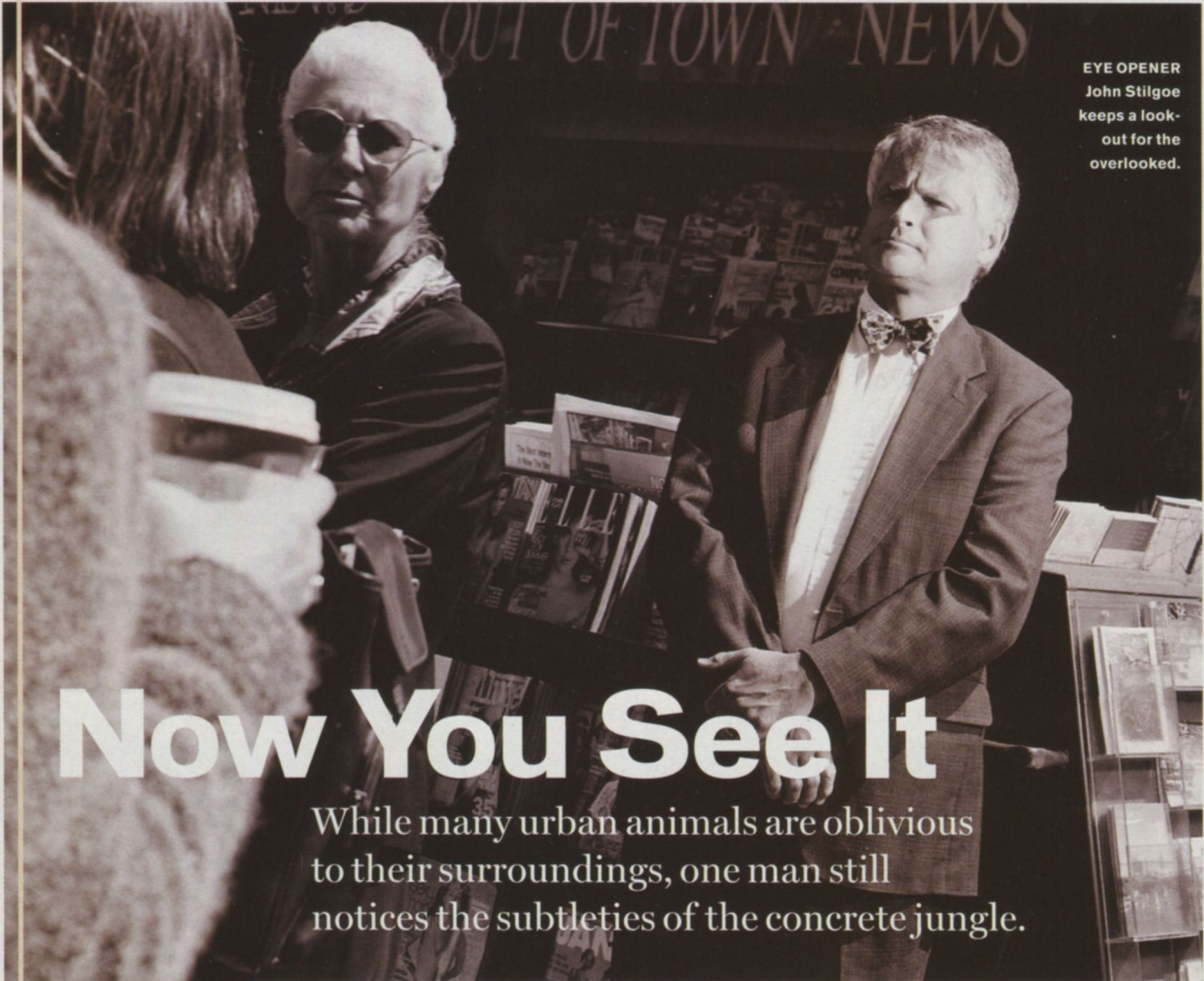


Ivory Tower By JOHN SEDGWICK



EYE OPENER  
John Stilgoe  
keeps a look-  
out for the  
overlooked.

# Now You See It

While many urban animals are oblivious to their surroundings, one man still notices the subtleties of the concrete jungle.

**T**HERE—YOU SEE IT?” JOHN STILGOE ASKS, peering out the trolley window as we pull past Boylston Street toward Arlington. I press my face against the glass, stare out into the subterranean gloom of the Green Line. Darkness, more darkness, and then, yes, I do see it: a dark tunnel headed upward, all that remains of a rail line from early in the last century. “That used to allow trolleys to ramp up to the street.”

Stilgoe tosses off this information as if it were obvious, a universal truth. But it's news to me, as is word of the other abandoned tunnel he's just pointed out at Boylston. That one runs out toward Roxbury, providing a vestigial peripheral link to a T system that is now, he notes, primarily designed to haul people to and from downtown. At Park Street station, he directs my attention to the vents along the staircase. “Note the square keyhole,” he says offhandedly. “Opens with an Allen wrench.”

Stilgoe is not a subway specialist, at least not particularly. He's an everything specialist, an historian of artifacts, an observer of the quotidian, whose discerning eye and seemingly total recall

ferret out the deeper meanings of the surroundings to which most people have grown deaf, blind, and indifferent. A hugely popular professor of visual and environmental studies at Harvard, he's the great noticer, the Sherlock Holmes of what he calls “the built environment,” meaning everything that man has touched. “He's got deep vision,” says John Wood, a poet, photographic historian, and head of the master's degree program in fine arts at McNeese State University in Louisiana. “He looks at something and doesn't see what other people see. John sees the complete history of it, its social impact, its aesthetic significance, its political implications, and on and on. His is as exciting a mind as I've ever come across.”

STILGOE HAS TAKEN ME UNDERGROUND THIS AFTERNOON only because it's raining. He wears a dark trench coat over his trademark suit and bow tie, and dons a [Continued on page 44]

*John Sedgwick's most recent book is The Dark House, a Boston-based psychological thriller published by HarperCollins.*



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**Ivory Tower** [Continued from page 42]

rather dashing fedora on his head. Like Holmes himself, he leads me at a brisk pace, throwing off observations as he goes: One of the antique cars mothballed at the Boylston station, the one from the 1930s, could accelerate "faster than a Porsche." The tight U-turn of the "repair track" at Park Street dictates the unusually short length of all the trolleys on the line. The subway tunnels used to be all white, to reassure anxious passengers that they wouldn't get dirty going underground. The tracks rise sharply coming into Park Street to reduce wear on the brakes.

It's more than a preoccupation, this exploring. It's a mission. "As a society, we're good at words and numbers, but we're poor at visual things," Stilgoe

**Stilgoe is on a crusade to reawaken senses dulled by standardized learning, mindless routine, and eye-hogging video technology.**

declares. "I think it goes back to art class. In school, art is maybe twice a week. It's not like math. That gives people the idea that the visual is not as important." He adds conspiratorially: "I think the trouble is, we call it art. If we called it visual studies, it might be different." He finds it appalling that Harvard students can score so well on standardized tests and still be so ignorant visually. He notes that few of them even know the color of their lover's eyes.

But, as Stilgoe would be the first to say, it's not just Harvard students who fail to notice anything anymore. It's all of us. Preoccupied, stuck in our increasingly narrow routines, our minds far more attuned to numerical representations of reality (stock prices, batting averages) than to simple, joyful observation of the world as it is, we live our lives in tunnels of our own making—gloomy, ill-lit corridors that lack history and go nowhere.

Stilgoe is on a quiet crusade to rectify this situation, to reawaken senses dulled by standardized learning, mindless routine, and eye-hogging video technology. He's written six books now, several of them on what he terms "edges," such as *Alongshore*, about coastal communities, and *Borderland*, about suburbs. But the most recent is a kind of Stilgoian guide to the universe called *Outside Lies Magic*, a plea for people to wake up and smell the asphalt. "The whole concatenation of wild and artificial [Continued on page 46]

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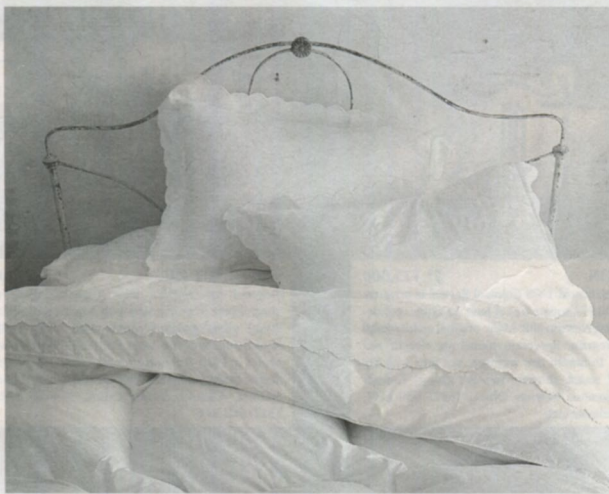
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### Ivory Tower [Continued from page 44]

things, the natural ecosystem as modified by people over the centuries, the built environment layered over layers, the eerie mix of sounds and smells and glimpses neither natural nor crafted—all of it is free for the taking, for the taking in," he writes in a surprising *cri de coeur* for someone who can seem remote. "Take it, take it in."

Stilgoe himself certainly has. He's prowled every corner of the United States and brought back 70,000 photographs: Midwestern grain elevators, the grassy strips beside highways, trailer parks, storefronts. To him, each image tells a story—about economics, psychology, history—that he's eager to know and to pass along. All eyes, he's learned to look without appearing to, lest someone interrupt to ask him what the heck he's staring at. Caught glancing around in New York City the other day, he was mistaken for a tourist and asked if he needed directions to the Empire State Building. "Jawohl!" Stilgoe replied. "Empire State Building! Ja!"

**S**TILGOE MUCH PREFERS to train his own eye outward than have another eye trained on him. "I don't usually talk to people like you," he tells me when we sit down together at Dunkin' Donuts after our subterranean ramble. And he quickly makes clear that he regards even the most standard reportorial question, such as "Where did you grow up?," to be an intrusion on his privacy.

Still, a few facts emerge. He lives with his wife and twin sons in an 1810 farmhouse in Norwell, where he was raised, the son of a professional boatbuilder. He writes there, since he won't allow a computer in his Harvard office out of fear his students will think it's more important to him than they are. He also raises chickens—17 Rhode Island Reds. And, trained by his father, he builds wooden boats in his shed. Two miles from the sea, Norwell also accounts for his accent, which is halfway between Yankee farmer and old salt. "I feel no need to cultivate the so-called Cambridge accent, which I find pretentious beyond belief," he declares. "I say 'literature.' I don't say 'litritch.' I mean, my God!"

He's been a watcher at least since the fourth grade in the Norwell public schools. As his teachers droned on, the young Stilgoe's eye would rove to the world map on the wall, where he noticed that Great Britain was always red and China, [Continued on page 48]



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### Ivory Tower *[Continued from page 46]*

always orange, and he realized that half a dozen mapmakers all subscribed to the same unwritten convention. A "good student," by his own appraisal, he went on to Boston University, becoming the first member of his family to graduate from college, and later to Harvard for a Ph.D. in American civilization. It was there that he fell under the spell of John Brinkerhoff Jackson, Harvard's legendary, motorcycle-mad visual studies professor who brought a loving scrutiny to the elements of the American landscape that, in more elevated circles, were considered backgrounds, nothing more. "Gas stations," Jackson's survey course was dubbed for its most notable segment.

Stilgoe teaches Jackson's course now, Visual and Environmental Studies 107, "Studies of the Built North American

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Environment Since 1580." It's lively and fun, a rare chance for undergraduates to engage with one of the great idiosyncratic minds on campus. This year, 280 students applied for 50 spaces, a typical ratio for a Stilgoe course. On one of the mornings I attended, Stilgoe rhapsodized about a student's paper on contraceptive and abortifacient herbs, declaring that he'd told his wife he planned to make a garden of them. ("What have you been reading?" she replied.) Then, for a class on cities, he returned to his favorite theme. "Around the turn of the century," he told the students in his usual rat-a-tat style, "city people stopped looking at their cities. That's how you established yourself as a city person. Otherwise, you'd look like a rube."

Despite his obvious charm, Stilgoe keeps some distance from his students. "I'm not their friend," he says. "I have to grade them." Similarly, with me, he maintains a nearly Victorian formality. I remain "Mr. Sedgwick" throughout our several conversations; he is "Professor Stilgoe" in return. He never even smiles at my jokes. And as we sit together in the doughnut shop, he tends to look not at me, but out the window over my shoulder, once noting the peculiar gait of the park ranger across the street and another time, the unusually narrow strips of tape affixing a poster to the glass. In a rare pause in



his conversation, I ask him if he ever trains his formidable powers of observation on his fellow man. He's noticed that New Yorkers walk faster than people in other cities, and that men in particular have a long, purposeful stride that he rarely sees in women.

"What about me?" I probe. "What have you observed about me?"

"I'm deliberately not observing you," he replies coolly. "Because that would change how I would respond to you."

I tell him to go ahead anyway, and, to my surprise, he gives me the first hard look of our interview and proceeds to construct an elaborate portrait of me that pulls together virtually every detail that I'd let slip about myself through our various conversations. It's a stimulating analysis, neither entirely true nor entirely false, that leaves my heart pounding. "And I don't care if I'm right," he concludes.

NORMALLY, OF COURSE, STILGOE'S insight is so keen it verges on clairvoyance. He goes on to say that he once saw a pair of workmen struggling to assemble a machine, and could tell in an instant that one was right-handed and the other left-handed, and that each was on the wrong side of the apparatus. "So I just mentioned to them, 'You guys would be a lot happier if you traded places.'"

"How do you see such things?" I ask.

He shrugs. "You can't figure it out. It's your mind trying to understand how your mind works."

The truth is, Stilgoe looks out, not in. That's enough for him, and for me. Twice a week, he gets offers to capitalize on his insights from the likes of developers eager to find out how to make their properties look safe to upscale women, or a parcel service uncertain how to transport heavy objects efficiently. He's not particularly interested. "Sometimes I'll just tell them the answers to their problems on the telephone. 'Look, solve it this way.' And people start gobbling like turkeys. 'Thank you, thank you.'" He reflects a moment. "But if you do that sort of work, you never learn very much, and my only greed is for knowledge."

That knowledge redounds to the delight of his students as well, both in the classroom and out. Later, when I'm alone on the street again, I find that, even in the drizzle, the cityscape seems to me deeper and more richly hued for Stilgoe's tutelage. As I stroll, I take in the manhole covers, the car exhaust, and the faint, seductive roar of subway cars down below. **B**



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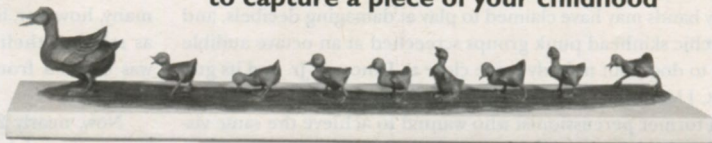
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