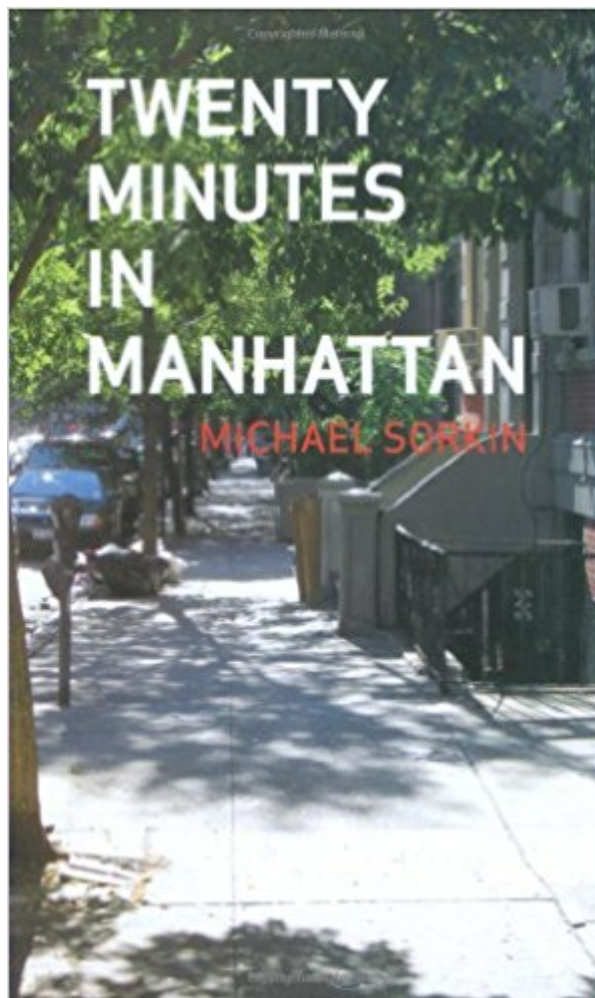


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# Twenty Minutes In Manhattan



## Synopsis

The walk from my apartment in Greenwich Village to my studio in Tribeca takes about twenty minutes, depending upon the route and whether I stop for a coffee and the Times. Invariably, though, it begins with a trip down the stairs. And so sets out architecture critic Michael Sorkin on his daily walk from his home in a Manhattan old-law-style tenement building. Sorkin has followed the same path for over fifteen years, a route that has allowed him to observe the startling transformations in New York during this period of great change. *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan* is his personal, anecdotal account of his casual encounters with the physical space and social dimensions of this unparalleled city. From the social gathering place of the city stoop to Washington Square Park, Sorkin's walk takes the reader on a wry, humorous journey past local characters, neighborhood stores and bodegas, landmark buildings, and overlooked streets. His perambulations offer him—and the reader—opportunities to not only engage with his surroundings but to consider a wide range of issues that fascinate Sorkin as an architect, urbanist, and New Yorker. Whether he is despairing at street garbage or marveling at elevator etiquette, *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan* offers a testing ground for his ideas of how the city can be newly imagined and designed, addressing such issues as the crisis of the environment, free expression and public space, historic preservation, and the future of the neighborhood as a concept. Inspired by Sorkin's close, attentive relationship to his beloved city, *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan* is in the end a valentine to the idea of the city that ultimately offers a practical set of solutions that are relevant to not only the preservation and improvement of New York but to urban environments everywhere.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Architecture critic and CUNY professor Sorkin (*Against the Wall: Israel's Barrier to Peace*) sets out with the simple task of narrating the daily commute from his Greenwich Village apartment to his studio in Tribeca. The result, a book of essays that's both memoir and sociohistorical study, is anything but pedestrian. Sorkin covers a range of material, from the history of NYC tenement laws to the sociological ramifications of Disneyland to his own battle with an avaricious landlord. Taking the torch from late urban activist Jane Jacobs, Sorkin discusses the ideological function of the urban neighborhood and its citizens, particularly as an antidote to the commercializing, gentrifying, homogenizing effects of capitalism. Historical and architectural details are considered at length; the Washington Square arch, for example, was "erected to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of George Washington's inaugural," but later used by Marcel Duchamp and John Sloan "to declare the independence of the 'Republic of Greenwich Village.'" Sorkin also profiles current residents like his elderly neighbor Jane, "an active presence at the community garden" who once "propelled herself from her chair to thwart a mugging across the street." Delightful and informative, this romp will please anyone with affection for the big city. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"This walk through the city shows Michael Sorkin at his witty and knowledgeable best. From the stairs of his small apartment house to the pyramids of Chichen Itza, from Local Law 45 to the motto of the Hanseatic League, Sorkin takes us on a journey through eras and worlds in the space of just 15 blocks. Better to spend 20 minutes with him than 24 hours with a standard tourist guide!" (Sharon Zukin, author of *Naked City*) "I am glad Sorkin doesn't take the subway: this is the most brilliant epitome of Manhattan ever written." —Mike Davis (Mike Davis) "Not since the great Jane Jacobs has there been a book this good about the day-to-day life of New York." Sorkin writes like an American Montaigne, riffing freely off his personal experience (sometimes happy, sometimes frustrating) to arrive at general insights about New York and about cities everywhere." (Robert Campbell) "Sorkin comes from a neighborhood of great urbanists — Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs, Grace Paley — and he belongs in their company. A short walk with him through the West Village turns into an adventure. He is one of the

smartest and most original people writing about New York and about city life today." (Marshall Berman, author of *On The Town: One Hundred Years of Spectacle in Times Square* and co-editor of *New York Calling*) "In his delightful book, Michael Sorkin writes about New York from a flaneur's perspective. Focusing on a 20-minute walk from his apartment to his studio, the author is one of architecture's most consistent and consistently interesting critical voices as he meanders through architecture, urbanism, sociology, politics and history . . . Quirky, erudite and occasionally frustrating in its movement between the personal, the political and the physical, every city should have its Michael Sorkin." *Financial Times* (*Financial Times*) "Architecture critic and CUNY professor Michael Sorkin sets out with the simple task of narrating the daily commute from his Greenwich Village apartment to his studio in Tribeca. The result, a book of essays that's both memoir and sociohistorical study, is anything but pedestrian. . . . Delightful and informative, this romp will please anyone with affection for the big city." (*Publishers Weekly*) "The trove of thumbnail sketches and obscure facts is augmented with fascinating ruminations about the socio-political ins and outs of the business of construction and urban renewal in New York City, the intricate socioeconomic consequences that result, and the ethical ramifications of these undertakings." *James Sclavunos, The Times* (*Times* (UK)) "If you want an introduction to what has been said and thought about the city around the world, and also what has been built and unbuilt as a result of all this theorising, this is probably as good a guide as can be had. Follow Sorkin on his walk, and you will certainly be better informed and perhaps a bit wiser as well." *Joseph Rykwert, Architects' Journal* (*Architects' Journal*) "No one writes better about architecture and urbanism in the United States than Sorkin. He is a tireless campaigner against cliché . . . perhaps his most personal book to date." *Blueprint* (*Blueprint*) "Michael Sorkin has long been the bad boy of architectural criticism." (*New York Observer*) "Michael Sorkin is fascinated by the myriad ways architectural details foster or inhibit community, neighborliness, safety, diversity, and intimacy. Sorkin has a light hand with history (he is never overbearing) and a worldly way with facts and anecdotes." (*Los Angeles Times*) "This book captures architect Sorkin wandering through lower Manhattan, where even the most banal-seeming sights send the author into casually fascinating digressions about urban planning, the history behind New York's grid, stoops, and parks. After looking at the city through this ambler's eyes, you'll never look at a tenement building--or a stairwell--the same way again." (*Time Out New York*) "His architecture criticism is best understood as a series of jazz solos. In each chapter, Sorkin takes a structure or a place and riffs on it, taking the theme to unanticipated places, his lifetime of experiences as architecture professor, practitioner, critic, and world traveler all informing his work."

(Daniel Brook Next American City)"With this book Michael Sorkin secures his claim to succeed Jane Jacobs . . . . He brings to bear an eye every bit as acute, a pen nearly as trenchant, and a political understanding perhaps a little bit more sophisticated of the never-ending struggle over New York's neighborhoods." (Times Literary Supplement)"Sorkin's architectural criticism can be smugly iconoclastic, but this is a wry and illuminating provocation: New York seen from the perspective of the author's daily stroll from his Greenwich Village apartment through Washington Square to his office in Tribeca. Along the way enjoy reflections on the privatization of public space, the uses and abuses of preservation, the ambiguous legacy of modernism - ultimately, all the strands of urban life."--John King, San Francisco Chronicle (San Francisco Chronicle)"His observations about buildings, parks, urban design, and city planning should inspire anyone who cares about the future of cities." (Philadelphia Inquirer)"The architecture critic turns his walk from his apartment in Greenwich Village to his studio into an erudite but utterly engaging reverie on the nature of cities."--Paul Goldberger, New Yorker Bookbench Blog (New Yorker)"Originally intended as a 'low-keyed memoir of the everyday,' Twenty Minutes in Manhattan delivers a far from mundane cache of urban insights." (Azure)"Lively and thought-provoking. . . . Would anyone really trust the ruminations of a self-styled New York expert were he not obstinate, curmudgeonly, and opinionated?" (Julia Galef Metropolis POV) (John Hill Architect's Newspaper)

This is one of the most fascinating books I've read recently. I'm a layperson in this field, but if you live or spend much time in New York, and are interested in urban environments, it's a must read. And even if NYC is foreign to you, it's a great book about cities and how they work on a block-by-block, building-by-building, person-by-person level. Sorkin is an architect, urban designer, and professor at the City University of New York. He's well known both as a designer and as an architecture critic. Twenty Minutes in Manhattan uses the route of his walk from home in Greenwich Village to his studio in Tribeca as a foil to talk about New York City, about architecture as a human enterprise, and about the state of our cities and ourselves as social beings. The book alternates brilliantly from close attention to details -- stairs, windows, shops, airplane bathrooms, someone appearing to run from a policeman -- to discussion of how the design of cities reflects political structures and in return alters politics and participation. Sorkin writes from a left-wing perspective and is a mostly unabashed critic of money and power. I say "mostly" because he is also clearly aware of the fact that better design costs money, and creates neighborhoods (like SoHo, Tribeca, and increasingly the Village itself) where people with money are drawn and push others out. He not prescribe answers but seems to hope instead to increase our awareness and attention. It is almost

a modern coda to Jane Jacobs (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*), whom he admires and discusses throughout. As I read it, I found myself drawn more and more to look at buildings, at stoops, at railings, at intersections, and yes, even at the other people on the sidewalk around the city. I hope it helps you do the same.

Although I have been a Brooklynite all my life, my father had a lot of family on Sullivan, Thompson and Spring Streets that we would visit, and, like Michael Sorkin, I have worked in Tribeca since the 80s. And like any other citizen of an "outer borough", I spent many a weekend frequenting the clubs and pubs and sights of The Village. So I am very familiar with the neighborhoods that Michael Sorkin examines in his wonderful and painful book *"Twenty Minutes in Manhattan"*. It's wonderful in its examination and confirmation of the structures and people of those places that are so dear to me, painful in its alarm that they may all vanish, if they haven't already, all under the name of improvement. My fellow New Yorkers often gripe about the "Disneyfication" of Times Square; how the area has lost its character. I often take this opinion to task. I tell them it's just nostalgia for their youth that they actually miss. Can they honestly tell me that they mourn the loss of the junkies, muggers, and prostitutes that harrassed or even threatened them as they walked from their offices to the Port Authority or the Times Square subway station? While I am not thrilled about the development of 42nd Street, it is an actual improvement. But the neighborhoods, buildings and lifestyles that Sorkin describes was never as bad as Time Square. While they had their seedier sides, the Village, SoHo and Tribeca were never as crime-infested as Hell's Kitchen and Times Square had been. These "improvements" downtown were unnecessary, intrusive and downright destructive. And Sorkin, like many other New Yorkers, worry about these changes, the obvious catering to real estate developers, and the boring, boring, boring effects of globalizing places that are fiercely loyal to their uniqueness. Sorkin is quite justified in mourning the loss of the Jane Jacobses of this City. Enough of my pontificating. The book itself is what I expected from Michael Sorkin. The analyses are supported by facts, the opinions are justified by well-reasoned logic, and the style ranges from near-tragic mourning to laugh-out-loud wit. The final sections, especially where he stumbles upon a movie set or two and when he encounters the ubiquitous stroller-pushing yuppies, are brilliantly funny. This is no easy book to read, and I will not claim to have understood all of the architectural, sociological aspects of it. In this regard, I am reminded of Mark Kingwell's *Ã A Nearest Thing to Heaven: The Empire State Building and American Dreams* (Icons of America), also a serious investigation of the architectural, social and cultural significance of what people think about when they think about New York City. It is also a book that I cannot claim to fully

grasp. No matter. What I did understand of Sorkin's "Twenty Minutes in Manhattan" was fascinating and hard to argue with. Sorkin is reminding us that we must remain vigilant to the changes, the "rehabilitating", the "improvements" being made to these--and other--neighborhoods of New York. Improvement can be deadly.

Many architecture books are towering achievements. This one sticks close to street level and delivers exactly the experience it promises: going on a walk through Greenwich Village, Soho, and Tribeca with an architect who talks about the things around you, his personal experience, and their history. If this is your idea of a good time (and wow, is it mine) buy this book. Read it as I did on a Kindle, while taking a walk. It is sweet. Sorkin digresses constantly into discussions that can get abstract, and he does not keep a secret of his politics. But he never repeats himself. This book only feels casual and rambling (like going on a stroll.) It's actually carefully planned and artfully constructed (like something by an architect.) The reader might think Sorkin is only chatting on his way to work, but Sorkin got there way ahead of you, and has sweated over these pages until they felt inspired, and improvised. Like a pleasant stroll, this book is full of views. Sorkin's are fair and encyclopedically informed. He sharply critiques the mistakes of Corbusier and fellow modernists, but makes you understand their motivations and ambitions. He juxtaposes Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses as antagonists but not opposites, with complex and sometimes mirrored legacies. He even-handedly spreads blame among landlords and tenants, developers and activists, regulators and entrepreneurs. (That's actually not quite true, but he presents them all as recognizable and rounded human beings.) His proposals at first seem outlandish but then weirdly make sense. He is often very, very funny. I liked this book more and more as I kept reading it, and like it even more as I look back. Like a great walk, it is too short.

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