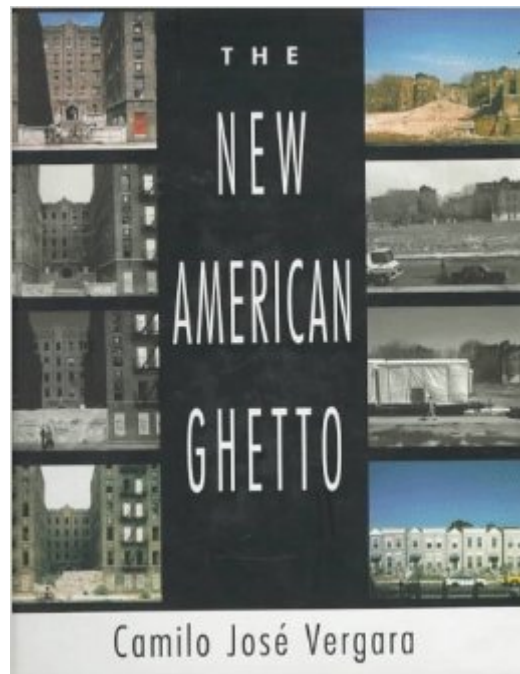


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# The New American Ghetto



## Synopsis

Illustrated with hundreds of photographs of urban America, this work portrays the stark devastation wrought over the last 30 years in the inner city. Wishing to provide a visual record for future generations, Vergara's document puts America to shame.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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.

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.

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.

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, in a remarkable combination of matchless photography and philosophical but highly informed commentary, chronicles the shameful destruction of some of our most beautiful American cities. His keen insight into the explosion of tastelessness and banality, combined with his careful time lapse documentation of urban decay, provides a sobering record of urban America. Without proselytizing or advocating any particular solutions, this book will help the reader understand the unprecedented task faced by those who would rebuild and re-energize our lost cities. This is the one book I would take to the proverbial desert island--hours of contemplation guaranteed.

Vergara has done an excellent job documenting the changing landscape of America's inner city neighborhoods. The sequence of photographs and the accompanying text take the reader on a journey which sadly, is all too familiar to many inner city residents. Vergara captures in time lapse fashion, images of some of the country's most notorious inner city areas, from their destruction to their renovation and rebirth. I consider this book a must read if you are an aficionado of urbanology and sociology.

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