

# Play

Edited & Designed

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# The Pit

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**I**n the late fifties, the New York City Transit Authority dug a subway connection from the Broadway-Lafayette Station five blocks east to the 2nd Avenue Station. They had to lay tracks in a place where there had never been a track or even a tunnel. That meant excavating a three-story deep pit through the playgrounds and parking lots along Houston Street's north side from Mulberry Street to 2nd Avenue. It was dug in stages, from the west to the east, and took over three years to complete. It was my playground from when I was nine until twelve..

As the work went on, our construction site playground changed, and what my friends and I played adapted to those changes. The Pit opened up new pastimes for us. We weren't interested in formal city playgrounds. The swings, slides, and monkey bars were too tame. A construction site was a more inviting place to play. There were fences around the site, but we found ways to get past them. If we didn't get in the worker's way, they didn't care what we did. After their workday was over they left, except for a watchman who didn't bother us, The Pit was ours. We played tag and Army and even made temporary clubhouses using Transit Authority supplies as the construction progressed.

The part we played in most was between Mott and Elizabeth Street, catty-corner from where I lived. That section was a real playground before the construction started. I went there to practice when I learned to ride a bike but still wasn't steady enough for the street. They tore out the swings and slides, trees, fences, and pavement. I wondered why, on the next block east between Elisabeth Street and the Bowery where the one-wall handball courts used to be, they left a long section of the handball wall, the one closest to the Bowery. We kids didn't play handball. The games we saw there were fast and played for money by tanned, hard-looking men—Jews, Italians, and Puerto Ricans. They played with a small, hard black rubber ball. You could hear the distinctive sound of it smacking into the wall over



the Bowery and Houston Street traffic noise. Instead of replacing the playground and handball courts, Houston Street was made wider. No one could ever play handball on that wall again.

When they finished removing the playground, and before they started digging, what was left was hard-packed sand. For a while, it was our baseball field. We had a baseball and a bat, and we each had gloves but no face mask for the catcher. I didn't know any better, so I agreed to be the catcher even though I was leery of getting hit with a fastball that I couldn't catch. But I dealt with that and was pleased with myself for handling a position that I'd never played before. I went from thinking that to lying on my back, looking up at my father. The batter got a hit and threw down his bat too soon. It swung into the side of my head and knocked me out. I didn't know how the game ended, but I remember feeling kind of woozy and going home with my father.

Just before the Transit Authority started digging, the local rats must have gotten a bad feeling because they all came out one night and were scurrying around Houston Street. We'd never seen anything like it. A bunch of us picked up some broken bricks at the construction site and started chasing the rats and throwing the bricks at them. Johnny killed one with his first throw. I ran after a rat, and it surprised me by stopping. As I ran past it, the rat started chasing me. I don't think it actually was, but that's what it must have looked like. Johnny said it reminded him of a Tom and Jerry cartoon when the roles are reversed, and the mouse chases the cat.

Games like follow-the-leader, tag, and Ring-a-livio were dangerous when we played them in The Pit. Ring-a-livio is like tag but with teams. One team would run and hide within a defined boundary. The other side would try to catch and tag them, saying, "Ring-a-livio, one, two, three," and bring them back to a den. When they were all captured, it was the second team's turn to go out. A game usually lasted about an hour or two. We played hard, ran fast, and jumped across whatever we had to. Sometimes we ran too fast and jumped without looking. Carlo was on my team in a Ring-a-livio game. I didn't know him well because he was from Elizabeth Street and we didn't go to the same school, but he seemed like a good kid. It was dark, and we were playing by streetlights. We both saw someone from the other team across The Pit. That meant about thirty-five feet across and almost as much down. I said something I thought was pretty reasonable, "Carlo, you go that way. I'll go this way, and we'll catch him between us." I meant: go around The Pit, but Carlo decided to go over it.

Carlo was an aggressive Ring-a-livio player, and I don't think he even heard me because he started running across a foot and a half wide I-beam to get to the other side of the excavation. These beams



were part of the structure that would hold up Houston Street when the subway connection was complete. We'd all walked across them on dares, but we did it slowly and not running full speed at night. Carlo slipped about halfway across and fell off the beam. He landed face down on a pile of sand.

The game stopped because we thought he was dead. As soon as he saw what happened, his brother, who was on the other team, ran to call their mother. A few of us kids climbed down and stayed with him. After what seemed like a long time to us but probably wasn't, he sat up, spit out a mouthful of sand, and started cursing about something on the beam that he tripped on because it was too dark to see. He was a tough kid and embarrassed because he had fallen. He wasn't hurt badly, just a broken arm. His mother arrived, took him by his good arm, and got a cab to the emergency room at Saint Vincent's Hospital. I saw Carlo the next day, with his arm in a cast and as cheerful as ever.

When we played in The Pit on winter nights, we'd sometimes use lumber that was stacked around the site to make fires. Not very big fires, usually just something to go to for a break, to get warm, and then continue with whatever you were doing. Louie, the night watchman, gave up on trying to keep us out of The Pit. We stayed out of each other's way and didn't pay much attention to him. Early one night, even before we lit a fire, he almost begged us to stop burning the wood that was so important to him.

"You burn too much lumber. In the morning, the men come, and they blame me."

Why was he so worried about some wood? We didn't know it, but we were burning wood at night that the construction workers had cut to burn in barrels to keep them warm when they came to work the next day. They were annoyed that Louie, the watchman, wasn't watching their wood. I guess we bought his story and felt some sympathy for Louie because we stopped burning his precious wood, although we kept making fires with scraps we'd found.

Eventually, they completed the construction, and the subway connection was made. Houston Street was a few lanes wider, and our adventure in The Pit was over. Throughout those few pre-adolescent years, that's where we would be found—after school, after dinner, on weekends, and all summer. The Pit attracted boys from well beyond our block on Mott Street. We made new friends and remained friends for years after. The Pit was our place to play, fight, and then make-up. When the new lanes of Houston Street opened, all that was left from before was that useless handball wall. It didn't matter that The Pit was gone because we were getting older and it was time to grow up.