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Gentrification and Its Discontents

Manhattan never was what we think it was.

By Benjamin Schwarz

IMAGE CREDIT:

MICHAEL SORKIN, AN architect and critic, and Sharon Zukin, an urban sociologist, have each written what they describe as books about contemporary New York City—but that’s putting things far too broadly. Zukin’s Naked City does make forays into the white-hot center of hipness, Brooklyn’s Williamsburg, and to rapidly gentrifying Harlem. But the bulk of her book, and all of Sorkin’s Twenty Minutes in Manhattan, is confined to fine-grained observations of the streets and neighborhoods within roughly 20 blocks of their apartments in Greenwich Village—that is, west to the Village’s Meatpacking District and new Gold Coast along West Street, east to the fringes of Alphabet City, north to Union Square, and south to SoHo and Tribeca. This area today is in every sense rarefied, and for most of its history was in crucial ways set apart from the rest of Manhattan, which to some extent leaped beyond it. Still, the precedent for using the Village to draw lessons and issue prescriptions about New York generally, and indeed urban life writ large, was of course sanctified in 1961 by that doughty urban observer and community activist, Jane Jacobs. She largely formed her conclusions in The Death and Life of Great American Cities—the ur-text for contemporary writing about urban life and the most influential American book ever written about cities—by closely reading the neighborhood life around her house on Hudson Street (about six blocks from Sorkin’s apartment and, by my reckoning, about 10 from Zukin’s; it’s all a bit clubby).

Both authors are consciously, unavoidably “in dialogue” with Jacobs, as Sorkin puts it, so it’s probably not surprising that the two broadly agree on what ails New York and how it should be remedied. The city, Zukin laments, has “lost its soul.” What Sorkin calls the “pathology” of gentrification is obliterating those elements of thriving urban life that Jacobs famously identified: diversity of uses; the mom-and-pop stores; what Zukin calls the “cheek-by-jowl checkerboard” of rich, poor, and middle class; the distinctive identity of neighborhoods. Formerly funky precincts are upscaled, redeveloped, and—you guessed it—“Disneyfied.” In the Village, Sorkin declares, “local businesses and longtime residents are being forced out by rising prices and yuppies.” In SoHo, the sidewalks have long been packed on weekends with people who “with no thought of art” (my emphasis) have “come simply to shop and brunch and to look at each other shopping and brunching.” (I should add that although their screeds and prescriptions are banal and predictable, Sorkin’s and Zukin’s minute, street-level observations and their analyses of the social forces underlying gentrification are astute and precise.)

Inevitably, behind cries of decline is a conception, conscious or not, of a time and situation that was better—when the city had a soul. In her invocations of laundries and shoe-repair and hardware stores, Zukin betrays a vague nostalgia, shared by many chronicles of New York (Robert Caro’s The Power Broker, Ric Burns’s documentary New York, Pete Hamill’s memoirs) for the Old Neighborhoods characteristic of what was once an overwhelmingly working-class city. As late as 1950, New York was by far the world’s largest industrial center, and even Manhattan was predominantly and the Village largely a center for labor. There were sewing rooms and small-scale manufacturing lofts in the east-central Village, SoHo, and Tribeca (where, in the late 1970s, I worked in a belt-and-handbag factory); the far West Village had a working waterfront (New York’s port was easily the world’s largest, employing 200,000 people) and a brewery (New York made one-fifth of the world’s beer). Even if Zukin and Sorkin bemoan the city’s deindustrialization and are wistful for the higgledy-piggledy way manufacturing was scattered throughout New York (diversity! mixed use!), they’re compelled to make clear that they don’t miss the sweatshops and
the exploitative, horrible life that went with them. And recall that the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, in the heart of the Village on a block fronting Washington Square, burned in the second decade of the 20th century—only 25 years before Mary McCarthy, 35 years before the Abstract Expressionists and the Beats, and 45 years before NYU student Woody Allen would all be strolling the square. Which means that even hazy melancholy for the New York of regular Joes with lunch pails returning after a good day’s work to their neighborhoods of kids playing stickball and corner drugstores dispensing egg creams can only evoke scenes pretty much limited to the years of the LaGuardia administration.

While Sorkin, Zukin, and seemingly everyone else misses the relics of that lost city, such as its dense network of mostly mediocre neighborhood bakeries—relics that, thanks to the uneven and arrested economic development imposed by the Depression, war, postwar decline, and fiscal crisis, were a familiar aspect of the streetscape of much of Manhattan into the 1980s—the city of the old neighborhoods was really an agglomeration of mostly self-sufficient, inward-looking, lower-middle-class communities. (Even as young marrieds, my French-Canadian grandmother and Korean grandfather, neither of whom ever mastered English, largely confined themselves to the few blocks of their upper Manhattan neighborhood.) To many modern celebrants of urban life, the Manhattan of the 1940s seems, as Zukin acknowledges, a far less “interesting” place—a less hip, thrumming, and worldly place—than the contemporary borough. While some poor and rich communities were in shocking proximity—the slaughterhouses and shanties of Turtle Bay, until they were cleared for the construction of the UN headquarters, essentially abutted the grand residences of Beekman Place—there wasn’t much of the kind of lively intermingling of classes or even ethnicities that Zukin’s description might evoke.

When you come right down to it, the image of vibrant, diverse, but neighborly city life—Zukin speaks of the continued struggle between the homogenized “corporate city” (bad) and the “urban village” (good)—that champions of urbanism summon is really the ideal of the West Village neighborhood life that Jacobs imperishably described. Here were the laundry, the deli, the tailor shop, the candy and cigar stores, the greengrocer, the pizzeria, the hardware store, the locksmith, the corner drugstore, and the dry cleaner—all of which, with their comradely-but-not-officious proprietors, helped sustain the intimacies of long neighborhood association. Here was a rooted population of Italian, Spanish, and Irish working-class families, many of whose menfolk worked at the piers a few blocks to the west (my mother, who lived in the neighborhood—on Charles Street, just east of Hudson—from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s, always recalled the exotic glamour that the waterfront bestowed on it). Here were cobblestone streets and early-19th-century houses, such as the one Jacobs’s family was restoring, all of which testified to the continuity and stability—the fly-in-amber quality—of an enclave that, thanks to a series of historical accidents (and the nativist sentiments of its 19th-century inhabitants), was removed from the ravenous economic dynamism of a city that had bypassed it. Jacobs summoned, as Zukin trenchantly puts it, “an idyllic picture of small town life in the midst of the big city.” But added to the workaday if charming neighborhood were worldly bohemian embellishments: an antique store, a shabby-genteel French restaurant that Ezra Pound had patronized, and the White Horse Tavern, open very late, which had been a favorite of Anaïs Nin, James Baldwin, Dylan Thomas, and countless longshoremen. And here were the urbane newcomers—journalists, architects, artists—who, like Jacobs and her husband, eschewed the central part of the Village, around MacDougal Street, that the tourists were blighting. Here, then, was a vivacious, neighborly, historic district inhabited by Old World workers and well-educated sophisticates.

Thanks to the profound influence that The Death and Life of Great American Cities has exerted, the West Village circa 1960 has come to epitomize—really to be the blueprint for—the urban good life. But in its mix of the new and the left over, in its alchemy of authenticity, grit, seedy glamour, and intellectual and cultural sophistication, this was a neighborhood in a transitional and unsustainable, if golden, moment. Which meant that it was about to lose its soul. Two recently published books, Wrestling with Moses, by Anthony Flint, and Manhattan Projects, by Samuel Zipp, detail how the working class was driven out of the West Village, as gentrifiers like Jacobs drove up assessed values and rents. Progressive, reformist city planners, supported by seemingly most of the Village’s blue-collar residents, favored a relatively low-impact urban-renewal scheme to build hundreds of below-market-rate homes in the neighborhood—a plan Jacobs and a group of largely affluent residents successfully fought on the grounds that it would destroy the area’s character. Whatever the merits of the opposing positions, one of the proponents of renewal was
surely prophetic in arguing in 1961, “If the Village area is left alone … eventually the Village will consist solely of luxury housing This trend is already quite obvious and would itself destroy any semblance of the Village that [Jacobs and her allies] seem so anxious to preserve.”

Thanks in no small part to the fact that Jacobs’s recipe for livable and vibrant cities—keep the scale small, preserve the physical fabric of neighborhoods—has become, Zipp says, “the lingua franca of planners and city lovers,” the physical appearance of Jacobs’s old neighborhood (a place where I lived and worked in the mid-1990s) is much as it was. But its character is unrecognizable. The hardware store’s building, Zukin reports, now houses the New York branch of a small Chicago chain that describes itself as a purveyor of “hip designer maternity clothes”; in 2008 the ground floor of Jacobs’s former home contained City Cricket, which sold “one-of-a-kind, hand-made, antique treasures for children.”

The same processes created—and, as Sorkin and Zukin would have it, destroyed—contemporary SoHo, Tribeca, and the East Village. In their analyses of each, it’s clear that they pine for—and mistake as susceptible to preservation—the same sort of transitional moment Jacobs evokes in Death and Life, when an architecturally interesting enclave holds in ephemeral balance the emerging and the residual. Such neighborhoods still contain a sprinkling of light industry and raffish characters, for urban grit, and a dash of what Zukin calls “people of color;” for exotic diversity. Added to the mélange are lots and lots of experimental artists (for that boho frisson) and a generous but not overwhelming portion of right-thinking designers, publishing types, architects, and academics, and the one-of-a-kind boutiques and innovative restaurants that will give them places to shop and brunch.

Neither writer seems to apprehend the inherently impermanent nature of this balance, because neither writer comprehends large-scale economic processes. For instance, in railing against the passing of SoHo’s exhilarating, creative days—characterized by “the mix of artists, craftspeople, small manufacturers, researchers [], as well as of commerce oriented to their needs” (a few funky bars for the artists; places like the collectively run restaurant Food)—Sorkin joins in the lamentation for “the rapid decline of the city’s industrial economy.” He doesn’t recognize that the SoHo he yearns for was precisely the product of that rapid industrial decline, which made economically available to artists and their hangers-on all those cool industrial spaces that in more industrially vibrant times would have been used by, well, industry.

Zukin declares that she “resent[s] everything Starbucks represents,” which really means that her urban ideal is the cool neighborhood at the moment before the first Starbucks moves in, an ever-more-fleeting moment. Indeed, what has changed since Jacobs’s day—and the reason, as these books attest, that gentrification has become so intense an issue—is the speed of the transition of districts from quasi dereliction to artsy to urban shopping mall. This acceleration results from the ways consumption has become the dominant means of self-expression (Zukin is perceptive on this point) and from—relatedly, ultimately—the acceleration of the global economy.

Confronted with this unstoppable process, Zukin proposes waving a magic political wand by calling for an assortment of mandates and controls to ensure that certain ethnic groups and social classes and the practitioners of certain livelihoods contribute to the “authenticity” of the city be able to live there. Surely this is taking the fetishization of vibrant Jacobsian urbanity too far. It’s entirely reasonable—in fact, humane—to argue that the state must ensure decent living conditions for its citizens (and God knows we are terribly far from that situation). But it’s a wholly different proposition to argue that, in the name of what Sorkin calls “the protection of … the local” and to forestall “a landscape of homogeneity,” the state should create the conditions necessary for favored groups—be they designers, craftspeople, small-batch distillers, researchers, the proprietors of mom-and-pop stores—to live in expensive and fashionable neighborhoods or boroughs. That effort would ultimately be an aesthetic endeavor to ensure that the affluent, well-educated denizens of said neighborhoods be provided with the stage props and scenery necessary for what Jacobs and her heirs define as an enriching urban experience.

Mostly, though, such political solutions seem quaint: all this bellyaching about authenticity and lost soul. Sorkin and Zukin, sentimental progressives, need a bracing dose of Marx. Manhattan is the primary locus
of global capitalism, the most voracious force for change in history. Best to pick a different place to try to render fixed and solid that which inexorably melts into air.

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The gentrification issue is best understood as nuanced with costs and benefits. It’s also better understood in local context, i.e., it is genuinely a debatable issue in San Francisco or Manhattan, but a totally phony issue in Detroit or Buffalo. Some places fall in the middle of the spectrum. Faint signs of gentrification can be detected in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Milwaukee and Memphis, but there is so little of it that concern about it should logically be among the lowest priorities. Yet it isn’t. The hot rhetoric spewed (perhaps appropriately) in San Francisco gets mindlessly repeated in c Gentrification is transforming cities, small and large, across the country. Though it’s easy to bemoan the diminished social diversity and transformation of commercial strips that often signify a gentrifying neighborhood, determining who actually benefits and who suffers from this nebulous process can be much harder. The full story of gentrification is rooted in large-scale social and economic forces as well as in extremely local specifics—in short, it’s far more complicated than both its supporters and detractors allow. In Newcomers, journalist Matthew L. Schuerman explains how a phenomenon