

## The Sidewalks of New York – Not What They Used to Be

Midtown Manhattan, arguably the most affluent and popular tourist destination in the world, is being invaded by street people, also known as “druggies, winos, petty hustlers, panhandlers and low level dealers” (Stringer, 1998, 83). Like an army, they have infiltrated the area and are taking over the sidewalks and transforming the character of the area from mixed commercial and residential to skid row. The process of transformation is insidious and relentless. I have compiled two slide shows, each comprising a series of pics depicting this transformation (TISP, 2016; TISP-S, 2016).

My primary method of research was direct observation supplemented with brief interviews with a few of the subjects. I chose to rely mostly on direct observation with minimal personal interaction because I wanted my pics to be candid depictions of actual conditions, not staged or contrived photo-ops that might have resulted if I had first actively engaged myself with the subjects. The more candid the pics the more truthful the message. Thus, unlike Mitchell Duneier whose research methodology was predicated on enmeshing himself with his subjects (Duneier, 1999, *passim*), I deliberately maintained a distance from the street people depicted in my photographs.

Midtown Manhattan is undergoing massive gentrification. The area is becoming more congested and more expensive. Buildings that were once abandoned are being renovated and new construction is occurring practically everywhere. Areas such as Times Square are being upgraded and restored. These efforts are succeeding in improving the area. Large pockets of urban decay have been eliminated.

Yet this transformation is also a smokescreen. The poor, which includes street people,<sup>1</sup> who are being displaced are not gone. They have merely retreated. They are being held at bay by a wall of money, and that wall is brittle. It can crack and disintegrate. They are patiently waiting for the opportunity to re-emerge in full force and make the sidewalks theirs again, like they did when the city de-industrialized decades ago. They are constantly making forays, “testing the waters,” probing here and there for any weaknesses in the wall. When they find a weakness they infiltrate. Hence, the return of street people to the sidewalk. What makes their reappearance more remarkable is that unlike in the past when the streets were far more deserted, the sidewalk today is not dead space. It is actively being used by the rest of the community too.

Now, why choose the sidewalk as the focus for this study? The reason is this: the sidewalk provides the most visible and accurate barometer of the health and viability of life in a city. It is open to all and is representative of public life (Hou, 2010, 2). Jane Jacobs writes:

**Sidewalks, their bordering uses, and their users, are active participants in the drama of civilization versus barbarism in the cities. To keep the city safe is a fundamental task of a city’s streets and its sidewalks (Jacobs, 1930, 30).**

If the sidewalks are failing in their task to keep the area safe, it could have a destabilizing effect on the entire neighborhood. On that point, Claude S. Fischer writes:

**People in different social worlds often do “touch” in Park’s language. But by doing so, they sometimes rub against one another only to recoil, with sparks flying upward. Whether the encounter is between blacks and**

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<sup>1</sup> It would require an entirely new understanding of the concept of social class to argue that street people should not be included with the poor.

**Irish, hard-hats and hippies, or town and gown, people from one subculture often find people in another subculture threatening, offensive, or both. (Fischer, 1984, 58)**

**Different groups recoiling from one another. Not a pretty picture, but not necessarily an inaccurate one.**

**Is the area actually being invaded? The answer to that question is yes. According to two series of photographs, the first taken between February and April 2016 (TISP, 2016), the second during May 2016 (TISP-S, 2016); street people are to be found virtually everywhere. Most of the pics were taken at various locations in midtown Manhattan. Most were taken during the day. Approximately one hundred twenty-five street people were photographed. Some had their pics taken more than once. About ninety percent were male; for some their gender could not reasonably be determined. About one-third were actively or passively panhandling (one was garbage picking); the others were either awake and quiet or sleeping on the pavement. Six (five male and one female) utilized wheelchairs (whether all five were actually wheelchair-bound could not be confirmed). Two had visible physical disabilities (a male with a right below knee amputation and a female with a deformed right arm). At least two had dogs; one played with pigeons. One was urinating (NYCAU, 2016). Their ages varied but all appeared to be adults. About half were white, the others black and other races.<sup>2</sup> Many appeared disheveled. None appeared to be starving and none seemed to be in acute physical distress. Many of the pics were taken during the day and when**

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<sup>2</sup> In *Sidewalk* Duneier gives the impression that only black men are street people. My observations of street people in New York City and elsewhere suggest a more varied demographic picture.

weather conditions were clear and cold. (Indeed, it is noteworthy that cold temperatures alone do not deter street people from staying on the sidewalk.) A few were situated under construction awnings and inside recesses of buildings, one was in Grand Central Terminal, three in Penn Station, two were in the subway, three were in bank lobbies, but most were on the sidewalk fully exposed to the elements.<sup>3</sup> The pics were taken at random, that is, when the opportunity presented itself. There is no claim that they are a representative sample of the entire street people population in Midtown Manhattan or of conditions on the sidewalk in general. However, the large number of pics compiled plus the recent time frame during which they were taken makes these pics a credible source of data.

To gain a better understanding of the relationship of the street person to the sidewalk, I placed myself on the sidewalk for a short period of time. I chose a spot located on Fifth Avenue midway between West Forty-Third and West Forty-Fourth Streets. I selected that spot firstly because it was unoccupied. It also had a steady flow of pedestrian traffic, was in sunlight, was in front of a vacant lot, seemed free of biological waste products (both human and animal), was located in a reasonably safe area, and afforded an unobstructed vantage point from which to observe my surroundings and be noticed by others without obstructing the pedestrian flow. Located near the West Forty-Third Street end of the block was a food vendor and opposite the vendor was another street person, sitting on the sidewalk, his back propped up against a fence, with his placard (TISP, 2016, pics 104-105). The other street person occasionally glanced at me but otherwise left me alone.

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<sup>3</sup> Although a few of the pics are interior shots, all the pics show street persons occupying public space.

Placing myself on the sidewalk was an intrusive act. I was occupying a piece of real estate that I did not own. That fact did nothing to deter me from occupying it. After I settled in, which took only a few moments, I started watching the pedestrians passing by. It was a mind-numbing experience. I was doing absolutely nothing except watching other people. I was cognizant of the crowd but not part of the crowd. I had nothing to sell, was not actively panhandling, but at that moment became fully engaged in the role of street person. In the words of street vendor Hakim Hasan, I became a public character (Duneier, 2001, 6). All I needed was a cheap paper cup, a brown cardboard placard pleading for bus fare to get back home, a gimmick such as a musical instrument with which to play pleasant tunes, and the picture would have been complete. I would have transformed, at least in my mind, a non-descript, no-account concrete slab bordered by cigarette butts into a place of commerce (SSFA, 2016; SSFA1, 2016; POTS, 2016). I would have become another Hakim, the only difference between us being in what we were peddling: he books and me entertainment. Thus, I confirmed what the sidewalk means to a street person: a place to do business.

At first glance, the act of placing oneself on the sidewalk seems to make no sense at all. That is why it is such a disturbing spectacle. It perplexes the mind. It gives cause to be taken aback.<sup>4</sup> It goes against one of the most basic of human drives – the desire for shelter. (By the term shelter I mean an edifice with four walls and a roof or something closely approximating it.) Some attribute this baffling behavior to mental illness. Sharon Zukin writes about how as a result of deinstitutionalization, streets became “crowded with ‘others,’ some of whom

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<sup>4</sup> Note the reaction of the passerby in pic 127 (TISP, 2016).

clearly suffered from sickness and disorientation” (Zukin, 1995, 287). This explanation is not satisfactory.

The decision to place oneself on the sidewalk is a lifestyle choice and not a symptom of delusional thinking. In *Sidewalk*, two Greenwich Village street persons, Ron and Hakim, candidly admit that they deliberately chose to live on the street (Duneier, 2001, 49). They knew exactly what they were doing. Ron said, “I left my apartment, my clothes, television, everything. I just left it there!” (Duneier, 1999, 49). Hakim

gave the impression that he ha[d] made a clear choice between two different kinds of lives, what some people call a “lifestyle choice” (Duneier, 1999, 49).

Living on the street may be symptomatic of a whole slew of personal problems but mental illness is not one of them. To assert that street people are sick and disoriented without the benefit of a clinical examination to support that assertion is unempirical and pure conjecture. Of all the subjects photographed, only one, “Cellophane Man” (TISP, 2016, pic 37) exhibited overt signs of mental deterioration. He was sitting in a subway car intermittently screaming. All the other subjects were generally quiet (this statement includes the ones who were sprawled on the street) and exhibited no overt signs of psychosis. Instead, their behavior is a function of a street culture that places value on being able to successfully hustle for money.

Is the presence of street people a normal condition for a city? Ernest W. Burgess believes that it is; that it is actually part of a normal process of urban growth and development. Skid row is part of the urban landscape. He calls

such an area “‘hobohemia,’ the teeming Rialto of the homeless migratory man of the Middle West” (Burgess, 1925, 78). It is located adjacent to the central business district and is characterized by high crime and a shrinking population. The problem is that if Burgess is correct, it still does not explain why Midtown Manhattan has become such an inviting place for vagrants and beggars nor why, despite the influx of street people, and the closing of certain business establishments, the area in general seems not to be shrinking in population but becoming more congested. There seems to be no massive out-migration of people from the area occurring.

What is it about Midtown Manhattan, then, that makes the sidewalk in that area such an attractive place? First, the area has a huge amount of pedestrian traffic. Millions of people travel to and from the area every day; most use public transportation. In addition, the location is teeming with commercial activity. The area includes some of the most popular tourist attractions in the world. Those include the Empire State Building, Grand Central Terminal, Times Square, the Theatre District, Herald Square, Madison Square Garden, and many other famous places. All five major league sports – baseball, football, basketball, hockey and soccer – have their executive offices in the area. It also is a venue for scores of major medical centers, schools, universities, libraries, and hotels as well as hundreds if not thousands of bars, restaurants, curio shops, delicatessens and other commercial establishments, and at least two large homeless shelters, Mainchance on East Thirty-Second Street and the New York City public shelter on First Avenue. It is also the venue for four major interstate transportation terminals:

**The Port Authority Bus Terminal, the Thirtieth Street PATH station, Penn Station and Grand Central Terminal. What does all that mean to a street person?**

**First, it means that Midtown Manhattan provides, in the words of Mitchell Duneier, a “habitat able to sustain the daily lives of unhoused men” (Duneier, 1999, 143). It offers places where street people can get food, clothing and even cash assistance. Lee Stringer writes, “There are numerous organizations that help feed, clothe, and counsel street people” (Stringer, 1999, 204). Second, it means that the area is readily accessible from outside. All they need to do is take a train or bus and within minutes they can be basking in the lights, action, noise and excitement of Midtown Manhattan (TSS, 2013).**

**But the primary mission of street people is not to sightsee. It is to beg for money. Some perform that task in creative ways. A male street person seated at busy street corner on Fifth Avenue, who called himself the street poet, was constantly calling out hellos and good mornings to passersby (TISP, 2016, pics 55-56). At Grand Central Terminal another man, situated at the Vanderbilt Avenue entrance to the terminal, was performing the duties of “greeter” for people entering and leaving the station (TISP, 2016, pics 75-76). He was smiling and affable. (Yet it was all an act. When asked how he was doing, he dropped his smile and said “terrible.”) A few blocks away another street person, standing outside the entrance to a restaurant on Fifth Avenue, was noisily shaking his cup and greeting people as they entered and exited the restaurant. When he noticed I was observing him he asked if I was planning to call the police (I told him no) (TISP, 2016, pic 74). On Madison Avenue near East Forty-Eighth Street a street**



person facetiously asked passersby if they could spare him a fifty-dollar bill and admonished them not to be ashamed if they could not (TISP, 2016, pic 104). One passerby did offer to buy him some food.

Like most everyone else, street people are concerned for their personal safety. A female street person situated under a scaffold on Fifth Avenue reported that one of the reasons she preferred her spot was its close proximity to the Duane Reade store that was open twenty-four hours, the presence of which she believed afforded her protection (TISP, 2016, pics 77, 126, 127). That was also the case for most of the other street persons I observed. Most were found at locations that contained a high level of commercial activity and street traffic around the clock. Those locations afford them a measure of security that allow them to beg, sleep, flop or do whatever else they do without fear of being attacked. According to urban sociologist Gregory Snyder, “People in public space want to feel safe and secure” (Snyder, 2016). That includes street people too.

This may seem absurd. Street people are the intruders. Yet the fact is that they are entitled to the full protection of the law. This means the following: first, that government’s commitment to create a safe environment extends to street people and second, that street people cannot be targeted by law enforcement authorities for removal from the sidewalk without probable cause and must be afforded due process if arrested. But presuming that the street people presence on the sidewalk is illegal, then why aren’t the police acting to control or eliminate the offensive behavior?

Perhaps an answer to that question can be found in the relationship of street people to the broader community. It could be argued that street life is sufficiently unique to constitute a subculture, one that exists on the sidewalk. If that is the case, what right does anyone have to evict them from the street? Are they not an integral part of the community too? Both questions are germane to the diverse nature of urban life, a condition that has long been recognized by urban sociologists. Simmel writes that “Cities are, first of all, seats of the highest economic division of labor” (Simmel, 1903, 30). Wirth defines a city as a collection of “socially heterogeneous individuals” (Wirth, 1930, 34). Fischer asserts that deviant behavior is part of the urban scene. He writes:

Thus urbanism has unique consequences, including the production of “deviance,” but not because it destroys social worlds – as determinism argues – but more often because it creates them (Fischer, 1984, 57).

If Simmel, Wirth and Fischer are correct, then street persons have a rightful place in the community. Hence, the sidewalk takes on a new meaning. No longer just a thoroughfare, now for some it is a final destination, a legitimate place of business and a home.

Paradoxically, the influx of street persons is occurring at a time when Midtown Manhattan is experiencing an unprecedented economic boom. This economic upswing is being financed by the multi-billion-dollar tourist industry that supports the entire neighborhood. Yet the influx of all this money does nothing to stem the street people invasion. In fact, the more the area is inundated with tourists, the more the sidewalks are being swamped with street people. But that is not surprising. Tourists are a source of money. In addition, tourists contribute to the transient nature of the sidewalk in general.

The character of the community itself has changed. There are now scores, may be even hundreds, of hotels in the area. Fewer people are rooted in the area. Everyone is moving about, circulating, on the go, all of which creates an ideal venue for panhandling. For the tourists, for whom the entire area is nothing but gaudy scene, that may not be a problem. In fact, they may consider street people to be part of the show. Gregory Snyder states, “Capitalism is demanding that all space be profitable” (Snyder, 2016). That includes the sidewalk too, and is a factor that must be taken into account when analyzing the question of who is allowed access to a particular space.

But for people who reside in Midtown Manhattan, the question of access is more than academic. Louis Wirth discusses the transitory nature of urban life. He writes: “The contacts of the city may be face to face, but they are nevertheless impersonal, superficial, transitory, and superficial (Wirth, 1938, 12).” If everyone is living a transitory existence, then when placed within a contextual framework, public vagrancy can be seen as being part of a larger pattern of urban life and therefore not as marginal as it seems. That gives cause for concern. If the skid row phenomenon is a manifestation of some kind of normative social process, then Midtown Manhattan is in deep trouble. True, the tourists keep piling in, but what good does it do if that does not translate into improved quality of life for the area? Is the area doomed to become another Bowery?

According to Snyder, “The economic structure of society is predictive of its esthetics” (Snyder, 2016). Thus, in a capitalist society even the most grotesque manifestation of social dysfunctionality can acquire value and on that basis be

perceived as being beautiful. That includes a skid row populated by scruffy-looking people located on the sidewalk whose presence gives the area a certain “character.”

At one time the Bowery was a rundown area. As dilapidated as it was, however, very few people were to be found on the street. For the most part they stayed in flophouses. Today, that is not the case. The sidewalk has become the flophouse. And for good reason. There are no more cheap hotels. Hence the sidewalk becomes more than just a pedestrian thoroughfare. It acquires a new role, unanticipated by planners and certainly in variance with the purpose for which it was originally intended. For Lee Stringer, Grand Central Terminal was not a train station, it was a crash pad that afforded him some relief from the harsh and oppressive environment of the street (Stringer, 1998, 43ff).<sup>5</sup>

Through clever marketing strategies, New York City has succeeded in selling itself to the rest of the world as a great place to visit. And if what is being peddled is just a bunch of recycled junk repackaged and sold to a gullible public, then all the better for the city which stands to make money, and for the street people too. The sidewalk then acquires new value. It is no longer just a repository for dilapidated human beings. Now it is part of a “scene.” Tourists can experience the “real” New York City, interact with genuine street people (even if their contacts are limited to a furtive glance and the depositing of a small “donation” in somebody’s cup), and then leave town with the satisfaction of one who has “seen it all.”

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<sup>5</sup> Then again, just about any space can have more than one meaning. For some a Nazi concentration camp meant a legitimate instrument of state power, for others an instrument of terror. Same place; two different meanings.

Seems farfetched, but not really. This is part of the decadence that characterizes today's consumer driven society. Once upon a time, New York City was the single largest industrial manufacturing center in the world. People did not move to the city to go touring. They came to the city to live and to work. Manufacturing drove the entire economy, not only that of the city but of the entire nation. But with the virtual disappearance of the manufacturing sector, the city, in partnership with large commercial interests, has been forced to find new and creative ways to generate business. As a result, what was once considered ordinary, now gets resold as something valuable. Mark Gottdiener writes:

Since the 1960s a new trend of symbolic differentiation within the built environment has appeared that contrasts graphically with the earlier period. The use of symbols and motifs more and more frequently characterizes the space of everyday life in both the city and the suburbs. (Gottdeiner, 1997, 303)

In other words, whereas in the past commercial activity was not dependent on hyping the product to make a sale, today it is all hype, driven by symbols that are used to manipulate the public to buy. It is all a sham. Today what is being sold is the label, not the substance. Thus, whereas in the past, skid row was a place to be avoided and shunned, today it is a label that is part of a larger theme, the "real New York." Its value lies entirely in its symbolism.<sup>6</sup>

For street people, this is a bonanza. They get more attention, acquire a certain notoriety, gain legitimacy, and most importantly of all, increase their chances to "earn" money. One must remember that street people, like everyone else, value the dollar. They just don't want to work for it, at least not in a

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to imply that conditions in the industrial era were better. In many respects they were much worse. But it did not produce an entire class of people who willfully place themselves on the sidewalk. That is a post-industrial phenomenon.

conventional way. They want to make money easily, and they do, from the public. Total strangers engaged in a financial transaction in which nothing is purchased, not even good will. The “seller” has nothing to sell and the buyer acquires nothing tangible. It is a black market operation, totally unregulated and certainly not taxed. And that makes it exciting and profitable. As a street person named Ron explained, “I never went back to the shelter. I was making a hundred dollars every single day!” (Duneier, 2001, 49).

All of this is happening on the sidewalk. On the sidewalk a street person need not concern himself with overhead charges that drive other businesses into the ground. The hobo of yesterday is now the entrepreneur of today (Lee Stringer collected bottles; Hakim sold books). The wandering ne'er-do-well who would have been chased out of town in the past and possibly even arrested for vagrancy is now a street salesman, playing on the sympathy of a well-meaning but hapless public.

There is no doubt that today the city tolerates the presence of street people on the sidewalks. Street people being roused by the police (Stringer, 1998, 43ff; Duneier, 1999, 253-260) no longer occurs. This study found no instance of the police, or anyone else in authority for that matter, engaged in any kind of systematic effort to chase street people off the sidewalk. If anything, the attitude of the police seems to be one of benign indifference. During my research I observed only one instance of the police ordering street persons to move. It occurred on the Fiftieth Street side of Saint Patrick's Cathedral. The police in a patrol car observed two street persons sleeping near the entrance to the church

and directed them to leave. At Fifth Avenue and East Thirty Fifth Street a female street person set up “shop” directly next to a police car. The presence of the police did not faze her in the least. Nor did the police seem to take notice of her (SPSUS, 2016).

From a distance, New York City looks spectacular. Flying into JFK airport affords a magnificent vista of the city (FIJA, 2016; LAJA, 2015). The view of the Midtown area from the Empire State Building is equally breathtaking; its grandeur unsurpassed (MTM1, 2013; MTM2, 2013; MTM3, 2013). But at ground level the area loses its charm. In Midtown Manhattan anything and everything happens on the street. There is a cacophony of harsh sounds – sirens blaring, horns honking, metals clanging. Everything seems chaotic. Proliferation of bicycle traffic, erratic operation of motor vehicles, streets converted into obstacle courses and garbage dumps, people scurrying in all directions, frenetic hustle and bustle, all of it part of a culture that conveys the messages: “Anything goes” and “Do whatever you want.” A perfect place to act out; a perfect place to be a street person.

In Midtown Manhattan the triangulation discussed by urban architecture expert William H. Whyte is almost limitless (TSLS, 1988). There are constant events, all targeted at the tourist traffic, occurring that bring masses of people together at parks, schools, theaters, shops, restaurants, parades, arenas, and train stations. As a result, the sidewalks are always crammed with pedestrians which, of course, attracts street people who are free to do just about anything they want short of committing the most serious crimes.

This indulgence shown toward street people is not surprising. In the past Midtown Manhattan contained neighborhood enclaves (Hell's Kitchen, Gramercy Park, Murray Hill, Kips Bay, Chelsea, Rose Hill). People, mostly working class, lived and worked in these enclaves. Although located in an urban setting, each enclave functioned like small town. Social conduct was monitored and controlled.

Simmel writes:

Small town life in antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages imposed such limits upon the movements of the individual in his relationships with the outside world and on his inner independence and differentiation that the modern person could not even breathe under such conditions. Even today the city dweller who is placed in a small town feels a type of narrowness which is very similar. (Simmel, 1903, 16).

It would have been virtually impossible for anyone to place themselves on the sidewalk without being immediately noticed and causing an uproar. Also, neighborhood boundaries were well-defined, the local residents much more protective of their turf, and the streets much more aggressively policed. Vagrants knew that these enclaves were off-bounds to them. There is no way that a street vendor presence like the one researched by Duneier would have been tolerated in Greenwich Village forty years earlier. But those neighborhoods are now shadows of their former selves; mere names on maps. Today behavior that in the past would have been quashed thorough sheer weight of social condemnation is allowed to flourish. That includes the decision to place oneself on the sidewalk.

From the data compiled, we can draw certain conclusions. First, the sidewalks in Midtown Manhattan have become a venue for street people. They



have arrived; their presence is ubiquitous. They are to be found at practically every major street intersection and major thoroughfare in the area. Second, there are no disincentives for street people to leave the sidewalk. The sidewalks of Midtown Manhattan are the ideal venue for street persons. The combination of high volume of pedestrian traffic coupled with the transient nature of the area makes it a street person's paradise. Third, the presence of street persons on the sidewalks is tolerated by law enforcement authorities. The police will not clear an area of street persons only because they are on the sidewalk. Does that mean that the police endorse public vagrancy? Not necessarily, but others in positions of authority who set policy may feel differently. The police do not have the final word on the matter. As Gregory Snyder says, "Power doesn't always say no" (Snyder, 2016). Especially if there is money to be made.

At this point then, is Midtown Manhattan now a skid row? Right now, not yet, but it is heading in that direction. Frankly, the prognosis is poor. Reconfiguring the sidewalk, resorting to so-called defensive architecture (Snyder, 2016), to make it more user-unfriendly for street people could reduce their presence, but it would in no way completely bar them. It would be a mere stopgap measure.

This raises a question: is the Midtown Manhattan community really interested in banning the vagrant from the sidewalk? A forthright answer will go a long way to determining whether the transformation of the sidewalk from thoroughfare to permanent hobo hang out will be reversed. It may also be indicative of whether traditional norms that have shaped social institutions thus

far are being replaced by new norms that are redefining the use of urban space in ways that for some may seem callous and degenerate but to others are liberating, inclusive, and a benefit to society.

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<sup>7</sup> Except for TSLs, Phillip W. Weiss is the author of all videos listed herein.

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