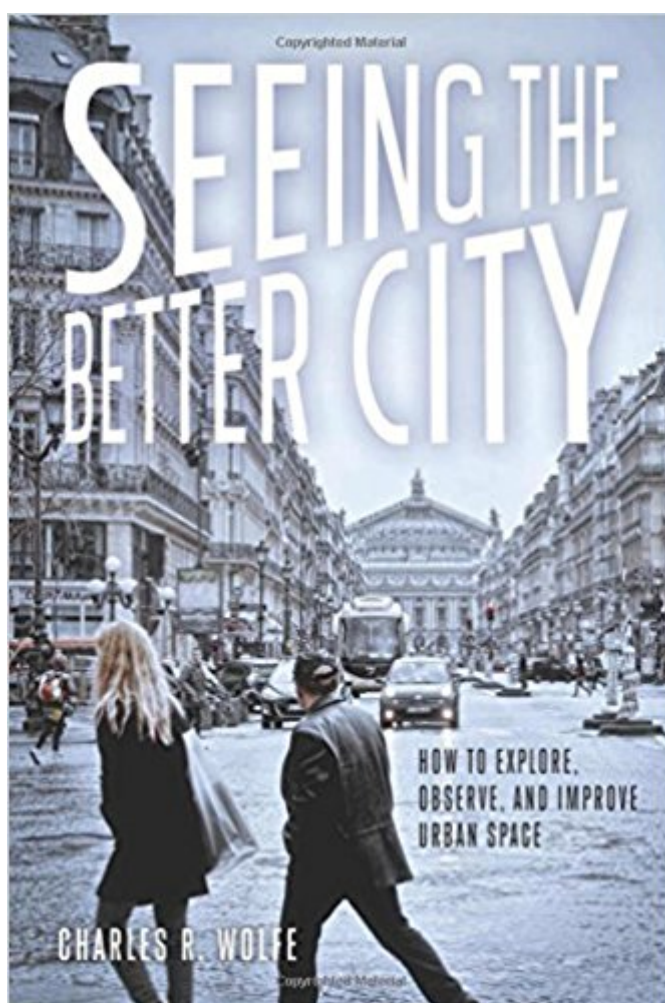


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# Seeing The Better City: How To Explore, Observe, And Improve Urban Space



## Synopsis

In order to understand and improve cities today, personal observation remains as important as ever. While big data, digital mapping, and simulated cityscapes are valuable tools for understanding urban space, using them without on-the-ground, human impressions risks creating places that do not reflect authentic local context. *Seeing the Better City* brings our attention back to the real world right in front of us, focusing it once more on the sights, sounds, and experiences of place in order to craft policies, plans, and regulations to shape better urban environments. Through clear prose and vibrant photographs, Charles Wolfe shows those who experience cities how they might catalog the influences of urban form, neighborhood dynamics, public transportation, and myriad other basic city elements that impact their daily lives. He then shares insights into how they can use those observations to contribute to better planning and design decisions. Wolfe calls this the “urban diary” approach, and highlights how the perspective of the observer is key to understanding the dynamics of urban space. He concludes by offering contemporary examples and guidance on how to use carefully recorded and organized observations as a tool to create change in urban planning conversations and practice. From city-dwellers to elected officials involved in local planning and design issues, this book is an invaluable tool for constructive, creative discourse about improving urban space.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Absorbing...[Wolfe] encourages readers to think with our eyes and communicate with visual

imagery in order to improve our cities." (Huffington Post)"A book of insightful urban observation...works well as a detailed how-to instruction manual on capturing the essence of place." (Crosscut)"With this book Wolfe has created a detailed how-to for personal observation, for whatever reason the observer chooses." (Landscape Architecture Magazine)"As a guide for becoming a better observer, Seeing the Better City is highly successful. Wolfe provides a structured template for an urban diary, but invites readers to construct their own." (ASLA's The Dirt)"A comprehensive toolkit for helping us reintroduce the human experience into urban planning." (Spacing)"Touching on historical examples, from Berenice Abbott's Changing New York series from the '30s, to neighborhood debates of today's changing modern metropolis, Wolfe outlines a philosophy that reflects his multihyphenate nature, blending the artistic approach of a photographer with the rigor of a lawyer." (Curbed)"If we want to create the places of our dreams, we need to observe our cities more clearly. Seeing the Better City is both a thoughtful guide and an enticement to take up this challenge." (Charles Montgomery, Author of "Happy City")"We experience cities through what we see. Not since the legendary Kevin Lynch has an author opened our eyes to the power of observing urban space. This book masterfully illustrates how to understand and capture moments in time, see present-day patterns and layers of history, and gain visual insights into the urban space that shapes our daily lives. Chuck's images and words will truly inspire you." (Mitchell Silver, NYC Parks Commissioner and former president of the American Planning Association)"With Seeing the Better City, Chuck Wolfe accomplishes what few have tried to actually bridge multiple disciplines in order to help people effectively see, understand, and improve urban spaces. He provides us with an invaluable, accessible roadmap for a place-led future." (Ethan Kent, Senior Vice President, Project for Public Spaces, NYC)"We need to be incessant students of place. In Seeing the Better City, Chuck gives us this mandate as well as the tools to succeed in the endeavor. This book is a valuable contribution to the place conversation by championing place ethnography for the betterment of cities and their people." (Dr. Katherine Loflin, The City Doctor)"A toolkit for fine-tuning your observational acumen...this type of close, thoughtful looking is a way to snap out of the stupor of the daily grind and parse the details that are so easily overshadowed. But, Wolfe writes, it's also a way to think about how to shape the future." (Atlantic's CityLab)

Wolfe emphasizes personal observation as a key to creating better neighborhoods.

Absolutely fantastic addition to my urbanist bookshelf! Chuck's book focuses on one of the most

important aspects of our "smart city" era - direct observation of our cities - and amazingly, it's the only recent book to do so. With modern technology and the proliferation of smartphones this book is a thoughtful and educational guide not only on how to see patterns in urban environments, but also how to tell the story you need to make the case for crucial changes that are too often unillustrated (and unsuccessful). Giving the public ownership over their city is desperately needed if we are to work together to improve cities for everyone - and I couldn't be happier that Chuck's book literally puts this power into their hands. Any city-dweller should buy this book!

The more images captured by Chuck Wolfe that you come in contact with, the more it becomes clear that he sees cities through two lenses: one as a photographer and the other as a lawyer/professor. It is also clear that one lens informs the other. As a professor, he sees the way the city *ought* to be based on policy and politics, and the reader can see that this may inform where he points his camera. As a photographer, his eye is drawn to interesting subjects, often in the built environment and informed by his legal practice. I believe some of these images taken in the built environment through the *photographer lens* *inform* his legal practice and teachings as well. Regardless of which lens you think he is looking through for any given image, you will appreciate his composition, his subtle capture of color to punctuate an idea, and his sense of humor. If you are an urbanist, you will appreciate the subtle appreciation of the city; if you are a photography buff, you will find images of the city that may not be what you expected to find in a book of photographs of a city. Either way, let go and let Chuck Wolfe will take you on a journey through the city - you won't be sorry.

In *Seeing the Better City*, Chuck expands upon his observations not only of individuals within an urban environment or the bits & pieces that make up a city, but also of the value of taking a step back within oneself to appreciate the broader picture around each of us. Yes, I think something should be one way, or maybe two. But as Chuck encourages his readers to do, when I look at it from another perspective, putting myself in the shoes of the woman down the street or the man who lives in the tent beneath the highway, maybe my vision isn't the only vision, or even the correct vision. Considering how each of us play our part within our vast urban networks, and how those networks *of* sidewalks, streets, bike lanes, neighborly hellos, and street-side restaurants *define* our vision of our homes and our lives, expanding our views and appreciation therein (and thereout) allows us as city dwellers to build upon our interactions to create urban environments that reflect natural human needs. What makes his

argument even more interesting is his encouragement of each of us to create our own "Urban Diary." A personal presentation, through words, photographs, video, artwork, or whatever medium speaks to us, to attune ourselves to our urban environments and share or not that vision with others. Taking the time to create your diary inherently provides lessons in how the world shapes itself, and how humans interact within it. It expands beyond the simple brick & stick buildings and encourages appreciation of culture and history and grace within civilizations, both current and ancient. It allows us to grasp what it is that makes us human, and makes us whole, and even what makes us broken, as people and as a community. Just imagine if each person took the time to memorialize their experiences, their perceptions, and their desires for an ideal. Incorporating those ideas, some of which may seem infinitesimal, if not entirely insignificant, and others to the contrary, into our cities as we grow can only create more human, more vibrant, communities that embrace their differences and their beauty in ways that we cannot now comprehend. And so, I highly recommend *Seeing the Better City*. It opens the reader's eyes in new ways, and allow us to see what, quite honestly, becomes the better city.

"*Seeing the Better City*" has brought about a different quality in my engagement with my surroundings. Having lived in my current city for over ten years, I had come to take much for granted. Reading this book is allowing me to see my city with fresh eyes, experiencing myself as an intrinsic part of it, rather than separate. I find myself engaging with it in a more active and surprisingly satisfying way. For instance, as I continue to read more of this interesting book, I am noticing details about my city, both small and subtle, as well as the obvious. I allow my gaze to linger and to savor what I am seeing. I notice that which is pleasing to me and that which I can rearrange with my mind's eye to become more pleasing. I have slowed down in order to truly "see" what it is about my city that brings me joy. The city I live in is generally easy on the eye, and I have come to take it for granted. Now that I am reading "*Seeing the Better City*", I have a renewed appreciation for the beauty of my city. Seeing with "fresh eyes" has become an essential part of my new engagement with my city. I feel enthusiastic as I take my almost daily forays with new and interesting discoveries. I look forward to reading the remainder of this very practical and interesting book.

*Seeing the Better City* brings into sharp focus the importance of including a diversity of viewpoints into the conversation of how our cities should grow and evolve. The book explores how to create

urban spaces that are better for everyone, not just the most connected and influential. The reader learns how to create and present inclusive visual narratives that illuminate the diversity of human experience within a city; and the important role visual narrative can play in smart and equitable decision-making. A very readable and informative book!

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