

Book Review

Seeing the Better City: *How to Explore, Observe and Improve Urban Space*

Charles R. Wolfe, 2016, Island Press, Washington D.C, USA; pp. 263, ₹ 700,
Paperback

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There are several pieces of literature articulating the need to improve the quality of life within the city by improving its public realm and urban spaces; however, this literature attempts to redefine the same objective but can demonstrate the way forward for advocacy. It brings about the discourse of capacity building in documentation regarding what we like and dislike about our surroundings. We see, observe, and react emotionally or intellectually as urban dwellers. Still, these reactions have the least to do as the way forward with such observations or improving the quality of urban spaces or making policy structure. The art of documenting visual and perceptual compliance is as much an essential asset as any physical or cartographic documentation. Such data sets are unique and can contribute to understanding the urban environment, the interrelationship of society, and the built environment.

The book opens up with the quote from Jonathan Raban (*Soft City*), "That living in cities is an art, and we need the vocabulary of art, of style, to describe the peculiar relationship between man and material that exist in the continual creative play of urban living".

The book highlights the importance of interdisciplinary aspects of human experience as a valuable resource in making the city. The visual and experiential attributes can contribute to understanding the urban environment and its relationship with society and its people. In that sense, the book sets an approach toward fresher ways of seeing the city.

The built environment has competing interests and presents complex and often contradictory visions. These are usually in a dynamic state and do not allow for singular experiences to set in. The ways of seeing the city go beyond the design domain and planning processes and require a distinct visual sense.

The introduction chapter takes the basic argument about "Why Urban Observation Matters?". The organized two-dimensional controls or regulatory approaches do not allow for complete communication of the reality or day-to-day experiences of the city. The argument was further augmented with classical readings from Kevin Lynch and Malcom Rivkin, who wrote about urban perception as a critical aspect of unfolding the urban experience. This is evident in the excerpt quoted by the author "*Inspirational oral histories, myths and creation stories were rich with imagery and often tried to particular location and landmarks*". The author also writes about the role of human perception in a data-driven world and how human observation is also seen as data that are unique to the place.

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Chapter One on "How to See City Basics and Universal Patterns" attempts to articulate what comes naturally, what could be readily observable, indigenous facets of urban settlements (Jan Gehl & Birgitte Svarre). The process of sensing the city or place decoding requires fundamental questions and processes of documentation. The author advocates better cities are a result of learning how to sense the city first, within which he propagates the tools (Urban Diary) for documentation. The Urban Diary model could be central to place decoding and to locate indigenous roots of dynamic urban reality.

Chapter Two argues on "Observational Rules" learning how to recognize the pattern of city life. The author gives a rich account of the literature, reinforcing the identification of unique patterns of the city. Tony Hiss assembled the book on "Simultaneous Perception" and "Experience of Place" or "Psycho-geography" (probably by Simon Sadler, the Situationist City) or John Montgomery's "Happy City", where attempts have been made to discern how we look at and feel about urban spaces around us. Modern writers like Lewis Mumford and J.B. Jackson often described human-urban relationships as richly engraved into urban history. The framework of seeing the city, as he suggested, firstly, an unconscious search for order and familiarity; secondly, an experience of critical elements worthy of an ongoing look; and finally, discerning a syntax, or a language of form as code.

Chapter Three on, "Seeing the City through Urban Diaries", brings about the importance of representation within the vast disciplines of architecture, planning, geography, and anthropology. The chapter summarizes the traditional approaches along with the Urban Diary, which would adopt the LENS method (Look, Explore, Narrate, and Summarize). The author cites several vital excerpts from the Urban Diary, describing cities to exemplify the connection to place with various types of documentation and interdisciplinary arguments. It also deals with how the Urban Diary can decode the change in everyday life.

Chapter Four on "Documenting our Personal Cities", articulates ways of thinking about 'urban observation' through a personal observation approach. This includes documentation of visual characteristics of urban spaces through various influencing factors such as navigational hints, which bring about naturalness, blending of open and defined spaces, historical significance, and order (coherence, congruity, legibility, clarity).

Chapter Five takes Urban Dairy's agenda forward to policies, plans, and politics. The author states that the city is undeniably a human creation, full of our emotions, impressions, and experiences, while policies and regulatory processes are purely empirical. Accordingly, the need of the day is to know how to re-infuse processes with the all-important attention of human experience and to be accounted for in the planning policies. The subjective ideas and emotional or associative understanding require tools to induce them into the planning processes. The probable way forward is to wed the subjectivity of the city with the urban spaces and its public realm.

Seeing The Better City provides important insights into human experiences from multiple perspectives and, most importantly, deals with the human relationship to cities. This book is a must-read for architecture students working on their architectural thesis research on urban questions and for postgraduate students of urban studies, either in urban design, urban planning, or landscape architecture. The book attempt to help urban scholars, writers, and researchers to articulate what they see and observe various facets of urban life.