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# Walking, Emotion, and Dwelling

## Guided Tours in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn

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*This article uses photography and ethnography to understand and represent residents' emotional-phenomenological experiences of walks through their neighborhood. It addresses how narratives of the personal and the social structure individuals' experiences of familiar public spaces. A diverse group of residents gave the author their personal tours of emotionally significant neighborhood places. The author then continued these conversations with participants using photographs of these ordinary sites. The article addresses how these personal stories layer on public spaces and build aspects of psychologist Kurt Lewin's situational, emotional and individual-specific life space, as well as constructing senses of dwelling and Heideggerian lifeworld. To consider ways in which people build senses of home in public spaces, the article looks at ordinary things to which people give little reflective attention yet that often support deep connections to place.*

*Keywords: narrative; affect; neighborhood; phenomenology; photography; walking; New York City*

The city is made of layered environments, entwined with many people's experiences and connections. The urban context is gridded, marked, and mapped; there is an impulse to see it as transparent, as knowable, as though these marks and maps are where meaning is made and made visible. Yet there is important meaning outside these ordering structures; there are spatial tactics and emotional poetics that interplay with these structured everyday spaces.

When I moved to the small Brooklyn neighborhood of Prospect Heights, my senses were heightened to how these connections, identifications, and personal meanings are embedded in places. There was a clear demarcation of "Prospect Heights" in many neighborhood people's minds, and many services were local. There was a neighborhood supermarket, a neighborhood playground. Many people used these places, people of diverse histories, races, ethnicities, and economic means. These were the

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individuals I saw on their way to the subway in the morning, the people who worked in local businesses, the children I saw playing in local schoolyards.

Although no utopia, this was a neighborhood of many individuals sharing a small physical space, and I was new to this place, with my own burgeoning routines and desires. As I lived there, I built my own world of connections, attachments, and life events. Places took on personal and community meaning for me: the building where Kaushik and I lived and got married, the restaurant at which my friend Emily and I met for breakfast at 8:00 in the morning. The list grew; places of importance to me resonated with memory, emotion, and my own perspective of understanding as I walked past, continually building my own sense of belonging in and to this place. I felt that there was a lyrical quality to my getting to know this place, and I felt that this must be so for other people who lived there as well. I had a growing sense of the environment as humming with stories I could not see. It seemed that this “hum” made the place, making meaning for those who experienced that place.

### “Guided Tours”

To explore and make visible some of these personal, humming, layered neighborhoods that I felt sure must constitute Prospect Heights, I began a project I called “Guided Tours: Prospect Heights,” pieces of which you see in this article. This photographic and documentary project is a strategy to unpack, understand, and represent many different emotional-phenomenological experiences of a walk through my neighborhood: how the narratives of the personal and the social structure an individual’s experience of familiar public spaces. In any space, names and places have no singular meaning or story but rather many meanings and stories that “traverse and organize places” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 115). As these stories build public spaces, they also are part of the process of emotional engagement with places, with building the situational, temporal, emotional, and individual-specific psychological concept of the “life space” (Lewin, 1943). These places and stories construct senses of dwelling and Heideggerian “lifeworld,” the “tacit context, tenor and pace of daily life to which normally people give no reflective attention. (Seamon, 2000, p. 161). This project considers the many ways people feel at home in public spaces by looking at ordinary things to which people give little “reflective attention” yet that support a deep connection to place.

The “Guided Tours” project centers on several residents’ guided, narrated neighborhood walks and the photographs that I make to document those walks. I ask people to give me their own personal tours of their community, focusing the work on everyday practices and how the locales of these practices act as repositories of memory and narrative and are part of a continually building lifeworld. Ten community members each gave me a tour of their personal conception of the neighborhood: Tanya M., David W., Mike H., David K., Julia M., Duke S., Ulysses R., Neville H., Emily H., and Kaushik P. The group sprang from the people I knew in my neighborhood and grew to include members of my tour guides’ communities as well. In this article, I concentrate on the tours and responses of Mike H., David W., Tanya M., and David K. These 10 people touched on places of both neighborhood and personal importance

and in so doing talked about the *process* of experiencing the community and building individual lives within, and *with*, the physical environment, expressing how experience can be both shared and multiple in one small area.

To allow stories to unfold while in the spaces themselves, my tour guides walked with me, we talked, I took photographs, and then we looked at them together. I had planned for my tour guides to take their own photographs, but in the end, it seemed that they represented themselves in narrative; asking them to photograph was asking them to work in a medium out of their element. The photographs are my part of the conversation, and part of my theorizing about this place.<sup>1</sup>

I take seriously the idea of careful looking and Seamon's (1990) suggestion, in an article on the images of Andre Kertész, that photographs can momentarily suspend the taken-for-granted-ness of the world and that, using Heidegger's terminology, an "emotional *presence-to-hand* reveals *readiness-to-hand* of the lifeworld in a new and vivid way" (p. 50). In other words, an entity (a photograph) that emotionally calls attention to itself as an object outside the world pictured can reveal the way in which the everyday and often unnoticed thing (or detail) pictured is an inherent and vital part of the way we experience the world. Far be it from me to compare myself to Kertész, yet Seamon's analysis well expresses how a photographic mode of working allows me to see in detail the small pieces that make up the everyday.

In taking a phenomenological perspective, I have asked people to talk not about the agreed-on histories of this neighborhood but about places in this small area as *they* have experienced them.<sup>2</sup> This discussion of connection to place does not rely on knowledge of the specifics of the neighborhood examined here; rather, I hope that this project evokes the specifics of the reader/viewer's own spatial experiences. The stories told here (and those like them in any neighborhood) are not just *in* the environment but intertwine with and build versions of the lyrically humming neighborhood that we all experience, and in which we exist.

## Walking

As we walked, my tour guides expressed what it was like for them to live in the neighborhood, how they built a sense of themselves as residents, and their memories that were evoked by the sites we passed by. This experience of physical neighborhood space, structured by personal life experience and memory, is supported by the spatial act of walking through familiar public spaces, continually making the spatial routes one's own. These tours, these site visits, are as much about passing by and through as they are about recognized "sites"; my tour guides constructed spatial narratives as we walked.<sup>3</sup> Often, the sites pointed out are not understood at face value but rather exist as something else of importance for each individual tour guide, these are representational spaces that "imagination seeks to change and appropriate," escaping the definitions imposed by superstructural control (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). It seems that walking among a panoply of stories, known and unknown to each individual, makes for a palpable richness, an almost tangible sense of place.

*[Selected sites from the tours, overleaf]*



### St Marks Avenue House

*These two guys, Andre and Dan lived here. We used to have wild parties over there. When I met these guys, that was 8 years ago. And I have the store for 8 years, but I've been straight for 7. So the first year that I was here, we'd go to their house and, you know, girls and guys, all kinds of people used to be over there, and I'd get sloshed. But when I used to come here, I used to be so alone. When you're drunk the day before, I don't know how drunk you've gotten, but you don't feel like doing nothing the next day. And me, I get mad at the world. Her fault. That bitch made me do it, she gave me that first drink. Right! Or, that sonofabitch Dan, what he did to me last night, you know? If it wasn't for him coming by with two bottles I would have never drank. Then, by the end of the day, I look in the mirror and say, nobody's fault but mine. I could have said no. Could have said no. And finally, finally, I said, my god, enough is enough, now I'm gonna see, because everyone tells me that these people from AA can help me. Let me see what these people can do for me. I'll give it a shot, you know, for heaven's sakes. Then, when these people used to come by, Dan and Andy, I'd tell them, "not today." (Mike)*

### Figure 1.

Source: Author.



### Met Food Supermarket

*Talk about capturing the sense of the neighborhood, Met Foods. "You're homebound, don't worry, call us, tell us what you need. We'll get it to you." I haven't heard of that since I first came to New York to visit my aunt in 1958. I just wish my aunt could be here to enjoy it, and mix me a Bloody Mary. She died with a Bloody Mary in her hand. Mixed it, sat down, boom. If one thing talks most about this community, it is probably the supermarket....Because of the people there and what they try to do. They do it to make money, granted, but they do it because they seem very happy to be here in this neighborhood, concerned about people, concerned about delivering service to the neighborhood. And, to the whole neighborhood. It's not that they came in and decided, "Oh, we're getting rid of the Goya stuff here, you know? We're going upscale." No. Still got ham hocks there. It's what made this neighborhood for us. Twenty-five years ago we got very lucky on the house, but really it's the fact that it's a comfortably mixed neighborhood. Now, I don't know whether I'm saying that because....I can't pull down my veil of ignorance....Yeah, I'm part of the dominant society, but it just feels to me like a comfortably mixed neighborhood. (David)*

### Figure 2.

Source: Author.



**George's Restaurant**

*I really like this place. Besides the fact that you see different people, you just hear people talking, and you hear 'em joshing around...it's a very mixed crowd in here, race, sex, age. You see people from all different backgrounds. Cops come in here, you see sanitation, you see park police, plumbers, accountants, politicians, and you hear people talking trash....Mike gives the place its life, cause he'll talk to anybody and he'll talk crap with anybody—it's funny!*

*This is somebody who's doing a job, and you constantly, especially here in New York... America.... You have this whole thing about being somebody of a certain level, the doctor, the lawyer, the Wall Street whatever...that's the ultimate, that's what you want to be. And you have people here who have a life, they run a luncheonette, and they make people happy. They like it? They come back. They don't like it, they don't come back. It appeals to me very visc-*

**Figure 3a.**

Source: Author.



### George's Restaurant

*erally. You hear them constantly doing all kinds of family things on the weekends, it's nice to hear that type of thing. I think being around that is something that makes me realize, make sure you do family stuff. Yeah, you need some money, but you don't need to be chasing, just chasing a dollar, you know to the exemption of everything else. And it doesn't have to be a big thing that you do.*

*I think that's one of the things that I really like. This is their place, it's not just a job, cause they love it, and I feel that they love it and that makes me like it, also. If I'm in a bad mood and I come in here, I think I walk out in a better mood. It's not necessarily just the talking, it's just about the place. It's just, it's comfortable. You know? (Tanya)*

### Figure 3b.

Source: Author.



Places of the city are not only spaces of movement but are “fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read...symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 108). When David K. shifts easily between a story about his Baptist church’s month of services to the next block, where he tells me a man had his neck slashed at a deli, I see how multiple and layered and contradictory the experience of this place can be:

Ricky, this little boy, that thinks he’s nice in handball, lives here. Thinks he could beat me, after I beat him so many times....This is a church [Duryea Baptist Church]. My church came here for a funeral. This guy had died, but we didn’t really know him that well.... We used to have exchanged services, where our church would come to them sometimes and they would come to us. And we had something called Octoberfest, where for the whole month of October we had services, for 31 nights. If they came, if the pastor came and preached at our church, then we had to go to his church one time and preach. I guess they call that fellowship. Whatever. Here go the District 13 [Office], right next to the park, Underhill. That’s kind of not a good thing for me....cause if you mess up in school or something...they come here and speak to the Board of Education, and then, you get in trouble....That store right there, it’s been there for a long time. They switched owners over to new people. This guy, Willy, he had got his throat sliced there, before. He was there one time, and I guess it was gang related. And he got his throat cut. He lived, though. But now it’s not that bad over here no more. See how quiet it is.

These stories came to him in waves, so close together, building his world, and yet, all of this is part of his experience of his place. This sense of contradiction and contrast is central to the difficult pleasure of living in a city.

In privileging the walking experience, this project aims to expose meaningful spaces through an investigation of the everyday navigations and “tiny deportations (displacements and walks)...that intertwine and create an urban fabric” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 103). Carefully considering the practice of walking, Tanya M. tells me about her intertwining routes and “tiny deportations,” on which she meets people, does errands, and allows for taking care of her two sons, 2-year-old Nicky and 9-year-old Calien. Tanya M.’s tour is a time-organized movement through a meaning-rich city, imbued with the strategy of a game:

I was trying to think of the order in which I do things, because that’s just the way my mind works, and that’s the way I set it up, especially because I’m always walking with a stroller. One of the things I’m constantly trying to tell my husband is, OK, go out the farthest and work your way back. Or, plan: you have this in your bag, you have this in your bag, you have to do A B and C, versus going back and forth, zigzaggy. I like to work it in a circle. I like to have my path. I don’t want to have to get close to home and then go back out. I want it working in some kind of order. It was hard for me to figure out exactly what order to put it [the tour] into. How to go to the different places....It’s sort of a dichotomy, who am I going with. Those are the different types of things: am I walking during the day, am I walking at night? Is it the summer, so we’re going up to the bandshell to go see a show, cause that’s a different walk, again...it’s going to be different destinations depending on the child, depending on the weather....You know, there really is a difference between regular walking and walking with a stroller.

Tanya’s walk and her defined trajectory have a great deal to do with who she is and how she uses the space. From this description, I can see the relationships within her family as well as her own jobs, needs, and satisfactions through her description of navigating

a familiar space. Her path through these spaces weaves stories of her own relationships through the neighborhood. When Tanya says that it is “different destinations depending on the child...there really is a difference between regular walking and walking with a stroller,” her narration muses on how the walking experience changes. It is not only an interaction between environment and person; particularly for women with children and others who depend on them, the walking experience is a negotiation between people, as well as an interaction with the physical environment.

Still, the performative aspect of her walk, the body’s movement through space, is part of the idiosyncratic manner in which my tour guides (and most everyone else) know and remake the city, continually weaving a nonlinear narrative. Tanya’s walk represents both experience and practicality, as well as possibilities noted and to be taken later, when, for example, she is not walking with a stroller.

## Emotion

Although these walks are in and of themselves spatial practices, they also express an emotional construction of personal life in public neighborhood space, an experience familiar to each of us as we make our daily way through our neighborhoods. The psychologist Kurt Lewin’s (1943) concept of the lived “life space” as “the person and the psychological environment *as it exists for him*” (p. 307) expresses this contextual and phenomenal construction. Who you are and what is defined as your life space is a shifting identity; you are always experiencing the world as yourself in a given temporally specific situation.

Objects in the environment hold little meaning without their social context and social use, as “social facts (friendship with another child, dependence upon adult) must be regarded...as no less real than physical facts” (Lewin, 1935, p. 75). The neighborhood of my 15-year-old tour guide, David K., was populated by, among other things, friends’ houses. One building in particular became an important part of his tour. We can look at David’s description of his friend Gus’s house and block. David told me in depth as we walked up this block how he socially interacted with the physical environment and how a space of danger might be mitigated by the comforting social relationships he has in that space:

It’s kind of not the safest block to be on, when it comes night, but I know people over here, so it’s not that bad. So, we’re not going to walk all the way down to the other side, cause...But, Gus, he lives in the second building, the building’s kind of nice. Gus, that’s my friend that I was looking for. And most of my friends live in the same building. Gus lives on the fourth floor, Lashawn lives on the third floor, Dblock, well, we give them some names, like, his real name isn’t Dblock, his real name is Christian, but we call him Dblock, he lives in here...[I know them] from Met’s [supermarket]. They used to come and pack. Me and Gus, we played basketball and then, just started talking and hanging out, and that’s how we became friends.

Social interactions such as these are part of constructing vastly varying worlds of experience within the same physical space. Yet social interactions do not solely construct the different ways in which my tour guides experience the apparently stable physical space of their own individual “life spaces.” Questions of identity, narrative, and values also play a large part in this meaning-rich environment. I find that on

one block, one corner may have great significance for David K., but for Mike H., it is ignored. Tanya dislikes the playground on Underhill Avenue for her children, whereas the world of teenager David K. centers on the handball courts there, and Mike H. and David W. tell still another story, using the park and its rehabilitation to symbolize their perception of the rebirth and community participation of the neighborhood.

Young David K.'s discussion of the playground is built through intimate experiences with its physicality; he has used the park through all its incarnations as he's grown up. He talks about how he's used it and accepts it as one continuous space through time. His narration of this park is not symbolic but rather a description of bodily experience and memory of this place's shifts and changes, when he explains,

the handball courts used to be over here where the grass is, and they changed it and separated it into two. When it was over here, there was gate, so if the ball went out, you had to go through the gate and get the ball wherever it went. But now, if you hit the ball over, you gotta climb over the wall.

His connection to the park has a great deal to do with his understanding of the changing place and neighborhood over the time that he's been there, but it primarily has to do with his own conception of himself as a teenager, an athlete, and a handball champion, a role that has meaning within his own social circle. Yet for Mike H. and David W., this park has an entirely different meaning, disconnected from much actual use or experience of the place. They each took me to the playground to express a theme of their own identities as connected to this place as a symbol of neighborhood rebirth. First, David W., from within the larger narrative of community activism that infuses his whole tour, talks about the park as a community effort that brought people together, which "shows you what people working together can do." For David W., the park represents an event that cements his understanding of the community as a diverse one that works together to make the place better for everyone. Mike H.'s sense of the rebirth is even more visceral. He talks passionately about how this park was terrible and drug ridden and how, with a lot of work and effort of "a whole lot of people," it improved to be the shining example he sees it as today. His narration of the site relates to the framework of degradation, work, and subsequent rebirth that he as a recovering alcoholic gives to most of his sites of importance.

This struggle-and-rebirth identity is even more powerfully situated in another site for Mike H. A nondescript house, and the photograph thereof, served as a jumping-off point for a story that Mike needed to tell, one that helps him define his identity (see Figure 1). Mike tells about this house around the corner from his restaurant as a way to discuss his battle with alcoholism and the first time he entered Alcoholics Anonymous. His memories of the parties there reflect his larger narrative that expresses how he began to overcome his alcoholism. Embedded in the house is the symbolism of the temptation to which he first said "no." In this way, the physical house references for Mike both a memory of the site itself and an explication of aspects of his own identity history that for him can be told through the story of the house.

## Dwelling

As they reconceptualized place and identity, I found a poetry of the everyday in the way my tour guides wove their narratives. The emotional context of the physical

environment was central to my tour guides' expression of the place they experience as their neighborhood, a place they build that in turn builds them. They expressed an inextricable intimacy of person and world, what Martin Heidegger (1927/1996) would call a *being-in-the-world*. This holistic connection of person and world is central to understanding the way in which a narratively layered neighborhood makes space for the multiple lifeworlds (and life spaces) of residents and the way in which emotional connections make space within which people not only live but dwell. Dwelling can be referred to as "an active making of a place for ourselves in time and space...the most intimate of relationships with the environment" (Saegert, 1985, p. 288).

In anyone's neighborhood, there are sites such as the Met Food supermarket with everyday use values, as a purveyor of food, or even as a tacit meeting place. Yet these places can also be entities from their very existence that cement an emotional connection to neighborhood (see Figure 2). For David W., the supermarket, counterintuitively, does not afford him shopping abilities, because he regularly shops elsewhere at a food co-op. This place builds for David a dwelling place, deep in meaning about neighborhood definition and what kind of place it is in which he wants to live. There, he experiences people who value the diversity of his community, who do things, such as delivering to the homebound, that are part of the kind of community in which he wants to live. The physical building itself reminds him of all this, and when he walks by, he waves at the man who owns the store. In short, he sees in the supermarket a place that supports his values. In these familiar environments, we easily notice the use value of places such as a supermarket, but it is the emotional support that a place may garner for us, that we don't often immediately notice.

David's relationship with this supermarket is one of "letting dwell"; though it is a supermarket, not a home, this can still be a locale that "shelters...men's lives" (Heidegger, 1993, p. 360). Although neighborhood spaces such as the supermarket are not houses in the sense of domiciles, they can house these peoples' senses of self, comfort, and, importantly, being-at-home in the place, in this public space of the neighborhood. This supermarket helps define what kind of neighborhood this is that makes David feel at home.

A neighborhood street, Park Place, is a place to walk, or a quick route to get from here to there, or even a place to play hopscotch, but as a site that allows dwelling, it is a place where a feeling floods you as you remember the kiss that once happened on that corner, or even the fright that takes you, thinking of a crime you know happened there.<sup>4</sup> Emotional lives and places are continually intertwined.

Although the supermarket and the street have perhaps surprising emotional content, Tanya M.'s discussion of George's Restaurant most clearly expresses a synthesis of an individual life space and a nonhome environment within which she can dwell (see Figures 3a and 3b). In talking about George's, Tanya simultaneously engages many of the previously mentioned themes, from the construction of a life space around places that care for herself and her children to her memories seated in this place to the deep affective relationship she has with the restaurant. Tanya's stories about George's are not about the restaurant as a restaurant but rather about a place that supports her building of her own lifeworld and life space. Tanya analyzes this familiar world, noting what makes it a "comfortable" place for her. She expresses that the place reinforces several of her own values, for example, relating to people from many different walks of life. Her discussion builds to use the space to discuss her sense of the capitalist system; she finds reassurance within a business space that there is more to life than the bottom line. This place, with all its attendant social interactions, creates a place that fosters the

development of her own values of family and caring. The way this appeals to her “very viscerally” gives us a sense of how engaged the experience of this place is with her own sense of self and life space. Tanya includes and moves beyond social life space-building to this expression of a place that is central to her sense of home place, and lifeworld, a place that supports her dwelling in this neighborhood public space.

The ways in which Tanya and all my tour guides experience these places are important ways of understanding them; we cannot fully conceive of the environment without the emotional responses that continue to make and remake how we experience and build the lyrical neighborhood.<sup>5</sup> When I asked my tour guides to notice what is taken for granted, there arose an awareness of the poetics of these places. They were not only excavating their relationship with the environment but were creating and presenting to me narratives of self and environment.

Although the details of this article are about Prospect Heights, it is my aim to show the detail of any place, that every experience is complicated, beautiful, and essential. People strive to build these dwelling places everywhere, but there are many places where these connections are severed as they are being built, where spaces do not “let dwell.” By showing a place where this works on a small, unglamorous level, I am hoping to point out how much is lost when this is denied people. I have been deeply moved by my tour guides’ stories, and as I now walk through Prospect Heights, I hear these histories vibrating through the building walls.

## Notes

1. Future work will address the interaction between photographs and sites as well as how photographs frame familiar spaces.

2. The photographs and tours here exist in active dialogue, neither one illustrating or captioning the other. Members of this community added more stories to the project in a public presentation of this work in early 2005.

3. Although the way in which the photography work is presented here stresses the sites more than the walks, capturing the sense of the walks photographically is my ongoing photographic project.

4. For Mike H., Park Place reminds him of his friendship with Amy Watkins, who was one of his regulars and who was murdered on that block in 1998. The spot reminds him of her and their chats and also of the blow that this crime was to the neighborhood. In a personal conversation with another Prospect Heights resident, Teresa M., she told me that for long after the crime happened, on this tree-lined, brownstoned, block-association block, she would cross the street to avoid the unnoticeable spot where Amy Watkins had actually been killed.

5. It is worth noting that many issues related to the question of neighborhood connections could not be addressed here. Although this article has not extensively discussed cultural differences and current economic issues and their role in constructing space, this is essential, and it is my next project to draw out the manner in which the cultural and political are experienced and expressed through the lens of individual personal experience.

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*Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani is a Ph.D. candidate at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her dissertation addresses the dialogic relationship between photographs and our ability to see the everyday world and asks what happens when we look closer at the everyday that fills our lives. She is also a freelance photographer and independent curator, most recently at the Center for Architecture in New York.*