



# HYPERALLERGIC

STREET

## Learning a Lesson from New York City Birds

A public artwork reminds us that what's happening to the humans in a city is not necessarily the same as what's happening to the animals.

Alexis Clements | April 17, 2017



Aaron Schraeter, "Birdhouse Repo" (2017), mixed media (all photos by author for Hyperallergic)

Urban ecosystems can feel like they're entirely human-made. So it often follows, in many people's thinking, that what's happening to the humans in a city is the same as what's happening to the plants and animals. But that's not necessarily so. This distinction felt noteworthy when I stopped in at First Park in Manhattan to see "[Birdhouse Repo](#)," a sculpture by [Aaron Schraeter](#), installed as part of the New York City Parks Department's [public art program](#).

First Park — or First Street Green, as it's been dubbed by [the group](#) that took over its revitalization in 2008 — is a slim strip of land tucked between the southern edge of the East Village and Houston Street, running for half of the block from Second to First Avenue. Tons of people move past and through it, hustling from the nearby subway or strolling up and down the avenues of a neighborhood that's well into the late stages of gentrification. The most famous marker of change in this particular pocket of the city sits a block and a half from the park, on Bowery. There the punk mecca [CBGB](#) gave way to a high-end men's clothing store in the mid-2000s, and just a couple doors down, chef Daniel Boulud decided he was happy to profit off the loss by opening a restaurant he dubbed DBGB, which unironically serves hamburgers ranging from \$16–\$55. *Let them eat farm-raised, antibiotic- and cruelty-free meats*, say the new royals of the neighborhood.



Yet another large construction site is visible looking through the back entrance to the park on 1st Street.

Walking into the park, you're likely to see many expensively dressed dogs and their leavings, trash scattered around the borders, rat traps, towering [London planetrees](#), scattered [arborvitae](#), and what look like [winter hazel](#) and roses, among other flora. You'll also see large plywood panels covered in vivid and unmolested graffiti and street art that the First Street Green folks [commissioned](#). When I was there, a number of tourists and residents stopped by to snap highly Instagrammable shots. Some also shot photos of "Birdhouse Repo," perched on a high pole amid the trees and brightly painted background. The mixed-media sculpture depicts a somewhat oversize birdhouse with a large "FORECLOSED" sticker on one side, "RESTRICTED ACCESS" stickers on the other, and tiny boards covering up the entryways that would be for birds.

Hearing a very loud [American Robin](#) calling overhead while I took my own photos, I began to take stock of the fowl in the park. In late winter/early spring, with the traffic of Houston Street and the lack of native foliage, it wasn't surprising to find only the frustrated robin and a handful of rock doves sleeping high overhead in the branches of the planetrees.

Viewers seemed to get the message of "Birdhouse Repo" without much thought: *oh, look, even the birds are being forced out of the city*. The dark humor is clear-cut and seems to give people a chance to laugh before they snap their photo, heave a sigh of resignation, and move on. It's tough these days to figure out what the purpose of gentrification art is when displayed in the midst of neighborhoods like this, that have moved well past the point of no return. Particularly when it's displayed in front of sanctioned graffiti and street art, which have become their own symbols of commercialism, given how often they're exploited by individuals and corporations for profit (see recent examples in [lower Manhattan](#) and [the Netherlands](#)).



Aaron Schraeter's "Birdhouse Repo" in the foreground, with a work by AXE colours in the background

But, as a birder, I couldn't help but note that things have not been exactly the same for feathered city dwellers as for people. In fact, as recently as 2015, a particularly iconic species returned, nesting in New York City for the first time in 100 years — none other than the bald eagle. Last year, a pair gave birth to two eaglets within the city limits for the first time in as many years. Why are they back? Decades of work by environmental groups, the state, and the federal government to clean up the area's air and waterways, particularly the Hudson River, have resulted in a far healthier ecosystem than existed 50, even 100, years ago; it provides food for these impressive birds to eat, and, notably, doesn't poison the people who use, draw food from, or work on the river either. Other recent returnees include ravens and American crows (which weren't gone for long, but got hit hard by West Nile virus). A bit less recently, but still notable, are red-tailed hawks and peregrine falcons, which have adapted well to our skyline. Work to remove invasive plant and animal species and increase the number of native plants has given the birds that pass through our parks while traveling hundreds or thousands of miles (as well as the year-round residents) a much healthier place to catch their breath and gain energy for their journey.

That doesn't mean things are great and no work remains — pollution is still a problem in the waterways, air, and soil in many areas of the city; invasive and introduced species are continually crowding out others; development that paves over existing green spaces is bad for everyone; glass buildings kill hundreds of birds every year; and feral cats kill millions. Plus, having participated in a handful of citizen science events about birding in the past couple of years, I can say with certainty that global climate change has already had a dramatic impact on many migratory species.

But the point of making the distinction here between birds and people is to say that not everything operates on the same trajectory, and across-the-board resignation is just as destructive as the forces making people feel hopeless in the first place. “Birdhouse Repo” is a bit of a bathwater throw that takes the whole city with it. As much as getting closer to the natural world in New York has presented me with some bleak realities, seeing the surprising and dramatic positive shifts too is a reminder that pretty much anything is worth trying for, because what's at stake is enormous. Rather than preemptively shutting the door on birds, we might take this as an instance where they, and the habitat many are working hard to preserve for them, can offer a lesson to us humans. Economically diverse cities are more resilient, and cities with higher racial and ethnic diversity are better for everyone's development and well-being. We figured out that biodiversity was essential for wildlife and have worked to make the changes to save it. It's time we do the same for ourselves.

*Aaron Schraeter's “Birdhouse Repo” is on display in First Street Green (33 E 1st Street, East Village, Manhattan) through June 6.*

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