

The City of Tomorrow . . . Today

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An aspiring urban developer, Ryan Schell seeks to combine his passion for good design with his professional experience in finance and investments to positively impact peoples' lives through the built environment. He received his undergraduate degree from Harvard University in 2011 and worked as an investment banker for municipal and nonprofit healthcare institutions before attending the University of Michigan. After completing his dual Master's degrees in Urban Planning and Business Administration, Ryan plans to work as a real estate developer in the city of Detroit.

ABSTRACT

First published in 1961, Lewis Mumford's classic macrohistorical work "The City in History" follows human civilization from its paleolithic origins to modern-day metropolises. Mumford was both a historian and social critic, demonstrating a singular ability to draw inferences from ancient civilizations to critique contemporary society, frequently with biting rhetoric. Written from the perspective of Mumford himself, this essay adopts his critical approach to assess the urban form of Troy, Michigan – a large suburb of Detroit. Drawing comparisons between public life in present-day Troy and that of the ancient Hellenic polis, it describes the emergence of a new hyper-individual urban form – the suburban micropolis – in which large single-family homes serve as self-contained metropolises for the nuclear family. Socioeconomic competition, low-density urban fabric, and internet connectivity have encouraged this new form to emerge rapidly in Troy, but it will soon spread across the suburban American landscape.

In the city of tomorrow, the morphology of the built environment is largely irrelevant. Life is contained within the home, the car, and the office mall. Gone are the days of walking to work and window shopping downtown. Concepts like density and distance are no longer top of mind. Instead, the average American experiences life almost entirely in an augmented reality provided by computer screens. Even during long commutes to work, autonomous vehicles give passengers more time to stare at their phone screens. There is little reason to engage with the world outside one's windows.

This city of tomorrow is quickly becoming the city of today in Troy, Michigan. Beginning with its incorporation in 1955, this metropolitan Detroit suburb experienced rapid growth, with shopping malls, corporate headquarters and tract housing, transforming a small rural village into a large suburban polis.¹ However, unlike the citizens of ancient Athens who relinquished their individualism to transition from village to city, Troy's residents moved in the opposite direction. Socioeconomic competition, a low-density urban fabric,

and the emergence of internet technology led to the advent of a new hyper-individual urban form – the suburban micropolis – in which homes serve as self-contained metropolises for the nuclear family. While this new form will first come to dominate upper-middle-class suburban enclaves like Troy, continued technologic developments and social stratification will cause it to eventually dominate the American landscape.

Troy's high-quality school system, boasting the state's sixth- and eleventh-highest ranked public high schools, makes it a destination for Metro Detroit's upwardly-mobile middle class.² Beginning in the 1980s, parents moved to Troy to provide their children with expanded opportunities through educational attainment. Recent newcomers have been a diverse collection of first- and second-generation immigrant families from around the world. They have little in common but a commitment to their children's education. In this way, Troy resembles the concept of a polis as a "place where people come together, not just by birth and habit, but consciously, in pursuit of a better life."³ Tragically, the modern

American conception of a “better life” represents a harmful inversion of that which existed in a typical Hellenic city.

In ancient Athens, intellectual discipline was a shared value that encouraged all citizens to engage in public life. A litany of festivals and public performances during the year required “constant attention and participation” of the Athenian citizen, frequently in “direct face-to-face intercourse.”⁴ Without a deep understanding of history, literature and the arts, the Athenian citizen would miss the richness of life provided by these shared experiences. Furthermore, these obligatory events made it virtually impossible to stay confined to one section of the city; staying in one’s home would mean complete isolation from society.

Contrary to its role as a unifying force for the Hellenic polis, education serves as an isolating influence among Troy’s citizenry. In America’s knowledge-based economy, educational achievement separates winners from losers. And the country’s increasing socioeconomic stratification means the stakes have never been higher. Competitive college admission requirements force families seeking the “good life” for their children to approach schooling as a zero-sum game. A neighbor’s success becomes both a personal failure and an existential threat. Just as students shield test answers from the prying eyes of their peers, the nuclear family turns inward to prevent neighbors from gaining an upper hand at their expense.

Before moving beyond this last point, it is necessary to recognize that Troy’s neighborhood schools provide ample opportunities for both children and parents to socialize with their peers.

Student plays, ice cream socials, and youth sports all bring neighborhood residents together. However, since these activities are organized according to neighborhood boundaries, the socialization usually occurs among similar socioeconomic classes. Without a well-functioning common public space, there is limited interaction between different classes. Furthermore, the isolating nature of educational competition and Troy’s pre-existing structural deficiencies are quickly nullifying the positive influence of neighborhood activities.

Troy’s decentralized urban fabric has always favored isolation. The construction of I-75 through Troy in the 1960s precipitated a deluge of low-density residential development, transforming what was once a small agricultural township into a sterling example of an “anti-city,” or “diffused low-density mass.”⁵ Regional job dispersion throughout Metro Detroit makes the isolating nature of the low-density landscape even more acute. Despite providing almost one-fifth of Metro Detroit’s office space, only one-eighth of Troy residents both live and work in the city.^{6,7} This means that a majority of Troy residents spend most of their weekdays outside of the city, making it far too easy to simply commute from home to work and back.

Troy would need a vibrant mixed-use downtown district – akin to the Hellenic agora – to bring people together. This type of environment exists in many cities across Metro Detroit. In fact, neighboring cities like Royal Oak, Birmingham, and Rochester each have small, walkable downtowns that form the core of a shared experience for those communities. Unfortunately, Troy’s history of single-use zoning has prevented any such district from forming.

Troy's monument to American consumerism, the Somerset Collection, embodies the agora's spirit of exchange but fails as a unifying force among Troy's citizens because it reinforces social stratification. This megamall is anchored by Sachs Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus, with in-line stores like Coach, Louis Vuitton, and Tiffany & Co. Shoppers do not frequent these stores to engage with their fellow citizens. They shop at Somerset to materialize and broadcast their social stature, presenting themselves as "winners" of the socioeconomic competition. Like its ancestor the Roman bath, Somerset Collection is seen by contemporary observers as a symbol of the city's economic and social prowess. But in reality, it is a painful reminder of the plutocratic aspirations and inter-class competition that prevent Troy from establishing a diverse and rich public life.

Technology has diminished the motivation to resist these forces of individualism and isolation. Internet connectivity eliminates the need for local engagement because people can find their favored communities online. Small differences between neighbors are magnified by the ability to search online for someone with a shared perspective. This ability to "swipe for friendship" reinforces views without the need to consider alternatives. Instead of finding common ground within their local communities, individuals shelter themselves from meaningful discourse using televisions, laptops, and phones. With little reason to engage in the community at large, nuclear families hunker down in their homes. This tendency has led to the emergence of a new urban form: the suburban micropolis.

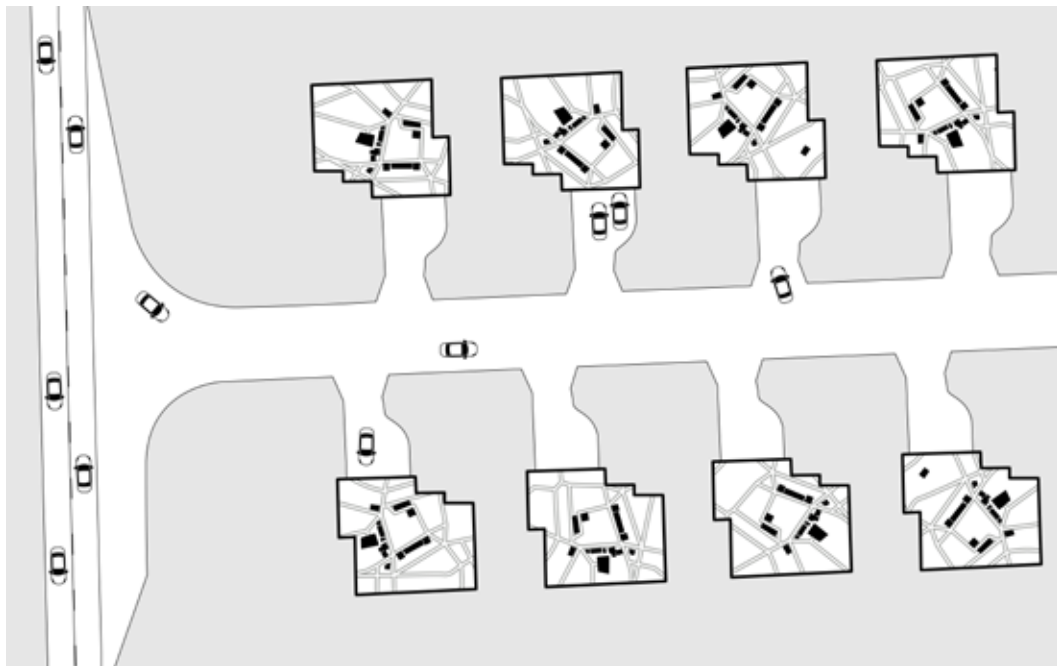


Figure 1: Annexation of public space inside the walls of the suburban micropolis.

The suburban micropolis is a single-family home that replaces the city as the container of community life. During the neolithic age, the ancient city emerged as a self-contained unit that gave form to the culture and kinetic energies of the community.⁸

Physical spaces and institutions, like monuments and museums, were required to store and transmit society's collective knowledge among the citizenry. This physical form is no longer required in the technological age. Satellite television and HBO Go have supplanted the public plays of the Athenian polis. Every couch becomes a personal colosseum on football weekends - vomitorium no longer required. Skype connects newcomers to their families in different parts of the world, and Amazon delivers life's essentials right to the front door. In response, home sizes have swelled to accommodate this increased activity, annexing public space from the city within the timber and sheetrock walls of the suburban micropolis.

This new form is currently limited to McMansions in upper-middle class enclaves like Troy, but it will quickly spread as socioeconomic stratification and income rigidity take hold across the United States. Universal wireless connectivity and autonomous vehicles will make people location-agnostic. Community, culture, and commerce will be accessible via smart watches, phones, tablets, and computers from sea to shining sea. Autonomous vehicles will enable conurbation on a scale that would be inconceivable to past generations of suburbanites. Passengers will eat breakfast, watch the news, and even dress for the day within the confines of their cars. Although telecommuting will enable more people to work from home, many manufacturing jobs will still require employees to commute to work. However,

spending two hours in the car each way will no longer be an impediment to frontier development. Suburban micropolises will sprout wherever internet is fast and land is abundant.

It is not too late to avoid this fate. The same factors that contribute to the rise of the suburban micropolis can be harnessed to reverse this troubling trend. Education will remain a critical path to success in the global economy, but students can learn that fair and equitable outcomes are good for everyone. While the internet can certainly be an echo chamber that reinforces group-think, it is also an incredible resource to learn about the world and broaden perspectives. Autonomous vehicles have the potential to encourage sprawl, but they also enable infill development that increases residential density. All citizens must choose to either break down the walls of their personal citadels and embrace the complexities of a pluralistic society or build their McMansions and live in bleak metropolises of one. ■

Endnotes

1. The Troy Historical Society, *Troy: A City from the Corners*, ed. Loraine Campbell (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia, 2004).
2. "Best High Schools Rankings," U.S. News and World Report LP, accessed February 18, 2018. <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/search?state-urlname=michigan>.
3. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, 1961), 131.
4. *Ibid.*, 168.
5. *Ibid.*, 505.
6. Harrison West. "Strong Finish to the Year for Detroit's Office Market." *Jones Lang LaSalle Q4 2017 Office Insight* (2018), <http://www.us.jll.com/united-states/en-us/Research/US-Detroit-Office-Insight-Q4-2017-JLL.pdf?6e117eb0-49c6-491a-a326-929ae96c3c5a>.
7. "Commuting Patterns: Troy," Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG). Last modified 2013. <http://maps.semco.org/CommutingPatterns/>.
8. Mumford, 97.