How to Tell the Story of a City

Jon Christensen: [00:00:00] Welcome to Story+World, Changing Stories for a Changing Planet, the podcast of UCLA's Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies. I'm Jon Christensen, the director of LENS, here with our producer, Liv Slaby, and our guest today, Michael Kimmelman. Michael Kimmelman is the architecture critic at The New York Times and founder and editor at large for Headway, a small team of journalists at the Times dedicated to exploring the world's challenges through the lens of progress Michael has written from more than 40 countries and was a columnist based in Berlin covering culture and politics in Europe and the Middle East.

He teaches at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. And his most recent book is The Intimate City, a series of walks around New York City with architects, historians, and others during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although, Michael, your official title is architecture [00:01:00] critic, I think of you more as the newspaper's urbanism critic.

I know you write about buildings, but you also write about cities, infrastructure, the environment, and climate change. Looking back over your writing about cities over the past 15 years since you returned to New York as the Times architecture critic, I'm struck by the variety of stories that you have told about cities, which is why we're calling this episode How to Tell the Story of a City.

Michael, I'd like to start with a foundational question. Do you think cities need a narrative?

Michael Kimmelman: Pleasure to be here, Jon. And the answer to that is yes, of course. Cities are complex constantly evolving narratives changing narratives which we create. In a way, you know, the news business is a created narrative and it's something that we tell ourselves to make sense of the world we live in.

I see what I do as making sense of the built world because I kinda feel like we are what [00:02:00] we build, which is why I feel like writing about buildings is part of my job, but really you want to talk about the way in which buildings exist in a context. 'Cause they do. They're not sculptures. And they exist in places, on streets, in neighborhoods used by certain people over time.

And play that out and you realize they're also built by complex numbers of people. So they're, really microcosms of the city itself which is made by us all.

So I just thought that that was actually a way of talking about architecture that spoke to both architecture's genuine beauty and complexity.

Architects are not just working in a studio by themselves, but they have to work with all sorts of different people to bring about something, to bring about something they think is gonna improve the life of the people who come into contact with it. In a way, it's like the politics we conduct.

Doesn't always work, nor do buildings all the time. And I also think that [00:03:00] working against strictures, working within confines as many artists will say, but certainly architects know produces a particular kind of art. And that to me is the art of architecture

Jon Christensen: Do cities need different narratives at different times?

You did say they're changing all the time and that story is changing all the time. And I'm wondering if there's a kind of need for different stories at different times. Like New York during the pandemic, for example, when you embarked on-

...

Jon Christensen: That project of "The Intimate City."

Michael Kimmelman: Yeah. It's a really good question, and I think part of my job as a writer and essentially as a storyteller, because that's what I do by nature as a journalist, is to try to find the right story at the right moment.

And I would say that COVID was thrust upon us all and left us all in this, you know, limbo and a feeling of being lost. I remember, my own [00:04:00] plans, were You know, shot to hell because I didn't even know if I could leave the house and that was true of so many people. So then the question is, what is the tether?

And to me, the early moments of that, really quite early were involved with looking out my window and seeing other people looking out their windows across the street and realizing that the thing that provided people with a sense of place and continuity, hope too, was the physical city itself because the city has gone through so many endless crises and changes, but endures and that the idea that we shared this city, was binding people.

You remember that-- I don't know if it was happening out here in LA, but it certainly was in New York, that at 7:00 in the evening people would open their windows and bang pots.

Jon Christensen: Yes.

Michael Kimmelman: Yeah. And that was because that was when the, emergency workers in the hospitals were changing shifts so it was a thank you [00:05:00] for all those people in the ERs.

And that was also a moment we could see each other and see the city around us, see the streets. So the narrative in a sense to me was what is the story the city has told us about, moments like this? And about how the city itself brings us together. So for me that was also a personal narrative because doing that project provided me with a sense of grounding, a sense of purpose at a time when we all felt a little lost.

A grounding in something clearly larger than myself, which we all want and the city is that. And I thought that narrative was also useful because frankly it was a distraction for Times readers, as well as for me and for the people I was doing this with because all we were reading were horrible stories about, you know- Yes

doom and gloom, right? And here were stories about, neighborhoods, places, things we could identify with, things that had meaning and some joy, and beauty because they were often [00:06:00] wonderful places. And they were reminders of the fact that the city will come back and it will be the same. So that to me was like that was healthy for me to do that.

That was the story for me too.

Jon Christensen: Yeah and there're a bunch of was it 12 or 14 beautiful s- stories or something, that- I don't remember- Yeah ... right

Michael Kimmelman: now.

Jon Christensen: And all based around you wrote to people and said, you know Would you like to go on a walk? Yes. Um, and, and we'll walk and talk.

Michael Kimmelman: Yep.

Because we could still go outside.

Jon Christensen: Yes. Yeah.

Michael Kimmelman: That was the one thing, at least for a while, we felt we could do. Yeah. You know, how could we be together? It was walking around the city.

Jon Christensen: Yeah. And I was delighted to rediscover that in the book, it begins and ends with walks with Eric Sanderson-

Michael Kimmelman: Yeah

Jon Christensen: Who wrote the book, put together the project called "Mannahatta" that looked back at the deep history of New York through maps and archives and stories and records and at sort of a deep ecological history of New York. And then there's many other wonderful stories, contemporary and [00:07:00] historical, in those conversations, but I thought that one, going back to that deep environmental history of New York.

I've had the pleasure and privilege of knowing Eric as well, and I find it's always been fascinating to me that when that book came out, w- there were always these conversations of like, "We should do this for the San Francisco Bay Area," or, "We should do this for LA." Yeah. You know?

Michael Kimmelman: Oh, absolutely.

And I love Eric and I'm grateful to him, um- He's got a new book coming out too, next month, and I think it's gonna be great. Carries forward the story of Mannahatta. Uh, for me personally, What began as a kind of like, I would do this with a couple people and see what happened, I think the response to it I got both inside the Times, but also from the public, made me feel that there was a hunger for this essentially counter-narrative, something that wasn't about the unknowable next 24 hours, but something more enduring.

And then I thought, "Okay, well, if I'm gonna do it as a longer thing, it has to have some narrative arcs," and one of them was chronological, [00:08:00] so I thought it was important to find a way to talk about New York long, long before it was New York, almost before the continent existed with Eric.

Another was to have all these different perspectives, because the city is made up of, literally made up, uh, by people who bring different kinds of expertise. Some of them are architects, of course, but some of them are community organizers. Some of them are cartographers. Some of them are lawyers.

Some of them are historians and environmentalists. So I wanted to represent those ways of seeing how the city was built. And finally, I wanted to at least suggest that there was an attempt to talk about different kinds of neighborhoods, 'cause that's another narrative of the city, the complexity, the tapestry of the city.

And so when Eric and I did the first one, and that was fun, we were trying to think of something else, and I was both really anxious to have another narrative of the Bronx, and also to sort of carry [00:09:00] forward the story from the early one chronologically a bit and talk more about what happened, after the Ice Age.

Yeah. And when Mickey Mantle was playing center field for the New York Yankees.

Jon Christensen: And the groundwater was seeping up through the, the grass in the- Exactly ... outer field- Exactly ... 'cause the side ground... I love that piece.

Michael Kimmelman: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Jon Christensen: Looking at Los Angeles you've written in recent years about the LA River, what might rise from the fires in LA, and water in LA.

And I'd like to take those in turn and talk about how you thought about telling the story of LA through each of those stories, how you reported for narrative- Mm-hmm ... um, and then the literary de-devices, if you will, or the formal devices that you use to tell each story. Let's start with the LA River.

Michael Kimmelman: Yeah, which I think was the first one. And we began to talk around them too- Yeah ... and you were very helpful and helped inspire that too. I didn't grow up here, [00:10:00] obviously, and I'm, uh, very mindful that Angelinos aren't really thrilled when New York people come and tell them about their own city unless they-

Jon Christensen: Kind of famously.

Michael Kimmelman: Famously. Unless they try to really learn the lay of land. So I wanted to do that. And it took a long time. Actually, I think I started to sort of know a little about the LA River years ago when, Mia Lehrer, the landscape architect, took me kayaking in the LA River. And the funny thing I remember

about that was I called a friend of mine who I was supposed to have dinner with that evening who, lived on Mulholland.

So take that as you may. And when we got out of the river, I found my phone, which I couldn't take in the kayak with me, frantically calling him. I said, "Ricky, I I'm really sorry. I'm definitely gonna be late for dinner. I'm on the shore of the LA River, taking my kayak back to this kayak place.

And, I was just kayaking up the LA River. I don't know how long it'll take for me to get to your [00:11:00] house." And there was this very long pause, and he said, "Michael, I have no idea what you're talking about." "And so that's the best excuse I've ever heard." In other words, what I got from that was here's somebody who lived in Los Angeles at that point for 40 years and effectively didn't even know the LA River existed.

And one of the reasons I'd been with Mia was because she was talking about these questions around essentially restoring the green part of the river, that had been lost when it was channelized. But I began to have more sort of conversations around it, and I began to see the river itself as the story of Los Angeles.

The evolution of the river was itself the narrative of Los Angeles, its changing identity, and that attached to the river were all sorts of dreams of what Los Angeles might be or should be or never became. And we could talk about that too, but th-th-the narrative spine [00:12:00] was literally the 51-mile river, which runs through dozens of jurisdictions and very different kinds of places that don't necessarily see themselves linked and yet are, both by the coincidence, you might say, of being along this, this channelized river, but also by the new sort of realities of environmental change and ideas about natural restoration, governance, inequity, because the river became, the sort of physical embodiment of LA's inequities.

So for me, that's, as a writer, that's like a beautiful opportunity to try to tell those stories and find people at different points of the river who see it differently and therefore see LA differently. I mean, that was the heart of the way I thought about the piece. I set it up, Also in a way chronologically, so that there's a movement through time that brings you to the question of what the river should be, which is really a [00:13:00] question of what LA is at this moment, facing environmental questions, facing questions around, inequity and the complexity of the society.

The river provided me with a scaffolding.

Jon Christensen: And it's also became an embodiment in a way of what LA wants to be. We did a poll, several years ago about the LA River in which we found that, there are some people who don't know there's a river.

Michael Kimmelman: Yes.

Jon Christensen: And there are, but there are a lot of people-

Michael Kimmelman: Right ... who

Jon Christensen: kinda know there's a river, but they've never been there, many of them. A few people have been there more than once, a few more have been there-

Michael Kimmelman: Right ...

Jon Christensen: once, you know. But they all have overwhelmingly and across neighborhoods and demographics a sense that they want the river, they understand that the river needs to be for flood control, with the big rains that we get a few times a year, contain those waters and not flood the city.

They want it to be a place where people can recreate, safely, play, and they want it to be habitat for [00:14:00] other species. And so, like, Angelenos want everything- Of course ... from this river.

Michael Kimmelman: Of course.

So it's, you know, it's the famous image of touching parts of an elephant. Yeah. Like, you don't necessarily know what it is you're seeing. If you've been to the river in Glendale, have you also been in Compton? Have you also been at the headwaters? And it's a very complex thing, as is the city.

And I think therefore people come to it with different perspectives and project onto it different dreams. The reality though is that, The river was a very quixotic-- uh, it wasn't the Hudson or the Seine or the Mississippi or something. It, it was a thing that came and went, and when native peoples lived in, near it, they were used to that, vagary.

As the city grew and exploited the river for agriculture around it, it also became a threat because the river, this crazy thing which can disappear, also was able to, like, have the force of the Mississippi at times. And that was manageable by

people who lived [00:15:00] with it for hundreds of years. But if you put the city, growing city next to it, it's not.

So the channelization which followed those great floods, which killed many people and destroyed property, the channelization solved that problem, and it was possible because LA had already gotten another source, which we're about to talk about, I can tell, which is the aqueduct of water. And so the river's channelization solved a problem and essentially allowed people to forget what had happened, what the river was.

And by the time there was a kind of attention with the environmental movement, again, MacAdams and so forth, looking at the river, what they saw was not something that was threatening, that was sort of an existential question for Los Angeles, but that was a scar that represented some of the industrialized Los Angeles, which seemed heroic in the mid-century and now was coming to seem something like a blight.

So there was also in this the way in which memory works and [00:16:00] generational changes. You know, we see this in the elections all the time, those of us who are a little older remember periods of violence and political uprising, and so with people who are younger it's like this is the worst ever.

And I'm not saying that means this isn't bad, I'm just saying memory helps to understand in context how things happen and what responses are possible. And the river is an embodiment of that too, LA's own memory or amnesia.

Jon Christensen: Yeah, and, it's interesting when you put it that way. I mean, the river as a kind of character of itself in this narrative, but that the character of the character, if you will could change-

Michael Kimmelman: Correct

Jon Christensen: over time.

Michael Kimmelman: Right.

Jon Christensen: And I think let's move on to water. I mean- Yeah ... because, you know, the LA Aqueduct that brings water from the Owens Valley and the Eastern Sierra-

Michael Kimmelman: Yep ...

Jon Christensen: it was also an incredible,

Michael Kimmelman: Oh ...

Jon Christensen: heroic feat- Unbelievable ... of engineering.

Michael Kimmelman: Yeah.

Jon Christensen: It, it- Like

Michael Kimmelman: the Hoover Dam.

Jon Christensen: Yeah. And now it's seen as something maybe, that some [00:17:00] are ashamed of, or you know, that we take this water from-

...

Jon Christensen: The Eastern Sierra from this other, Right ... beautiful place. So it's- Right ... too has sort of changed character somewhat. How-- You wrote about how LA's relationship with that water-

Michael Kimmelman: Yeah

Jon Christensen: Is changing.

Michael Kimmelman: Yeah. I-i-i-in a way, the, the aqueduct grew out of the river because one of the questions I had was, well, there's all sorts of water problems in LA, and this thing is just a giant drain which whooshes all this water out. Is there any way to collect that water? Shouldn't we be thinking about water conservation?

And as I began to ask about that, I realized a couple things. One, the channel is not built to collect water, and it's almost impossible, which was interesting because I thought, how could that really be? But secondly, I began to hear from people, hydrologists and engineers and all sorts of other people that, you know, actually LA's become, like, really good at water conservation.[00:18:00]

So as a non-Angelino who didn't grow up in California that was very striking to me. Like, I don't think that's LA's reputation as being a great water conservator.

Jon Christensen: Even in LA, I think.

Michael Kimmelman: Even in LA, but I thought certainly elsewhere. Yes. And when I would sort of go around and try this out on people elsewhere, I saw the expression that as a writer, as a journalist, is gold, basically like that bafflement and shock.

So I would double and triple and quadruple check and so forth. That is in itself a story. You want to set up something that engages people because it is exactly what they don't expect. And part of the project for me around Headway, it was a little like the walks too, which was not a Headway project, but it is to provide people with narratives and perspectives that are not all despairing.

Because journalism, like, it's built a lot on stories of scandal and [00:19:00] tragedy and disaster and all that sort of stuff. The idea that there is actually a hidden story which has an interesting punchline that is more not just good news, but something that is, the sort of the base on which to build an interesting constructive conversation about what is possible.

Th-that's also really useful. So I liked that. That's how I began. But in a way, as with the river, I wanted to build it around a physical structure And the aqueduct was the perfect structure in that case because as with the river which was built was miraculous, then people forgot about it, the aqueduct was really miraculous and still is, and it l- allowed the creation of modern Los Angeles in all of its complexity.

And then Los Angeles outgrew the aqueduct, and people began to feel not just in the Owens Valley, as you say, but [00:20:00] elsewhere, like, "Why are we taking this water from the-- That's still not the solution." And that kind of evolution of thinking, I think, is natural, but it's very useful to remind people of the history.

How did we get here? Why? What was the problem we were solving, and why is the solution now the problem? And let me just say one other thing, which is that that is, uh, fundamentally the story behind Headway, which was progress is not an endpoint, it's a process, and every fix we have becomes the problem later on.

I could give you a million examples, and the aqueduct is one of them. It tells you both we are capable of doing miraculous things and that everything we do comes with choices. So how do you marry all of these sort of complicated ideas and broad things with character and place? And the last thing I'll say is if you're dealing with something like the river or, or certainly with the aqueduct, you're dealing with this kind of beautiful, like, it's such a [00:21:00] gift, beautiful

people, places, but especially topographies, which allows you to animate stories so they're not purely abstract.

Jon Christensen: Yeah. The story that you wrote about what might rise from the fires in LA, it was soon after the fires-

Michael Kimmelman: Yep ...

Jon Christensen: were put out and very much, I think, trying to think about what those possibilities could be.

Michael Kimmelman: Yeah.

Jon Christensen: Could you describe how you approached that story, but also-

Michael Kimmelman: Mm-hmm ...

Jon Christensen: do you have any thoughts where we are now a year and a half later?

Michael Kimmelman: The fires were still going on. You know, they were smoldering here and there, as you remember, they went on for a while. And I went actually with the architect Michael Maltzan when it was still cordoned off, but, Michael joined me. I was let in as a journalist. And, my question, it gets back to where we started.

My question always comes back to what are we building? If you see it as just people losing [00:22:00] houses, you're missing what it is that bound people to this place. It wasn't just the house, although that's incredibly important. It was the community, the sense of a place that comes from having the schools and community centers and public spaces and shops and other things that are, really what you consider home.

Are we thinking about home? With all the talk about, you know, how quickly can the houses be rebuilt? Where should they be rebuilt? I wanted to raise this question. Altadena was, will be again I hope, a really exceptional place. It was unlike you know, Pacific Palisades. It was a much more diverse community, economically, racially.

A really interesting, a complex place, with complex governance issues, 'cause after all, it's not even a city officially.

Jon Christensen: Unincorporated-

Michael Kimmelman: Unincorporated ... in

Jon Christensen: Los [00:23:00] Angeles County.

Michael Kimmelman: Exactly. Who makes these decisions about what it is and what it should be again?

And is that going to be affected by gentrification? I just... I'm always looking for the ways in which... Look, I just wrote a story that's published today, a couple today, and one of them was about housing, in general, but it's particularly two housing projects in New York. And they really are not, you know, the most amazing works of architecture physically, but they're incredibly dignified and ambitious works of affordable housing.

Jon Christensen: And they're an example of what can be done.

Michael Kimmelman: What

Jon Christensen: can be done. Um, it's, it's for-

Michael Kimmelman: Yeah ...

Jon Christensen: 5,000, 10,000-

Michael Kimmelman: Yeah. Between the two of them ... residents. Yeah. Yeah. But also that you're creating places. That's the ambition anyway. It's not units of housing. So those are the things that are in the back of my mind too, not just to sort of say that you have punched windows and, X kind of brick and so forth.

Yeah. Which is not irrelevant, but not the end of the story.

Jon Christensen: Yeah. I enjoyed that piece today. I mean, because, I think that is an example of writing [00:24:00] about buildings, but tying them to this much larger context and story of, how are we addressing the housing crisis, and are our ambitions and our solutions at a scale that Can do that.

Right. Maybe not, but it's still-

...

Jon Christensen: It's a dignified home for-

...

Jon Christensen: 5,000, 10,000 people. Um- Right.

Michael Kimmelman: Not chump change.

Jon Christensen: Yeah. No, it's- Right ... it's, it's worthwhile. Because we're on the brink of an important election I think it's-

Michael Kimmelman: Are we? That's-

Jon Christensen: Uh, it's six days away. Ten days, yeah. Yeah, and by the time that people listen to this, we may be counting votes or reading results. I'm thinking a lot about how elections are in some ways about voting on the stories we wanna tell ourselves.

Michael Kimmelman: Mm-hmm. Yep.

Jon Christensen: I think this is particularly salient in LA right now. What do you think? Do you see that in New York and other places too?

Michael Kimmelman: Oh, God. 100%. Earlier on I was talking about how the news is always stories we invent. There was, um, you know, the famous early 20th century really, um, to mid-20th century, American [00:25:00] journalist Walter Lippmann had this idea that you know, there's a difference between news and truth, and essentially the news is stuff that we decide is news in categories that fit, and then there's truth, which is a much larger, more complex thing, which the news tends to ignore.

And what I think he meant, I think that's 100% true, my metaphor would be like the, night sky. You see the stars, but 99.9% of it is, dark matter. That's the universe that we live in, and yet we tend to focus on the stars. And that's the case with cities too. Like, what are the stories we are going to choose to tell, and why are we choosing them, and how do they affect the elections?

And that's what politics is. It's always about who gets to control the narrative. We certainly are seeing that in this election. And we have in every election

probably forever, but especially in recent years, as you have the mechanisms to control that narrative in different ways, [00:26:00] expanding through social media and the collapse, frankly, of local journalism and what you might call the traditional, reliable common ground sources of news.

So people choose their narratives, when social media began, we started by saying, "This is great. Everyone gets a voice," and everyone said. Now we're beginning to think, "Actually, this is a problem." And we haven't settled that. We're in the midst. We're conducting this giant experiment on ourselves, and you see the results, for instance, in the White House right now.

Jon Christensen: Yeah, indeed, or even in the, LA election, I think we- Mm ... we've seen that. What do you make of the argument that Los Angeles is too complex to impose a narrative on the city? I hear this often.

Michael Kimmelman: Yeah. Look it is in the sense, of course. I mean, it's a vast insanely complex place. That's what makes it really, wonderful and endless and rich.

I, I think one of the problems that people had, I'll say again as a, as an [00:27:00] outsider, now as you know, I have had periods of living here and I tried to immerse myself in Los Angeles and love it. But I have the distance and I hope humility to know, you see the tiniest little bit of it and you're trying to make sense of the rest.

I think part of the problem that Angelenos have is that people assume that they could categorize it, and of course everyone's experience of it is different. So, New Yorkers coming in and talking about how it was just about self-fulfillment and Hollywood to me, of course, seems incredibly shallow and ignorant.

But you do have to have certain guiding narratives around cities in order to bring people together. There are things which emerge that bind people or divide them. Affordable housing is one. Homelessness has been one in Los Angeles. Climate is certainly another, and we're gonna go through more months and right [00:28:00] now, dealing with all sorts of environmental challenges.

These kind of things are narratives around which people can come together. They're not single narratives. One doesn't replace the other. But we choose to focus on one or another for whatever reasons. And I think that is another way that a cosmopolis works, that it brings people with as many different interests as there are people together to try to address things which are shared problems.

What is a city? We share a space, whether we like it or not. We have to accommodate other people and come to solutions, however compromised they may be, that we all are going to live with. So that is essentially coming together around particular narratives, at least for a while, until they are replaced or break apart.

Jon Christensen: The stories that you've written about LA are stories about a city, of course, and you tell stories about many other cities [00:29:00] too. But they're also stories about systems- Hmm ... and systems changes or systems undergoing change. And it, it's a challenge, isn't it, telling the story of a system or systems? But it's so important for understanding our world- Right

and how it's changing.

Michael Kimmelman: This is really important, Jon, I think because Again, one of the ambitions that I've had, and certainly at Headway was, if you're going to deal with, let's say, I wrote about homelessness in Houston. And again, that began from hearing things which were not what I was used to hearing.

Hearing from people who were homeless advocates and ran organizations who were saying, "Actually, homelessness is declining in X, Y, or Z," or, "This is a problem we know how to deal with." It was so counter to what everything you read and heard, was saying that I thought that was an opportunity. And [00:30:00] two things about that, and I'll get right to the systems.

Narratives that, especially, in the media, are, for good reason, focused on tragedy and, disaster because it is one thing to find the story and tell the story of somebody who was a professor at UCLA and lost a job and then ended up homeless on the street in, Phoenix.

Those stories are horrifying. People relate to them. They tell themselves. You have a central character. It doesn't have to go anywhere. How do you tell a story of a city that has addressed homelessness, reduced it? It can't be the story of one heroic figure, which we also like, because it's too complicated to do that.

So in Houston, for instance I spent a really long time, months, trying to unpack a system that had come together to reduce homelessness by over 60%, almost 70%. An amazing thing for the fourth largest city in America. How did that happen? [00:31:00] So how do you animate a story that's really kind of wonky and about all sorts of federal, governmental, NGO-like organizations?

It's really complicated. It's very satisfying if you can find a way to do it. You still have to find characters and threads that bring people through that story. There has to be enough ambiguity and openness to acknowledge that you're not telling people a solution, you're just showing them one way that a system has come together that may or may not be a model.

And after that story was published, there was a lot of response, just a lot at all different kinds of levels, and some of it from cities who were saying, "We are not Houston." And from others that were saying, both the public and governmental agencies saying, "Why, can't we do this?" That's very satisfying because then you're hoping that the outcome is systemic and not superficial

Jon Christensen: [00:32:00] They say we human beings, Homo sapiens, have become an urban species with more than 50% of our global population living in towns and cities since 2007 or so. What do you make of that as the chief architecture critic of The New York Times, and more importantly, I think one of our most important writers and thinkers on urbanism?

Michael Kimmelman: This is really interesting because when I started to write, in this job, I mean, I was-- When I was in Europe, I, was, of course, hearing this a lot and, writing about things all across Europe and the Middle East that were suburban related. But this was something that was coming out, like now we're an urban species.

This turning point. That narrative was very connected to what was then a vision of the city as the solution to a lot of problems, particularly, let's say, environmental challenges. Yes. And so it was very attractive, and then you had a lot of books that were coming out about how, you know, the city [00:33:00] was this economic engine, and it would sort of solve itself if everyone just acquiesced and moved to New York.

But, you know, the reality turns out to be quite different, and I think that part of the problem with that narrative is that it missed the fact that the other half of the world almost, or whatever the number is, doesn't live in a city. And it is not the city itself that is the subject, but the complexity of relationships between urban and rural and the ambiguous kinds of spaces in between.

There's a massive growth of cities in India. It's just insane, like thousands of cities, hundreds of Chicagos suddenly sort of being created very rapidly. Where are those people coming from? Well, they're coming often from rural areas where climate change and drought and other factors have driven them to seek some opportunity somewhere [00:34:00] else.

That is a ecosystem that cannot be separated out just in the city. It creates tensions in the city. It's creating giant problems for massive numbers of people, their societies, and families. So I don't see the question of whether people are moving to the city as itself like the story. I think the story is, much larger than that.

And I'll just add, when I did a large series of stories for the international desk and kicked off the climate desk at the Times about climate and global cities, partly the goal there was to say climate is not-- We talk about climate, or it's often talked about in environmental circles in ways that most people can't relate to.

In 2080, there's going to be X number of water level or th- And these numbers and predictions, and it just seemed very abstract. And I said, "Let's go to actual cities and look at the ways in which [00:35:00] climate impacts or interacts with cities as they are now." So I began with Mexico City Mexico City has been sinking for a long time, which is a whole story about, you know, the Spaniards coming and rebuilding it on lakes and the draining of the aquifers under the city and all this.

So then climate exacerbates this with temperatures and droughts and so forth that hadn't been as common before. And what are potential effects of that? Possibly the fact that you won't have as many people able to live there. Where are they going to go? They're going to potentially put more pressure, let's say, on the border, and this is going to affect, international relations.

And so again, the reason I'm giving that long story is, yeah, a lot of people move to Mexico City for a lot of reasons. We are a mobile people, and this is going to be a continuing dynamic. The end of the story is not Mexico City's growing and has millions of people living informally.

It is that [00:36:00] all of these different factors are going to also continue to spread out, in some ways metastasize. And how are we going to unpack that and decide to address it? I guess what I'm saying is that the urban story, which was very celebratory, has to be seen in a much more, I think, complex way.

Jon Christensen: Yeah. W-Where do we go from here? Without giving anything away of your story ideas, but I wonder if you could tell us, what are the urban stories you're interested in as you look forward?

Michael Kimmelman: One of the pleasures of being a journalist is that, the stories often arise when I don't actually expect them.

I do have lists, and then I'm like a chipmunk. I gather nuts, and I put them someplace, and then I forget where they were. And I'm not being coy or something. I mean, I do return to things. But there are a lot of things out there, and I think often I'll latch onto something because at that moment, it seems like [00:37:00] the thing that touches on themes that I had been looking at before.

And frankly, you know, there are some very pragmatic reasons for that at The Times. We publish in a very different environment now. And so you don't just produce as much. You have to be, I have to be anyway, selective, and there has to be a reason why something, I think, has resonance for a global audience.

And that changes. But look, I think the stories that, we've been talking about don't-- they're not going anywhere. And they are part of the political conversation we're having. I think they are the political conversation we're having. I, from my myopic viewpoint, think the story of the city is the story of who we are.

We have to constantly look at ways to tell that story such that people find... I used the phrase common ground before. Find a common ground to have a conversation about the society we want to be. [00:38:00] And th-that's the task that I always find most interesting. Like, not telling a good news story or finding a scandal, but finding a conversation that people can feel that they have been grounded in, get that history they need, get that sense of the complexity of it so that they can participate in a conversation around it that's constructive.

Jon Christensen: So looking at cities through a narrative lens, like we've been doing, what are three books or other media, films, podcasts that you would recommend to our listeners, either old or new?

Michael Kimmelman: Oh, God. Uh

Jon Christensen: You know, stealing Ezra Klein's question

Michael Kimmelman: here. Yeah, I know. Ezra's always asked this question, I think people have been given a lot of time to think about, and I forgot to give you my proper list.

I'm gonna give you things that I that I have been looking at just recently. Great. So I'm beginning to think about a book about Lower Manhattan, Greenwich Village, where I grew up as a kind of [00:39:00] way of seeing, unpacking the way cities work in general. And I started in an odd place, which is with the

writing of Emmanuel Carrère, the French writer because I find his work incredibly brilliant and sometimes really frustrating.

But what is very brilliant about it is the ability to weave together a kind of first-person, presence. I don't know whether, you know, like the Elizabeth Holmes movie what's real or what's not about that presence, but it's really compelling in stories that are, actually taking place.

In other words, how do you weave yourself into a much larger question? And since I grew up in the Village, I've been looking at that, and I find him to be one of these thrilling writers, actually, who in an unexpected way carries you forward. And the Russian novel book, and there are others too, which are just great reads.

I don't particularly love it, but I did just reread the Jacob Riis book, and the reason I'm mentioning it [00:40:00] is because I was thinking about this question of narrative.

Jon Christensen: It's the one about the- "

Michael Kimmelman: How the Other Half Lives."

Jon Christensen: Yes.

Michael Kimmelman: And I was thinking, you know, that he does something there which now seems so antique.

I mean, he was this relatively middle, upper middle class Dutchmen [correction: Riis was Danish] who come to America. And he Divides his chapters of people living in the slums by race and ethnicity, and It's painfully condescending and hard to read now. But he does something, and the reason the book is still read, which is really important, which is he's on the ground.

He's actually going to this place. He almost sounds like a tour guide sometimes. " Don't trip over the kids in the hall because they're playing with their pennies." He puts you in a place, and I think that ability to to give these stories clarity, specificity, people, particular people living in particular places that had particular floors and windows and so forth that was what I think really grabbed people at the time.

[00:41:00] They weren't abstractions about poverty. And that led to extraordinary reforms-

Jon Christensen: Yeah ...

Michael Kimmelman: which had a whole long history, but grew directly out of, I think, a broad sense that people now understood what was going on in a place they avoided. And I was gonna mention which seems now like a cheat, but people should look at Eric Sanderson's book.

Mannahatta is great.

Jon Christensen: Definitely.

Michael Kimmelman: And so is the new one, whose title I'm suddenly forgetting. But *Mannahatta* is a good example. It's mind-boggling to imagine when you're standing, you know, in Times Square that it was a beaver pond or what, must have been like for the Lenape to see the ship of Henry Hudson, coming through the Narrows.

And to imagine that the Hudson River used to be on the other side of Manhattan, that these glaciers moved and moved rivers and created the Heights, for instance, of Brooklyn. This is eye-opening to me and reminds us that [00:42:00] all things change, that there are these different scales of time, and we live in this one, and we want to bring about certain kinds of change.

We do our best. Circumstances change, and, you know, that can be liberating. It doesn't mean we have to come up with a perfect solution. We just have to come up with the best one we can.

Jon Christensen: And I think "Mannahatta" is-- it's almost 20 years old now, I think. Is it really? Yeah. Something like that, you know, and it's, still an important part of the conversation- Yeah

I feel like. People bring it up. They're inspired by it. The other interesting thing about th-that book, I think, is that it successfully uses history and a deep history to inform and help inspire a conversation about the future.

Michael Kimmelman: Yes. Right, and I think that's what I'm saying, that if people feel empowered by this knowledge and also feel a sense of place you know, it's just cool to be reminded, for instance, that when you're standing in Lower Manhattan, you're [00:43:00] probably standing on landfill, that you were in the middle of the water or whatever it is that is just, when Sandy swamped Lower Manhattan in 2012, it restored the original coastline of the island before man had ever expanded it. Yeah. That, that kind of thing is really--

I think it's I don't know. It's wondrous in a way, horrifying and wondrous, and it-- I think it does give people a sense of connection to place.

It's not Just Eric, but I, think Eric does that 'cause he goes into way back time.

Jon Christensen: Yeah. Well, Michael, thank you for joining us, and as always, thanks to our producer Liv Slaby and to all of you for listening in.

Michael Kimmelman: Thank you, Jon.