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Transit authorities would like to ignore the issue, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and they would prefer that the media did the same, lest their accounts frighten off riders and give the city a bad name. Homeless advocacy groups are also reluctant to deal with the underground homeless openly—or at least to publicize their plight—for fear the public will lump all homeless people with the most violent and dangerous of the underground homeless and thereby lose their sympathy and support. The issue will not go away with ignorance. Nor will it be solved or even successfully managed by treating the underground homeless as people just down on their luck. Certainly silence will not prevent that underground population from increasing.

Deep in the tunnels under New York, there are people struggling to survive. Here rats run in dark waves toward, not away, from people and the crunch of roaches underfoot is as familiar as the stench of sewage seeping through the rock walls. Here the thin streams of daylight filtering through the occasional overhead grate barely penetrate to the floor in the stagnant blackness. “They eat, sleep, and defecate here,” one policeman says with a mixture of pity and disgust. “Your eyes are seared at times by the smell of urine until sometimes you can’t breathe. It almost knocks your brains out.”

Some of the homeless live on the catwalks just a few feet above the rushing roar of subway trains and in holes chopped out of walls that support platforms on which commuters wait, but most of the homeless find their homes far enough away from operating tracks where they hear only a slight tremor when trains pass. Still others live in relative splendor—in the frescoed waiting rooms of a few long-abandoned subway stations, at least one of which is said to contain a piano, a fountain, and mirrored walls.

They die of AIDS and overdoses, but also of common colds that turn into pneumonia, of physical violence, and of tuberculosis, hypothermia, and diabetes. Their life expectancy is three to five years, one health-care official estimated. Or perhaps only two years. “If a knife, bullet, train, or live [high voltage] wire doesn’t get them,” he sighed, “some illness that should only be lethal in medieval times will.”

Whether New York’s underground homeless are harbingers of the future is an open question. They are a crisis of our time which, with help, the future can overtake. The homeless appear to be overcrowding; they seem attracted to, or at least more numerous in, huge urban areas where they can better live within the cracks, as it were. A great deal of food in cities is thrown out, particularly from restaurants, and a good deal of it reaches the homeless in one way or another. The large gaps between the wealthy and the destitute in cities also makes begging more successful and in some cases more profitable than a minimum-wage job. However, urban housing will always be in short supply, and accessible tunnels will always hold an attraction to some homeless.

Although virtually all large cities of the world have seen some of their inhabitants go into the subway tunnels and below, New York may be exceptional in its high proportion of substance abusers and mentally ill in the underground population. If society again decides to institutionalize the homeless mentally ill, and if the present easy access to cheap drugs could be curbed, the underground population of New York might be shrunk significantly and the spread of this phenomenon to other cities would be less likely. But these are big “ifs.”

The notion that the underground homeless people are “irretrievable” is refuted by their hope and caring for one another, which reaches far beyond the harsh environment in which they live. I know many people who attest to it. Theirs is a strange and foreign world, but it is very near and largely of our making.

“THERE IS A CITY BENEATH THE STREETS,” WRITES ROBERT E. Sullivan, Jr., in his introduction to Harry Granick’s *Underneath New York*, and the description has been used many times since. Sullivan meant it to encompass the vast networks of cables, gas mains, water and sewer lines, and the subway and train tunnels that serve as the nervous system, intestines, and bowels of New York City. However, when Sergeant Henry of the Metropolitan Transit Police uses it, he means the people who have made homes and communities within the subway and train tunnels, and the natural and man-made passages accessible to and from those tunnels, which are the dwellings of New York’s underground homeless. He means the burrows, large and small, that are not just under the streets but also plunge seven stories underground, and the interconnection between the homeless communities that exist there. The underworld of Manhattan is far more complex and extensive than dreamed about by most of those who walk the sidewalks of New York.

Manhattan is an anthill-like structure, its granite bedrock honeycombed and crisscrossed by almost endless cavities and burrows. Some of the monuments are like mountains, as deeply rooted underground as their peaks are high. Concrete, bomb-proof tubes are sunk eighty stories below the Chrysler Building, for example. In order to understand the structures, the city should be peeled back layer by layer.

Below the first three inches of asphalt and ten inches of concrete—both drenched with toxic chemicals seeping down from the roadways—are channels carrying all kinds of wires for telephones, for electricity for homes and offices, for street and traffic lights, fire and burglar alarms, and the rest. Below the wires are the gas lines and then, some six to ten feet down, are the water mains that run for hundreds of miles in all directions. At the next deeper level are steam lines, more than one hundred miles of them, and then the sewer lines and sewer tunnels, which are not level but slope downward to get gravity’s help in disposing of city waste and rain waters.

The underground networks are not only vast but chaotic. “Computer graphics are too calculated to capture the randomness of the world beneath the avenues,” Sullivan writes. In the mid-nineteenth century, New York had fifteen different gas companies, each with its own network of mains. Their consolidated successor, Con Ed, retired the oldest lines to preclude accidents and, since 1970, more than fifty thousand feet of old mains—some ten miles—have been replaced. Channels are often left vacant, and into them slip the homeless.

New York’s subway lines wind through 731 sprawling miles of New York’s five boroughs, in tunnels that burrow down to eighteen stories below ground at 191st Street and Broadway in Manhattan. These miles are divided among 23 lines and 466 stations. New York’s subways constitute the largest urban railroad system in the world, with 6,100 cars that carry a quarter of a million pounds of flesh and blood each day—“the greatest moving mass of human tissue in the universe, apart from the planet earth,” as Jim Dwyer wrote in *Subway Lives*. The eight-car trains move at up to forty miles an hour, and if you stand next to the tracks deep in the tunnels where they hit maximum speed, they take about ten ground-shaking, ear-shattering seconds to pass.

No complete, single blueprint of New York’s underground exists. Construction crews installing yet more lines and tunnels must sift through the archives of old maps to guard against breaking water mains and electrical wires, and then dig test pits to verify the picture they glean from the many different and often contradictory maps. Even they are often flabbergasted at what they find when excavating.

A ninety-two-foot-long merchant sailing ship from the eighteenth century was found under Front Street, part of the landfill when Manhattan’s lower tip was being extended. Its bow is in a museum in Newport News, Virginia, but its stern remains buried under a filigree of utility cables under Front Street. One excavation found the wall that gave Wall Street its name—a long stockade of upright wooden timber designed to keep out intruders, presumably Indians, three hundred years ago. Underground latrines from Revolutionary days are not uncommon. From more recent times, mysterious vaults are sometimes hidden just below the crust of the sidewalks.

There are also disused subway stations and abandoned tunnels of various kinds. In 1912, workers digging the BMT (or the Brooklyn Manhattan Transit, known by graffiti artists as “the ding-dong line” because the doors used to make a ding-dong sound when they opened) tunnels found the city’s first subway line twenty-one feet under Broadway between Warren and Murray Streets. It consisted of a single pneumatic tube 312 feet long and 9 feet wide, in which the cars were pulled or pushed along by huge fans at the ends of the tunnel. Noted inventor Alfred Ely Beach, the founder and one-time editor of *Scientific American* magazine, built the subway in 1870 and it ran for only a few weeks before New York’s infamous Mayor Boss Tweed shut it down. Other early underground transportation systems included a terminal for trolleys, which is still visible under Essex Street off a modern subway line, and a tunnel by which President Franklin D. Roosevelt traveled from the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel to Grand Central for a train ride to Hyde Park. Beach’s is the only one of several experimental subway lines uncovered, so far as known. One of its features, a waiting room furnished with a crystal chandelier and grand piano, was found intact when the line was rediscovered.

Into it and other large, abandoned underground waiting rooms have moved the homeless, sometimes only at night but also living there throughout the day. They are similarly encamped in some abandoned subway stations, like that at City Hall, which is now not long enough to host the modern trains. They also live in what is probably the newest abandoned underground structure—a six-lane stretch of highway built in the late sixties beneath Christie Street, which was almost immediately sealed, abandoned, and forgotten.

Some of them are fortunate to find shelter in burrows and tunnels near the restrooms built for the subway rider but long since closed. At one time 932 such facilities were open, but since 1981, only one hundred remain available to the public. Ingenious homeless people use many of the ostensibly closed restrooms and the toilet facilities built below the theater district on Broadway and long inaccessible from the streets.

With hundreds or thousands living underground, many die there, either in accidents or from disease, or perish because they lose their way. To sniff out dead and rotting bodies, the Transit Authority has Beau, the only dog in the state trained for the purpose.

Today’s transit employees who work underground repairing track and cleaning debris are just as afraid of the world below the streets as those workers a century ago who, as they dug the tunnels, feared cave-ins, whirlpools of sand, and sudden water flows from springs below and rain above. Now the fear is more personal—rats, roaches, leaking sewers and water mains, loose asbestos, hypodermic needles that might be contaminated with AIDS, human waste, and ordinary garbage. They also fear the people they encounter in the netherworld.

Sullivan considers the presence of people living underground to be a significant change from 1940 when Granick wrote the first edition of *Underneath New York*.

“Homeless people who now live underground by the thousands were more an oddity than an issue back then, as the city was close to full employment,” Sullivan said of the immediate pre— World War II period. Now, although some maintenance crews get to know squatters in certain tunnel areas and even bring extra sandwiches for them, most workers believe the underground homeless are dangerous—criminals on the run, insane people, drug addicts, alcoholics, AIDS cases, tuberculosis patients—all of whom represent threats of one kind or another.

Most frightening to the workers is the area between 28th Street and Canal Street on the Lexington Line, and the abandoned stations like those at City Hall, 18th Street, 91st Street, and Worth Street—in all of which communities of homeless have settled. Only a bit less dangerous, they believe, is the Second Avenue Station, which is popular because it is an unusually warm tunnel and is situated near a couple of food kitchens and welfare shelters.

The train tunnels under Grand Central Station contain perhaps the largest collection of squatters. There, in a mere three-quarters of a square mile, thirty-four miles of track stretch out along seven distinct levels before funneling into twenty-six main rail arteries going north, east, and west. Police have cleared out as many as two hundred people living in a single community like “the Condos”—short for condominiums and so named because they consider it very posh—and “Burma’s Road” and “Riker’s Island.” Those evicted from Grand Central went mainly to the tunnels under Penn Station on the West Side, and into tunnels under the Port Authority bus terminal. Some went deeper under Grand Central, down below the levels of subways and trains.

The first of the inhabited tunnels to get publicity was one near the Lafayette Street Station. Several dozen people lived there in 1989. One underground home consisted of a “little living room” with a mattress, table, and couch. A group shared a television set and a VCR, using electricity diverted from the nearby station. Another group enjoyed a stereo set. One area was wallpapered. Kitchen utensils and food supplies were also found.

Finding ways into these small and large burrows associated with the subway lines has always been rather easy. Thousands of stairways lead into subway stations and hundreds of others serve as emergency exits from tunnels. Locks were placed on most entrances to prevent unauthorized entry, with only four hundred keys made for Transit Authority personnel. There is a Brooklyn hardware store within walking distance of Authority headquarters that sells the key for a dollar. During rush hours, when some station turnstiles are crammed solid with commuters, homeless people who have settled in abandoned side entrances sometimes open their “homes” to the rushing passengers who, in gratitude, are invited to drop a subway token or some coins into a proffered cup.

“I consider it my public service,” says Hammer with a broad smile, tipping his Mets cap to commuters as they pour like lemmings through his door. They ignore his neat bedroll piled in the corner and the small box that serves as a table. The waxy black residue on the box supports the remains of a candle. Hammer’s long, thin frame seems only a little thicker than the vertical iron rods in the gate he obligingly holds open with one hand. In the other hand is his Styrofoam cup.

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The Bowery

COLD RAIN FALLS ON THE APRIL NIGHT AS A POLICE CAR WEAVES through the heavy traffic of lower Manhattan. By 8:30 P.M. the Bowery is already deserted. The crowning lights of New York’s Chrysler and Empire State buildings brighten the skyline to the north, but in the Bowery, where gray sheets of metal close like heavy eyelids over the sweatshops for the night, only headlights and flashes of red and blue police lights reflect off the wet streets.