Editors' introduction

Lewis Mumford (1895–1990) has been called America's last great public intellectual. Beginning with his first book in 1922 and continuing throughout a career that saw the publication of some twenty-five influential volumes, Mumford made signal contributions to social philosophy, American literary and cultural history, the history of technology and, preeminently, the history of cities and urban planning practice.

Mumford saw the urban experience as an integral component in the development of human culture and the human personality. He consistently argued that the physical design of cities and their economic functions were secondary to their relationship to the natural environment and to the spiritual values of human community. Mumford applied these principles to his architectural criticism for The New Yorker magazine in the 1920s, his work with the Regional Planning Association of America, his campaign against plans to build a highway through Washington Square in New York's Greenwich Village in the 1950s, and his lifelong championing of the Garden City ideals of Ebenezer Howard.

In "What Is a City?" Mumford lays out his fundamental propositions about city planning and the human potential, both individual and social, of urban life. The city, he writes, is "a theater of social action," and everything else — art, politics, education, commerce — only serves to make the "social drama . . . more richly significant, as a stage set, well-designed. Intensifies and underlines the gestures of the actors and the action of the play." It was a theme and an image to which Mumford would return over and over again. In his chapter on "The Nature of the Ancient City" in The City in History (1961), he wrote that the city is "above all things a theater". And as commenting on the cultural conformity of the 1950s, warned that an urban civilization that has lost its sense of dramatic dialogue "is bound to have a fatal last act."

Mumford's influence on modern urban planning theory can hardly be overstated. His "urban drama" idea clearly resonates with an entire line of urban cultural analyses. Jane Jacobs, for example, talks about "street ballet" (p. 106). William Whyte (p. 483) says that a good urban plaza should function like a stage. Allan Jacobs and Donald Appleyard (p. 491) urge planners to fulfill human needs for "fantasy and exoticism." The city, they write, "has always been a place of excitement; it is a theater, a stage upon which citizens can display themselves and be seen by others."

As a historian, Mumford is the antithesis of Henri Pirenne (p. 37), whom Mumford considered too much of an economic determinist despite his "excellent basic scholarship." Mumford's emphasis on community values and the city's role in enlarging the potential of the human personality connects him with a long line of urban theorists that includes Louis Wirth (p. 97) and many others.


Most of our housing and city planning has been handicapped because those who have undertaken the work have had no clear notion of the social functions of the city. They sought to derive these functions from a cursory survey of the activities and interests of the contemporary urban scene. And they did not, apparently, suspect that there might be gross deficiencies, misdirected efforts, mistaken expenditures here that would not be set straight by merely building sanitary tenements or straightening out and widening irregular streets.

The city as a purely physical fact has been subject to numerous investigations. But what is the city as a social institution? The earlier answers to these questions, in Aristotle, Plato, and the Utopian writers from Sir Thomas More to Robert Owen, have been on the whole more satisfactory than those of the more systematic sociologists: most contemporary treatises on "urban sociology" in America throw no important light upon the problem. One of the soundest definitions of the city that was framed was by John Stow, an honest observer of Elizabethan London, who said:

"Men are congregated into cities and commonwealths for honesty and utility's sake, these shortly be the commodities that do come by cities, commonwealths and corporations. First, men by this manner of conversation are withdrawn from barbarous folly and force, to certain mildness of manners, and to humanity and justice. . . Good behavior is yet called urbanitas because it is rather found in cities than elsewhere. In sum, by often hearing, men be better persuaded in religion, and for that they live in the eyes of others, they be by example the more easily trained to justice, and by shamefacedness restrained from injury. And whereas commonwealths and kingdoms cannot have, next after God, any surer foundation than the love and good will of one man towards another, that also is closely bred and maintained in cities, where men by mutual society and companying together, do grow in alliances, commonwealths, and corporations."

It is with no hope of adding much to the essential insight of this description of the urban process that I would sum up the sociological concept of the city in the following terms:

The city is a related collection of primary groups and purposive associations: the first, like
family and neighborhood, are common to all communities, while the second are especially characteristic of city life. These varied groups support themselves through economic organization of a more or less corporate, or at least publicly regulated, character; and they are all housed in permanent structures, within a relatively limited area. The essential physical means of a city's existence are the fixed site, the durable shelter, the permanent facilities for assembly, interchange, and storage; the essential social means are the social division of labor, which serves not merely the economic life but the cultural processes. The city in its complete sense, then, is a geographic plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theater of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity. The city fosters art and is art: the city creates the theater and is the theater. It is in the city, the city as theater, that man's more purposive activities are focused, and work, through conflicting and cooperating personalities, events, groups, into more significant culminations.

With the social drama that comes into existence through the focusing and intensification of group activity there is a single function performed in the city that could not be performed, and has not in fact been performed, in the open country. The physical organization of the city makes it possible for the drama or make it frustrate; or it may, through the deliberate efforts of art, politics, and education, make the drama more richly significant, as a stage-set, well-designed, intensities and underlines the gestures of the actors and the action of the play. It is not for nothing that men have dwelt so often on the beauty or the ugliness of cities: these attributes qualify men's social activities. And if there is a deep reluctance on the part of the true city dweller to leave his cramped quarters for the physically more benign environment of a suburb — even a model garden suburb! — his instincts are usually justified: in its various and many-sided life, in its very opportunities for social disarray and conflict, the city creates drama, the suburb lacks it.

One may describe the city, in its social aspect, as a special framework directed toward the creation of differentiated opportunities for a common life and a significant collective drama. As indirect forms of association, with the aid of

nucleus of civic institutes and associations, definite limitations on size follow from this fact.

In one of Le Corbusier's skyscraper schemes for an ideal city, he chose thirty million as the number to be accommodated: the number was roughly the size of the urban aggregate of Paris, but that hardly explains why it should have been taken as a norm for a more rational type of city development. If the size of an urban unit, however, is a function of its productive organization and its opportunities for active social intercourse and culture, certain definite facts emerge as to adequate ratio of population to the process to be served. Thus, at the present level of culture in America, a million people are needed to support a university. Many factors may enter which will change the size of both the university and the population base; nevertheless one can say provisionally that if a million people are needed to provide a sufficient number of students for a university, then two million people should have two universities. One can also say that, other things being equal, five million people will not provide a more effective university than one million people would. The alternative to recognizing these ratios is to keep on overcrowding and overbuilding a few existing institutions, thereby limiting, rather than expanding, the genuine social faculties.

What is important is not an absolute figure as to population or area: although in certain aspects of life, such as the size of city that is capable of reproducing itself through natural fertility, one can almost always draw the same figure. What is more important is to express size always as a function of the social relationships to be served. . . . There is an optimum numerical size, beyond which each further increment of inhabitants creates difficulties out of all proportion to the benefits. There is also an optimum area of expansion, beyond which further urban growth tends to paralyze rather than to further important social relationships. Rapid means of transportation have given a regional area with a radius of from forty to a hundred miles, the unity that London and Hampstead had before the coming of the underground railroad. But the activities of small children are still bounded by a walking distance of about a quarter of a mile, and for men to congregate weekly and frequently in neighborhoods the maximum distance means nothing, although it may properly define the area served for a selective minority by a university, a central reference library, or a completely equipped hospital. The area of potential urban settlement has been vastly increased by the motor car and the airplane; but the necessity for solid contiguous growth, for the purposes of Interstate, has in turn been lessened by the telephone and the radio. In the Middle Ages a distance of less than a half a mile from the city's center usually defined its utmost limits. The block-by-block accretion of the big city, along its corridor of avenues, is in all important respects a denial of the vastly improved type of urban grouping that our fresh Inventions have brought in. For all occasional types of intercourse, the region is the unit of social life but the region cannot function effectively, as a well-lit unit, if the entire area is too filled with people — since their very presence will clog its arteries of traffic and congest its social facilities.

Limitations on size, density, and area are absolutely necessary to effective social intercourse; and they are therefore the most important instruments of rational economic and civic planning. The unwillingness in the past to establish such limits has been due mainly to the fact that the assumption that all changes in magnitudes were signs of progress and automatically "good for business," and the belief that such limitations were essentially arbitrary, in that they proposed to "decrease economic opportunity" — that is, opportunity for living by congestion — and to halt the inevitable course of change. Both these objections are superstitious.

Limitations on height are now common in American cities; drastic limitations on density are the rule in municipal housing estates in England which could not be done has been done. Such limitations do not obviously limit the population itself: they merely give the planner and administrator the opportunity to multiply the number of centers in which the population is housed, instead of permitting a few existing centers to aggrandize themselves on a monopolistic pattern. These limitations are necessary to break up the functionless, hypertrophied urban masses of the past. Under the system of zoning, the planner proposes to replace the "mononucleated city," as Professor Warren Thompson has called it, with a new type of "poly nucleated city." In which a cluster of communities, adequately spaced and bounded, shall do duty for the
badly organized mass city. Twenty such cities, in a region whose environment and whose resources were adequately planned, would have all the benefits of a metropolis that held a million people, without its ponderous disabilities: its capital frozen into unprofitable utilities, and its land values concealed at levels that stand in the way of effective adaptation to new needs.

Mark the change that is in process today. The emerging sources of power, transport, and communication do not follow the old highway network at all. Giant power strides over the hills, ignoring the limitations of wheeled vehicles; the airplane, even more liberated, flies over swamps and mountains, and terminates its journey not on an avenue, but in a field. Even the highway for fast motor transportation abandons the pattern of the horse-and-buggy era. The new highways, like those of New Jersey and Westchester, to mention only examples drawn locally, are based more or less on a system definitively formulated by Benton MacKaye in his various papers on the Townless Highway. The most complete plans form an independent highway network, isolated both from the adjacent countryside and the towns that they bypass: as free from communal encroachments as the railroad system. In such a network no single center will, like the metropolis of old, become the focal point of all regional advantages: on the contrary, the "whole region" becomes open for settlement.

Even without intelligent public control, the likelihood is that within the next generation this dissociation and decentralization of urban facilities will go even farther. The Townless Highway begets the Highwayless Town in which the needs of close and continuous human association on all levels will be uppermost. This is just the opposite of the earlier mechanocentric picture of Roadtown, as pictured by Edgar Chamberless and the Spanish projectors of the Linear City. For the highwayless town is based upon the notion of effective zoning of functions through initial public design, rather than by blind legal ordinances. It is a town in which the various functional parts of the structure are isolated topographically as urban islands, appropriately designed for their specific use with no attempt to provide a uniform plan of the same general pattern for the industrial, the commercial, the domestic, and the civic parts.

The first systematic sketch of this type of town was made by Messrs. Wright and Stein in their design for Radburn in 1929; a new type of plan that was repeated on a limited scale – and apparently in complete independence – by planners in Köln and Hamburg at about the same time. Because of restrictions on design that favored a conventional type of suburban house and stable architectural forms, the implications of this new type of planning were not carried very far in Radburn. But in outline the main relationships are clear: the differentiation of foot traffic from wheeled traffic, the independent systems, the insulation of residence quarters from through roads; the discontinuous street pattern; the polarization of social life in specially spotted civic nuclei, beginning in the neighborhood with the school and the playground and the swimming pool. This type of planning was carried to a logical conclusion in perhaps the most functional and most socially intelligent of all Le Corbusier's many urban plans: that for Nemours in North Africa, in 1934.

Through these convergent efforts, the principles of the polynucleated city have been well established. Such plans must result in a fuller opportunity for the primary group, with all its habits of frequent direct meeting and face-to-face intercourse: they must also result in a more complicated pattern and a more comprehensive life for the region, for this geographic area can only now, for the first time, be treated as an instantaneous whole for all the functions of social existence. Instead of trusting to the mere massing of population to produce the necessary social concentration and social drama, we must now seek these results through deliberate local nucleation and a finer regional articulation. The words are jargon; but the importance of their meaning should not be missed. To embody these new possibilities in city life, which come to us not merely through better technical organization but through acuter sociological understanding, and to dramatize the activities themselves in appropriate individual and urban structures, forms the task of the coming generation.