After the city consolidated its underground subway lines in 1942 (they were previously owned by private companies), fewer New Yorkers were riding the elevated lines. This decreased ridership, along with the fact that the Els ate up valuable street-level real estate and created dangerous dark spaces, led to the city taking down the Second Avenue Elevated line in 1942. In 1955, the Third Avenue Elevated came down as well, catching the eye of a then 17-year-old Sid Kaplan, whose photos of the dismantling are currently on display at the Transit Museum’s Grand Central Gallery Annex. The museum tells us, “From his perch on the roof of an apartment building, or leaning out the window of an office, his images capture a unique perspective of the removal of a hulking steel structure, the hard-working people who dismantled it, and the ever-changing landscape of New York City.”
Sid Kaplan was born in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx in 1938 and started working in the darkroom at the age of 10. Finding the process “magical,” he then went on to hone his skills at the School of Industrial Art (now the High School of Art and Design), located on 79th Street between Second and Third Avenues, amid the elevated lines.

Sid’s time photographing the dismantling of the Third Avenue El between June 1955 and May 1956 led to a 60-year photography career that centered on capturing “vanishing New York.” He worked for decades at Compo, where he gained notoriety as a master black-and-white printer, producing the work of other photographers such as Robert Frank, Duane Michals, Weegee, Allen Ginsberg, and Joan Roth. Today, Kaplan teaches photography at the School of Visual Arts, which he’s been doing for more than 40 years.

A few years ago, Sid told the Times that he had no specific intentions for his El photos, “except that I knew that if I didn’t take pictures of it, it’s going to be gone and I’m not going to get another chance.” He likened it to an “addiction,” explaining, “I guess that’s the disease of just constantly wanting to be known as the guy who made the greatest picture in the world. Or in my mind then, anyway.”

The Third Avenue Elevated provided steam-powered service from South Ferry to the Grand Central Depot beginning in August 1878. It eventually extended to 133rd Street in the Bronx, and in 1902 was leased by the Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT)—who in 1904 opened the city’s first underground subway along Lexington Avenue. Beginning in 1950, the Third Avenue El
began to be dismantled for reasons described above. The Bronx portion remained open until 1973, but those in Manhattan were all closed by 1955 and demolished in less than a year.

*The Third Avenue Elevated line running past Cooper Union (on the left)*

*Near the 84th Street station*
Southeast corner of 42nd Street

Northeast corner of 18th Street
9th Street Station

78th Street, taken from a dentist’s office

84th Street Station
Today, at the 63rd Street station of the new Second Avenue Subway, artist Jean Shin created mosaics depicting the physical dismantling of the Second and Third Avenue Elevated lines (top image), as well as of New Yorkers in the 1950s in the shadows of the absent structure (bottom). She looked through archives at the Transit Museum and New-York Historical Society to find these images to replicate.

Alongside Sid’s photographs, the exhibit features artifacts from the Transit Museum’s collections “such as original signs from the 14th Street and
125th Street Third Avenue Elevated stations, vintage Third Avenue Elevated destination signs, and decorative colored glass.”

Deconstruction of the Third Avenue El is currently on view at the New York Transit Museum Gallery Annex & Store at Grand Central Terminal, where it will be open to the public for free thoroughly July 9th.

Above Sid’s photos, the 125th Street Station glass sign, c. 1888-1895

Colored glass from a Third Avenue Elevated station, c. 1880-1900