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Introduction: New York City in Transformation

LinDa Saphan and Jennifer M. Pipitone

Abstract

The editors of *Streetnotes* 29: New York City in Transformation provide an introduction to the issue and its content.

Introduction

This special issue of *Streetnotes* profiles urban transformations in New York City, broadly defined and ranging from mundane daily rhythms of the city to the extraordinary. Together, the nine academic and artistic selections in this issue highlight the myriad ways in which urban transformations can take place: at varying scales and speeds; at varying levels of visibility; and at the hands of different stakeholders, actors, and agents of change.

Our motivation to place the concept of “transformation” at the center of this issue may be connected to the current socio-historical context where we, as a people, are making sense of how living through a global pandemic has changed the places where we live, work, learn and play—and our relationship with these places. Urban transformations can be intensified in times of crisis; and New York City, with its share of urban traumas over the last several decades, has consistently revealed its toughness and resilience.

We chose to focus on New York City in this special issue, not only because of its keen ability to reinvent itself in response to ever-changing sociodemographic, political, and economic circumstances, but also because of its rich social fabric (it also happens to be the place we call home). Boasting 8.3 million residents according to the 2020 census, New York City is the largest city in the United States, and also one of the most diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The largest groups of its population are White (White 41.3%; White, not Hispanic or Latino 31.9%), followed closely by Hispanic or Latino (28.3%), then Black or African-American (20.2%) and Asian (15.6%). The city-wide household median income is \$69,407. Notably, household income and the distribution of races vary widely within and across the city’s five counties or “boroughs” (i.e., Brooklyn, Bronx, Manhattan, Queens, Staten Island). For example, the median household income in the Bronx is \$41,895, whereas in Manhattan it is \$89,812; however, Manhattan harbors zip codes that range from roughly \$30,000 to \$250,000. Socio-spatial disparities from income inequality to housing issues are common in multicultural urban settings. Thus, it is important that in appreciating the benefits that come with living in an increasingly diverse society, we also acknowledge the challenges and actively work toward social change—even if it is through the smallest of “everyday rebellions” (Steinem, 1983).

Cities as Socially Produced, and Socially Producing

One of the first steps toward social change is increased awareness and understanding of the benefits and social problems that characterize contemporary multicultural urban environments like New York City. To help in this endeavor, we grounded the call for proposals for this special issue within French sociologist Henri Lefebvre's (1900-1991) spatial theory. According to Lefebvre's (1991/1974) *Production of Space*, "(social) space is a (social) product" (p. 28). In the context of cities, this suggests that people, together with their interactions with each other and the surrounding environment, both shape, and are shaped by the urban landscape.

According to Lefebvre's theory, social space is produced through a tripartite dialectical interaction of how the space is perceived (spatial practice; *l'espace perçu*), conceived (representations of space; *l'espace conçu*), and lived (spaces of representation; *l'espace vécu*). The combination of vagueness and complexity of Lefebvre's writing allows for multiple interpretations of his spatial triad, which makes it ripe to engage with in theory, research, and practice. For example, as an urban anthropologist and environmental psychologist, we interpret the spatial triad as how space may be thought about abstractly (conceived), seen materially (perceived), and experienced bodily (lived), while another author interprets it as time (conceived), place (perceived), and people (lived) in her graduate architecture course. Regardless of interpretation or discipline, the "aliveness" of lived space, powered by active engagement with urban landscapes, allows for multiple spatial stories to emerge as space is (re)produced.

Another way to think about Lefebvre's theory on the production of space is as a critique of the status quo. Often, we are taught to view the world in a certain way, and it is disguised as "the natural order of things." However, when we pause and consider space as produced, we can see that society is structured in such a way that those in positions of power and authority (e.g., media, urban planners, institutions of higher education, etc.) often have the upper hand. Lefebvre was fascinated by generative moments, or moments that allow us to challenge this "natural order," question the status quo, and transform our ways of thinking, being, and doing in the world. Thus, this special issue highlights generative moments that include transformation of one's personal relationship with New York City, urban transformations in times of crisis, and reflections on the dynamic, ever-changing nature of community identity.

Creative Urban Transformations

In the spirit of disrupting the “natural order of things,” the call for proposals for this special issue welcomed both scholars and artists to submit their work for consideration. We felt strongly that “New York City in Transformation” could not be fully understood through academic reflection alone; as a megalopolis containing multitudes of human experiences, it is necessary to approach its dynamic shifts through the lens of artistic expression as well. The artists and their works presented in this issue encapsulate a wide spectrum of how urban landscape and personal narrative intersect and reflect the ever-changing fabric of New York City.

Thus, an additional line of inquiry in this special issue explores how artistic expression can represent Henri Lefebvre’s (1991/1974) *Production of Space*, an academic reflection on how space is produced. Artists utilize tools and methods of expression that reach beyond academic discourse and the written word, and thus, it is imperative to investigate the arts as a crucial arena where space is perceived, conceived, and lived. With a variety of mediums and materials, the featured artists have rendered complex experiences of urban life into visual stimuli, inviting the audience to imagine both their own and the artists’ geographies of transformation. Rather than center an academic discussion of each artwork, the five art pieces in this issue were selected for their unique artistic perspectives, from historical points of view to personal journeys. Through these artworks, we are offered a glimpse into how the artists understand negotiations of power among stakeholders and how those negotiations shape New York City’s dynamic urban cultures. In essence, the artistic submissions enable us to join the artists on their encounters with the city that never sleeps.

Featured Urban Transformations in this Issue

The nine featured selections span all five boroughs and include work from anthropologists, environmental psychologists, architects, and interdisciplinary artists, activists, and storytellers. The common thread among these submissions is that the transformation of the city is not a monolithic and one-dimensional process but rather a diversified and multilayered one, from personal to translocal to spatio-temporal.

Personal Transformations in an Urban Context

The first three selections in this special issue spark self-reflection on moments that prompt transformations to our personal relationships with cities, ranging from the sensual to the emotional. These selections illustrate that change can be initiated by something as small as awakening the senses, or as major as the loss of a loved one or relocation to a different city. Environmental psychologist **Tomoaki (Tomo) Imamichi's** "Being-with-Ears: How Christian Benning Opened My Ears to the Soundscapes of New York City and Beyond" explores the phenomenology of everyday urban sounds through the author's commute: a roughly four-mile walk through Manhattan, over the Queensboro bridge, and into Queens. Through simultaneous reflection and observation, Imamichi walks us through how everyday urban noises were transformed into sounds, and even songs of the city, by tuning into the surrounding environment. Urban soundscapes, too, are in constant transformation. From garbage trucks that roll through otherwise quiet nights, to construction noise that fills the air (and signals another type of urban transformation), the music never stops; Imamichi's work encourages us to not just hear the world around us, but listen.

Artist **Catherine Cullen's** sculpture, "Tree with Moons," also embodies the personal. The sculpture came into being while she journeyed through grief, mourning the passing of one of her brothers, and it was installed as a public art piece in Maker Park, Staten Island. The art piece depicts a tree with three moons and acts as both a reminder to the viewer to fight for a connection to nature regardless of the pressures of urban living, as well as a contemplation on the ephemeral qualities of life. The three moons are representative of different phases of the lunar cycle, new moon, full moon, and quarter moon, a cycle that predates our existence and will continue when we are gone. Yet the philosophical tone of the symbolism contrasts with the vibrant red color of the sculpture. It is a reflection of nature made raw and naked before our eyes, embodying the dynamic pull of grief, which, much like New York City itself, has a geography that shifts and slips from our grasp.

Artist and landscape architect **Sruthi Atmakur-Javdekar** takes us on a personal journey from her time as a doctoral student in New York City to the transformation of being a mother and professional in the city of Pune, India. In "A Daily Practice in Memories of a Lived Experience: Bridging Pune and New York City," personal transformation is transposed against the representation of urban landscapes in her artwork as she bridges both of her identities and urban narratives. Her story begins with the colorful acrylic painting *Across the Bridge* (2015). The painting

releases two opposing energies. One wavers in bluish-gray tones pressed together like pebbles that remind the viewer of crowded office workers on Wall Street as they fumble to make sense of the polarized location of their work site with the lack of individuality. The other erupts in warm tones of different shapes and lines with movements coming and going from all directions. The core of the painting lies in the center: the transformation of the artist's journey from a young graduate to a professional, from New York City to Pune. Considering the center inside of the whole, this piece evokes the experience of living in different urban environments that shape who we are more than we would like to think. Despite the abstract nature of Atmakur-Javdekar's work, there are hints of figurative elements, such as her use of lines and shapes, that take on a life of their own. Lines spin into circles, and the organic shapes of leaves and petals interconnect with colors that ooze from within each city's urban atmosphere. Atmakur-Javdekar's work is conceptual, as is space itself, and thus, the audience is invited to revel in the artist's perception of lived space in a representative form.

Urban Transformations in Times of Crisis

The second trio of selections draw our attention to urban transformations in times of crisis. Focusing on the public health crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, these selections engage with topics such as the transformations of streetscapes, collective resiliency, and recreation and leisure. In "Outdoor Dining and the Transformation of Public Space in New York City," **LinDa Saphan** and **Jennifer Pipitone**, together with their undergraduate urban planning and environmental psychology students, **Emily Perez-Garcia**, **Angelique Vieira**, and **Rossalba Francisco**, conduct a socio-spatial analysis of 45 outdoor dining establishments across 15 city blocks in Manhattan and the Bronx that sprouted across the urban landscapes since the start of the pandemic. Using multiple methods, including fieldwork and historical analysis, and guided by Lefebvre's theory, the authors consider how outdoor dining space is socially produced by uncovering conflicts between perceived, conceived, and lived space. Instead of engaging in the debate surrounding the Open Restaurant program's right to exist, the authors encourage a reframing of these conflicts as generative moments that can lead to a reimagining of public spaces that are more democratic.

Interdisciplinary artist and scholar **Milena Popov - Nena's** "Buzzing Calligraffiti," which is inspired by calligraphy and graffiti, uses sparse strokes of paint and pigment to capture the essence of human complexity and, at times, our contradictory feelings during the pandemic. Her paintbrushes meander across the white paper, reflecting the city's

residents' resiliency in the face of a pandemic and economic crisis. Yet, her artworks do not dwell long in the shadows of those dark times. They also depict whimsy through the dance-like movements of lines that represent the city slowly reopening from its strange, brief slumber. This series of artworks encapsulates the city's transformation in the last few years and takes us through an emotional peregrination of a shared urban memory of what once was and is still ongoing.

With "Playing Chess in Public: Recreational Traditions in a Time of Crisis," anthropologist **Clate Korsant** demonstrates how public chess playing in Washington Square Park and Union Square in Lower Manhattan transforms the possibilities of social interaction in public parks—even, or perhaps especially, in times of crisis. In a series of ethnographic vignettes informed by interviews, participant-observation, and archival research, Korsant profiles two prominent public chess players, Mr. Black and Alfred, who are both African-American. In unpacking the metaphoric expression "chess is/as life," Korsant situates public chess playing and the informal economy of hustling and tutoring within the turbulent socio-political context of 2020 (i.e., the dual crises of the pandemic and the public's national reckoning with systemic racism, spurred by the murder of George Floyd at the hand of Minneapolis police officers). While New York City was adapting to extraordinary crises in 2020, Korsant's work denotes that much of New York City streetlife endured, offering a sense of normalcy, and showcasing the city's resilience.

Transformation of Urban Communities

The final trio of selections deal with urban transformations at the community-level and feature responses to historical and current social injustices, including: issues surrounding belonging and community identity, New York City's housing crisis, gentrification, and transportation infrastructure. In "The Guerilla Gallery: A Rapid Ethnography about a Collaborative Public Art Installation in East Harlem," **Javier E. Otero Peña** presents an ethnographic and photographic narrative of The Guerilla Gallery, a largely interactive public art mural in the East Harlem neighborhood of Upper Manhattan. In documenting the transformation of this public art mural over roughly seven years (2015-2022), Peña explores what the mural means to the diverse residents of East Harlem, which include Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and other groups. Peña found that diverse community residents were collectively responding to socio-political crises like zoning changes, climate change, and the 2020 election, demonstrating what Peña calls "aesthetic empathy." Peña's work not only showcases the transformation of a public art mural, but also the

possibilities for public art to facilitate feelings of belonging within the ever-changing socio-demographics of many urban neighborhoods.

Artists **Seth Tobocman** and **Tamara “Tornado” Wyndham** take us through decades of changes in their comic art piece on the gentrification of New York City, from the 1970s to today, entitled “New York City Story.” The artists act as storytellers as they document crucial moments in New York City’s history, such as the squatter movement in the Lower East Side. Beyond the creation of art, this piece asks us to contemplate the role of artists as documentarians, recording and sharing the city’s history with the public. In this way, artists are public historians who actively shape the city’s identity. More than just a reflection of the city’s ever-changing structures and identity, this art piece is also a visual and educational tool that centers contemporary urban struggles and conflicts, specifically the politics of gentrification and the history of rent increases and homelessness. Finally, this piece is a call to action that asks us to reflect on what it means to be a citizen in the city.

The special issue concludes with artist and architect **Yen Ha’s** “Identities of Self and Place in Sunset Park: The Unmaking of the Gowanus Expressway,” in which Ha, teaching assistant **Lauren Phillips**, and architecture students **Andrew Clifton**, **Anna Cook**, **Anna Fritz**, **Jessica LaBarbera**, **Kim McGlone**, **Henri Talbi**, **Rita Xiong**, **Kelly Yu**, and **Amy Zhang** imagine possibilities for architectural re-design that would remedy historical injustices. The Gowanus Expressway, part of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway built in 1941, split the Sunset Park neighborhood into two, sending the neighborhood into decline. Ha’s students were instructed to use an application of Lefebvre’s spatial theory through Place (perceived space), Time (conceived space), and People (lived space). Her architectural design students brought a wide range of artistic and design sensibilities to the project: first with abstract lines, as any art form begins with a simple dot then turns into a line before creating shapes and figures. This project takes us on each student’s journey of capturing the essence of the place through wide brushes of varying shades of grays then turned to colorful shapes. These abstract lines are akin to the buildings and skylines that shape our perception of a city, shift to images of design rendering and modeling, all of which represent a re-imagining of life and re-injecting a new vitality to a much unloved infrastructure: the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. Ha’s students’ project gives to this cement space, an anthropological sense of place with the rigor of the architecture discipline. For Ha to assign this project to her students is in many ways a transformative “everyday rebellion” (Steinem, 1982) in and of itself: by engaging students in re-inventing and re-purposing

transportation infrastructure, it challenges historical cycles of demolishing and rebuilding common across many urban landscapes.

Our way of thinking about and engaging with New York City's urban landscape has been transformed by the featured scholars and artists in this issue, and we hope yours is too.

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As an environmental psychologist and experiential educator, Jennifer's work explores the human-environment relationship in multicultural settings locally and abroad with a focus on understanding and transforming how we think about difference. She has conducted research in several contexts including:

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Cover Photo Credit

Top left: Seth Tobocman and Tamara "Tornado" Wyndham, "NYC Story," 2022

Middle left: Amy Zhang, "Colors of Sunset Park" Patterns Identification and Development, 2022

Middle right: Sruthi Atmakur-Javdekar, "Across the Bridge," 2015

Top right: Angelique Vieira, Untitled, 2021

Bottom: Javier Otero Peña, "Free style Guerrilla Gallery, showing aesthetic empathy," October 31, 2019

Background: Kelly Yu, "Sketch H1", 2022