

HEARD & SCENE

Around the Block With an Expert

By VL. HENDRICKSON

It takes Alexandra Horowitz about an hour to walk around a city block—but only if she's trying.

"If I walked this way all the time, I'd never get anywhere," said Ms. Horowitz, author of "On Looking: Eleven Walks With Expert Eyes."

In the book, which landed in stores last week, she hits the pavement with an urban sociologist, a typographer, a toddler, artist Maira Kalman (whose illustrations pepper the text) and a blind woman, among others, and relates their relative "expertise," depending on their particular vantage point.

We consider ourselves to have fairly keen observation skills, especially when we see something shiny like residual New Year's Eve confetti in the cracks of the city's sidewalks. On the other hand, it's true that we miss a lot of things while walking to and from the subway station, simply because we aren't paying attention. For Ms. Horowitz, walking is part of waking up.

"We assume we can know other people; that we can get into their heads. But we can't really," said Ms. Horowitz, a psychologist who teaches at Barnard College. "So this was a social experiment. To grab a person and say: 'Show me what's interesting to you on this ordinary block.'"

If we didn't know better, we might have thought Ms. Horowitz had a multiple-personality disorder when we went for a midafternoon stroll with her last week. As we slowly made our way around the block that encompasses Bryant Park and the New York Public Library, she pointed out signs of insect life in a patch of ivy; the 1960s-era font on a building on 42nd Street; and a collection of cigarette butts, gum and other trash in a grate on the sidewalk (and all this before we'd walked 50 feet).

"It's really archaeology, when you think about it," Ms. Horowitz said, staring down at the grate. "Look at all the cigarette butts; there are a lot, but think of how many more there would have been 20 years ago. We're really a nonsmoking city now."

Ms. Horowitz chose the location for our walk. "These blocks are inherently interesting, and usually I was choosing the most boring blocks for my walks. But, while we're not going to ignore the interesting things, we're not to talk about them," she said before pointing out the direction the trees were leaning in the park, all "trying to grab some of the sun."

"I'm interested in telling the story of each thing; what happened to it in the past to make it look like it looks now. A naturalist would look at a tree and



Ramsay de Gitis for The Wall Street Journal (6)



Clockwise from above: author Alexandra Horowitz outside Bryant Park; an example of typography she pointed out during a recent walk; a column visible from 40th Street between two buildings; gargoyles atop a building as seen from Fifth Avenue; a patch of ivy in the park; and one of the city's new 'Look!' signs that serve as a reminder to New Yorkers to watch for oncoming traffic.

be able to tell me its past: if it had an injury and why it grows that way now."

Ms. Horowitz features 11 walks in her book, but said she went on many more that didn't make it onto the pages. Another that did make it was a walk with her dog. Ms. Horowitz's first book, "Inside of a Dog: What Dogs See, Smell, and Know," looked closely into canine life. Looking closely at what humans see was a sort of extension of that work.

As we continued east on 42nd Street, the topic turned to pedestrian flow. She pointed out how, despite our numbers, the walkers weren't often bumping into each other. We

all make little movements—lowering our pace, shifting to the left or right—to avoid contact, like "an ancestral dance." It was Fred Kent, an urban so-

Arlene Gordon, a blind New Yorker featured in the book, thinks of cellphones as beacons.

ciologist who is president of the Project for Public Spaces, who pointed this out to her during a walk, as well as a newish factor in the mix: people talking or texting on their

phones while walking. "He's not looking," she said, pointing to a man staring at his iPhone. "He's no longer making adjustments; he's not following the rules."

But, as Ms. Horowitz found out, things that are annoying to some New Yorkers can help others find their way. Arlene Gordon, a blind New Yorker featured in the book, thinks of cellphones as beacons. "She can hear people talking so she knows they are there," Ms. Horowitz said.

Walking with Ms. Gordon, who uses echolocation to make her way around the city, offered the most surprises, said Ms. Horowitz, who will read

from the chapter on their excursion on Thursday evening at the Barnes & Noble on Broadway at 82nd Street.

Ms. Horowitz made a classic New Yorker move in the middle of the Fifth Avenue block: She looked up. Then, she pointed out a row of gargoyles at the top of a building across the street that we certainly would not otherwise have noticed. And when we rounded the corner onto 40th Street, her glance went between two buildings to the columns on another building, only visible at a certain angle. We realized we were really missing a lot—especially as we tried to take notes.

Any power walker would have scoffed at the time it took us to return to our starting point at 42nd Street and Sixth Avenue. As we parted ways, Ms. Horowitz said she's gone back to the dogs, at least partially. "I'm back in the research lab, studying dog-human play behavior. It's all about deconstruction for me," she said.

After walking away, she returned momentarily to point out one more thing: one of the "Look!" signs that have recently been added to the pavement at many intersections, reminding pedestrians to check for traffic before crossing. "That could be the marketing slogan for my book," she said.

'The Greatest Geek Who Ever Lived'

By GARY SHAPIRO

His face could really light up a room.

The life and work of Nikola Tesla, the immigrant scientist and prolific inventor, has been celebrated at an energetic gathering over the past two days. Though he invented alternating current (AC) and made carloads of other discoveries, the Serbian-American electrical engineer Tesla has largely been an also-ran in history's fame game, edged out by boldface names like Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse.

Tesla's productive life ended sadly: He was spending time feeding pigeons in his last years, dying Jan. 7, 1943 in relative obscurity at the New Yorker Hotel. Now people, including the actor Nicolas Cage, have come to spend the night where Tesla had lived in his final decade. Others are working to preserve his laboratory in Long Island.

Upon entering the ballroom at the New Yorker Hotel, there were tables featuring buttons and paper currency with Tesla's face on it, as well as colorful collages made from license plates spelling Tesla's name. There gathered a large audience, who shared the view that the achievements of Tesla have not been sufficiently recognized. A goal of their conclave, which had the feeling of part fan convention and part science fair, was to set the record straight.

"Can we even imagine a world without Tesla?" asked Marina Schwabic, the chair of the Tesla Spirit Award Benefit, on Saturday evening. David Vujić and Nikola Lonchar, the chairman and president, re-



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spectively, of the Tesla Science Foundation, also offered welcoming remarks. The president of the United Nations General Assembly, Vuk Jeremić, said innovators and risk takers were the "true inheritors" of Tesla's legacy.

Cartoonist Matthew Inman was the rock star of the evening (no one from the rock band bearing the scientist's name made it to the event). In the fall, he launched a campaign on the funding site Indiegogo that raised roughly

\$1,370,000 dollars toward saving Wardenclyffe, Tesla's former laboratory in Shoreham, Long Island. Jane Alcorn, a retired school librarian who is leading the charge to save the site, said, "Science education is an area where we need to place more emphasis."

Mr. Inman, whose most recent book is called "How To Tell If Your Cat is Plotting to Kill You," said the funds raised were "a way of repairing Tesla's legacy." He has called Tesla "the greatest geek who

ever lived." The conference brimmed with sessions like "Tesla and Robotics" and "Tesla and Music." Phillip Baldwin, an associate professor at Stony Brook University, demonstrated how humans and computers can interface with each other beneficially, using head caps with neurosensors to read people's emotions.

"It works without a mouse and keyboard. The tyranny of the index finger is overrated," said Mr. Baldwin. This July, he



Clockwise from left: a Serbian folk dance ensemble performs at the Tesla Spirit Award Benefit; a painting of Nikola Tesla; Phillip Baldwin, right, and another guest; Vuk Jeremić, Mirjana Živković and Vladimir Bibić.



is planning to bring this technology to Gdańsk, Poland, using Shakespeare's "Coriolanus" in order to help keep students from Stratford-upon-Avon, England, interested in the Bard.

At the benefit, Serbian folk dancers drew heavy applause, and Mano Divina of the Divine Hand Ensemble used a Theremin to make electricity sing. Zoran Zelic, whose Stereoscopic 3-D Studio is called "ZZ3D," distributed glasses with infrared receivers to look at screen images reacting to the sounds

of music. Taking all this in was University of Baltimore student Stephan Kowalczyk.

At the benefit, the Consul General of Serbia, Mirjana Živković, and Vladimir Jelenković of the Tesla Museum of Belgrade were among the guests of honor. Dr. Ljubo Vujić of the Tesla Memorial Society won a lifetime award.

Tesla's visage was put on a U.S. postage stamp in 1983. All these supporters, however, want Tesla to gain a wider stamp of approval.