



A Last Walk at Sunset with
Michael Sorkin





**Bklyn
Bridge**

**Nine
Fabulous
Things
About
New York**

**Michael
Sorken**

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Michael Sorken

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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 original 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 “narcissism 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 ghettos 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

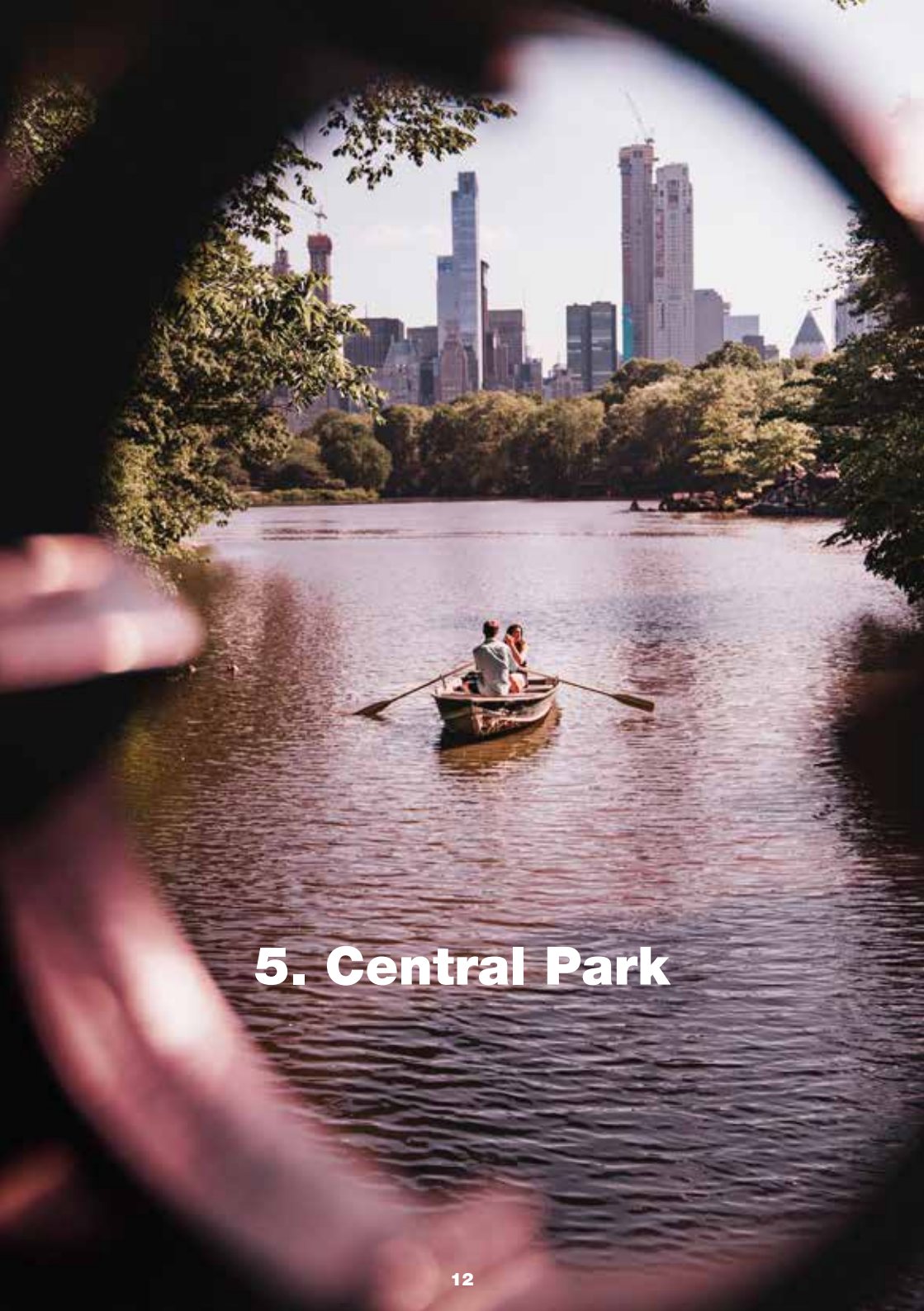


A great city must have its signature beauties. One of the big risks of contemporary urbanism – and this hotel is not a bad example – is that the globalization of culture and the economy will winnow the differences in the time-grown qualities of place that we now so value. Belfast must surely have its 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 neverending 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?

Michael's vision for Belfast



Junction of Castle Street /King Street towards CastleCourt



Proposed urban boulevard along Corporation Street



Junction of Winetavern Street / Smithfield Square North

The series of big moves, for Belfast, proposed by Michael Sorkin and his project team included, reorganisation of vehicular traffic, radical pedestrianisation, a new train stop, new cross links, calming of the 'inner-ring', an increase in green space, and, in particular, proposals for a '24-hour' environment afforded by site-specific proposals for three key city centre sites.

At the heart of his vision was proposal for achievable, transformative mixed-use building programmes that introduced substantial additional residential space, cultural and office accommodation – public spaces and commercial life intended to stimulate and harmonise the elements of a 'complete city'.



Proposed urban boulevard along Millfield



Michael recognised that the rich building fabric of the city and its compact, human-scaled character offered opportunity for 'artfully blended development' and his hope was for a centre-city that would become place of harmonious private and civic interaction, leveraged by the sorts of activities – walking, shopping, dining, studying, meeting – that are the core of the idea of a good city. In his own words, 'our purpose as urbanists is to establish the grounds for true mutuality, the core meaning of the city.' His vision for 'Building a Better Belfast', remains an achievable proposition.

Ciarán Mackel
ArdMackel Architects, Béal Feirste



Obituary

*Reproduced with the kind permission of the author, Joseph Giovannini,
New York Times, March 29, 2020*

Michael Sorkin, 71, Dies; Saw Architecture as a Vehicle for Change

Mr. Sorkin, who died of the coronavirus, promoted social justice in his prodigious output of essays, lectures and designs.

Michael Sorkin, one of architecture's most outspoken public intellectuals, a polymath whose prodigious output of essays, lectures and designs, all promoting social justice, established him as the political conscience in the field, died on Thursday in Manhattan. He was 71.

His wife and only immediate survivor, Joan Copjec, said the cause was the coronavirus.

In lectures and in years of teaching, Mr. Sorkin inspired audiences and students to use architecture to change lives, resist the status quo and help achieve social equity. His motivational writings and projects helped reset the field's moral compass.

With degrees from the University of Chicago and Columbia University, and a master's in architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he moved in 1973 from Cambridge to New York, a city he said he adored for its opera and toasted bagels. It remained his home for the rest of his life.

He and his wife, a professor of film theory at Brown University, spent decades in a modest, rent-controlled, two-bedroom floor-through apartment on Waverly Place in Greenwich Village, from which he commuted daily on foot to his studio in TriBeCa. He based one of his dozen books, "Twenty Minutes in Manhattan" (2009), on his pedestrian odyssey.

His writings ranged in scope from urban theory to the Israeli border wall to issues of sustainability. He specialized in compressing biting wit and intellectual scope in irresistible sentences that buoyed serious arguments.

His designs, mostly unbuilt statements of theory, were equally wide-ranging: a small-lot apartment competition in New York, a master plan for a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem, vast urban planning schemes for competitions in China. He laced his urban proposals with green zones and designed lighthearted zoomorphic buildings, like a seaside hotel shaped like a jellyfish drifting in the current.



A natural radical who saw architecture through a political and social lens, Mr. Sorkin maintained an outsider's critical perspective even as he entered the establishment as head of his own architecture firm and as director of the graduate urban design program at the City College of New York. His practice, writings and academic position gave him a public platform. At the beginning of his career, he made his reputation by speaking truth to power; when he achieved a degree of power, he continued to speak truth, as though still an outsider.

He first established himself as a public figure from 1980 to 1990 at *The Village Voice*, where he wrote searing critiques, leavened with humor, that were often delivered at the expense of people who lived uptown. "He said what everyone was really thinking but were afraid to say," said Max Protetch, whose Max Protetch Gallery specialized in architects' drawings.

Philip Johnson, long since ensconced as the dean of American architecture by the time Mr. Sorkin began writing, was a conspicuous target. He ripped into Johnson's post-Modernist AT&T Building on Madison Avenue (1984), designed like a Chippendale highboy, calling it a tarted-up "Seagram Building with ears." In the humor magazine *Spy*, he outed Johnson as a former Nazi sympathizer, a fact no one at the time dared whisper.

When he attacked Paul Goldberger, then the architecture critic of *The New York Times*, in *The Voice*, Mr. Goldberger fired back that Mr. Sorkin's writing "is to thoughtful criticism what the Ayatollah Khomeini is to religious tolerance." The mischievous Mr. Sorkin advertised that retort as a credential when he used it as a blurb on the back cover of a volume of collected essays, "Exquisite Corpse: Writings on Buildings" (1991).

"I thought of Michael as a bomb thrower because his pieces always shook things up," said Cathleen McGuigan, editor in chief of *Architectural Record*, where Mr. Sorkin was a longtime contributing editor.

Mr. Sorkin was an activist critic with a social agenda. He started his career identifying abuses of power while facing the headwinds of the conservative Reagan era. "Politics programs our architecture," he wrote.

He advocated for housing and green energy rather than prisons and malls, and for citizens to participate in the design of their own urban destinies. As architecture's largest expression, the city shaped how people led their lives, behaved and therefore thought, and he viewed urban design as an instrument of enlightened social engineering, political justice and power sharing. He inveighed against the privatization of public space.

"Ultimately Michael was a humanist: He believed in building for people, not the power structure," said James Wines, founder of Site, a New York environmental arts firm, adding: "Within the scope of his broad theories, he focused on how people use street signs, roadways and infrastructure. He was a complex thinker, and he designed complexity."

As part of a theoretical project for redesigning the East New York section of Brooklyn, Mr. Sorkin proposed planting trees in an intersection to reduce public space devoted to traffic and encourage the growth of a more agrarian low-density neighborhood. "Michael wasn't doing urban planning," said Andrei Vovk, Mr. Sorkin's architectural partner from 1992 to 2001. "He initiated organic patterns."

If his design approach in East New York was a down-to-earth act of urban acupuncture, he also started drawing imaginary ideal cities in the 1990s in which, Mr. Vovk said, "we introduced sustainability and ecology to foster better lives for us and the planet."

In the mid-2000s, Mr. Sorkin opened the Terreform Center for Advanced Urban Research, an interdisciplinary nonprofit dedicated to achieving a socially equitable urbanism. Its flagship project has been investigating self-sufficiency in New York's food, waste, energy and transport systems.

China's explosive growth over the last 20 years gave him the opportunity to actually build his imaginary cities. "He went to China because they were building cities from scratch," Mr. Vovk said. Mr. Sorkin wrote in *Architectural Record*, "I am thrilled by several Chinese commissions we've had for urban projects that demand thinking at a scale and a level of sustainability almost never sought elsewhere in the world."



Many of his vast urban designs for China placed among the winners of competitions, but none were built, though Mr. Vovk said their ideas were adapted by other projects. Typically in these proposals, Mr. Sorkin wove nature into the fabric of patterns he laid atop patterns. A butterfly could flutter its way through continuous swaths of green; a squirrel could make its way between trees without having to cross a street.

Michael David Sorkin was born in Washington on Aug. 2, 1948, to George and Ruth Sorkin. His father was a scientist, his mother a homemaker. He attributed the beginnings of his interest in architecture to the fact that their home was in an architect-designed community.

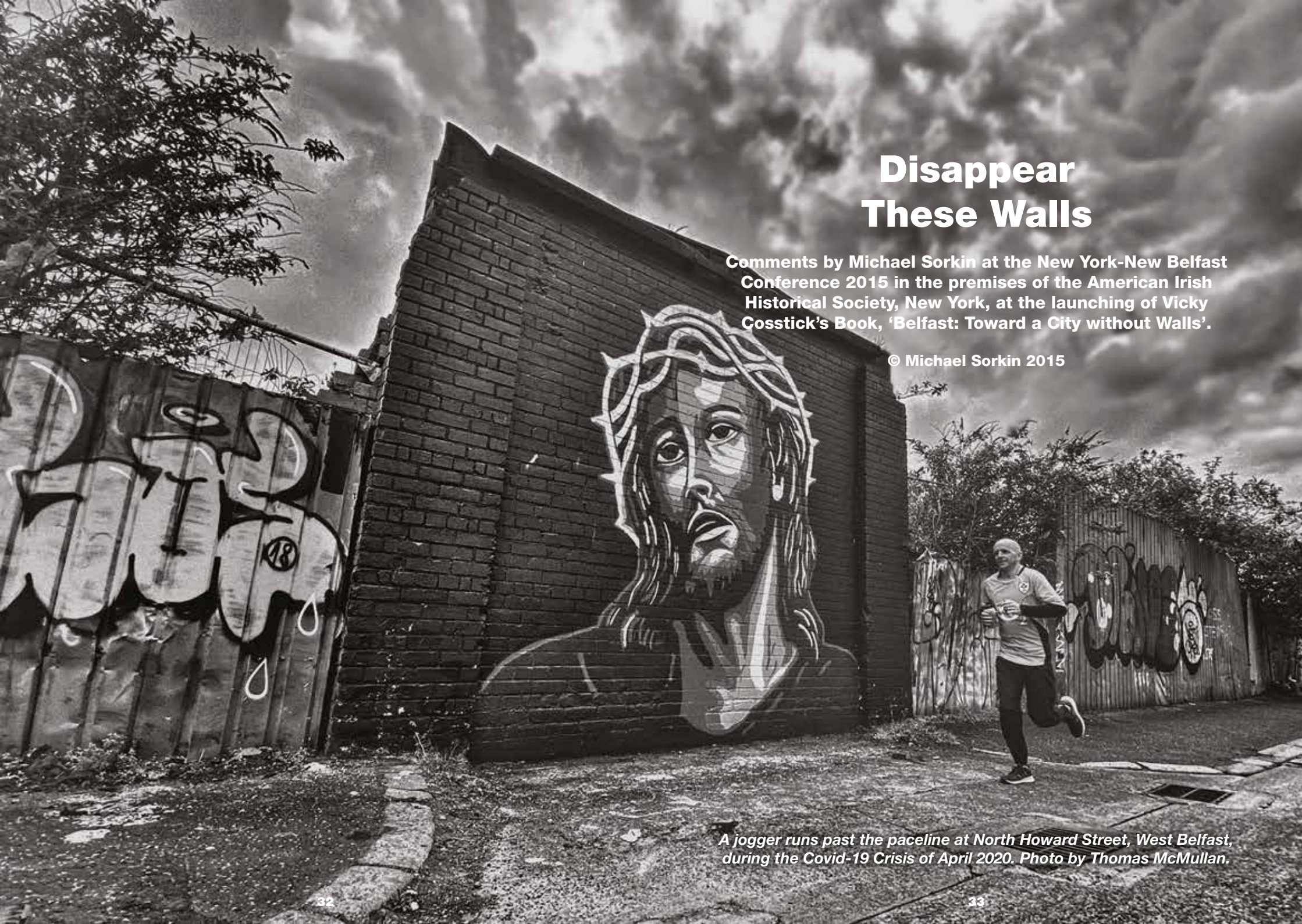
Focused on the big urban picture, Mr. Sorkin came to see the city as the source of architecture's social meaning. He designed not free-standing object buildings but structures that grew from the city of which they remained a part. His "House as Garden," an unbuilt project for a terraced apartment house in New York, illustrated how the landscaped city of his urban vision could climb onto a building. "When he was drawing a building, he was always drawing part of a city," Mr. Vovk said, adding, "His initial conceptual drawings were dances of his hand, the choreography of his mind, like scans between the hand and thinking."

In a tribute published on the website of the architecture and design magazine Dezeen, Geoff Manaugh, remarking on the rarefied sensibility Mr. Sorkin brought to design, quoted him as saying: "Fish are symmetrical but only until they wiggle. Our effort is to measure the space between the fish and the wiggle. This is the study of a lifetime."

Disappear These Walls

Comments by Michael Sorkin at the New York-New Belfast Conference 2015 in the premises of the American Irish Historical Society, New York, at the launching of Vicky Cosstick's Book, 'Belfast: Toward a City without Walls'.

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A jogger runs past the paceline at North Howard Street, West Belfast, during the Covid-19 Crisis of April 2020. Photo by Thomas McMullan.

Two summers ago, I was at a conference of urbanists in Mumbai. Included in the program was a tour of Dharavi, the largest and most notorious slum in India, alternately touted as a sump of deprivation and a miracle of informal economic and social improvisation. The tour we took was organized by a local dwellers' organization and we saw sights both horrible and inspirational. When the visit ended, the group gathered to thank our guide and he responded: "If you enjoyed this, please be sure to mention us on *TripAdvisor!*" Abashed, I wondered what one would write? "If you're going to take one slum tour in India, this is it!" Or, "I've seen lots of slums and this totally takes the cake! What excellent squalor!" While, of course, wanting to be helpful to the economic survival of Dharavi, this was surely a twisted route. But not exactly unfamiliar: so many cities are trying to "brand" themselves these days, to get in on the famous Bilbao effect, to project an image that will remake local identity and suck the tourists in.

I wrote the paragraph I've just read yesterday, before I'd finished reading Vicky's just arrived book a few hours ago. In this remarkable volume, she writes a brilliant coda about this very conundrum, the phenomenon of "dark tourism" and unpacks the same weird feeling of dissonance I had felt both in Mumbai and on my visit to Belfast a few years ago. The city was in the midst of trying to rebrand itself as the birthplace of the Titanic, weirdly looking for its own recrudescence in the image of a horrendous maritime disaster. This was not completely disingenuous thinking: the movie version did make an awful lot of money and there was surely some logic to occluding the Troubles with even more colossal troubles. But, Vicky's reading of *TripAdvisor* was even more revealing: as she discovered, the Titanic only makes number four on its list recommendations for a Belfast holiday, with the Crumlin Road Gaol at the top and the "History of Terror" tour checking in at number three.

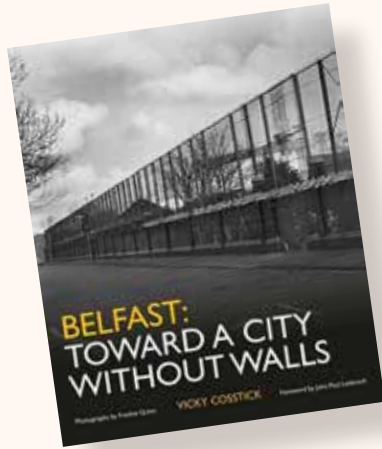
I've spent a lot of time in cities and territories divided by walls - Jerusalem, Nicosia, Gaza, Berlin, the U.S./Mexican border, the Korean DMZ - and all have assimilated the apparatus of division into their local economies one way or another. During my trip to Belfast, the walls and sectarian murals had long since begun to morph from forms of hostility and aggression into sites of attraction - into destinations. Indeed, our Taxitax tour - conducted by a rich-brogued veteran - was surely a highlight of our stay. This is not to trivialize this style of merging observation and consumption, rather to assert that objects are always mnemonic and that, as memories change, so does the meaning of the things that hold and fix them. The "peace" walls of Belfast were always seen differently by those who built them and those who confronted them and now they can only be seen more differently still. How then to assimilate them to the city of today, the city of tomorrow? What is to be the appearance of a well-healed wound? The surgeon presumably prefers invisibility but the patient, the object of suffering and suture, may want the scar, the emblem of pain and sacrifice.

Vicky Cosstick's deep meditation on the walls situates this question of their evolving meaning in the shifting context of both physical and mental space. Her eloquent plea is for genuine peace and tolerance and she passionately desires that Belfast move towards becoming a city without walls, a place where territories, neighborhoods, bus stops, and streets are not sites of restriction, prejudice, and impediment but locales of interchange, discovery, and neighborliness. Her book is not so much about the presence of the walls but about their role in "transcending the process of violence" in which they have played such a conspicuous part. This will take time. As the architect Le Corbusier famously observed: creation is a patient search. Something slow. Peace, we're perhaps too endlessly reminded, is a process.

With precision and eloquence, Vicky's book records and understands the way in which Belfast's walls continue to serve a purpose, one that, in her reading, is increasingly benign. For many, they seem to have become - even as they retain the ugliness of their original intent - armatures of negotiation and, perhaps, reconciliation. The question - as with so many negotiations, including the current nuclear talks between the U.S. and Iran - is one of duration, of conclusion. The idea of setting a date nearly a decade hence - 2023 in the 2013 promise of First Ministers Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness - for the final disappearance of the walls seems - and well beyond first blush - dilatory, even perverse. Why not eliminate them tomorrow? That would certainly be my wish but a big constituency in Belfast prefers otherwise, and the idea of the walls as a slowly disappearing phenomenon might well reflect a needed style of healing and an acknowledgement of the fact that the memory of the Troubles is still plastic, still fixing itself for the generation that lived through them and still contested as a legacy for those to come.

This idea of working towards disappearance begs the question of how memory retains its visibility, how its artifacts can connect and teach, indeed, how the *architecture* of the city is to respond. Thinking about this, I was reminded of the seven years in the 1990's that I spent commuting to Vienna to teach. Each time I went, my gaze was invariably drawn to the enormous *Flakturm* - the "flak towers" that were built during the Nazi era as anti-aircraft installations and bomb shelters. Looming above the city like implacable monsters, skyscraper tall with concrete walls many meters thick, they remained...as what? Memorials? Monuments? Markers? One had been converted to an aquarium and another a museum but, in general, when I asked how people could live so nonchalantly with these testaments to their own iniquity, they simply shrugged it off and told me that, of course, it would be better if they went but that - as a practical matter - it was simply too expensive to demolish them. A bit like the North Howard Street wall deemed too large to knock down just yet. For most Viennese, the Flak Towers had become the world's largest invisible objects.

Belfast's walls must never become invisible but must still disappear. How and when this paradox will be solved is not clear but I, for one, believe the sooner the better. Their physical erasure could be accomplished in an afternoon. But I also know that their demise will require both wisdom and generosity. Vicky Cosstick's superb book exemplifies both.



Belfast: Toward a City Without Walls
by Vicky Cosstick

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Suaimhneas síoraí go raibh aige.