

# 1067 Pacific St., Brooklyn: In the Ruderal City

**Robert Neuwirth**

*1067 Pacific People, United States of America*

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## **ABSTRACT**

A look at some of the plant life on a vacant lot in Brooklyn, NY. The plants that grow on this lot do not obey laws of hardened competition, but rather demonstrate facets of mutual aid as they eke out an existence on a polluted and rubble-filled ground. These plants help restore environmental balance that has been destroyed through two centuries of human use. This essay notes that ruderal—meaning waste land—is a man-made concept, but that it may be important to retain the concept in the increasingly built-on gentrified modern city.

**Keywords:** Brooklyn, invasive species, lot, vacant lot, margins, mugwort, New York, ruderal, waste ground, weeds

The plants choose their places carefully.

Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) sprouts in healthy clumps in one spot, but a few inches away it doesn't grow, ceding the patch of arid rocky soil to the cheat grass (*Bromus tectorum*). The boundary between the two plant groupings is so sharp it looks like someone took a razor to the soil.

thatch of Lambs Quarters (*Chenopodium album*) plus, in one spot, a determined tuft of what looks like beach grass (*Ammophila*)—a reminder that New York is an ocean city, even if the waves of the Atlantic are more than ten miles away.

Plants here naturally seize the spots that have the conditions they like best. Lambs Quarters like depleted



**Figure 1.** Mugwort sprouting from a crack between wall and pavement (Photograph by the Author).

This is a vacant lot in New York City, a place where conditions are so harsh, you'd expect pure survival of the fittest to be rampant. But this is no Darwinian dystopia. Instead, it's a Kropotkin cosmos, featuring various forms of vegetal mutual aid. By respecting their boundaries, *Artemisia* and *Bromus* share the ruderal city.

This place—1067 Pacific Street in Brooklyn—was an auto repair yard, auto body garage, and iron monger's facility for 40 years (someone who grew up on the block reported that there had previously been a residential building on the site, a single-room-occupancy rooming house, which was likely demolished in the 1960s). The soil is polluted from the history of human use. Vegetation was almost nonexistent when we took the space. And there's still a scar down the center of the lot where the repairmen disposed of used motor oil by pouring it into the soil. Last year, a batch of Virginia Pepperweed (*Lepidium virginicum* L.) thrived on the petroleum-soaked ground. This year, there's a low

soil. Mugwort, which arrived from Asia hundreds of years back, flourishes because of alkaline conditions: the plant feasts on the crumbled mortar of demolished buildings that is a common additive in New York City soil. Cheat grass came to the U.S. from Europe in the 1860s and has spread over much of the country. It thrives in the city because it likes coarse and rocky earth and wards off other grasses by sucking as much as 70 percent of the moisture from its habitat.

Among other species that make their appearance here: black nightshade (*Solanum americanum*), whose leaves and berries are toxic, white snakeroot (*Ageratina altissima*), another toxin, which, when livestock eat enough of it, renders milk poisonous (Abraham Lincoln's mother died at age 34 from drinking milk from cows that had eaten too much snakeroot); ladythumb (*Persicaria maculosa*); horseweed (*Conyza canadensis*); hawkweed (*Hieracium caespitosum*), also known as false dandelion; bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*); paper





**Figure 2.** White Snakeroot gone to seed (Photograph by the Author).

mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*); Japanese hops (*Humulus japonicus*); and a far less impressively aromatic variant of tarragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*).

Despite the increasing number of plants that have sprouted, the soil remains filled with the wreckage of successive businesses. We at 1067 Pacific People have removed bucketfuls of crushed glass and dozens of hunks of rusting iron, plus the usual detritus of the auto repair trade: spark plugs, gaskets, cylinder heads, cracked bulbs, and headlamps. But no matter how much we sift out of the dirt, large new shards of metal and glass continue to rise. It's as if the soil tries to clean itself through a slow motion natural spin cycle, and things that humans have buried deeply beneath the surface eventually come to the surface. I have no idea if this is true—but it is a wonderful image for the ruderal city: everything in continual churn.

The garbage, too, chooses its places.

The heights of Crown Heights is the ridgeline where Eastern Parkway runs—and the wind swoops off the slope down the cross streets before veering over the smaller buildings that are an ancient accident of

zoning and swerves towards 1067 Pacific, pushing eddies of trash against the corrugated metal that lines the exterior of this property. Life here is a procession of candy wrappers, yellowed, week-old newspapers, plastic snack-food wrappers, long-expired losing lottery tickets, Off Track Betting receipts, and battered and out-of-date business cards.

The insects choose their places too. They make the most of whatever opportunities they find. Mosquitos emerge wherever there's standing water—the pile of tires at the flat-fix shop next door and the popular car wash next to that are the perfect breeding ground. Ants seem to understand telepathically just where crumbs will wind up before the crumbs are even there. They'll carry off chunks of bread many times bigger than themselves. Bees swarm to the yellow blooms of hawkweed (*Hieracium*, a.k.a. false dandelion). Spiders nest beneath the leaves and in the beams of nearby garages. This year, for the first time, Aphids invaded with a vengeance, stunting the growth of the weeds unless washed away.

This ruderal place wouldn't be complete without the traffic on the street and in the sky. The booming of

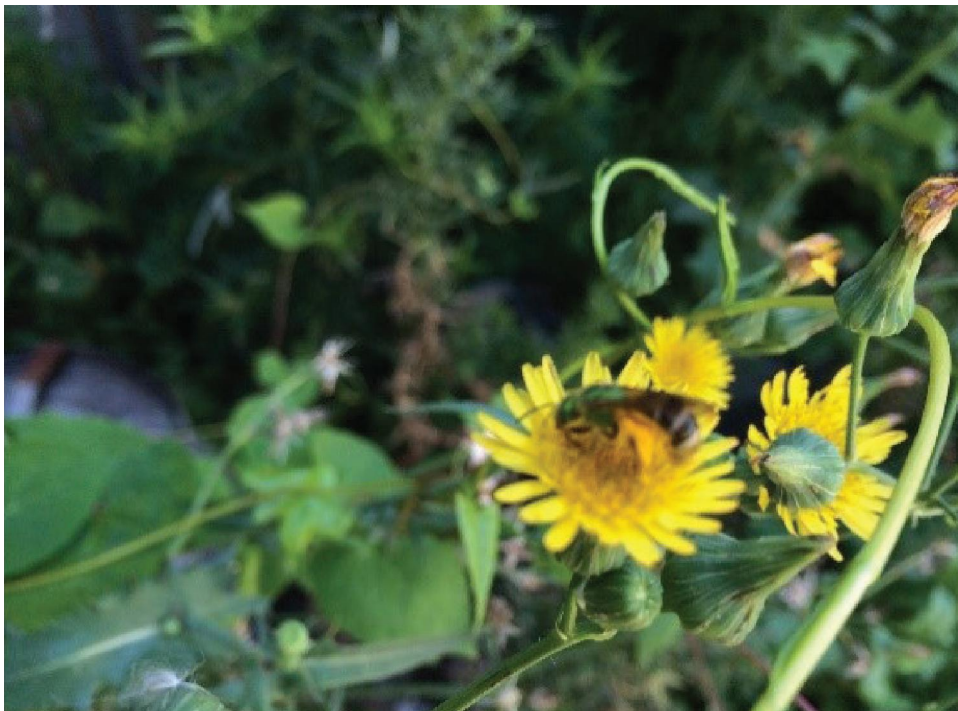


car radios is a summertime continuum, as people wax their cars after running them through the car wash that's just down the block and street mechanics still ply their trade in repair. And, during rush hours on most spring and summer days, airplanes whistle over every 90 seconds (planes have both a whistle and a roar, and different-sized planes have distinctive whistles—lower notes for wide bodies, higher tones for slimmer, more needle-like airships).

They crawl through the sky from the south, float north across the borough before taking a wide arc to the east across neighboring Queens where they make a half-loop just over Mt. Hebron Cemetery (where my grandmother and grandfather are buried) then drop quickly and roar in to land traveling east to west over Flushing Bay and onto the runway at LaGuardia Airport.



**Figure 3.** A business card arrived on the wind (Photograph by the Author).



**Figure 4.** Pollinating a false dandelion (Photograph by the Author).

I didn't know what the word ruderal meant until last year. And even now, I have to google it to make sure I've spelled it right and got the meaning down.

Here's the definition, from Oxford Dictionaries:

ru·der·al 'rōdərəl/

Botany

adjective: **ruderal**

1. (of a plant) growing on waste ground or among refuse.

noun: **ruderal**; plural noun: **ruderals**

1. a plant growing on waste ground or among refuse.

Origin: mid 19<sup>th</sup> century [the full Oxford English Dictionary suggests that the first usage was in a gardeners' manual published in 1835], from modern Latin *ruderalis*, from Latin *rudera*, plural of *rudus* 'rubble.'

Ngram—Google's guide to the history of word usage in the digitized corpus of Google Books—tracks ruderal to the 1840s.

The word is actually more ancient than these two sources suggest. Samuel Johnson, in his groundbreaking English-language compendium of 1755, cites previous dictionaries (most likely a nod to Nathan Bailey's 1727 *Universal Etymological English Dictionary, Volume II*) as his source for defining a similar word:

**ruderary** adj., [*rudera, Lat.*]

Belonging to rubbish.

I have written two books on waste ground and refuse—though neither of them was about waste ground and refuse. They were about squatter communities and street markets and the people who live and work in them. Mostly squatter communities and street markets are located on marginal land—parcels that had been neglected or polluted or were too rough for development and habitation.

Society has an unfortunate tendency to define people by the conditions they live in—and thus has sequestered these people as in essence ruderal. One of my arguments is that we should not confuse people with the material conditions they live in. They negotiate the conditions of their homes—four walls, a roof, water, electricity, a toilet—because society, government, neighbors, all of us collectively, do not fight to ensure that everyone has access to these necessities. Which reveals the hollowness of the concept of the ruderal. People are not ruderal. Nor are plants. If I eat a tomato on a vacant lot that is strewn with trash, and some seeds spill on the ground and sprout, does that make tomatoes ruderal? There is no waste ground in nature. For sure, some portions of the planet are hot and some are cold. Some are lush and some are rugged. Some are more conducive to plant life and other places present more of a struggle.

The idea of 'waste ground' is a human construct. We create waste. We dump it on certain overlooked parcels. And we then define those parcels as waste ground.

If the lot at 1067 Pacific Street in Brooklyn is ruderal, it is ruderal because human occupation and use has depleted and defiled it. It is ruderal because humans made it ruderal and let it continue to be ruderal. The plants that grow here are simply trying to do the best they can in the difficult conditions we have created. And some of these invasive and undesirable plants serve a purpose: they help take the toxins and pollutants out of the soil.

The ruderal city is harsh. The plants can be assertive and overpowering. The wind can be strong. The trash can be a constant presence. The insects overwhelming.

Yet today, in Crown Heights, as in all of New York, the ruderal is rapidly disappearing as the onslaught of real estate development gobbles every available parcel. Places like 1067 Pacific Street are the last frontier, conserved, for now, only because they are zoned for manufacturing.

As New York and all global cities converge, they become more monochrome in form and content and they lose the restless churn that drew people to them. The ruderal offers a passive challenge to this process. If we lose the ruderal city, do we, in a way, also lose ourselves?

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