a child was at my grandparents' country house at 57 Timber Hill Lane in then-thriving South Fallsburg. Today, the town has virtually no open businesses (some open just for the summer when Catskills tourism is at its all-time-lowest high), but the house is within walking distance of five different golf courses, each adjacent to its own crumbling, empty resort-compound.

In spite of their nightmarish qualities, the resorts feel very familiar to me as I trespass on their grounds. The distance between my present explorations and my childhood memories of the same places felt ever-shrinking as I re-familiarized myself with these territories of my past.

I am afraid as I stand behind my view camera, shrouding myself beneath the hood of my dark cloth to frame and focus these photographs. But beneath the fear is recognition, a re-igniting of youthful joy in me as I recall myself, lost in the carpet of this corridor or that lobby. I would step into rooms I didn't know I remembered, suddenly able to pin down the memory to the place. Decay came quick on abandonment's heels, but the past remains present beneath the surface of encroaching filth and destruction.

It is this butting-up of present fear against childhood memories of holiday glee that infects my subconscious. I've woken up sweating from being chased by the unknown evils lurking in these abandoned spaces, the spirits that leak out through the broken glass, viscous as the acrid slime puddling on the floor and eating away at the foundation. There are nights when I can't fall asleep because I'm thinking too hard about how my foot went through the floorboards that afternoon, about what grimy terrors lurk under the lush, mossy carpets.

In truth, much of the terror I've felt in the course of taking these pictures may be of my own invention. Now, the cold, damp breezes that blow through the sinking buildings of the Borscht Belt remind only of the visible decay and never the fun, warm days of so many summer tennis players and high-divers. The impressions of joy here are barely discernable.

It has been hard for my eyes to see past the desecrated landscape of this economic climate, though I know how full of life it all was. I remember how much fun we had and how easy it was to lose myself down these mazelike, carpeted hallways, tracing the shapes with my eyes and jumping to avoid their most sinister colors. I invented games with myself that I can still feel in these fallen kingdoms; in the fraying seams around the gold-leaf tree in the Kutsher's dining room; down the ramps at the rebranded Fallsview; in the would-be shadows of the Concord's demolished towers.

I have seen the old home movies of my family swimming happily, my bubby's trepidation on the diving board. In the archives of media and memory are photographs of me grimacing under the studio lights where every family had their formal portrait taken before the Passover Seder. Though I only came into the

world for the decline of the Borscht Belt, my experiences there as a child were pure, leisurely indulgence. I couldn't see what these Grand Resorts had been—I didn't feel, as I do now, the strain of time in their aging complexes.

Of course, there are also pictures in this group that are not about the destruction so many of the resorts have suffered—photographs of what life remains in the Catskills. There are a handful of resorts that have survived in various forms. Many have become summer camps or schools for Hassidic children. Two are spas geared toward a broader range of clientele. One was recently made an Indian Reservation, and there are plans for casinos on some sites. Talk of development, however, has been long and slow, and many proposed projects have already failed or lost support.

So this project continues. It will grow and breathe with the region as I continue to photograph its simultaneous re-development and progressive decay. This work is a vision of the Borscht Belt's present, weathered self, despite how the past may bleed and cry out of these images. The past is present, the present, past.

special thanks & gratitude to:

Lana Barkin

Kelsey Shell

Stephen Shore

My Uncle Ray

My Parents

Samantha Lange

Charlotte Austin

The Jewish Studies Department

Emily Walsh, Madeline Wise, Wendy Lotterman, Anna Swann-Pye and Erica Tavvs

Laura Steele

David Bush

The Catskills Institute at Brown University

Michael Ives

Rosie Motley

Emily Wissemann

Nick Sugihara

Parker Hatley

Elke Young

Victoria Belle McPhee

Michael Vahrenwald



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