

## JOURNAL ARTICLE

# Review of “In the Midst of Things: The Social Lives of Objects in the Public Spaces of New York City”

By Mike Owen Benediktsson Princeton University Press, 2022,  
264 pages.

<https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691174334/in-the-midst-of-things>

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A decade ago, I was interviewed by Daniel Dale, then urban affairs reporter for the *Toronto Star*, and now a high profile “fact checker” at CNN. Dale had just witnessed an incident wherein a young woman lunged unsuccessfully at the subway doors and lost control of the coins she was carrying, hurling them onto the floor of the northbound train as it sped away. In his article, “The Free Money Nobody Wanted”, Dale puzzled why none of the riders picked up a toonie (a two dollar coin in Canada) which had fallen into a corner of the subway car.

I was reminded of Dale’s article when reading the fourth chapter, “The Subway Door,” of Mike Owen Benediktsson’s terrific new book *In the Midst of Things: The Social Lives of Objects in the Public Spaces of New York City*. Like Dale, the author divines that there is an emergent social order that materializes on subway trains, especially with regards to passengers obstructing doors that are closing. Brief and superficial as these social interactions may be, they are crucial to the speed and efficiency with which underground transportation functions in New York.

The book is divided into three sections, each of which “focuses on one of the important moments in the social life of a material thing.” The first part, “Appearance”, deals with the introduction of new objects into existing public spaces in the city. Part Two, “Disruption” highlights the responses to modifying established built landscapes and material technologies. The third and final part of the book, “Disappearance”, analyzes the social consequences of removing an object that has been part of the urban fabric, heretofore providing stability, security and social interaction. Each chapter is introduced by zooming in on a single material object: a public lawn, a folding chair, a concrete traffic divider, a subway door, a newsstand, a bench in Trump Tower. In some cases (newsstand, subway door), the artefact is the central focus of the chapter; in others (folding chair, traffic divider), it is more of a visual lead-in to a case history in public design and planning.

Of the six chapters, one is especially memorable. Chapter 3 (“The Traffic Divider”) is a story of pedestrian risk in New Jersey’s suburbs. It examines two stretches of Route 30, once the major link between Philadelphia and the beaches of Atlantic City. By the time Benediktsson arrived in the mid 2000s, the “White Horse Pike” and the “Black Horse Pike” had become notorious as the site of numerous pedestrian traffic deaths. The problem lay in a failure by public authorities to recognize that service workers at the discount stores, fast food restaurants and budget motels lining the east side of the highway could only reach the bus stop on the west side by sprinting at great peril across six lanes of traffic. This was complicated by having to break stride to vault a concrete traffic divider, installed to keep motorists from crossing the median. The author walked for miles along the dusty pathways lining the west shoulder of the highway and at least once accompanied one of his research subjects in a sprint across the turnpike. This is a stunning illustration of how suburban landscapes endanger the lives of the working poor. Tellingly, when the New Jersey Department of Transportation decided to install a pedestrian overpass on a similar six-lane highway nearby, it chose a location in an upper-middle-class community that was cut off from easy access to the playing fields and walking paths of a public park.

One loose thread here is the author's views on the *agency* of "things." Although he acknowledges in a footnote that the influence of Bruno Latour and actor-network theory should be evident throughout the book, his preference seems to be for inanimate objects as encouraging or constraining certain types of social interactions rather than being actants *per se*.

Accordingly, he leans on the concepts of affordances and programming. Originally coined by the psychologist James Gibson, *affordances* refer to the behavioral possibilities that are endorsed by an object or place. These can only exist, Benediktsson says, in the relationship between the object and the person. A newsstand, for example, is physically only a container bolted to the sidewalk, but its social affordances include acting as a site for human encounters between the proprietor and customers and passersby and helping to suppress crime and disorder on adjacent streets. A consistent theme of the book is that a public space requires open affordances. This is not true of many of the cases he presents, notably the Brooklyn Bridge Park (Chapter 1) where the designers imposed a mosaic of micromanaged environments whose affordances are too restrictive or inflexible. *Programming* is a prescription for how an object or place should or should not be used. It suggests, or often dictates how users should behave. As Mike Davis memorably illustrated in *City of Quartz* (and is reprised here in the chapter on the Trump Tower) agents of social control fear that benches in public places will become the sleeping platforms for undesirable people. To prevent this, designers make them inaccessible or uncomfortable.

While the book takes public artifacts as its primary lens, much of *In the Midst of Things* unfolds as case histories in planning and transportation history. There are fascinating accounts here of political struggles over the design of the Brooklyn Bridge Park, of New York City's efforts to create new public plazas, of efforts (largely unsuccessful) by the MTA (Metropolitan Transit Authority) to speed up subway service by shaping passenger behavior, and of re-imagining the role of the venerable newsstand on New York's street corners in the digital age. Benediktsson presents all of this in sparkling readable prose, mercifully devoid of dense planning jargon and theory. I highly recommend *In the Midst of Things* to anyone

fascinated by the everyday design rhythm and social organization of urban life.

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