

Review: Twenty Minutes in Manhattan, by Michael Sorkin

5 August 2009 | By Jef Smith MELD Architecture & University of Kent



PRINT



EMAIL



SHARE



COMMENT



SAVE

A book based around the contemplative opportunity offered by the daily act of walking through the city to work was always going to be something I could readily relate to, having been able to do exactly that for all but one of my 14 years in London. But Michael Sorkin's informative and enchanting *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan* exceeded my, naturally high, expectations.



Twenty Minutes in Manhattan, by Michael Sorkin

Within the structured framework of a variable 20 minute walk from his Greenwich Village apartment to his studio in Tribeca, the narrative evolves with the journey. By integrating the personal and political, multi-strands of history and theory, with humour and insight, it ultimately becomes a paean to his New York and the life-enhancing vitality of urbanity in general. The presence of Jane Jacobs, who was a friend and neighbour of Sorkin's, is never far away and there is, as in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, the clearheaded assertion that cities should be about the accommodation and celebration of difference - the messy vitality of the diverse whole, not the reductive super-imposition of the big idea. Though I did begin to tire a little of the repeated derision aimed at Corb's Plan Voisin - yes, yes we know, we know...

There are essential lessons here for all of us: the pernicious aspects of Manhattan's extreme version of gentrification, excluding all but the super rich, and resulting Disneyfication; the creeping assault on civil liberties in the interests of "homeland security"; public space and, hence, public life under threat. The admission that this book was written over a period of 12 years and that his studio is no longer in Tribeca, now taking considerably less than 20 minutes to reach, explains the richness of his musings but also demonstrates the diminishing inclusivity and diversity of the city.

Perhaps the key lesson for architects is the timely reminder of the need for an ethically based approach beyond the limited focus on formal issues, one that understands and integrates the complexity of social, environmental and aesthetic conditions into a more equitable whole.

The scope of this book's references and humane insights, encourage a sensibility that can show us a way. There is much common ground here, I think, with Jeremy Till's recently published *Architecture Depends* in its call for an architecture that embraces the idea of contingency. Which is more affective? Well read them both, then you be the judge!

Postscript:

Reaktion Books, HB 272pp, £16.95