

***In the midst of things: The social lives of objects in the public spaces of New York City*, by Mike Owen Benediktsson**

Princeton, NJ and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2022

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BOOK REVIEW

In the midst of things: The social lives of objects in the public spaces of New York City, by Mike Owen Benediktsson, Princeton, NJ and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2022

In the five chapters of Benediktsson's new book we are faced with singular objects—one could even say “banal objects”—so when asked to read and review “The Public Lawn,” “The Folding Chair,” “The Traffic Divider,” “The Subway Door,” “The Newsstand,” and finally, in conclusion, “The Bench,” I, perhaps selfishly, thought “what the hell?” Two hundred or so pages later, this is one of the most thoughtful, articulate, and insightful texts I have read. It has all the qualities of social spatial research as heralded by David Harvey, Neil Smith, and William Whyte, but this is in the here and now. As such, it becomes obvious that the “object” is a catalyst to explore “the midst,” and thus the complexities of evolving city life and attitudes. The research methods used throughout are longitudinal, in-person surveys ranging from field notes to interviews and attending meetings. Each offers a level of careful detail.

One might ask at the onset, “Who is this book for”—those administering and repurposing the City of New York, or other world cities? This is possibly the case, though I consider the book “digs deeper,” which I aim to unfold. As is the case with many significant contributions to “city,” the book is not directed at a specific audience, offering an invitation to all those interested in, and concerned with, city life. The two opening chapters are under the heading “Appearance,” as in meaningful intervention. “The Public Lawn” is a detailed study of Harbor View, and a component of Michael Von Valkenburgh's Brooklyn Bridge Park. “The Folding Chair” references a simple yet brilliant innovation of the City of New York in closing small sections of road to form plazas, each of which is graced with folding chairs.

“The Public Lawn” is the most comprehensive of the six investigations, quite brilliantly defining attitudes, political maneuvering, and the potentials, and perceived issues of designing places for people. It digs into the rough edges between local and city goals, capitalism and the public good, exaggerations of “fear” and protection of property values, and the real needs of many “publics” to have the right to access the city. Benediktsson asks why it is that landscape architects still have fixations of botanical beauty and the master plan, and little understanding of the skill and maneuvering to bring about the public good; this book is essential reading for landscape architects.

Similar arguments can be brought to “The Folding Chair,” which I found fascinating in so many ways. Dare I praise New York City designers who sacrificed a car for a chair and in so doing helped New York redefine itself? Though the author quotes here Jane Jacobs and William Whyte, two of the most insightful urban observer/theorists, I prefer to reference Richard Sennett (1970) in defining the essential nature and fundamental need for democracy as the “soul” of the city. In Sennett's terms, the city must welcome “difference,” “complexity,” “accessibility” and “risk,” each so well explained and animated in Benediktsson's case studies, as well as those entities clearly adverse to risk, and expressing false senses of fear, which of course has been a media curse to cities. Imagine, as researched, the neighborhood fighting against a school having a “city place”—what better acculturation to city etiquette, and life?

The second part of the book, with two chapters, is termed “Disruption.” The first, “The Traffic Divider,” examines the consequences, from the point of view of accessibility and isolation, of engineered highway barriers. “The Subway Door” considers how one door in the New York subway, or more particularly those preventing it from closing, can disrupt not

only people wishing to return home, but an entire system, and in doing so raising problematic questions. Though “The Newsstand” and “The Bench” are grouped under the third section “Disappearance,” representing a loss of public space and amenity, they in fact fit better with concerns for the subway. In these last three chapters it becomes clear, through questionable policies and investment, that the city domain, the city that belongs to us all, is so easily threatened and potentially lost.

“The Traffic Divider” should possibly not be in this book, however original and fundamental a work. In essence, it suggests that what we call suburbia is the home to a deprived population dependent upon economies peripheral to city. Simultaneously, as we all know, singular-minded highway engineers, and inadequate transit, have divided homes, amenities, lives, and hence opportunity while instilling both isolation and danger. What essential reading for what Mumford (1963) termed “monotechnic thinking.” How we would welcome sociological research of a 21st-century phenomenon, where the poor are forced, or attracted, to peri-urban existence only to be harmed by top down and ignorant approaches to planning and traffic engineering.

“The Subway Door” and “The Newsstand” really fit together in perpetuating not the social life of Whyte’s plaza, and Jane Jacobs’s neighborhood street, but the often-anonymous world of “city.” Each of these chapters is the outcome of longitudinal observation of key components of city, and often in close association. The first study, “The Subway Door,” demonstrates how ruthlessly subway doors can be held open. In the first instance, this clearly identifies “city managers” in terms of access and respect, and as a means of gauging city culture. However, also brought into question is the need for, and efficiency of the subway system, and how finally balanced are issues of both human and system failure. In the case of “The Newsstand” we have seen all too often bureaucratic approaches to “cleaning up the city,” in this case missing the fundamental understanding of the multitude of benefits that newsstands bring to the otherwise anonymous street. Why do administrators aim to dehumanize and underinvest? To be fair, we do now have New York folding chairs, pocket parks, bike culture, and the COVID restaurant street pod slowing traffic. But isn’t it obvious, as the author clearly indicates, that we need street corner guardians and 21st-century transit, and the more one can marry mobility and place in a manner particular to city, the better. These acts not only engender identifiable space, but city etiquette, what Sennett (1970) terms “ways to behave,” and in a deeper sense Heidegger’s “rootedness” as a shared sense of belonging (Mugerauer, 2008).

Jane Jacobs and William Whyte possibly opened the door to this more in-depth form of study, though referencing them as “pillars of New Urbanism” (p. 196) is clearly incorrect. So, I avoided “The Bench,” oh how I hoped this would be an ongoing study, place designated as public, yet in both control and psychology is private. Here is high drama, Trump Tower, “make America great again” turned into a Lefebvre nightmare of authoritarianism and hypocrisy. The “bonus” of “public place” granted as a component of gaining additional development rights, but then “placed in bondage” through private control. In detail, the Trump Organization received significant development bonuses, with the requirement that their street plaza entry be “public,” but then deprived the “public” of places to sit, hence the study “The Bench.” This now requires serious examination, so I hope this work will continue.

Academia is a labyrinth of fiefdoms with “firewalls.” How can we advocate for tomorrow without joint teams “bridging” disciplines and subduing the pressures of grades, tenure, accreditation, and departmental finance, and now focused on “engaging”? How can we advocate for tomorrow without joint teams of designers working with allied professions, and with close involvement in community workshops, and working alongside applied research?

This is where this work is so refreshing. We need the “sociable city” accomplished through the good will of people, the civil society, and the sensitive, and tested interventions of designers working both in, and for community.

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