



The cities we need: Essential stories of everyday places, by Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani

Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2024

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BOOK REVIEW

The cities we need: Essential stories of everyday places, by Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2024

The Cities We Need is an aesthetically attractive and emotionally moving book of photographs and prose that makes the case that residents of two neighborhoods—one each in Brooklyn, New York, and Oakland, California—find their sense of belonging and freedom to be their most authentic selves through the “everyday places” they encounter on a daily basis. Author Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani labels this experience “placework.” For the last almost quarter century, she has frequented the neighborhoods of Prospect Heights in Brooklyn and Mosswood in Oakland, sometimes living there with her family. Over the years, she has asked residents to give her their own guided tours, identifying the places in their communities, such as diners, playgrounds, and shops, that help them achieve a sense of well-being. Throughout the text the reader encounters substantial quotations from these neighborhood informants, testimonials to their connections to the everyday places where they live out their lives. These first-person reflections are the greatest strength of the book, particularly when paired with photographs of the sites they often lovingly describe.

I first encountered Bendiner-Viani’s work as a photographer in an essay that she wrote with her PhD adviser, environmental psychologist Susan Saegert of the CUNY Graduate Center, on the way residents of the subsidized housing built by the New York Urban Development Corporation in the 1970s were making their apartments feel like home 3 decades later (Saegert & Bendiner-Viani, 2007). Now, in *The Cities We Need*, Bendiner-Viani brings the same perceptive and sometimes quirky eye to the world ordinary people inhabit outside, rather than inside, their residences.

Bendiner-Viani’s text combines observations by residents with the history of the neighborhoods that typically traces their existence from Native settlements and slavery through more recent events like redlining, urban renewal, and highway construction. She also peppers her prose with references and quotations from theorists of urban space and related topics in a way that on occasion can feel intrusive and an unnecessary credentialing of her perspective. Often, however, her conceptualizing proves insightful, such as when she distinguishes between two kinds of talk, the “enduring talk” of long-term relationships and the “casual talk” that is fleeting but nonetheless essential to binding neighbors together in their common spaces.

The strength of Bendiner-Viani’s appreciation for what makes neighborhoods work for people is her attention to the emotional and psychological factors that contribute to people’s feeling of belonging to a place. This focus on the personal psyche is not typical of urban analysis, is very welcome, and is clearly derived from her field of study and vision, environmental psychology. And yet, one is left wondering if there are not more structural factors—sociological and economic—that deserve more analysis for how they contribute to the way residents experience their neighborhoods. For example, Bendiner-Viani emphasizes how a coffee shop or a playground can serve as meeting grounds for people who might never have encountered each other due to differences in their race, ethnicity, age, or sexual preference. Although she does not shy away at all from denouncing how gentrification undermines neighborhood solidarity, she doesn’t give systematic attention to the fact that even before gentrification, Americans have tended to live in segregated enclaves, defined by their commonalities rather than differences. One wonders then how well these neighborhood institutions have actually brought people of different walks of life together.

Similarly, although we hear of small storekeepers shutting down because of financial difficulties, we don’t get a full picture of the punishing economics of small retail in today’s era of commercial concentration and e-commerce. In contrast, in an earlier era of major transformation in the economics of neighborhood commerce during the 1930s, documentary

photographer Berenice Abbott used appreciative images of storefront display windows and street markets that were soon to be shut down to send a message of impending loss, as Rick Halpern has described it in “New York Palimpsest: Berenice Abbott’s Depression-Era Foodscape” (Halpern, 2023). Other structural factors that contribute to people’s sense of belonging might likewise have been more thoroughly theorized. In fact, Bendiner-Viani presents compelling examples of how infrastructure in Brooklyn—whether the open space outside the Barclay Center that provided the Black Lives Matter movement with an ideal site for protests or the ubiquitous stoops and fences in front of Prospect Heights houses—facilitated a sense of shared community.

These suggestions aside, *The Cities We Need* is a book we need to remind us that personal well-being should be a crucial measure of a city’s success and deserves the same kind of consideration as more quantifiable factors like economic investment or population stability. There is a long tradition of documentary photographers helping Americans see their cities with new eyes, from the Progressive Era reformers like Jacob Abbott and Lewis Hine to the Farm Security Administration chroniclers during the New Deal to the postwar image makers recruited by Roy Stryker for the Standard Oil of New Jersey Project. Like them, Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani has used her camera, along with her prose, to hold up a mirror that reflects back to us a city that we should, but do not always, want to see. *The Cities We Need* reminds us that the most intimate of experiences—on the block or in the corner store—is what makes urban life special and helps urban dwellers feel emotionally fulfilled as human beings.

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