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Nine Fabulous Things About New York

1. People Cross Against the Light

Great cities require a certain level of insubordination. Bending the rules is a way in which we establish our right to use the city in our own ways and New Yorkers are champions at both modest and dramatic acts of rebellion against the strictures of the system. We enjoy a certain latitude here. There is, for example, an implicit compact with the police that jay-walking is not an offense, unless it is flagrant or markedly dangerous, and one of our urban art forms is the balletic weaving through stagnant traffic to cross the street at the most efficient point or on the most economical diagonal. By crossing freely, we establish the importance of making the city tractable to our individual desires and proclaim our independence from arbitrary authority.

Not every culture uses its cities this way and the license that people internalize about the way they negotiate urban space reflects volumes about their parent societies. I taught for some years in Vienna, a lovely city but one populated by many ghosts, many of which are highly authoritarian, to put it mildly. A typical experience for me was to haul up at a street corner and confront a red light. Often, after glancing from side to side, I would determine that no traffic was approaching and would saunter across. Frequently this meant leaving a knot of Austrians standing at the curb, dutifully awaiting the changing of the light. I could feel their censorious gazes piercing my back and would mentally digress into fantasies of why their parents had been Nazis, why they were so uptight.

Of course, there are boundaries in such acts of petty rebellion and one of the downsides of New York is that many go too far. We all know that Lee Kuan Yew, erstwhile dictator of Singapore, had a thing about chewing gum. For many years it was forbidden and, even now, can only be bought in pharmacies. Uncle Harry's gum problem was not about annoying chewing and snapping but the ejection of the spent chaw on the ground. While I do not think that caning or the death penalty is appropriate redress for expectorated gum, I am often disgusted by the failures of civility that myriad gum dots on the sidewalk or subway platform reveal. I hate those damn dots and see them as markers of failures of hygiene, orderliness, and caring. In a good city, freedom must be circumscribed by neighborliness. But neighborliness cannot be produced by legislation or punishment, it must grow from a civic culture that values the idea of sharing, of give and take. While it may be fatuous to compare littering or jay-walking to the "troubles" that so long afflicted Belfast, these quotidian acts exist on a continuum of civility that resides in both small kindnesses and more global forms of tolerance and mutual respect.

2. The Number Seven Train

There's a subway line in New York that runs from Times Square across Manhattan to Queens and all the way out to Main Street in Flushing. It is the emblem of what is

perhaps our city's greatest achievement, the rainbow of diversity produced by our own historic – if fluctuating - hospitality to immigrants of all nations. We architects use the term "section" to describe a drawing that slices through a building, revealing its interior and the Number Seven train cuts just such a section through New York's population and an astonishing variety of neighborhoods is visible out the window after the train crosses the East River and is carried on a viaduct to the end of the line.

Queens is the most ethnically diverse county in the United States, embracing immigrants from 150 countries (who knew there were so many!) and an astonishing Babel of languages, cuisines, costumes, characters, and colors. These include Irish in Woodside, Indians, Bangladeshis, and Latin Americans in Jackson Heights, as well as clumps of Afghans, Turks, Koreans, Thais, Romanians, Spaniards, Poles, and myriad others, all culminating in Flushing, which now has the largest concentration of Chinese (not to mention the best dim sum) in the city, supplanting our orignal Chinatown in lower Manhattan. Because we are a town in which sociability and food are intimately linked, the Number Seven also represents the railway as smorgasbord. I think it can fairly be said that we are enticed into a sense of tolerance by the demands of our guts. Cities, like armies, move on their stomachs.

Freud wrote of the "narcisism of small differences" and Belfast is a tribute to the potentially murderous consequences of political systems based on the repression of diversity, on the negative inflection of difference. While New York is the repository of many intolerances – some of which reflect arguments imported from abroad – we are also a city in which ethnic and religious tolerance is both enacted and celebrated. We are less of a model when it comes to questions of class and our growing income gap is an obscenity that we share with many other places. This is a difference that, in its inequity, is a great dissipator of both rights and harmony. While we have awakened to the value of differences and continue to learn respect for the other, some differences are corrosive. But most, viewed through a lens of tolerant urbanity, can be a source of stimulation and joy.

3. The Rest of the Subway System

Although this seems counterintuitive, New York City is the second most efficient consumer of energy in the U.S. Despite the enormity of our appetites, the scale of our buildings, and the unceasing motion of our citizens, we somehow come out on top of the green heap. In fact, there is a single explanation for this extraordinary performance: we are far and away the largest users of public transportation in the nation. Indeed, in the area of Manhattan where we gather today, fully 90% of commuters arrive via public means, a remarkable number.

Cities are juxtaposition engines, great organisms dedicated to facilitating both deliberate and accidental encounters between people. The ways that a city chooses to accomplish this speak volumes about its character and potential. While I am second to none in my advocacy of sustainable and comprehensive systems of public transit, I still believe that the most crucial means of movement in city is on foot. If we believe that neighborhoods

are the bulwark of urban order and civilization, then they must be dimensioned tractably. As we reimagine the development of both Belfast and New York, its crucial to think about communities that solve movement problems on the demand side, places that are structured to locate all the necessities of everyday life – work, commerce, culture, education, recreation, etc. – within easy walking compass of home.

Efficient and enjoyable public transportation is central to achieving such neighborhoods. By guaranteeing equality of access, we begin to dissipate the nasty hierarchies of ghettoes and more elective communities. By making automobiles superfluous, without any advantage in speed, access, or convenience, we unclog our traffic, expand the useful public realm, and recapture wasted street space for better uses. If its not too extravagant a point, sharing a ride is great way of sharing a society, an antidote to bowling or driving alone. And, whenever I ride the subway, I am delighted at the number of readers I encounter: public transport is a bulwark of literacy, another of democracy's underpinnings.

4. The Brooklyn Bridge

A great city must have its signature beauties. One of the big risks of contemporary urbanism – and this hotel is not a bad example – is that the globalization of culture and the economy will winnow the differences in the time-grown qualities of place that we now so value. Belfast must surely have its Ritz-Carlton and its Sheraton, not to mention its Starbucks and its KFC and this is not an entirely positive development. We prize cities – whether Venice, Fez, Limerick, or Suzhou – for their singularities, for the way in which they express the collusions of culture, tradition, climate, materiality, habit, and genius that create them. We must seek fresh means to guarantee these special qualities.

Many cities are now over-invested in the so-called Bilbao effect, the idea that some singular monument will offer the key to revitalization and identity both. This is not an altogether faulty concept as far as it goes. Like the Brooklyn Bridge, Gehry's museum is a masterpiece and one that expresses key qualities of its time. It is also an excellent piece of urbanism, one that reclaims a waterfront long derelict. But pure singularity is not enough: we must be conscious of the specific nature of the effect. Sometimes the representation of extraordinary inventiveness will do. Before there was Bilbao, there was the Eiffel Tower, a structure that was at once about its pure visibility, about its amazing and hitherto unseen structural behavior, and about offering a view of Paris also unseen until then.

The Brooklyn Bridge is perhaps richer and more consequential in its meanings. For my money, the structural achievement of its great span exceeds that of the tower. And, its literal purpose – conveying traffic across the East River from Brooklyn to Manhattan – gives it a deep gravity. As an expression of the incorporation of Brooklyn, which had been a separate municipality, into a greater New York, it is incomparably resonant. While this historic political divide is of a very different order than the divisions that have so long characterized Belfast, this seems like a ripe territory for symbolic and literal engagement, the enterprise of joinery, the bridging of impeding barriers.

The risk in the project of a captivating singularity, however, is that pure form becomes a disguise for questionable meaning. Frank Gehry has just walked away from a project in Jerusalem on which he had long been working. This was a typically flamboyant container for a so-called "Museum of Tolerance" that, in fact, was so far from embodying any sense of this precious value as to appear a cruel joke. To be built on the site of a Muslim graveyard and containing virtually nothing that addressed the ugly inequalities of that divided city, this dramatic building was to rise a stone's throw from the Israeli security wall that would literally prevent the presence of Palestinians at this ridiculous institution. The expectation of the project's sponsors, of course, is that dazzling architecture would distract people from lethal politics. The Bilbao defect, on might say. Sometimes the best bridge is just sitting down for coffee. New York has excellent cafes.

5. Central Park

The Manhattan we know today is the product of a remarkably visionary act: the laying out of the island's grid in 1811 by the city's commissioners. In the midst of this Cartesian order fabricated to accommodate the perquisites of an idealized increment of property - the 50 x 100 foot lot - space was left for a vast park. This was realized decades later through the genius of Olmsted and Vaux and is, without doubt, our greatest public amenity, one of the finest such spaces in the world. Although we've moved beyond nineteenth century fantasies of the power of such places to civilize the dangerous classes, Central Park is important for many reasons beyond its marvelous amenity.

To begin, Central Park is an authentically public space, part of the municipality, a genuinely shared resource. Central Park is not Disneyland, not an island of private control, not an instrument of profit, although it does have a dramatic effect on the property values that surround it. I believe very strongly in a public model for public space. Nowadays, we hear constantly about "public-private" partnerships and the current fiscal regime insists that new public spaces pay their own way. While governments should be prudent in the conduct of their affairs and in their management of the public purse, the idea that the collectivity should simply get out of the way of "free" enterprise is a slippery slope to selfishness and indifference. Since the blighted regime of Ronald Reagan we are constantly told that government is the problem, that only business can be relied upon as an effective steward of the commonweal. If only the great communicator were alive to comment on the excellent care British Petroleum is taking of the Gulf of Mexico!

Indeed, the pendulum still remains too far to the right in New York. One of our principal strategies for inducing constructive behavior on the part of the development community is the so-called "bonus" system. This is a strategy in which the city exchanges some liability to obtain some benefit. In general, the swap is for increased bulk in new building, allowing it to exceed the underlying zoning and to thus defy its original purpose, the preservation of light and air in the city or the management of density. We have traded out-sized buildings for little parks, for scattered arcades, to incentivize development of areas the market was hesitant to touch, and have now begun to try to

induce the construction of "affordable" housing by offering far bigger buildings for the rich who are to live next door. What this actually will produce remains to be seen.

For me, much of what's great about New York is the way in which we collectively take care of those who are disempowered and take pride in our municipal achievements, in the on-going struggle to expand the public realm. We have more publicly built housing, more public hospitals, more public parks, more public sports facilities, more public schools and colleges, more public transport, than any other city in the country. This is our pride. Our joy. And we must have more still! So should you.

6. Uneven Development

We meet in an interesting part of town. Although we sit today on landfill, a lateral version of our greatest commercial enterprise - the increase in the surface area of the city - across the highway lies the site of the original Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam. Indeed, the mercantile Dutch began the landfill process. If you wander the streets today, though, you will still find a fragment of an essentially medieval street pattern, something exceedingly rare in this city framed by the grid. Of course, there is almost no vestige of the little houses or windmills of that foundational settlement but the streets remain and have forced subsequent architectures to dance to their tune. I strongly suggest that those of you new to the city take a walk this afternoon. The financial district is filled with towers from the early twentieth century that represent the high-point of the form. Notice the way in which many gyre and gimbel as they rise with their bases conforming to the irregularity of the streets and their ascending shafts rotated to conform with the uptown grid. Notice the exuberant verticality of their expression, the joy in their complex ornament. Notice too the way in which the juxtaposition of large buildings and small, old buildings and new, record both the cycles of boom and bust but the sequence of tastes the city has had for itself.

Begin your tour with the fortress at the Battery, built to defend against a British attack during the War of 1812, an attack that never came. Look out at the harbor to the cranes behind the Statue of Liberty, signifiers of one of the city's most radical morphological and functional transformations. When I was a kid the edges of Manhattan were lined with piers and the waterfront – which effectively stretched inland for blocks – was dense with shipping, warehousing, union halls, and the homes of sailors and longshoremen. Jet aircraft and container ships ended all that and the port migrated to the vast flatscape on the other side of the harbor. We now confront the need to remake this space, but more about that in a moment.

Perhaps your next stop should be Cass Gilbert's amazing customs house at the foot of Broadway. This is a great model of the architecture of the City Beautiful movement, of a time at which the culture had an expansive idea about the responsibility of the government to ornament, enrich, and glorify the city. That this movement corresponded with the Halcyon days of America's imperial project, with our own colonial moment, is no coincidence. But – as with Bilbao and the Museum of Tolerance – it's important to

make distinctions within the field. There's a big difference between doing something for yourself and foisting it on others.

If you cut over to Broad Street, you'll find one the island's few curving streets and can walk past the Stock Exchange and the horrifying display of firepower that our more contemporary imperial errors now, it seems, have made necessary for our own protection. If you keep going north, you'll hit the Chase Manhattan Plaza where another historical layer is inscribed in the form of the very good modernist slab designed by SOM. If you now turn around and face back downtown, you'll see another slab – the Equitable Building of 1915. Conceptually, the two buildings are very similar, rising straight up from the ground, extrusions. But the Equitable was considered a monster in its day and is the origin point of one of New York's great contributions to the techniques of urbanism. Picture the densely packed city of the early twentieth century. When Equitable went up it cast its vast shadow for blocks to the north, suffocating its neighborhood in a cloak of darkness. The zoning legislation that emerged in 1917 established the idea that citizens of the city had a right to sun and air and it mandated a system of set-backs – a sky exposure plane – designed to assure that the city's streets would be day-lit.

The code also had an immediate effect on architectural morphology and, in essence, invented the stepping profile that is emblematic of so much of the city. Chase Manhattan is the result of a much later shift in paradigm, one that sought another way of skinning the cat of solar access. In 1961, new legislation was introduced that favored the kind of sheer towers favored by the kind of modernism that first found expression in Europe in the 1920's. So, instead of our fabulous ziggurats we got towers in the park and slabs that stood – like Chase Manhattan and many others - behind plazas. Chase is an example of the best produced by this taste culture because its plaza does not dissipate the strength of a street but is networked into a rich sequence of open public spaces that traverse its region of lower Manhattan. It is part of the flexible genius of our city that we have now reverted to a regime more like the original law and – more important – that we have been able to embrace two very different models of form and still retain a rich and satisfying whole.

The 1917 zoning law is a vertical extension of previous legislation that progressively established the right of residents to have light, air, sanitation, and safety at home. Over the nineteenth century this mandate was progressively expanded in the so-called tenement laws so that the windowless warrens in which so many immigrants struggled were made illegal. Every room had to have its window. Every building had to stand free of adjoining structures. Every apartment had to have plumbing. This is the very definition of urban social progress and it is ironic that we now modify the zoning law with a bonus system that trades away an aspect of this progressive vision in order to achieve another. Still, what should be taken away is the idea that form follows fantasy, that a proposition about rights and dignity can shape our architecture in ways we never expected.

But I digress. What I really want to urge you to do is to walk across the Brooklyn Bridge at sunset.

7. 600 Miles of Waterfront

Although our urban coastline is enormous, we have not yet reaped the benefit of what it might be. It is, nevertheless, our greatest asset and we share with Belfast a powerful orientation to the water. The sheer abundance of this edge should allow great diversity of use but the municipal imagination still struggles with organizing the right kind of variety. Here are some of the qualities and energies on which we must draw: the superb beaches on the Atlantic and Long Island Sound in every borough save Manhattan; the reviving wetlands – especially those of Jamaica bay – that are central to preserving natural diversity, to remediating our water, and to protecting us from surging storms; the great waterside parks that we have built since the nineteenth century; the enfiladed buildings that line the shore to capture the view; the docks for ferries and cargo; the remnants of maritime commerce and construction. All of these and more need to be incorporated into a vision for the future and I imagine the same repertoire is crucial to yours.

Battery Park City, where we meet today, is now nearing completion and it reveals both the possibilities and perils of our current styles of thinking about the water's edge. The fill on which this project stands was excavated from the original World Trade Center construction and represents, I hope, the last great real estate incursion into our waterways although the threats ebb and flow. The shape of this artificial platform is not particularly subtle – a kind of primitive lateral extrusion – and its geometry is hydrologically insensitive, particularly at its northern edge where indifference to the Hudson's flow has created a dead zone. But the promenade is superb, there are many lovely amenities, and the aura of calm that you feel is genuine and welcome. Still, our planners are perhaps too eager to reproduce the character of this place and the East River waterfronts in Brooklyn and Queens are being lined with tall buildings fronted by narrow parks. These are often indifferent to their hinterlands and are recasting the city away from the idea of diversity and mix in favor of uniformity and single-use. And, if you take a walk around Battery Park City you will not find a single building that is not being sold or rented at the market rate: there is no place for the poor here. For a city founded on aspiration, this is very sad indeed.

And, although it is in many ways an extremely pleasant environment, Battery Park City is fundamentally dull, lacking the lively street life its density should engender. The place was designed at a time when modernist planning was coming into increasing disrepute and the layout reflects a traditional street grid, never mind that this grid is completely disconnected by the enormity of West Street from the actual city grid over the way. While there's nothing exactly malevolent in this grid, it does beg interesting questions about the ways in which we regulate form, the values that we prefer. Battery Park City is renowned not simply for the restoration of the orthodoxy of the grid but for a prescriptive code that specifies materiality and character of its buildings. I've always wondered what the result might have been if this code had descended not from a set of morphological and visual predilections but from one simple requirement: every room have a view of the river. Quite a different place, I imagine. What such benign fantasies do you have for Belfast?

8. Pooper Scooper

Perhaps the most amazing instance of collective good behavior on the part of New Yorkers is our scrupulous observance of the pooper scooper law. In 1978, the state enacted the Canine Waste Law, requiring people in cities to clean up after their dogs. And they do! I regard this as remarkable: although I love dogs, I can't suppress an involuntary shudder at the sight of some well-turned-out walker, her hand wrapped in Saran, at the ready to pick up a steamy pile. This only increases my sense of admiration and gratitude. The marvel of it all is that this cooperation is at heart not the product of any police crackdown but of simple compliance with a reasonable statute and this is crucial to the character of democratic urban citizenship: cooperative behavior is elected. We obey the law because we are able to shape it. And, in the contentious and never-ending struggles that move New York in the direction of greater reason, we find what is very best about the town. Democracies thrive on dissent.

9. Irish Bars

Although I've never been to Ireland – how I've managed to miss it I don't know – I have the sense that Irish bars in New York (of which there at least 41 below 14th Street in Manhattan alone) may be superior in some ways to Irish bars in Ireland. I think ours are open much later. I believe that our Irish bartenders have a far greater repertoire of cocktails. And I like the idea that our Irish bars sit in the great New York system of watering-hole diversity, that one can give up on Jameson's and roll next door for a grappa. That may not necessarily be wise: never mix, never worry my mother taught me. Is it too early for a drink?