

“IT TAKES A VILLAGE...”: A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO LEWIS MUMFORD’S CITY IN HISTORY

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The City in History is most often used as an historical catalog for understanding how we have arrived at our modern urban form. However, its more important use is as a guidebook for recognizing what makes our cities “good” or “bad” and why. The essay briefly explores the broader themes of Mumford and concludes that it is the incorporation of so-called village attributes into the metropolis that create a more positive urban environment.

What is wrong with cities today? As inhabitants of a world that appears destined for conurbation, in which more of us each day live an urban existence, we could provide a ready litany of responses. Invariably, our answers would include congestion, gentrification, sprawl, environmental non-sustainability, and the like. However, when asked how to fix the modern city we become more uncertain, for these problems do not admit of easy solutions. Just as the scale and scope of the city have grown, so too has the inability to effectively comprehend, much less address, its many quandaries. As a result, it appears easiest to either blindly accept what is wrong or to conveniently start with a clean slate by destroying the old or expanding into virgin territory.

Lewis Mumford wrote *The City in History* as a pragmatist, but he never embraced such a fatalistic worldview. Despite everything he had witnessed firsthand or learned as a student of urbanism, despite the transformation of cities into ever more inhumane containers, he still believed that the course could be reversed. “It would be foolish to predict when or how such a change may come about; and yet it would be even more unrealistic to dismiss it as a possibility, perhaps even an imminent possibility...” (Mumford 1961, 574). Mumford takes on the role of not only a fascinating educator but also a concerned father figure who seeks to help us recognize urban forms both good and bad and thereby learn from our mistakes and successes. Upon reading Mumford, then, the inevitable next step is to look around and say: what is good and what is bad?

One often hears in planning circles that the chief problem of the modern city—and the bane of our future existence—is its “sprawl,” which gobbles up the surrounding countryside and obscures the city’s edge. Mumford, too, appears to embrace this misconception, when discussing the threat of “universal conurbation” (Mumford 1961, 540), but he fortunately recognizes that the real issue is not expansion itself, but rather the underlying features of the expanding organism. “[T]he urban growth becomes more aimless and discontinuous.... Old neighborhoods and precincts, the social cells of the city, still maintaining some measure of the village pattern, become vestigial” (Mumford 1961, 543). However unwieldy our metropolises become, however complete a conurbation we might experience, the human scale and the social fabric in which we thrive will never change. This scale must remain at the heart of urbanism.

Mumford elsewhere speaks in terms that reinforce the classic dichotomies of urban/rural, city/village, or town/country, but here he recognizes that it is when these distinctions break down that

the city realizes its highest potential. To appreciate the beauty and potential of the city, one must be able to recognize in it the familiarities of neighborhood and shared experience. This is evidenced by his affinity for the Greek polis and the medieval town. These may have been small in scale, but as Mumford reminds us, “contrary to the convictions of census statisticians, it is art, culture, and political purpose, not numbers, that define a city” (Mumford 1961, 169). The city is a concentrator of people, but its chief function is to “convert power into form, energy into culture, dead matter into the living symbols of art, biological reproduction into social creativity” (Mumford 1961, 571). The beauty of the polis was in its nascent freedom, its promotion of a public and civic pride, and, perhaps most important, its appreciation of the human measure (Mumford 1961, 124), which Mumford terms the “village measure” (Mumford 1961, 128). These features resulted in a “collective life more highly energized, more heightened in its capacity for esthetic expression and rational evolution” (Mumford 1961, 125). The same energy characterized the medieval counterpart, which is praised for promoting an education of the senses in both the social and biological respects (Mumford 1961, 296-99).

But is the modern city devoid of such attributes? One need only travel to the nearest metropolis to witness a diversity of cultural opportunities or to titillate the senses. Yes, our cities still have a pulse, and during the festivals we still celebrate one cannot deny that the heart of the city is strong. A pulse, though, is simply the clinical, base indicator of life. What marks a higher form of vitality, and what many of our cities lack, is a healthy rhythm (Mumford 1961, 444-45). The downfall of Rome points to this distinction. As Mumford speaks of the devotion to arena, theater, and bath (Mumford 1961, 230-32), he reveals that, while urban circuses may be used to resuscitate the city, they cannot cure the underlying disease. Museums and stadiums may appear lasting, but kill the city and they too will decay. Rhythm, by contrast, develops in the intimate relationships between people, among the workaday interactions of family, friends, and even strangers. As these associations form neighborhoods and boroughs and create their own variety of space and meaning, they become more profound than even the grandest of spectacle, and they create a permanent, living link between our current existence and the generations of the past.

The true crisis, then, is that too many of our cities have broken from their pasts; they have forgotten that they sprang from a field of villages. The core city of any large metropolis may function as the center for transportation, business, or public spectacle, and we gather there as passers-through, workers, or tourists. But the gathering is only numerical. Our skyscrapers, arenas, marketplaces, and thoroughfares can accommodate a greater concentration of people than ever before, and still the association feels forced and hollow. Our relationship with the city becomes at best an illicit affair, at worst a one-night stand, and we inevitably return to our true home in some far-flung suburb. And there the situation is barely better, for in attempting to find freedom from the anonymous congestion and impersonal crowding of the city, most have accepted a suburban fabric marked by anonymous houses in an impersonal landscape. Mumford witnessed this devolution and reacts to it with an affecting sadness, captured best when he quotes Alexis de Tocqueville: “Each of them living apart, is a stranger to the fate of all the rest—his children and his private friends constitute to him the whole of mankind; as for the rest of his fellow-citizens, he is close to them but he sees them not; he touches them, but he feels them not; he exists but in himself and for himself alone” (Mumford 1961, 513).

At this juncture it is tempting to object that advances in communication have largely cured this condition. Indeed, the symptoms have somewhat subsided. The “whole of mankind” is now potentially as broad as one wishes—indeed, it can span the entire globe. The ability to engage as an informed citizen, even if less directly than in societies past, is at least more accessible. But what has this freedom brought? As of yet, very little. As Mumford points out, “freedom” in the Middle Ages

meant freedom from feudalism, to favor the communal activities of the town; under capitalism, it meant freedom for profit, “without any reference to the community as a whole” (Mumford 1961, 415). In the information age, we now have the advantage of a worldwide community, but our reference to it is so attenuated that it only marginally impacts our rampant individualism, if at all. We have an unprecedented freedom of thought and expression, but our world does not foster the creativity and intellect needed to give full meaning to this freedom. Mumford frequently emphasizes the importance of the quality and quantity of human interaction because “the dramatic dialogue is both the fullest symbol and the final justification of the city’s life. For the same reason, the most revealing symbol of the city’s failure, of its very non-existence as a social personality, is the absence of dialogue—not necessarily a silence, but equally the loud sound of a chorus uttering the same words in cowed if complacent conformity” (Mumford 1961, 117-18).

Yet there is something to be said for the knitting together of our world, even if by electronic, impersonal means. For as we face “what is wrong with our cities,” the question is now more universal than ever before, and perhaps the solutions likewise become more recognizable. The agents of globalization—the domination of capitalism, the multinational corporation, the rise of the internet, and the increase in rapid travel—have drawn metropolises worldwide into closer resemblance. When writing *The City in History*, Mumford may have concentrated on western civilizations, but in a world without borders—and, more importantly, one in which the western model of urban and regional form has been the most heavily exported—his observations remain universal.

For all the efficiencies and profits of the unbridled capitalist city, we now see that it has had less-tangible, long-term costs. Mumford was acutely aware decades ago that the capitalist city relied on creative destruction as its lifeblood (Mumford 1961, 414-15), and now we appear to be realizing that the collection of our self-centered actions ultimately damages our planet, our cities, our communities, and—by logical extension—our individual selves.

In the final analysis, then, Mumford does his readers an important service by reminding them that the good of a city lies less in its ability to produce profit or be an efficient laborer in the global market, than in its ability to nurture the human person in all his various associations and enterprises. In short, it must embrace the village ideal in order to move beyond it. This was Mumford’s key observation; his greatest gift is to invite us to share his passion—to not only examine our urban surroundings, but then to act on these observations by using the vast potential of our technologies, ambitions, and connectedness for the greater good (Mumford 1961, 570-71). Importantly, this invitation is not for the cavalier urban planner, crusading as one man against the tide. The sheer size of the urban complex demands a more unified front. For while “responsible public direction working for well-conceived public ends is essential for the foundation and development of all urban communities” (Mumford 1961, 444), “[t]he solo voice of the planner ... could never take the place of all the singers in a civic chorus” (Mumford 1961, 350).

WORKS CITED

Mumford, Lewis. 1961. *The City in History*. New York: Harcourt, Inc.