



Contested City: Art and Public History as Meditation at New York's Seward Park Urban Renewal Area

by Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018, 234 pp., US\$50 (paperback).

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To cite this article: Karilyn Crockett (2020) Contested City: Art and Public History as Meditation at New York's Seward Park Urban Renewal Area, Planning Perspectives, 35:3, 565-567, DOI: [10.1080/02665433.2020.1753362](https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2020.1753362)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2020.1753362>



Published online: 18 May 2020.



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BOOK REVIEWS

Contested City: Art and Public History as Meditation at New York's Seward Park Urban Renewal Area, by Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018, 234 pp., US \$50 (paperback).

Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses may yet wage at least one more battle beyond the grave, and Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani has pledged to help us all keep score. In her book *Contested City: Art and Public History as Meditation at New York's Seward Park Urban Renewal Area*, Bendiner-Viani marshals considerable creative and intellectual skill to tackle big questions for the future of the Seward Park Urban Renewal Area (SPURA), a fourteen-block stretch of land in New York's Lower East Side. For decades this bustling hub has stood suspended amid the city's failed development attempts and residents' yearnings for more inclusive urban planning. Bendiner-Viani deftly captures this high-stakes territorial drama of big questions and old ghosts. On each page she asks readers to consider two seemingly simple questions: what are the multiple meanings of a place, and how do you find out? But, as anyone who has ever posed these questions knows, this line of inquiry invites a stunning array of complex and often conflicting answers. Bendiner-Viani's professional expertise as an artist and environmental psychologist brings clarity and direction to an urban development study that might otherwise lack both.

In six action-packed but richly reflexive chapters, Bendiner-Viani explores the shifting meaning of place in the Seward Park neighborhood. Working in partnership with local residents, Bendiner-Viani and her team of New School students have devised a tactical strategy for imagining more equitable and inclusive development trajectories for populations facing displacement. Deconstructing academic research norms that valorize a guise of scholarly impartiality, Bendiner-Viani challenges universities and their faculties to become directly engaged in the politicized land fights abutting their own campuses. This is groundbreaking work. She combines art and public history to teach city observers, residents, and planners new methods to rebuild old places. The book opens with an account of a failed community meeting that Bendiner-Viani calls a 'case study in poor planning' (p. 2). Her disapproval of the meeting's lack of clear communication, physical space, or cross-cultural relevance reminds us that these types of meeting failures are all too often the norm. In case Martin Anderson's classic work *The Federal Bulldozer* or even Jane Jacobs's seminal manifesto *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* may have persuaded you to hope that all those poorly planned planning meetings died in the bad old days of urban renewal, Bendiner-Viani has news for you: they didn't, and she has a solution.¹

Bendiner-Viani's study of SPURA offers an antidote to contemporary planning processes, but with a twist. She demands reckoning with the past. Armed with a transdisciplinary method that she calls 'visual urbanism,' Bendiner-Viani engages her students, colleagues, and neighborhood partners in a process of imaginative future-making by mining multiple narratives of the past. History is front and center in her approach. With careful precision, she examines the neighborhood's past 'marked by discrimination and conflict' and tells her readers that 'the pain of displacement and exclusion has not been forgotten' (p. 2). By tethering her scholarly intervention to the needs of Puerto Rican, Chinese, Jewish, and African American residents who have called SPURA home, Bendiner-Viani addresses the real-time activism of multiple populations fighting permanent displacement. This is a book about power and how to fight for it within neighborhoods under economic siege.

For Bendiner-Viani, social history—in the hands of students and residents—can be deployed as a productive tool for community mobilization (p. 62). But she doesn't merely assert this ambitious claim, she also shows us how to get there. Through walking tours, exhibits, public talks, and neighborhood partnerships,

Bendiner-Viani anchors her scholarly work in more than forty years of archival content and the lived experiences of past and present residents. Working at the intersection of community and artistic practice, she recasts the boundaries defining how academic knowledge can be used to advance the material and political needs of area residents. Her commitment to authoring a ‘new way of knowing’ is informed by the neighborhood’s multi-layered social history as well as the lasting, negative emotional effects of clearance. Like Marc Fried and Mindy Thompson Fullilove, whom she references, Bendiner-Viani shines light on the mental health consequences for populations ‘grieving’ for homes and relationships lost.² But Bendiner-Viani takes this mission one step further by suggesting how planners, architects, developers, and city officials can partner with residents to produce new plans. Her key aim, however, is not to produce a definitive type of plan but to build a creative process that prioritizes strong partnerships with residents while making ‘new spaces for dialogue’ (p. 133). In a real sense, Bendiner-Viani is rewriting the pre-plan planning process for contested neighborhoods. This is revelatory and promising, but can demand a level of political and technical fluency that threatens Bendiner-Viani’s highest hopes and occasionally the coherence of her book.

While describing the ways in which her project, Layered SPURA, was shaped by the work of other advocacy organizations, Bendiner-Viani presents aspects of the development process that likely mystify rather than educate general readers. A reliance on inside baseball-like commentary sometimes compromises her plotline: ‘The members of the Community Board 3’s Land Use, Zoning, Public and Private Housing Committee labored long and hard together in those mediation and planning meetings that John Shapiro and Eve Baron facilitated throughout 2010’ (p. 91). On a few too many pages, these kinds of grocery-style lists of unknown actors and regulatory descriptions slow down and even betray Bendiner-Viani’s intent to convey SPURA’s meaning and urgency. She is at her best when offering high-level synthesis and historical insights on what makes ‘visual urbanism’ a compelling approach, not when inundating her reader with details that may have little meaning beyond her inner circle of students and partners. However, details do matter, and finding a way for general and more specialized audiences to engage in urban development discussions with a shared understanding of what’s happening and what’s at stake is a defining issue of our time.

When Robert Moses looked at the Lower East Side in the 1960s, he saw little more than a low-income neighborhood full of traffic congestion and depressed real estate values. For Moses, an expressway was the logical solution to changing its economic fortunes. Jane Jacobs’s success in defeating Moses’s Lower Manhattan Expressway dream is legendary—as is her admonishment of urban planners. She blasts planners’ preoccupation with ‘luxury housing projects’ and ‘[e]xpressways that eviscerate great cities.’³ Though Jacobs remains the object of much scholarly critique, her impassioned argument for new values and goals for rebuilding American cities endures. Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani heeds Jacobs’s plea to expand the scope of our urban redevelopment imagination while issuing a new call for universities to join the struggle.

Contested City is an important book for urban planners, historians, artists, and anyone who cares deeply about the redevelopment of older U.S. cities. Bendiner-Viani succeeds in delivering highly readable interdisciplinary scholarship that is simultaneously a historical meditation, a cautionary tale, and, most critically, an arts-meets-humanities-meets-urban planning how-to guide. She ends her study where she began: ruminating on the future. The last material traces of SPURA are now being removed to make way for thousands of units of primarily luxury housing in the neighborhood’s rebranded identity as Essex Crossing. While a small group of senior residents has been welcomed back to the neighborhood, many other residents continue to wait indefinitely for affordable housing. This battle is not over, and Bendiner-Viani wants us to pay attention before it’s too late.

Notes

1. Anderson, *The Federal Bulldozer*; Jacobs, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*.
2. Fried, *Grieving for a Lost Home*; Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America*.
3. Jacobs, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, 4.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2020.1753362>



Lizabeth Cohen, *Saving America's Cities: Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019, 547 pp., US\$22 (paperback), ISBN 978-1250758019

In 1985, Ed Logue recalled that, shortly after taking the reins of the New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC), he ‘helicoptered’ into downtown Utica ‘and landed on the lawn right next to City Hall, which caused a little excitement.’¹ This incident, repeated elsewhere in the state, shows Logue’s flair for the dramatic. It also serves as a metaphor for his work to bring state and federal funds to cities like Utica that eagerly sought them.

Between 1949 and 1974, the federal government injected \$13 billion to revitalize 1,300 cities and towns around the country. The UDC spent another \$2 billion in New York between 1968 and 1975 for the same purpose. Logue was a central player in this story, and his career encapsulated both the early promise and mixed record of urban renewal. He led major revitalization efforts in New Haven, Boston, and New York State between 1954 and 1975. At the twilight of his career, Logue worked on a smaller stage as head of the South Bronx Development Corporation.

In 1954, Richard Lee became mayor of New Haven, a post he would hold for the next sixteen years. Lee inherited an aging city and declining manufacturing base. He enthusiastically embraced federally-funded urban renewal. Lee tapped Logue to head this effort. Under their leadership, New Haven took in \$745 per capita in federal urban renewal funds, placing the city among the top recipients of this largesse. At first, Logue appeared to be New Haven’s savior. Robert C. Weaver, the first Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, praised Logue’s work as ‘coming closest to our dream of a slumless city’ (pp. 69–70).

Because of Logue’s record in New Haven, Boston’s mayor John Collins offered him the directorship of the Boston Redevelopment Agency. Logue served in this post from 1960 to 1967. As he had in New Haven, Logue attracted large amounts of federal urban renewal money. Boston received the fourth highest per capita funding in the country. Boston was a major challenge for Logue. The city had experienced two massive urban renewal projects during the 1950s, described by Cohen as ‘horrendous examples of ... demolition-style urban renewal’ (p. 158). Logue was determined not to repeat these mistakes, and to work more closely with community groups.

In 1968 Logue got the chance to play on a large stage, the State of New York. Governor Nelson Rockefeller recruited him to head up the UDC, a public-benefit corporation set up to take over failed urban renewal projects. The UDC had the authority to issue its own bonds, and it could override local zoning and building codes. Although Logue used his override powers sparingly, he took full advantage of his