CONTENTS

Introduction

If you look around at your home, or office, or wherever you happen to be reading this, your eyes will settle on countless manmade objects. This is not a risky speculation. They literally surround us at all times. In cities, they typically occupy our entire field of vision. What we generally do not see, however, is that these objects have ideas in them. Ideas about us. The chair in which you sit makes assumptions about you. Some of these might be correct, others incorrect. Your height and weight, the length of your legs, and the width of your torso—your chair has ideas about all of this. Your chair also has ideas about how you might like to sit. Erect or recumbent; rigid or relaxed. It may even contain ideas about how you *should* sit, imposing its own normative standards upon your posture. If you happen to be seated in a classroom, then your chair is probably a bit uncomfortable. This is intentional. It wants you to stay awake.

Sometimes, the ideas that are designed into objects are oriented on individual human users. Other times, they involve social norms or relationships, and here things get complicated. A dining-room table gathers, but not quite like a television does. A bathroom door separates, sometimes imperfectly. The window in the kitchen reinforces a gendered division of labor.[1] A rifle next to the door reflects the natural order of the universe.[2] Our material possessions, it turns out, are sociologically complex and fascinating things.

But this book is about a different class of things. When you leave your home and venture out into your community, you will encounter objects that do *not* belong to you, and that come together to constitute what is

commonly referred to as public space. Let's call these things "public objects." These objects have ideas about you as well, but to them, you are only one of many—part of a collectivity. They will lump you together with the hundreds, or thousands, or perhaps even millions of other people who routinely occupy the same environment. The "public," in other words.

Outside your door, you may be lucky enough to find a sidewalk. If you do, it will probably assume that you (now plural) prefer to walk in straight lines, rather than in sinusoidal patterns or circles. A public stairway will anticipate that you might need a handrail for support, or textured surfaces for added traction. A street sign will imagine your native language, your level of literacy, and your attention span. The great majority of public objects are humble things. Their purpose is to facilitate everyday life, and if they do their job well, we repay them by ignoring them completely. They are the small talk of the material world: if we find them to be a little boring, this is a feature, not a bug. At the same time, this class of objects is deceptively interesting, just like the objects in your home. As it turns out, the material landscape outside your door is not just a physical space. It is a densely significant cultural product, embodying countless assumptions regarding who you are, how you think, and how you should behave. And these assumptions can be massively important.

Unlike the artifacts in your living room, public objects are meant for use by the public. This means that they have to imagine who, exactly, that public might be, what it might want, and what it might need. Sometimes, the ideas designed into public objects are idealistic, expressing hope for a more just, inclusive, or joyful society. Other times they are practical, aspiring to greater efficiency or safety. And still other times, they reflect cynicism, mistrust, or a desire for hierarchy or domination. Not far from my home, a crosswalk has been painted the colors of the rainbow, to signify public support for the LGBTQ community. Several blocks away, a short stone wall is crowned with sharp, daggerlike rocks, to prevent people from sitting on it. One object expresses hope and inclusiveness, while the other embodies territoriality and suspicion. In fact, the ideas behind these objects have really only one thing in common. They are ideas about society itself—how it might be, or how it must be.

These ideas are not trivial, uniform, or universal. They always reflect a specific social context. The objects around us have much to say about the political and economic forces that prevail in our communities. The material world serves as a sort of sociological connective tissue, expanding outward from each individual; upward to political, economic, or cultural institutions;

and backward through time. Social scientists often attempt to understand how "micro" and "macro" are linked, striving to identify the mechanisms that connect the small-scale world of the individual with the large-scale world of the society as a whole. Public objects compose such a mechanism. They tie our subjective, moment-by-moment experiences to those of many others. They guide our thoughts and movements along channels that reflect economic interests, bureaucratic routines, and cultural or political ideologies. When we leave our domiciles and move through public space, we have no choice but to use objects that were shaped by these forces. In doing so, we come into a fairly direct type of contact with the forces themselves. We engage them with our very bodies. Perhaps we resist their invisible propulsion. Or maybe we go with the flow.

This book examines the social lives of six material things found in the public spaces of New York City and its suburbs. Each of these public objects has a story to tell about the social and economic changes sweeping through New York City and its environs. And each of these stories illustrates an important but widely unappreciated fact of urban life—that material objects constitute a primary point of contact with the broader social and political currents that swirl around us. A newly built lawn on the Brooklyn waterfront reflects a competitive struggle between different conceptions of the public good, each drawing on a distinct ideological tradition. A low cement wall on a divided highway in New Jersey speaks of escalating suburban poverty and the demise of the postwar American dream. A metal folding chair on a patch of asphalt in Queens tells us of the political obstacles that face attempts to make the city more livable and sustainable.

Starting with a close look at these objects, and then expanding my focus to include the people, places, and spaces around them, I argue that social life occurs "in the midst of things" in two respects: we are surrounded by a material world that constrains and shapes our experience; and, through this experience, we come into direct contact with a much larger set of "things"—ideas, laws, markets, policies, and so on—that together constitute the broader ongoing narrative of social change.

Material Sociology: Affordances and Programming

This book employs an approach that is far from "paradigmatic" in the Kuhnian sense.[3] Material sociology, pardon the pun, is not really a thing. There is a good reason for this and a not-so-good reason. The good reason is that the material world does not seem to explain many of the things that are of

interest to social scientists. The early twentieth-century sociologist Georg Simmel famously suggested that buildings and other material objects "fix the contents" of society. According to Simmel, objects anchor social processes in space, offering longevity to social formations that otherwise might dissipate with time. But, he acknowledged, they typically do not make things happen on their own.[4]

Obviously, objects enter into our social consciousness practically every day. They are useful metaphors—they make abstract social categories and processes more concrete. We communicate using an everyday poetry that links material things with our social world, without thinking about why these linguistic shortcuts work. We know that the "white-collar worker" or the "pencil pusher" is different from the "blue-collar worker" or the "hard hat." The "latte sipping" elitist is different from "Joe six pack." The "white tablecloth banquet" is different from the "brown bag lunch." Social structure is not something we can easily see or feel, so we refer to its material correlates, in a form of metonymy.

Even more fundamentally, our daily social routines are closely linked to material things. Our lives are, in fact, impossible to describe without frequent reference to objects. "Taking out the trash," "going to the bank," and "getting the car washed" are cultural rituals that involve the routine care of material possessions. They make sense only if we assume that the material world exerts a constant power over our social reality. Nevertheless, material artifacts often seem trivial compared with the large-scale social forces that drive human behavior on a broader scale. The things that really matter—inequality, deviance, racism, rationality—can be said to take place *through* the material world, not *because* of it.

But if we are too quick to dismiss the causal significance of objects, we run the risk of failing to understand how they work. If objects "fix the contents" of the social life of the city, how exactly do they do this? This is one of the questions that I seek to answer in the pages that follow, occasionally drawing on concepts from several distinct fields of social research and theory.[5] In the interest of doing so clearly and directly, it might be helpful to identify and define a couple of important ideas, right from the beginning. Throughout this book, I make use of the terms *affordances* and *programming*. Both concepts are vital for thinking about indirect consequences of design and planning and, by extension, the social control capacity of public objects and places—what they do (and don't do) for specific groups of people in specific settings.[6]

Affordances are, generally speaking, the ideas that objects have about us. More precisely, they are the behavioral possibilities that are endorsed

by an object or place.[7] Affordances can be embedded in the design of an object, as well as the sign and rule systems that apply to an object's use.[8] But they are real only to the extent that they are recognized by an actual human being. In this sense, affordances do not exist inside of an object, but in the relationship between an object and a person.[9] *Programming* is the act of embedding affordances in an object or place. Programming can be used to suggest not just what could be done with a thing, the essence of an affordance, but what *should* be done (or not done) through the imposition of prescriptive programs of use.[10] Programming takes three forms: material, symbolic, and institutional. I'll take a moment to discuss each one in turn.

Once programmed into the *material* surfaces of an object or a place, affordances can become physically coercive in their control over human behavior. The steel and plastic contours of playground equipment offer carefully selected affordances—*slide here*—while negating others—*do not jump from here*—seeking to guide children's behavior in a way that provides both fun and safety. Subway turnstiles, speed bumps, and airport security checkpoints engage in similar sorts of behavioral engineering, coercing human action in specific directions in order to preserve the rule of law or to derive profits, as the case may be. But not all material programming is intentional. Some is coincidental, emerging from the unintended ways in which material form shapes human behavior. An industrial refrigerator is too large and too heavy to be carried in your pocket, but this is not to prevent theft or misplacement. Many restroom keys, on the other hand, are tethered to large and cumbersome objects for this exact reason.

The affordances implicit in design are often combined with signs, labels, and symbols that reinforce or modify the intended pattern of user behavior. This *symbolic programming* generally offers a cheaper and more flexible way of suggesting how users should behave. It would be tremendously expensive to design a parking space that physically exists only at certain times of day, but a cheap piece of pressed aluminum, mounted on a signpost, can advertise the local parking regulations and perhaps have a similar effect.

A third way in which public objects stabilize social life is through the institutional assignment of specific uses to objects. Unlike physical and symbolic programming, this *institutional programming* is typically invisible. The formal laws and informal norms that apply to a given object may be written down somewhere or advertised through signage, but in some cases, they are simply known, residing in the background knowledge of users.[11]

Also unlike material or symbolic programs, institutional programs imply a "third party"—perhaps an anonymous stranger, a neighbor, or the federal

government—who recognizes appropriate and inappropriate uses of an object and provides incentives or sanctions. In the case of privately owned objects and spaces, the most important third party is the owner, who often has wide leeway in dictating how an object should be used. Within the home, informal norms and sanctions typically take over. Many parents of young children, myself included, uphold a de facto anti-graffiti ordinance that is enforced not by the local police but by an inconsistently applied system of time-outs and television privileges. In public settings, on the other hand, an equally comprehensive authority may reside with the state, and institutional programming may consist of a complete legal code for public behavior. Sidewalks, because they are public, are institutionally programmed, or regulated, in a way that one's living room is not.

Through these overlapping material, symbolic, and institutional means, public objects confer structure, regularity, and a degree of predictability to the social life of the city. Paradoxically, when they do this job effectively, they disappear into the background, permitting us to go about our lives without wondering which objects to use, and when, and how. Theorist Bruno Latour famously referred to material objects as "the missing masses," an army of actors who remain invisible when we fix our eyes on the social realm.[12] For Latour, objects are the sociological equivalent of dark matter: rarely observed but vital in explaining observable patterns of behavior. They are, in a sense, the most ancient of social media, helping us concretize and transmit our interests, ideas, and mental states. And to the extent that they are successful, social scientists (and people in general for that matter) are free to focus on what people do and why they do it without being distracted by the things they do it with.

When Objects Make Trouble: Appearance, Disruption, Disappearance

So, things fix or stabilize society. This is the good reason for ignoring material objects. The not-so-good reason for ignoring them is an assumption that the social world is stable all, or even much, of the time.[13] New things are constantly appearing on the scene. Old things deteriorate, vanish, or simply fail to function as planned. During these moments, objects "make trouble," disrupting social order, to repurpose a term used by sociologist Harold Garfinkel.[14] When they confound our expectations, objects emerge from the background of social life into the foreground, becoming more visible to us. Theorists have offered some clues concerning when we can expect

this to occur, highlighting three discrete phases of an object's lifespan: when it first appears in a social setting, when it disrupts desired patterns of action, and when it gradually or abruptly disappears.

The first moment in which objects typically make trouble is when they first appear. For designers and architects, this occurs during the innovation phase, when the technical properties of objects remain unsettled and their social capacities are not yet taken for granted.[15] For the public, objects generally appear a bit later, when introduced for the first time into an uncontrolled social environment. At these times, designers, planners, and ordinary users scrutinize the form of a new public object, a process that can expose the social implications of design decisions.

Designers and architects generate affordances during the earliest stage of an object's life course, imagining patterns of social use. When they design physical structures, writes Thomas Gieryn, they "theorize" about society. "To some degree, every blueprint is a blueprint for human behavior and social structure, as well as a schematic for the 'thing' itself."[16] Design professionals have no choice but to make assumptions, not simply about the physiological or psychological traits of users but also about their sociological and cultural backgrounds, their lifestyles, or their personal histories.[17] Through these inferences, they translate social context into material form, theorizing a social universe in which their object is rational, profitable, virtuous, and so forth. According to John Chris Jones, designers "are obliged to use current information to predict a future state that will not come about unless their predictions are correct."[18] The subject matter of urban planning, design, architecture, and engineering, in other words, is a fictional future that must be extrapolated, imperfectly, from the sociological present and then conjured into being through material means.[19]

Along the way, architects, designers, and planners construct hypothetical users whose qualities are defined in relation to the characteristics of the artifact under consideration. Even when based on deep knowledge of the social context around a proposed public object or public space, these users are fictional constructs. Unlike the protagonists of books and films, however, they bear little resemblance to actual human beings; they do not have complicated backstories, idiosyncratic personalities, or ambiguous motives. They are assembled out of implicit or explicit assumptions concerning how an object will be used, or a space inhabited. And, as fictional people, they continue to haunt a material artifact long after actual users appear on the scene. The resistance offered by a restroom door tells us about imaginary users' strength, which has been programmed into its mechanisms; the mirror

on the restroom wall tells us of their vanity; the stalls convey their desire for privacy. These physical and cultural traits do not belong to the actual users of a restroom, but their imagined counterparts, who remain imprinted upon the space's surfaces and mechanisms, even after a living, breathing person has taken their place.

Occasionally, designers explicitly and earnestly describe the users they have in mind for a given object. When these moments occur, they are crucial, bringing the social implications of design to the surface. But typically, they do not occur in public. The social calculations involved in design generally take place on password-protected computer networks or behind closed doors. In the case of consumer goods, private corporations hide their market research in order to protect their designs from competitors, or to paint their products in a flattering light. Imagined users may appear later, in product marketing campaigns—a child on the box, whose job is to show that a toy is suitable for toddlers with small hands, an athletic young man hiking toward a distant ridge, who illustrates the appropriateness of a pair of pants for an outdoorsy lifestyle, or a pixelated human who lounges, admiring a computer-drawn sunset in an architectural rendering, offering intentional clues to the social programming of a proposed public space.

As material artifacts make their first appearance in uncontrolled social settings, these imaginary people are replaced with real ones. When a new foreign object is introduced into an existing social world, there is no guarantee that its users will react as designers intended. After an object or a built space is constructed, the well-behaved, imaginary people who appear in blueprints and designs are replaced by a more unruly and less predictable collectivity: actual human users. The "potential environment" envisioned by designers and planners is supplanted by the "effective environment" created through human use, to use a pair of terms coined by sociologist Herbert Gans.[20]

At these fascinating moments, the affordances incorporated into new public objects can emerge sharply into view, through their contrast with the needs, desires, values, expectations, habits, or routines of a human population. In some cases, new social norms prove necessary. According to Claude Fischer, the home telephone was seen as a rude and socially intrusive object at first—much like a neighbor who barges in without knocking. The object compelled its users to decide on an appropriate greeting from a range of equally plausible options. (It turns out there was nothing natural or inevitable about "Hello.")[21] Focus groups, surveys, and prototypes provide an

initial test of how an object will be received, but the real test comes when it is introduced into the sociological wilderness of unpredictable everyday life.

Luckily for us, material things rarely exert absolute control. They are used in ways that are unforeseen by their makers all the time. A paving stone can be thrown at the police. A book can be used to stabilize a wobbly desk. As Terrence McDonnell argues, the social contexts in which objects are used impose a degree of "entropy," producing new meanings that were unforeseeable by their designers.[22] Things that were originally functional—for example, the "Green Monster" in Boston's Fenway Park baseball stadium—can take on profound symbolic meanings that supersede their utility, as Michael Borer has shown.[23]

These new meanings may turn out to be far more significant than the old ones. The Blarney Stone, a limestone block embedded in a castle battlement in Ireland, was designed to stop arrows and crossbow bolts, and perhaps, once upon a time, it did. But it is now an object of rare celebrity, kissed by thousands of tourists who desire to be more eloquent in speech. Once devoted to fortification and defense, its current social function is to deliver "likes" on Instagram when paired with an appropriate hashtag. Central to the spectacle is the blunt humility of the stone, its own ineloquent silence, and the physical contortions necessary to kiss its underside. When artifacts are used in unforeseen or counterintuitive ways, the ideas that inspired their design are brought into relief, through their contraposition with new programs of use.

A second type of moment when the material world emerges into the foreground occurs when an object disrupts a desired or habitual course of action. The immediate causes of disruption can vary. Sometimes, an object breaks down, or malfunctions, failing to provide the service that it was designed to offer. Repair or redesign become necessary, bringing into view the object's affordances.[24] Other times, it is the user who deviates from the object's expectations, imposing new and unanticipated demands. Objects are frequently incorrect about us, as any left-handed person knows. When their assumptions are wrong, they force themselves into our consciousness. Often, we anthropomorphize the disobedient object in question, as if its resistance were personal. These moments reveal the extent to which we mentally blur the lines between people and things. We yell at the computer when it refuses to respond to our keystrokes. We kick the door when it jams, to punish it for being incalcitrant. We repeatedly jab at a lit elevator button, as if this expression of our frustration meant anything at all to its impassive circuitry.

Moments of disruption are particularly revealing in the case of public objects, because they elicit reactions from the people and organizations who hold power over things. In response to changing social or physical conditions, the affordances of a public space can be altered—*reinforced*, or *adapted*. And, again, this takes place through material, symbolic, or institutional means. Consider a large flowerbed positioned near the entrance of a public building (say a library) that, due to its position in between the sidewalk and the library entrance, has come to serve as an informal pedestrian route, resulting in a defined pathway, barren of vegetation.[25] A knee-high wrought-iron fence can be erected around the flowerbed, making it physically awkward to cut through the flowers on foot; a small sign can be planted, asking visitors to stay on the sidewalk; or library security guards can be tasked with keeping an eye on the flowerbed during their rounds, and asking patrons not to intrude. In these three hypothetical scenarios, the initial affordance (*flowerbeds are for admiring, not for walking through*) has not been altered, but instead reinforced physically, symbolically, or institutionally.

Now consider a fourth possibility. A landscaping company is hired by the library to create a formal path where there was previously an informal one. They remove the crushed daffodils in the place where people have chosen to walk, and line the resulting pathway with paving stones, while leaving the surrounding flowerbed untouched. The social meaning of the space has been changed. Formerly ornamental, the area is now functional. In this case, its affordances have been physically *adapted* rather than *reinforced*. Crushed daffodils might seem a trivial matter, but often the stakes are higher. As theorist Langdon Winner famously argued, objects are political—their materiality allows them to reinforce social hierarchies or advance specific interests.[26] By suggesting affordances, or programs of use, they become charged with normative significance—they guide and constrain human activity in ways that are rarely directly coercive, but that establish the parameters of user behavior, empowering some users and marginalizing others. Their ability to gently nudge us toward one course of action is just as political and consequential as their ability to prohibit, punish, or exclude alternatives.

Finally, a third scenario in which material artifacts emerge into the foreground of human events occurs when they *disappear*, revealing the degree to which habitual patterns of action depend upon overlooked artifacts and technologies. Just as a misplaced set of keys highlights all of the routine activities that require locking or unlocking, some public objects—bridges, churches, monuments—reveal their broader importance to a community

when threatened or removed.[27] The affordances of these objects, perhaps taken for granted, become conspicuous when the object disappears.

At these moments, the capacity of material things to recede into the background of human action and passively stabilize society has a paradoxical effect, as social action can be destabilized in unpredictable ways in their absence. For some New Yorkers, the twin towers of the World Trade Center were functional as well as symbolic landmarks—large objects, visible from a great distance, which helped pedestrians find their bearings in dense Midtown or Downtown Manhattan streets. After the World Trade Center fell on 9/11, their psychological disorientation was overlaid by moments of literal disorientation—for example, when emerging from a subway station in an unfamiliar part of town.

When appearing for the first time, disrupting our desired or habitual behavior, or disappearing, things make trouble, revealing their importance within the dynamic and uneven social landscape of the contemporary city. But these moments have received little attention from mainstream social science. Traditional sociology offers little guidance on how and when material objects are contested, modified, and adapted, a topic that has only recently begun to generate concerted interest.[28] This book is motivated by a series of speculations. What if, rather than looking past objects, we place them at the center of the analysis? What if we direct our attention to the occasions when public objects first appear, when they disrupt our behavior, and when they disappear—moments when the material world emerges into the foreground of individual thought and social consciousness? By shifting focus away from individual human actors or social groups—conventional "units of analysis" in the social sciences—to the objects that they use, perhaps we can learn something new about how people relate to the material world around them in the public spaces and places of the city.

Public Space and Place

All of the objects in this book are found in *public space*. In fact, the public space in and around New York City is not just the setting but, to a lesser degree, the subject of the chapters that follow. At a philosophical level, public space is important because it is the material embodiment of the public *realm*—a theoretical arena in which open cultural expression and unencumbered social contact may occur.[29] Rarely, if ever, does actual public space live up to this ideal. But public space is nonetheless vital to a wide range of social processes that depend upon interaction and communication. It is where

the members of a society come together, if they come together. It is where democracy happens, if it happens. It is where we encounter strangers, and people whose backgrounds differ from our own. Public space is where social movements mobilize and conflicts erupt. For these reasons, it is central to discourse and collective social action. Some people consciously participate in public life by volunteering at a soup kitchen, supporting a professional sports team, or voting on election day. However, by a qualitatively different standard, we are all public actors whenever we are *in* public. It is partly by sharing meaningful forms of contact with the material world outside our doors that we become a society.

In less abstract terms, public spaces differ from private spaces in that public spaces are seen as providing public (non-exclusive) benefits. This role is institutionalized in formal laws and ordinances that seek to insure that the objects found in public space are both publicly accessible and for public use, a consideration that limits the authority of any one private person or organization over the built environment. In other words, the material form of objects and rules about how objects are to be used are both central to the publicness of public space. Gramercy Park, on Manhattan's East Side, is a manicured green space surrounded by a tall iron fence and locked gates, to which local property owners have the key. The park is a private space. It is not just legally but visibly and tangibly private, and it has objects to thank for this. Manhattan's Central Park, in contrast, is accessed via gateways and openings that were designed to be welcoming. Central Park is a public space. It is not just legally but visibly and tangibly public, and it owes this, in part, to material objects.

Some public spaces are publicly owned and managed by the state. But increasingly, they are privately owned. And more generally, across the United States, parks, plazas, and other public spaces are encroached upon by private interests and private enterprise.[30] Nevertheless, the areas in and around New York City still contain great expanses of public space, and much of this terrain is intensively used. This is a book about public objects, but it is also, necessarily, about public space, which is constituted, embodied, and realized by such objects.

Place is another concept that is important to this book. Place is different from space. Space, including public space, is inherently abstract, emptied of its specific contents in order to gather together social processes that do not "take place" in the same place. Places, in contrast, are tangible, meaningful, and unique. According to a definitive essay by sociologist Thomas Gieryn, all places have three ingredients: a location, a configuration of material things, and a set of meanings that people attach to both the location and the things

involved.[31] Although social life occurs within and across space, it is situated and immersed in place. In other words, we do not consciously live, work, study, or spend our leisure time "in space," we do these things in places—discrete locations that have their own identities, and that, importantly, are composed of specific combinations of material objects.[32]

Places are invested with meaning. Sometimes the meanings involved are sacred, sometimes they are profane. A concert hall, a prison yard, and a vacant lot all might qualify as places, although they carry starkly different connotations. The way we think about places is crucial to their ability to shape and structure our social lives. Places anchor the everyday interpretations that are necessary for any action or interaction—the basic, usually unspoken set of assumptions that sociologists who study interaction refer to as "the definition of the situation."[33] For this reason, behavioral norms are place specific. We do not usually throw parties in a graveyard or brush our teeth at the post office.

Just as public objects are vital to public space, they are central to place. Things are given meaning by the specific locations in which they are found. A urinal mounted on the wall of an art museum is to be treated differently from the one in the bathroom. The vertical steel poles found in a subway car are materially identical, but sociologically different, from the ones found in firehouses, which are, in turn, different from the ones found in strip clubs, although all three poles look and feel the same. By the same token, objects help to define and create specific places. When we walk into an ambiguous place for the first time—a new store or restaurant, or, for that matter, a neighbor's house—we tend to find ourselves asking, "what happens here?" Objects provide our first clue, and in many cases, the only one we need. In thinking about material objects, place directs our attention to how objects are used and perceived by people in specific locations. Considerations related to the possession of objects, or the distribution of objects in space, or across space, though important in their own right, run only through the background of this book. In the foreground is the question of how objects are used (or misused) at specific places and times.

Programming the City

All of the case studies in this book are set in New York City or the surrounding area. This is not coincidental. The city has become a veritable petri dish for an approach to urban design and planning that raises the profile of mundane public objects. In recent decades, city agencies have focused on improving quality of life through increasingly public interventions in the

small-scale environments of the city. This strategy has transformed small, quotidian things that were formerly supporting actors in the drama of city planning, objects such as park benches, bike racks, and apartment building entryways, into leading players in their own right.[34] Public objects, the centerpieces of this book, have become battlegrounds for competing ideas about what kind of city New York is, and to whom it belongs.

It was not always this way. In the early twentieth century, city planners prioritized housing and infrastructure projects that were massive in physical scale, and legitimized their material interventions in the landscape of New York by invoking the economic and social prospects of the city as a whole. Older neighborhoods inhabited by immigrants or people of color were regarded by city planners such as Robert Moses not simply as expendable but as blights on the landscape of the modern city. Informal urbanism—the ostensibly chaotic street life of the city—was a problem to be solved through the application of technocratic expertise.[35] Public benefit was construed broadly in this process, superseding concern for the specific communities that were most directly affected. The needs of a particular neighborhood were only rarely invoked to justify the design of federally subsidized public housing, for example, or the drastic expansion of the city park system or highway system.[36]

During this time, the authority of city planners and urban designers increased in accordance with the size and ambition of their projects, insulating them from the public they served. But during the second half of the century, the scope and ambition of urban development began to change.[37] A mounting chorus of influential critics condemned urban planning as a high-handed enterprise, indifferent to the needs and concerns of local communities. In New York City, the writing and activism of journalist Jane Jacobs helped to trigger a sea change in urban design and planning.[38] During a series of high-profile battles, community-based social movements forced public authorities to modify or abandon major interventions in the urban landscape. These defeats helped to change both the culture of urban planning and its legal and regulatory context, as community stakeholders were increasingly granted input into the siting and design of local public spaces.

In the case of large-scale projects, this input became a required element of the public review processes required by city, state, or federal law.[39] In other cases, community actors were involved in the planning or design process from the outset, a practice known variously as community-based or participatory planning and design.[40] As a result, city planners have become more susceptible to political pressures and arguably more receptive to community-level concerns. Not coincidentally, contemporary city planners are far more likely to emphasize the importance of what sociologist

William H. Whyte called the "social life of small urban spaces"—the informal patterns of thought and behavior that develop at street level in the city's parks and plazas and on its sidewalks.[41]

In a 2006 essay, roughly at the start of the period covered by this book, Amanda Burden, a New York City planning commissioner under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, acknowledged these changes in plain terms, suggesting that Jacobs "prevailed" in her struggle against Robert Moses by influencing the context in which planners now operate. "While no one person changed the physical landscape of New York as much as Robert Moses, Jane Jacobs' legacy and her influence is much more deeply rooted and felt widely by urbanists, planners and elected officials," Burden wrote. The centralized planning and "broad brush" plans of the Robert Moses era, according to Burden, were "a thing of the past": "Planning today is noisy, combative, iterative, and reliant on community involvement. Any initiative that does not build consensus—that is not shaped by the give-and-take of the public review process—will be an inferior plan and, deservedly, will be voted down by the City Council, and die."[42]

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the Bloomberg administration extensively reworked the urban fabric of the city, using policy and planning to spur private development, transform transportation infrastructure, and modify public space. These sweeping changes reflected a complex and conflicted set of objectives for the city, enhancing environmental sustainability and public safety, while simultaneously converting urban space into an asset intended to attract affluent residents and tourists to the city and spur real-estate investment.[43] When Mayor Bill de Blasio took Bloomberg's place, he made only sporadic efforts to deviate from his predecessor's approach to public space, largely preserving, if not expanding, Bloomberg's legacy. Contemporary New York City, where public space is both valued and locally contested, is an ideal environment in which to take a close look at the social role of public objects. In this place and time, small, humble things found out in public—bits and pieces of infrastructure, components of green space, the odd assortment of objects that planners refer to as "sidewalk furniture"—emerge as sites where competing ideas about social life come into visible conflict.

Methods and Organization of the Book

Many fascinating books have been written that explore the social role of things. Several of these books pursue a single material object across breadths of time and space.[44] Other similarly excellent books have looked at how a new object is interpreted or used by different members of a community,

or across a society.[45] Still others have examined all of the objects found in a given home, or on a particular block, in a sort of material census.[46] This book attempts something different. The chapters that follow provide a close look at routine interactions between people and things. Their guiding assumption is that these interactions contain valuable information—clues that help us to uncover new insights about how the social world and the world of things are intertwined, more generally. To paraphrase this book's epigraphs, the built landscape is shaped by an array of social forces, and this landscape, in turn, shapes us, guiding our thoughts and actions. For this reason, public objects are Rosetta stones, whose stories help us to decode the sociology of urban and suburban life, revealing the links between our subjective experience of the city and the invisible factors at work in a given place and time.

Each of the chapters that follow begins with a detailed look at the social life of a public object, drawing on my fieldwork in New York City and the surrounding suburbs. I then gradually expand the focus to include the people and places, and, eventually, the political, economic, and cultural forces that surround the thing in question. By zooming in on a single object, and then zooming out to bring its social and historical context into the frame, I try to gain a better understanding of how the material realm mediates between our individual, subjective experiences and the larger social world we inhabit.

The six objects featured in this book were chosen because they share two traits in common. All of the objects are found in public space. And all of the objects, in one way or another, make trouble. They are, or have been, controversial—focal points of social and political friction or debate. As noted above, the social role of material objects is invisible under most circumstances. It emerges into the foreground when objects problematize life as usual, offering new affordances or taking away old ones in ways that create tension or conflict. Understanding the sociology of public objects means getting to the bottom of this trouble.[47] As I progressed through the case studies in this book, I chose my research methods based upon the kind of trouble that the objects caused. I obtained county medical records in order to study pedestrian deaths in the suburbs. I scanned the minutes of public meetings and combed through hundreds of media reports to trace the political controversy provoked by the design and planning of Brooklyn Bridge Park. I used ethnographic fieldwork and interviews to sketch out the widely divergent meanings and interpretations attached to the plazas created by the New York City Department of Transportation (NYC DOT). And so on.

This omnivorous approach to research produced evidence that falls in four general categories. Along with a constantly shifting team of graduate

and undergraduate research assistants, I engaged in extensive participant observation in the settings described in this book, generating hundreds of pages of notes, photographs, and illustrations. As part of this ethnographic work, I observed the object at the start of each chapter for an extended period (between six and nine hours) on a single day, in some cases repeating this "day in the life" approach over two or three days. This laborious method resulted in perhaps the best kind of data on the way objects and spaces are used, producing rich and detailed descriptions of interactions between people and things. The second category is spatial and demographic evidence. I used quantitative data gathered by the Census Bureau and other government agencies to situate the objects in their socioeconomic and demographic context. Thirdly, I talked to city planners, designers, community members, and users of the objects and spaces discussed.[48] Finally, I relied heavily on a wide variety of archival sources, including newspaper articles, blueprints and other technical documents, advertisements, medical examiners' reports, and so forth. With these data in hand, I proceeded in an inductive, rather than a deductive, fashion. Rarely did I have clear hypotheses to test. Instead, I used the sources at my disposal to extend my ethnographic perspective and map out the larger spatial and historical context for each object and the place where it is found, moving outward until a pattern or trend emerged that provided fresh perspective, or an insight that felt unobvious. There was never a clear and definite endpoint to this process: in the case of each object in the book, I concluded my research when I felt as if I had learned something new, and when, for practical reasons, I simply needed to move on.

This book is separated into three parts. Each part focuses on one of the important moments in the social life of a material thing. The first part, "Appearance," describes the design process and the introduction of new artifacts into an existing social context. In chapter 1, "The Public Lawn," I tell the story of a sloping lawn in a controversial new public park on the Brooklyn waterfront. Through interviews and archival research on the design process, I excavate the origins of several debates that threatened to cast a shadow on what elected officials and city planners heralded as a rival to the city's great urban parks. When the coalition that initially supported the park fractured, a variety of competing objectives for the space emerged. In advocating for specific designs and defending or criticizing the plan to place housing in the park, community members constructed the park's users, imagining various publics who would benefit from the space.

Chapter 2, "The Folding Chair," tells the story of a blue folding chair in a newly created public plaza in Jackson Heights, Queens. In 2008, as part

of a broader program of infrastructural renewal, NYC DOT launched a plan to convert dozens of underutilized spaces across the city into pedestrian plazas, citing new urbanist principles, public health, and environmental sustainability. This initiative has extended deep into the outer boroughs, creating plazas in neighborhoods that vary widely in their demographic and socioeconomic mix. The prospect of open, flexible urban space and informal street life embodied by the folding chair was not universally welcomed, and served as a sort of Rorschach test revealing the unique aspirations and anxieties at work in different areas of the city. By examining in detail several plaza projects that met different fates, the chapter reveals the way attempts to foster urban quality of life are shaped by the local political and social contours of a heterogeneous city.

The second part of the book, "Disruption," describes attempts to modify objects in response to changing social conditions and social norms. Chapter 3, "The Traffic Divider," moves from New York City to its suburbs, where a growing low-income population occupies a built landscape designed for the last century's middle class. In recent years, the state of New Jersey has confronted a rapid deterioration in pedestrian safety—the result of a growing suburban population that lacks access to an automobile and is forced to improvise dangerously in a sprawling landscape of strip malls and divided highways. The objects that populate this landscape, cement traffic dividers and dusty strips along the sides of arterial roadways, take on different functions and meanings for different classes of users. After investigating pedestrian deaths on two roadways in Atlantic County, Black Horse and White Horse Pike, I describe the potentially serious human cost of a condition I refer to as programmatic conflict—a disjunction between the needs of users and the design of built space. I then show that inequality within and between suburban communities shapes the ways in which they seek, through design and regulation, to bring public behavior and the programming of built space back into sync.

In chapter 4, "The Subway Door," I take a detailed look at a particularly controversial and problematic object in New York City's transportation infrastructure. Since the first subway stations opened, just after the turn of the twentieth century, the transportation agencies that manage the New York City subway system have grappled with passenger behavior in and around the points of entry for individual subway cars. The subway relies not just on the formal infrastructure, comprising the material technologies and human employees who work for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), but on something I call *informal infrastructure*—systems

of passenger etiquette that are not simply polite or pleasant but vital to the functioning of this formal infrastructure. By blocking the doors, pushing on board an already crowded train, or holding the doors open, subway riders violate this etiquette, compromising the reliability and efficiency of service. In recent years, these breaches of informal subway etiquette have become increasingly common, compelling the MTA to seek behavioral engineering through a variety of means.

The third and final part of the book, "Disappearance," looks at the social consequences of removing objects from urban public space. Chapter 5, "The Newsstand," analyzes the social consequences of an object's gradual disappearance from landscape of the city. The sidewalk newsstand is an iconic New York City artifact designed to house a person and to mediate social interaction in specific ways, facilitating the exchange of money, goods, and information. The formal social functions of these kiosks, however, obscure their informal social functions, which include the monitoring of public space and the fostering of everyday sociability among New Yorkers. In telling the story of these disappearing artifacts, I flesh out these informal social functions, illustrating the costs of losing material artifacts that provide stability, security, and social interaction in otherwise anonymous urban space.

Finally, the concluding chapter looks at a sixth artifact, a humble bench in Midtown's soaring Trump Tower that disappeared temporarily, only to be begrudgingly restored by the well-known owner of this eponymous skyscraper. By looking at the controversial history of this final object, I attempt to bring the book up to date, pull together the threads that run through the previous chapters, and summarize some general findings about how people relate to the objects and public spaces of the city. But first things first. We start with two stories about when public objects first appear on the scene . . .

INDEX