



An amusement park in New York. Credit: Fred H. Rothstein

A blended landscape of New York and Israel that examines both past and present

Fred Rothstein documented the New York experience during the 1920s and 1930s, along with the city's construction boom during the Great Depression. His granddaughter, Navah Joy Uzan, breaks down his photos in her video work and integrates them with her own contemporary photos from Israeli construction sites.

By [Esther Zandberg](#) | Jul 31, 2016

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A poster carried by members of the American Communist Party during a demonstration in New York during the early 1930s calls for the release of labor leader Tom Mooney, who had been falsely accused of involvement in a fatal bombing on the eve of America's

entry into World War I. The protesters demand that the government tackle growing unemployment and a guarantee of some kind of national social benefits for all.

Another sign demands justice for the [Scottsboro Boys](#), nine black teenagers who had been falsely accused of raping two white women in Alabama in 1931 — a case of racism and a miscarriage of justice that is a black stain on the American conscience to this day.



A demonstration by the American Communist Party in the 1930s. Credit: Fred H. Rothstein

This rare moment in American history was captured by Fred

Rothstein (1903-1983), a New York insurance agent, amateur photographer and social activist in his own right. It is one of hundreds of Rothstein's photographs that document the New York experience of the 1920s and 1930s and the city's construction boom during the Great Depression.

Most of the photos were well-preserved and eventually inherited by his granddaughter, Navah Joy Uzan, a New York-born Israeli artist. Uzan, fascinated by the treasure she'd come to possess, sees the DNA of her own work in the photos.



Fred Rothstein (1903-1983), a New York insurance agent, amateur photographer and social activist in his own right. Credit: Fred H. Rothstein

Her video installation, entitled “Inheritance 2016,” which she describes as an interaction with her grandfather’s archive, is currently on display as part of an exhibit called Lobby, featuring works by graduates of Hamidrasha's postgraduate fine art program.

The show, curated by Hila Cohen-Schneiderman, will be on view until August 6. Hamidrasha's exhibition space is situated at the entrance to a generic-looking hotel on Hayarkon Street in Tel Aviv — the city's main thoroughfare for tourist hotels. The location would undoubtedly be classified in Rem Koolhaas' book on Manhattan, "Delirious New York," under the "lobotomy" category: a total disconnect between a building's façade and what's going on inside.

In "Inheritance 2016," Uzan breaks down Rothstein's architectural prints and inserts into them her own contemporary photos, taken at construction and architectural sites in Israel. The installation, a large, mesmerizing video screened on the second floor of the exhibition space, is a cross-breeding of New York and Israel, combining bridges and interchanges in Queens or Manhattan, factories and laborers, industrial buildings and Art Deco high-rises from the first generation of New York skyscrapers with bridges and interchanges on Route 531 in the southern Sharon region or a cemetery in Herzliya, which gives the installation a morbid dimension reminiscent of a disaster film. The surrealistic combination leads the viewer into the bowels of the feverish construction that spans the globe and continues incessantly, here and there, then and now.



A structure in New York City in the early 20th century. Credit: Fred H. Rothstein

Uzan sees a connection between the construction boom in New York, which was a paradise for developers as well as urban and architectural experiments during the Depression, and “The process taking place in the center of the country in recent years, the hubris of construction, the new neighborhoods and dense buildings that look like reproductions of each other, and the claustrophobic feeling I get when I take pictures in the center’s cities.”

During that historic period, New York turned into “A factory of man-made experience where the real and natural ceased to exist,” writes Koolhaas. Israel is still far from such a post-modern experience, and the link between Israel’s central cities and New York is exaggerated. Still, despite the differences between the reality

or fantasy in New York and in Israel, putting them side by side and within each other on the screen provides food for thought.

New York “was so ambitious that to be realized, it could never be openly stated,” Koolhaas writes in his book, which is subtitled, “A retroactive manifesto for Manhattan.” Even without a manifesto, Manhattan — and New York in general — never lost its way despite its ambition. It is a forward-looking, finely-calibrated planning and architecture machine, packaged in a tight grid which obeys iron-clad rules that prevent unruliness; its architecture over the generations has never operated in a vacuum but was grounded in deeply rooted traditions.

On the other hand, Israel, though it had a clear planning manifesto from the day it was founded, chronically commits planning suicide. Planning breaks out in all directions, with no thought given to the long term; the construction obeys no rules and the architecture is a collection of whims, with no tradition or roots. The video installation that combines Rothstein’s New York photos with his granddaughter’s Israeli ones exaggerates the difference without words.



"Inheritance 2016," a video installation by Navah Joy Uzan at the Hamidrasha Gallery in Tel Aviv, July 2016. Credit: Mor Shmoshkovitz

Rothstein was a “classic immigrant,” his granddaughter says. He came from a traditional Jewish family that immigrated from Russia to the United States, grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan

and then lived in a middle-class neighborhood in Queens. He married Marion Ruth, who came from a wealthy, educated and secular family that objected to their relationship.

Rothstein and Marion Ruth were leftists, Uzan says. She hated the world of the rich that she came from, and he was broad-minded, a man of culture and music, and far more than an amateur photographer, as can be seen from his photos. He wanted to be an artist, but despite repeated attempts he could not make his way into professional and museum photography. Left with no choice, he opened an insurance agency in New York called Red Stone. No manifesto could have anticipated a “red” insurance office in New York.



The New Yorker Hotel building in New York City, early 20th century. Credit: Fred H. Rothstein

“1932 is a time of iconographic convergence between the USSR and the USA,” writes Koolhaas, and Rothstein illustrates the paradox in his photographs. In one of the pictures, the New Yorker Hotel building, an Art Deco structure built in typical “wedding cake” style, stands out among Manhattan's Eighth Avenue skyline. The building was inaugurated in 1930, around the same time as many other similar skyscrapers in the area, the most famous of which is the Empire State Building. As hard as it is to believe, these capitalist Art Deco creations were a source of iconographic — if not ideological —

inspiration for Soviet dictator Josef Stalin when he sought to beautify Moscow during the 1930s and erected what came to be known as the Seven Sisters: seven public buildings in the heart of the communist capital that look exactly like New York high-rises, although less elegant.

The photographs by Rothstein, who was thrilled by the socialist New Deal policies introduced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, reflect Koolhaas' "convergence." They document a capitalist environment but are enveloped by a veil of theatrical drama that would be perfectly at home in a Soviet propaganda pamphlet. An ideological communist storm seems to circle over his New York, over the photos of factory smokestacks, the worker climbing an endless ladder, the children of immigrants on an empty street, and even over the New Yorker Hotel and the rides he photographed in Coney Island that for a moment remind one of the futuristic monument for the Third International from the era of Russian constructivism.

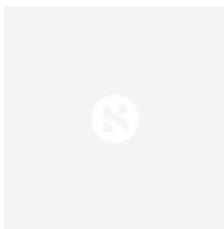
Even with the passage of time, Rothstein's photographs are not nostalgic but political. Two decades later, during the McCarthy era, they would probably have inflicted disaster upon him. Perhaps the State of Israel is on its way there.



A worker climbs on a ladder, New York, early 20th century. Credit: Fred H. Rothstein



"Inheritance 2016," a video installation by Navah Joy Uzan at the Hamidrasha Gallery in Tel Aviv, July 2016. Credit: Mor Shmoshkovitz



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Letters to the Editor

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