

# Kid from Queens: NYU professor walks through his old 'hood

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A tour of Forest Hills, Queens with historian Mitchell Moss.

There aren't many people who know more about [New York City](#) than [Mitchell L. Moss](#). The professor of urban policy at [New York University's Wagner School](#) grew up in [Forest Hills, Queens](#), lives in the [I.M. Pei](#) graduate towers on Houston St., and summers on a bench in Ikea Park in [Red Hook, Brooklyn](#).

"That's my second home," he says. "Where else do you need to go? I have boats, the sun, benches, the harbor and New Yorkers."

Moss is opinionated, honest and a little cocky, but always refreshing on how he views [New York](#). He's been writing and teaching about the city for more than 35 years.

"If you want to study nature, go to the woods," says Moss. "If you want to study people, you stay in the city. For me, there is no better city in the world to study people than New York. I'm not one of those people who know a little about a lot. I know a lot about one thing, and that's New York."

Growing up in Forest Hills in the 1950s, Moss remembers taking the subway to the 42nd St. library alone when he was 8 years old. He remembers the old tennis club that was recently replaced by a

Latino church the size of a small soccer stadium. He remembers when all four corners of [Queens Blvd.](#) around 71st Ave. were stone banks with limestone facades reminiscent of [Yankee Stadium](#).

When we meet Moss in front of the last original bank, the national landmark and still operational [Ridgewood Savings Bank](#), he's talking and teaching about the neighborhood before saying hello.

"Look at this bank and the [Chase Bank](#) across the street?" he asks. "What's the difference? The new one is all glass and fancy. This one is stone, sturdy and strong. Where would you rather put your money?"

Starting the neighborhood tour, Moss watches people cross the street. Pointing at them, he knows what makes New York exciting.

"I don't care what part of New York you live in," he says, "on the grimmest level, during that walk from your house to the subway or the corner bodega, anything can happen. You're almost guaranteed to notice something new every day. There is nothing routine about this city."

In Forest Hills, most old-guard residents and real estate watchers heavily criticize the teardown of 1950s brick ranches for the construction of multi-lot gigantic mansions by Russian and Eastern European families. While he might find some of the homes garish, Moss applauds the cultural guts of the families who have moved entire generations of families into 10,000-square-foot homes with gold-and-silver iron gates out front.

"People come to New York because it's only here that they can compete against the best in the world in fashion, banking, athletics, style or any industry," says Moss. "These people feel they have won and they want to show it. Who are we to say you can't build a dream home with a concrete driveway for a front lawn? By building a house, these people have invested a significant amount of money in the city of New York. Their property taxes help feed our poor and send our children to public school. How can anyone be against that?"

When questioned about the neighborhood changing too fast, he laughs.

"If you don't like change, then get out of New York," he says. "People living here should just recognize right now that change will come. This city will never stand still. It just can't. Your favorite restaurant may be gone tomorrow. Your favorite bar will close. New ones will arrive. People age and leave, and new ones come. Real New Yorkers need to get used to that. Change doesn't have to be destructive."

On the quiet side streets of Forest Hills, people of all ages and ethnicities walk in bunches. We see Orthodox Jews walk quickly on one side of the street, while a group of Russian elementary schoolchildren skateboard home. An Indian mother pushes a baby carriage.

"A good neighborhood will never go down," he says. "Why do you think all these different types of people wanted to come here? It has good schools, good housing, good medical care, very good shopping and very good transportation. It's like the upper East Side. These people came here because they know they can lead a good life. In New York, where you live says more about you than what you do."

As we approach [Forest Hills High School](#) from a ridge overlooking the playing fields and the Queens County valley below, Moss gets giddy. The mixture of Russian kids in sweatpants, African-American teens with earrings, Latino kids in polo shirts, and Indian, Korean and white students promotes an exchange of ideas not possible when he was growing up.

“This high school was one building with terrible ballfields,” says Moss, who was an editor for the school’s newspaper in the mid-1960s. “Look at this growth and energy now. You do not see this in the suburbs. These kids have such a leg up already.”

Passing the lower middle-class section of the neighborhood characterized by semidetached brick garden apartments with eight-foot wooden fences, Moss mentions the importance of privacy in the city.

“These people paid a lot for their homes, too,” he says, looking at the \$450,000 homes owned by MRI technicians and paralegals probably working in [Manhattan](#). “You have to take a bus to the subway from here but you get to own your home. Look at that woman eying us through the hole in the fence because we slowed down? There are some great characters here.”

Moss stops at the retail stretch on 108th St. and 64th Road. The only store left from his childhood is Forest Hills Hardware, its sign decaying. Most restaurants and supermarkets are kosher. The candy shop where Moss sipped egg creams at the counter as a kid is now Carmel Grocery. He pops in to buy fresh roasted coffee ground on the premises, pita bread and tabouli. Old men in hats smoke cigarettes with younger women in skin-tight pants. Like a kid, Moss doesn’t want to leave.

Circling back toward Queens Blvd., he takes us through “the Canyons,” his name for the high-rise apartment houses on the winding and tree-filled streets. We pass an old synagogue with a sign for “Mikvah,” the post-menstrual purification ritual for Orthodox Jewish women.

The brick apartment buildings have columns in front or circular entrances with verandas on top, and terraces for corner apartments. Built in the 1950s for middle-class doctors and lawyers, they’re named after American Colonial heroes and English gentlemen such as Ethan Allen, [Benjamin Franklin](#) and [James Monroe](#). Nurses aides help elderly men with walkers maneuver busy sidewalks. Moss smiles.

“You know why the old people stay here,” he asks. “It’s the same reason young and smart people from all over the world want to come to New York, and why we’re the only city on the East Coast that continues to grow. You don’t need a car and you don’t need to be rich. Most of the people who live here have worked here their entire lives. This is still a city of opportunity and energy. You can feel that on Park Avenue and you can feel it right here.”

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