

Multi-Urban Visions: Stones, Laws and Sanctuaries

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A series of essays have been published on the Coach Quad which is a website I curate. These essays involve the representation of specific states of mind in three distinctive American cities: New York, New Orleans and Las Vegas.

In this essay, I offer more perspectives on my own state of mind when visiting or at least journeying by three urban areas: Stamford (Connecticut), the Bronx (New York), and New York City (with a focus on the entertainment business as represented on “Broadway”). These three urban centers contrast dramatically with one another and were all witnessed by me, several weeks ago, when Kathleen (my wife) and I drove from our home in Maine to take in an afternoon of theater and an evening of cabaret in New York City.

We spent our nights at a hotel in Stamford, Connecticut (to avoid the major costs of hotels in “The Big Apple”). While on this journey to Broadway, I made some observations regarding the diversity of displays that passed by our car window and the messages being conveyed in the theater and cabaret offerings. Having just finished a book (Bergquist, 2025) about the “new Normal” (that seems very abnormal), I was particularly attuned to displays and messages that conveyed something about the volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous, turbulent, and contradictory conditions we face in mid-21st-century America (VUCA-Plus).

Connecticut: Stone Cities and Hearts

I first noted the abundance of opulent displays in Connecticut. Everything was big, new, and shiny. At the same time, a “faux” gentility was represented in the words being used and the carefully manicured lawns and gardens. Everything was modern and rather sterile, yet we are meant to “believe” that this is still the quaint “out of town” Connecticut to which Manhattanites retreated when wanting to “get away from it all!” I love the name assigned to the busy expressway/freeway on which we were driving. It was called a “parkway.” I expected to witness horse and carriage at some point trying to keep up with us in our recently purchased hybrid! Trees next to the parkway were disguising the tall office buildings and hotels located adjacent to the highway. Everything was lovely, planned and in many ways “fake.”

There is also the “faux” admiration for physical labor. Those working in (and sometimes residing in) the Connecticut cities admire the men and women who tend the gardens located adjacent to their high-rise buildings. They complain that plumbers and electricians are “simply not available anymore” and declare their commitment to the funding of more vocational-technical education. Yet, these busy folks typically learn very little about the plumbing in their building or the electrical wiring that keeps their computers and copy machines running.

Physical labor for these trade-illiterate men and women consists of going to the gym once or twice a week or simply allowing their limbs to be mobilized by a masseuse or the bubbles in a hot spa. The VUCA-Plus condition of Contradictions was clearly present with the espoused valuing of physical labor

being contradicted by the expressed values of “labor” on the tread mill. As Chris Argyris and Don Schon noted many years ago (Argyris and Schon, xxx) contradictions between the words we speak (espoused theory) and the actions we take (theory-in-action) are numerous—including perspectives regarding “use” of our physical body.

Kathleen and I spent the evening at a hotel in Stamford, Connecticut. We were then back on the highway to Manhattan. At times, on this Saturday morning, the traffic flowed freely. At other times, everything came to a sudden stop. Neither the speed nor the stoppage made much sense. The VUCA-Plus condition of Volatility was front and center. What’s with the stop and go of the traffic? After all, this is Saturday morning. No one should be out on the highway! Heavy traffic and the resulting volatility (stop and go) are meant for the weekdays!

I was reminded that many men and women commute each day from Connecticut to Manhattan. They spend many hours in their car: stopping and starting. I suspect that some stress management is required of these commuters, perhaps news or music on the car radio or on XM. Others might (illegally and dangerously) be texting or speaking via mobile phone to their fellow workers, friends, or family members.

Then there are those commuters who avoid the erratic traffic and life in the automobile. Instead, they live on the train (and perhaps the subway). It is easier (and safer) to communicate by mobile phone, text, or read on the train. The trade-off is a world in which one doesn’t really know any of the other travelers and the sense of community is clearly lacking. Alienation fills the crowded aisles and seats as one waits for the door to open. As Stephen Sondheim declares: “another 100 people just got off the train.”



I recognized that some of the folks in Connecticut avoid the commute by working in one of the many large buildings near the highway. Rather than living in their car, these mostly corporate workers live in the office elevator and their nook on the 12th floor of the building. Traveled on streets that seemed like thin canyons separating the tightly packed office buildings,

I was reminded of a term used by Robert Sommer, a noted observer of structures and spaces. Having worked (as I did) in the country of Estonia during the last two decades of the 20th Century, Sommer used the term, *Stone City*,

when considering life in the high-rise buildings of this Soviet-occupied country. I found the high-rise office buildings of Connecticut to be Stone Cities in their own right. I suspect there was just as much alienation in these buildings as there was in the stone cities of Estonia.

There is also the matter of the lives being led by those women and men who are working on the 12th floor. Many years ago, several critical observations were made about men who were working in corporate settings (this was before women played much of a role in corporate life other than serving as a secretary). Labels such as “man in the gray flannel suit” (Wilson, 1955) or “the organization man”

(Whyte, 1956) were used when describing the conforming attitudes and behaviors of those employed by large corporations. A 1961 musical was even written by Frank Loesser about corporate life: *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*.

Have the norms and values changed over the past seventy years? The buildings are still straight up and tall (with a few postmodern anomalies thrown in). Are the men also still straight and upwardly mobile? And have the women followed suit? What has replaced the gray flannel suit? Perhaps, business casual—or “anything goes” if they are working from home. What is the new motto? Perhaps it is the title of a song from “How to Succeed”: “I believe in you [referring to himself]”. This phrase captured the spirit of individual accomplishment that was emphasized in contemporary corporate life during the 1950s (and beyond). I think it is still appropriate.

Another song from this musical capture another of the dictums of corporate life during the second half of the 20th Century: “The company way.” This homage to conformist life (doing it “the company way”) stands, ironically, alongside an emphasis on individual achievement (“How to Succeed . . .”). What about today? The intense individualistic spirit still seems to be alive and well among the Gen Xers and Millennials who tend to hop from job to job in search of greater status and more money. This job-hopping suggests that there is less loyalty to a particular corporation among Gen Xers and Millennials. However, they still may be doing it “the company way” with regard to the specific organization in which they are now working.

Perhaps individualism and conformism live alongside one another in the stone cities of Connecticut. These valued perspectives might not contradict each other; however, they certainly provide some ambiguity (one of the VUCA-Plus conditions). As Ken Gergen observed several decades ago, we are living with many values and images of ourselves that often swirl around our Heads and Hearts. Gergen wrote about the Saturated Self and the epidemic that he calls “multiphrenia.” Do those who work in the Stone City find that their sense of self is being pulled in several different directions. Their ambiguity-producing multiphrenia includes both a pull toward a distinctive individual identity (“I believe in you”) and a push toward fitting in (“the company way”). Their Heart might have become frozen given the dissonance inherent in this push/pull tension. Do they find personal and corporate survival by adopting a *Stone Heart*?

The Bronx: Stone and Law

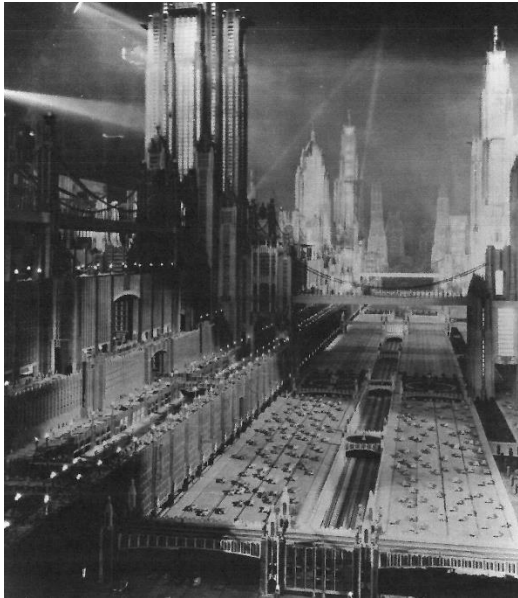
Kathleen and I were driving through the Bronx on Saturday morning. An even more powerful and disturbing Stone City was on display as we passed the many housing projects that had been built in the Bronx many years ago by Robert Moses, the “visionary” city planner and developer. This renowned power broker knew it would be “good” for everyone if he took them out of their “nasty” ethnic neighborhoods and offered them the opportunity to live on the 8th floor of an anonymous apartment building.

Somehow, it never entered his mind (or heart) that many people had invested their identity in the small,



crowded neighborhoods where they grew up as second-generation offspring of immigrant parents.

While the urban neighborhoods of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and many other cities are often unrealistically romanticized (e.g. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* or more recently *Saturday Night Fever*), a glue existed (and still exists) in some New York area neighborhoods. Drawn together by ethnic identity, those living in these neighborhoods had for generations created their own island of culture.



The same man (Robert Sommer) who wrote about alienating Stone Cities that he identified as *sociofugal* (pushing from one another) wrote about the way shared culture (music, street art, marketplaces) produced *sociopetal* (pull toward one another) (Sommer, 1975; Sommer, 1980).

What about Robert Moses' visit? Visionary pictures of his futuristic city during the 1930s? Science fiction movies of the 1930s and 1940s often replicated Moses' high-rise building and elevated transportation systems. Did his vision come to fruition?

The Bronx buildings my wife and I drove by certainly were not the clean and bright buildings portrayed in *Life*. These tenement buildings were constructed of brick (not a very futuristic building material). The brick is now often

smudged (air pollution) and the technology (elevators, heating systems, etc.) are often in disrepair. The Stone City of the Bronx seems to have replicated the Stone Cities of Soviet-occupied Estonia. Did Robert Moses and urban planners of the Soviet Union hold similar perspectives on how people should live?

I observed that there were some playgrounds, and some seating areas placed among the tall tenement buildings. I saw paved basketball courts (often with tattered nets) and a set of swings here and there. However, as we drove by the tenement areas, I saw very few children playing on the swings or young men and women raising up and down the basketball court. Most importantly, I didn't see anyone "hanging Around" even though it was a Saturday morning when most of the Bronx citizens had ample free time.

There was none of the sociopetal hanging out at the corner—for there was no corner. Folks didn't gather at the nearby drug store or grocery store, for these stores didn't exist. They were replaced years ago by supermarkets and super drug stores located two bus stops away from the tenements. Fully absent where any vendors on the street selling fish, mangos or a special locally made sausage. These vendors had nowhere to work (no streets) and food safety laws prevented them from operating anyway. I wondered where the children, young adults and older adults congregate—or do



they congregate. Where were these folks? Should I have found a way to peer into the windows of their apartment. Were they watching TV. Maybe they were absorbed virtually with real and artificially generated characters on the Internet.

Robeert Moses may have had good intentions' however, there is compelling evidence to suggest that his intentions were not always pure. Even with good intentions, the Moses' dream of a clean, carefully planned city seems never to have been realized. There are antiseptically clean and carefully controlled cities such as Geneva, Switzerland and Singapore; however, the Bronx doesn't belong on this short list. Instead, I have concluded that this urban setting is more of a stony nightmare than a liberating, realized Moses dream.

I was struck by another image as we passed the tenements and began our journey across the bridge to Manhattan. This image emanated from the many billboards that "graced" the Bronx and Manhattan skyline. A large number of them (I quit counting after fifty) were marketing legal services. Everyone and their brother were hocking their judicial prowess—often litigating injury settlements or divorce



settlements. My surprise might have been nothing more than the usual expectations that legal services are usually offered in a more "professional" and less ostentatious manner.

However, something of greater importance seems to reside behind the appearance of numerous legal service advertisements. The marketing of these services might relate

to the existence of Stone Cities in Connecticut and the Bronx. There is also the matter of Uncertainty (one of the VCUA-Plus conditions). If you don't know what going to happen next in your life and if you don't trust your own family and "tribe" to protect you when things go bad, then you need to find external, professional, paid protection. Call Anh Phoong!

While those living in the tenement buildings of the Bronx usually can't afford legal services, there is plenty of money to be found in the Connecticut building for the purchase of high-cost legal assistance. Those on the 16th floor of the Stamford high rise might actually need more legal protect than is the case with the 12th floor tenement dweller, given that these corporate folks are more likely to be immediately impacted by the condition of Uncertainty. I suspect that even those living on the 12th floor of a Bronx high-rise can envision receiving a large chunk of money from an injury they sustained at work or from the poorly managed health care they have received. Given that some lawyers market themselves as those "who only get paid with a successful settlement", the tenement residents might dream of engaging legal services.

Most importantly, legal services are ultimately only needed when the trust among citizens of a country is shattered. Robert Bellah and his colleagues (Bellah and others, 1985) write about the "habits of the heart" that pervaded earlier American communities. These communities were founded on the basis of

shared trust (Bergquist, 2025). In a community where trust is fully present, disagreement can be resolved without litigation; injury can be compensated based on handshake agreements.

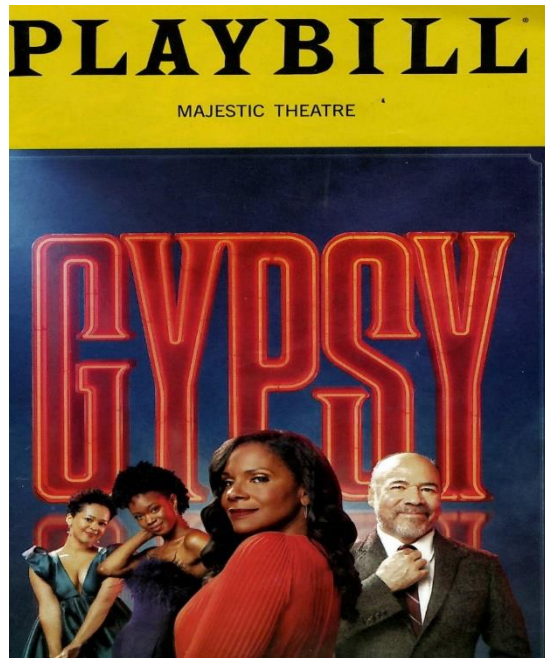
Fundamentally, it is a matter of collective responsibility (sociopetal pulling toward) offsetting individual rights (sociofugal pushing away from). If the individualism of “organization man” and “gray flannel suit man” is still lingering in our shared psyche, then lawyers rather than local leaders, church leaders or a wise community elder are required. If there is still a “lazy” fall into corporate or tenement conformity, then it is perfectly appropriate that we call our lawyer (or one of the lawyers on the billboards) when things a bit strained and an interpersonal relationship (such as marriage) is broken. “Everyone else is doing it, so why don’t I. Someone might take advantage of me if I don’t have legal representation.” Stone requires law in a mid-21st century city such as the Bronx.

Broadway: Worth and Sanctuary

We finally arrived on the streets of Manhattan. My wife and I were fortunate to attend a performance on Saturday afternoon of Jule Styne and Steven Sondheim’s *Gypsy*. The revival of this classic musical stars the multiple award-winning Audra McDonald as Rose, the overbearing mother of Gypsy Rose Lee. We then walked several blocks up Broadway to have dinner and a live performance at *54 Below*, a cabaret featuring Broadway stars in an intimate setting.

Kathleen and I enjoyed a wonderful dinner and an evening of song and recollection provided by Donna McKechnie. The music of Stephen Sondheim was featured. This seemed very appropriate since Sondheim wrote the lyrics for *Gypsy*. Donna had worked with Sondheim on many of his productions (and the character “Cassie” in the musical, *Chorus Line* was based on her life).

I left the theater and cabaret that evening (returning to Stamford) reflecting on three themes that stood out for me from this brief time revisiting Broadway. First, there is the matter of being of worth in one’s



life –and topic I am now writing about extensively (e.g. Bergquist. xxx). At the end of *Gypsy*, Mama Rose declares that she has sacrificed everything for her two “ungrateful” daughters.

Her younger daughter (Gypsy Rose Lee) comes on stage and asked her mother if she was doing this sacrificing for her daughters or doing it for herself. Mama Rose declares: “I just wanted to be noticed!” Gypsy Rose Lee responds: “Like I wanted you to notice me.” This interchange between Mama Rose and Gypsy Rose was very powerful, in part because of the dramatic flair and powerful voice that Audre McDonald brought to the part. However, something more was present in my Head and Heart.

I found myself returning to my work on the Psychology of Worth. When are we truly acting on behalf of our children? When are we trying to enhance their Worth, while actually trying to provide (or perhaps demonstrate)

that we are a “worthy” parent? More generally, is authentic “Worth” harder to establish in a world of Stone and Law?

Perhaps, at a basic level, it is hard to be noticed by anyone in a world where “another 100 people just got off the train.” This sense of being alone and unnoticed in a crowd was particularly poignant as my wife and I navigated through massive crowds on our short journey from the theater to the cabaret. I felt powerless and not “worthwhile” while being pushed and jostled by many people who were trying to get places on Broadway, just as my wife and I were intending to do.

A second theme was particularly prevalent in Donna McKechnie’s monologue that accompanied her wonderful singing. As a close friend of many Broadway stars, composers, directors, and producers, Donna dropped many names and recounted many instances where something of importance occurred in the preparation of a Broadway musical for production. I was reminded of a lyric from the recent highly successful Broadway production called “Hamilton.” The lyric concerned the presence of someone at a major historical event in American history: “I was there when it happened.”

I was reminded of yet another musical in which Stephen Sondheim and John Weldman wrote about the first encounter of Americans with people and culture of Japan. In this musical (“Pacific Overtures”), a Japanese character sang (in sparse Kabuki style) about witnessing the first encounter between Admiral Perry (representing the USA) and the Japanese dignitaries. These “real” events, accompanied by “unreal” songs, speak to the power of witnessing. While we might not be “worthy” ourselves, we can participate in or at least observe something that provides an indirect sense of “worthiness.” Much in the case of a billiard ball bouncing off one or more billiard table cushions (a “bank shot”) to tap another ball into the pocket, the sense of self-worth is gained from a bank shot off the worth of someone or some event that is truly “worthwhile.”

This reliance on back-shots might contribute to the challenge of Psychic Complexity (a VUCA-Plus condition). We not only are saturated with multiple images of self but also find that these multiple images are interdependent—as are all entities in a complex system (Miller and Page, xxx0. We may find our sense of self (and of self-worth) relying indirectly on a successful bounce off the wall of some observation of worthy behavior of other people or of a community. Given what is now happening in American society, these indirect sources of Worth might be few and far between. Furthermore, the complex sense of self is often joined by the other troubling conditions of VUCA-Plus. When Volatility, Uncertainty, and Ambiguity reign supreme, it is hard to find our own worthy and reliable self.

The third theme that pervaded my Head and Heart, especially when driving back to our hotel in Connecticut, concerned the matter of Sanctuary. We face the challenge of working in Stone Buildings, living in Stone Cities, being controlled by Stone Laws, and fighting off the temptation to harden one’s heart and live vicariously off the successes of other people. Where is a place that provides us with relief (at least temporarily) from these challenges? The warm and inviting *54 Below* provides me (and many other people) with a sanctuary of food and song. I breathe deeply when entering this cabaret and even find respite when viewing live *54 Below* performances on my computer.



Many years ago, Garrison Keillor (1985) wrote about the “storm home” that had been assigned to him as a welcoming place to go after school if there should be a snowstorm that prevented him from finding his way back to his family home. Keiller never met the people who lived in his storm home; however, he envisioned that they would be warm and welcoming of him. They would protect him from the storm and nourish him until he could safely travel to his parents’ home. Keiller suggests that we all need our “storm home,” given the kind of turbulent challenges we face every day. We are navigating a whitewater environment (Vaill, xxx) that requires us to engage in centering and find balance (Bergquist, 2025) This is not easy if we feel saturated and uncertain.



Perhaps, *54 Below* is a storm home for me. I don’t even have to be present at this cabaret or watch a Sondheim performance at this Broadway club. I find my storm home just thinking of the warm glow I experience when entering the door of this cabaret or clicking on the link that opens the *54 Below* website.

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