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CITY LIFE

*Urban Expectations
in a New World*

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The Measure of a Town

CITIES ARE ARTIFACTS. THEY ARE NOT THE BIGGEST man-made objects in the world—they are not as big as works of pure engineering like the Great Wall of China or the Panama Canal or the continental telephone system—but what they lack in extent they make up for in conscious impact. The telephone system is huge but largely invisible, and only a part of the Great Wall or the Panama Canal can be seen at a time; the immensity of these creations makes itself felt only in the imagination. But a city can be experienced all of a piece. That is why city views, whether of Paris spread out below the heights of Sacré-Coeur or of lower Manhattan from the Staten Island ferry or of the crowded island of Hong Kong from Kowloon, are so moving. Such views are also a potent re-

minder that cities represent great human achievements. "It was divine nature which gave us the country," wrote the Roman scholar Marcus Terentius Varro, "and man's skill that built the cities."

It would be logical to assume that because cities are man-made and not accidental creations, they follow discrete patterns, and hence can be described and catalogued according to some simple scheme. Canals can be categorized according to length or depth or lock capacity, say, and telephone systems can be rated by technical sophistication or by the number of calls carried or the distance covered. Since cities are above all concentrations of people, population suggests itself as the simplest measure. Yet to begin with, there is no strict, or even loose, definition of just how many heads it takes to make a city. In the United States, "city" has been used to identify settlements of almost any size. The grandly named Dodge City, laid out in 1872, was described by a contemporary visitor as "about a dozen frame houses and about two dozen tents, besides a few adobe houses." Even in its heyday, when Dodge City had a reputation as the western frontier's wildest town, rivaled only by Deadwood and Tombstone, the permanent population was probably well under 1,000 people. Plattsburgh, New York, which is near where I used to live, had 7,446 inhabitants when it was incorporated as a city in 1902. When Miami was officially declared a city, it had only 343 voters. In Canada, the provinces of Ontario and Quebec require that a town have a population of 15,000 before it can incorporate itself as a city, but British Columbia does not use the official designation "town" and calls anything larger than a village a "city."

The idea of what constitutes a city has varied greatly in the past. Aristotle thought that the ideal city should contain not more than 5,000 citizens (he did not count women, freemen, or slaves), which he considered was the largest number of people who could conveniently meet together to govern themselves. This was an im-

plicit criticism of Athens, since it is estimated that at the time of Pericles the city contained about 40,000 citizens. Although it was probably smaller when Aristotle lived there, it was obviously much larger than he judged fit. What would he have thought of ancient Rome, which reached a million inhabitants at its peak, although it shrank to less than 100,000 during the Middle Ages? One hundred thousand was still exceptionally large for the time. In medieval Germany, settlements of 3,000 inhabitants were granted the status of cities, and in medieval France, there were numerous examples of walled cities with as few as 200 or 300 households, probably 2,000 or 3,000 people. Such small, compact cities would have functioned like modern neighborhoods: one walked everywhere and knew everybody.

There were many different ways of referring to cities and towns. In the Middle Ages in Europe, walled, self-governing towns were usually called boroughs or burghs, from the German *burg*, originally meaning a fortress or castle; whence also the terms burghers, Burgess, and bourgeois. Bourgeois now refers to a social class rather than place of residence, but borough continues to be used in England (and in some American states) to denote self-governing towns. In New York City, borough refers to the five administrative units that constitute the city. *Bourg*, in French, means a market town, and *burg* has survived in its many forms in the names of cities around the world: Strasbourg, Salzburg, Nuremberg, and Edinburgh. There are so many burgs in the United States—Pittsburgh, Saint Petersburg, Gettysburg, Vicksburg—that beginning in the nineteenth century, "burg" became a colloquial term signifying town. "Urban," from the Latin *urbs* for city—as distinct from *rus*, or rural—has survived in English and has produced urbane, which implies refined behavior, clearly derived from life in towns.

The word "town" comes from the Old English *tūn*, and origi-

nally meant a fence or an enclosure. During the Middle Ages it became a generic term for large and small urban settlements, which were usually walled; even as late as the nineteenth century in Scotland and northern England a group of farm buildings was referred to as a town. In the United States, on the other hand, a town or township can be a large administrative area that often has a rural character. As for the word "city" (derived from the Old French, *cit  *), it originally signified towns that were the seat of a bishopric. This had nothing to do with population—cathedral towns were not necessarily larger than others—and eventually, important boroughs were also granted the title of city. The city was thought of as the seat of authority. National capitals were called cities, as were the traditional centers of old towns: the City of London or the Ile de la Cit   in Paris. City was also used to distinguish special religious places—Rome was the Eternal City, Jerusalem the Holy City; heaven was the City of God.*

Perhaps one should not make too much of the distinction between city and town, for it is not present in all languages. In Spanish, *ciudad* can be used to describe both a city and a town; in Italian, *citt  * likewise blurs the distinction. In German, Russian, Polish, and Hungarian, although there are special words to denote a village, the same word is used to describe both a city and a town. In French, a single word, *ville*, refers both to Paris and to small country towns. The need English speakers uniquely felt to distinguish towns from cities may have been simply a linguistic accident. As a result of the Norman Conquest, modern English is an amalgam of Old English and Old French, and sometimes this results in different roots for words with related meanings, like house

*The use of the word "city" to denote a special place, rather than an urban center, still occurs in building names like New York's Radio City, and Chicago's Marina City, as well as in commercial names like Toyota City or Circuit City.

(Old English) and mansion (Old French), or rope (Old English) and cord (Old French).

Whatever the reason, the presence of the two different words, town and city, has allowed English speakers to draw subtle distinctions. Today, to call a place a town implies that it has close economic and emotional ties with the surrounding countryside. A city, on the other hand, while it may appropriate natural areas for weekend recreation, is considered to be self-sufficient, and if it depends on natural resources, these are likely to come from far away, not from its immediate surroundings. Thus, to say that one place is a large town and that another is a small city is to insinuate that while their population sizes may be similar, their character is not. To call a place a small town evokes an image that is not merely demographic. Big city, city slickers, and fighting city hall all connote a certain way of life, just as town hall and town meeting suggests a smaller, more intimate scale, which is why the notion of a "national town meeting" is an oxymoron.

For a long time, it was the largest cities that set the tempo for entire eras, and being number one in population counted for something. This was true of imperial Rome and Constantinople, medieval Baghdad, fifteenth-century Nanjing, and nineteenth-century London. London was number one, demographically speaking, from 1850 until 1950, when it was overtaken by New York City. When Tokyo displaced New York as the world's largest city in the 1980s, it was taken as a sign of Japan's industrial prowess. But a list of the world's six largest metropolitan areas today would include not just Tokyo and New York City but also S  o Paulo, Mexico City, Shanghai, and Bombay. While it could be argued that the presence of Shanghai reflects the arrival of the People's Republic of China as a world economic power, the same can hardly be said of S  o

Paulo, Mexico City, or Bombay, which are all situated in countries with troubled economies. Indeed, of the twenty-two so-called megacities, cities whose population is expected to exceed 10 million by the year 2000, none is in Europe, only two are in the United States, two are in Japan, one is in South Korea, and the rest—seventeen of them—are in poor countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Even among rich, industrialized nations, the size of a city is no longer a measure of its importance. A ranking of cities by population situates Chicago above Paris; yet whereas Paris, like London and New York, is a city of global influence, Chicago, despite an outstanding university, a famous symphony orchestra, and one of the world's busiest airports, is not. An important banking center like Zurich is in the same population rank as Buffalo, which is not an influential city. Rotterdam, which handles the most cargo of any ocean port in the world, is lower on the population scale than the port city of Valencia. Jerusalem, a city that dominates Middle Eastern politics and is a holy place for three world religions, is side by side with Manchester, England, a city whose glory days ended a century ago.

The size of a city's population is a crude measure of urbanity, for it reveals nothing of the wealth or poverty of the citizens, of their education or lack of it, of their level of culture and degree of accomplishment. When Vienna, the city of Mozart, was a sophisticated imperial capital, it contained only slightly more than 200,000 people. The population of Venice peaked at about 180,000 in the seventeenth century, yet this small city (about the size of present-day Little Rock, Arkansas) was home to a host of creative individuals: Titian and Veronese, Monteverdi and Jacopo Sansovino, as well as, of course, their many enlightened patrons. Venice's legacy was not just artistic; the city also gave Europe such varied inventions as glass mirrors, income tax, gambling casinos,

government bonds, and the term "ghetto." In 1516 the New Ghetto (literally, New Foundry—*getto* means "to cast metals") was set aside for German and Italian Jewish refugees from the mainland; the district was surrounded by a wall and locked up at night. Venice has grown almost not at all since the seventeenth century, and the modern visitor can still experience the pleasure of a small and concentrated city that can easily be grasped in the mind's eye, unlike the behemoths that we call cities today.

By the eighteenth century, the largest city in Europe was London, with a population of about three-quarters of a million. In population, that is roughly the size of present-day Phoenix or Edmonton, but the cultural resources of these provincial centers cannot be compared with those that flourished in eighteenth-century London: the dozens of locally published journals and newspapers, the hundreds of theaters and music rooms, and the almost 2,000 coffeehouses, where literati could go for gossip, political debate, and reading material. "When a man is tired of London," said Samuel Johnson, "he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford."

Nor does the measure of the population of a city disclose what came before or what is to come. It does not indicate whether a city is growing or stable or shrinking. Detroit and San Diego presently have about the same number of inhabitants, but one city, a former giant, is a troubled company town whose industries are in retreat and whose population is contracting (about 175,000 people less in 1990 than in 1980), and the other is an up-and-coming regional powerhouse, international in language, culture, and orientation, whose population is growing rapidly (an increase of 235,000 people in the same decade).

Detroit and San Diego are a reminder that the fortunes of cities change. Venice started as a European banking center and has become a tourist city; Miami started its urban existence as a tourist

city and may eventually become a tropical Zurich. Miami was incorporated in 1896 and, thanks to a combination of surrounding citrus groves and the railroad, by 1920 it had grown to about 30,000 people. Then, two years later, the South Florida land rush began. The boom lasted five years, and at its height people from across the United States were arriving at the rate of more than 6,000 a day. It was an extraordinary spectacle, as people rushed in, often to discover that their dream home was half an acre of the proverbial swampland. Most stayed, however, and by 1926, the population of the city stood at a remarkable 130,000. The next great period of expansion did not occur until after World War II, when Miami became predominantly a winter holidayers' and a retirees' city. A mixture of beachside hotels and inland mobile-home parks accommodated both groups. Between 1940 and 1950, the city's population almost doubled; since then, its growth has been less dramatic, except for sporadic bursts of immigration from Central and South America. The greater Miami area, including Fort Lauderdale, is now among the ten largest metropolitan areas in the United States, and functions as the chief shopping and banking center for the well-heeled (including the drug-cartel managers) of the Latin American countries of the Caribbean. What is also dramatic is the change in the character of the city, half of whose population is now of Hispanic origin, predominantly Cuban.

The American city planner Kevin Lynch suggested that there have always been distinct ways of thinking about cities, and that all cities could be described as having been built following one of three conceptual models. He called the first model "cosmic" to denote cities whose spatial layouts symbolically represented specific rituals and beliefs. These beliefs could be religious, as in the case

of ancient India, where cities were laid out like huge mandalas; in traditional Chinese capital cities, which were planned as perfect squares, the twelve gates, three on each side, represented the twelve months of the year. When the ancient Romans laid out new towns, the two intersecting main streets stood for the solar axis and the line of the equinox. In Japanese cities the central location of the emperor's palace symbolized the preeminence of imperial rule. Sacred or cosmic aspirations were also expressed in the location of buildings. Hilltops were reserved for temples and other buildings of religious importance. In some Asian cities man-made temple-mountains were intended to recall Mount Meru, the mountain at the center of traditional Indian cosmology.

Symbolic urban layouts are not necessarily religious or ancient. Washington, D.C., where the separation of White House and Capitol symbolizes the separation of executive and legislative powers, was planned at the end of the eighteenth century. Washington obviously influenced Albert Speer when he redesigned Berlin for the Third Reich: a grand boulevard was to terminate in a huge domed hall. Speer's plan was never realized, but there have been other symbolically charged capital cities built in the twentieth century. New Delhi, begun in 1911, has a great east-west processional way leading to a hill on which sits the domed viceroy's residence. Canberra, Australia, planned in 1912 by the American Walter Burley Griffin, is less formal, but likewise establishes a symbolic axis between two hills, Parliament Hill and Capitol Hill. The plan of Brasília (1957-1960) resembles the outline of an airplane, with the main government buildings located in what would be the pilot's cockpit.

Lynch's second model is the "practical" city—that is, the city imagined as a kind of machine, chiefly a machine for commerce. Such cities are pragmatic and functional; they grow according to material needs, as new parts are added and as old parts are al-

tered. Their urban form derives from simply the addition of undifferentiated parts; they have, Lynch writes, no wider significance. This does not mean that practical cities are urbanistically inferior, but unlike cosmic cities they are not subject to a single overriding philosophical guiding principle.

The streets of the practical city have typically followed an orthogonal grid. The oldest gridded cities were colonies of preclassical Mesopotamia and Assyria. Grid planning has often been associated with colonization, since standardized, orderly, rational layouts appeal to the military mind; grids also can be devised in advance and imposed on different terrain. The Laws of the Indies, codified by Philip II in 1573, mandated that Spanish colonial towns in the New World (at least the civil settlements—the laws did not govern forts and mission towns) follow a standardized grid plan that incorporated sensible ideas about orientation and zoning (slaughterhouses and tanneries, for example, were separated from residential areas) and provided shaded arcades on the main streets. The main public area in these towns was a large central plaza surrounded by the chief colonizing institutions: the royal council, the town hall, and the main church.

The most recent examples of grid planning on a huge scale are found in the cities of the Third World. In the suburbs of Djakarta, Calcutta, Nairobi, Mexico City, and Lima are so-called sites and services projects, large tracts of land subdivided into small rectangular plots onto which poor families move and erect their own dwellings. The systematic, orderly layouts of these new planned neighborhoods are in marked contrast to the apparent chaos of the unplanned slums and squatter settlements they replace. This geometric order is not merely the result of engineering considerations and a rationalized sewerage layout, but also represents a kind of colonization, the colonization of traditional cultures by modern state bureaucracies. The political persuasion of the bu-

reaucrats is irrelevant; similar sites and services layouts are imposed by Asian autocracies, African dictatorships, and Latin American oligarchies.

North American cities, with their regular grids of intersecting streets, are typical examples of Lynch's practical model. This does not necessarily mean that the apparently mechanical grid lacks poetic character, however. When the grid meets the natural landscape, it produces special lakeshore and harborside conditions (Chicago); it can be fractured by ravines (Los Angeles) and protruding hillocks (Montreal); and the view of distant mountains (Seattle) inevitably introduces a picturesque element to the practical city. Grids are lifeless only when seen from the air. They assume a different bearing on the ground, where topography asserts itself as it does in Cincinnati, where the mechanical mating of grid and hills produces amazingly steep streets. Buildings on higher ground inevitably assume greater importance, as does the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in Morningside Heights, seven miles north of City Hall and the old downtown in New York City. Even a gentle slope significantly modifies the experience of the simple grid as some streets climb hills and others run across the slope. In San Francisco the unusual combination of practical grid and dramatic topography has produced one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

Grids are usually homogeneous checkerboards, but not always. The 1811 gridiron plan of midtown Manhattan, for example, incorporates a clear hierarchy, with broad, short-block avenues for large buildings and narrow, long-block streets for smaller row-houses. An extra-wide avenue like Park introduces yet another differentiation to the grid; so does the occasional open square like Gramercy Park, or the slanted slash of Broadway across the regular gridiron. Like the angled meeting of different grids in Atlanta, Seattle, and New Orleans, diagonal streets produce odd-shaped building plots and odd-shaped buildings. There is one American

city whose grid could accurately be described as cosmic: Salt Lake City. What appears to be merely an unrelieved crisscrossing of streets is actually based on the "Plat of the City of Zion," devised by Joseph Smith in 1833 following what is said to have been a divine revelation.

The third type of urban model Lynch called "organic." As the name suggests, this is the city considered as a kind of organism: cohesive, balanced, indivisible. Medieval towns are organic—their layouts look natural rather than man-made. Streets vary in width, they are rarely straight, and they wind sinuously throughout the town. Many traditional Islamic cities likewise consist of a convoluted web of streets and dead-ending alleys. To the visitor who wanders away from the main town square, the Islamic city is perplexing. There are no simple axes, no vistas or replicated geometries. In fact, the labyrinth contains a carefully organized hierarchy of spaces, from public avenues to private, family compounds. A larger-scale example of an organic city is London, whose sprawling street layout, unlike that of Paris or Berlin, defies easy characterization. It is a result of centuries of addition, as different neighborhoods, or boroughs, gradually knitted together to form a whole. Most organic cities seem to have been planned around meandering pedestrian movement, or, as in the case of Los Angeles, around the meandering line of an electric railway. One exception is Venice. The city grew by the accretion of parts—*islands*—that were expanded and combined as need dictated; additional canals were built to provide access by watercraft.

Lynch describes three historical urban models. It's necessary to add a fourth, to reflect the momentous change that affected cities at the beginning of the twentieth century: the automobile city. The city planned for cars and trucks resembles the organic city, inasmuch as it is chiefly a pragmatic expression of personal mobility. Just as the medieval city enabled its inhabitants to walk easily

from place to place, the automobile city enables people to drive. Since drivers move faster than pedestrians, however, the horizontal extent of the automobile city is vastly greater; it is spread out. A small medieval city could be traversed on foot in about fifteen minutes. A fifteen-minute drive at low speed, on the other hand, covers about five miles. The requirements of automobile movement also impose their own peculiar geometry, producing cities like Houston and Phoenix, whose gently curving freeways resemble arteries or rivers, or indeed, canals. The other difference in the automobile city is the presence of large numbers of vehicles. Buildings in cities have always needed coach houses and stables, but their number was limited by the high cost of owning and maintaining horses. The large number of privately owned cars, as well as the size of trucks and buses, has vastly increased the amount of land devoted to parking, an unproductive but crucial function in the automobile city.

Lynch's scheme describes what cities look like, but cities are also historical creations. The French historian Fernand Braudel has identified three distinctive stages in the early history of European towns: the open town, the closed town, and the subjugated town. According to him, the ancient Greek and Roman settlements were examples of open towns. The line between town and country—and between townsman and countryman—was not rigidly drawn, although citizenship itself was exclusive (even when democracy was introduced, not all free persons were citizens—not women, for example, nor many traders and craftsmen). This openness was reflected in the fact that Sparta never built town walls, and Athens did so only after the Persian invasions. Lewis Mumford used the term "open" in reference to the Pharaonic towns of ancient Egypt, which were also unwallled.

The open town was succeeded by the closed town, a classic example of which was the medieval walled town, or burg. The burg was closed in many senses: not only military and social, but economic and political as well. Legal distinctions as well as the imposing walls that surrounded all towns separated the townspeople, or burghers, from the serfs. It was true that "*Stadtluft macht frei*" (the town air makes you free), as a famous German saying went, but this freedom was not for all. It was severely circumscribed by the powerful ruling merchant families and the members of the fiercely monopolistic guilds. In some towns a countryman became a city man—that is, a citizen—only after ten years of residence, property ownership, and a local marriage, practices that still exist in parts of Switzerland. In the eighteenth century when the first suburbs began to grow outside the city walls, it was, among other things, as places where the so-called free crafts could escape the constraints of the traditional guilds. A different type of closed town was found in Russia (and in China): here it was only the compound of the rulers that was walled; outside the Kremlin or the Walled City, the ordinary people lived in a more or less suburban sprawl. This is undoubtedly why, as Braudel notes, Russian towns did not dominate the countryside as did their counterparts in Europe.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, some European towns started to lose their independence and to come under the authority of the aristocracy. This is what Braudel calls the subjugated town. The Medicis, the German princes, Louis XIV, and the Hapsburg emperor controlled Florence, Munich, Paris, and Vienna, respectively. They built their grand palaces (the Nymphenburg, Versailles, Schönbrunn) on the outskirts of the walled cities and slowly but inexorably imposed their royal will on the town. By the Baroque period, this will was evidenced physically in huge urban construction projects: squares, avenues, promenades. But

the major change was political: citizenship, which had originally meant allegiance to the town, was transformed into allegiance to the state, which eventually replaced the monarchy as the leading urban power.

This takes us up to the seventeenth century, but what of the modern city? The industrial city of the nineteenth century was more akin to Braudel's closed town of the Middle Ages. There were no walls and gates, to be sure, but the line between city and country was just as firm. A city was distinguished by industrial employment, access to power sources (steam, gas, and eventually, electricity), pollution, literacy, technological innovation, unemployment, social reform. The countryside had few of these things, and the character of rural life (with the exception of coal-mining communities) remained largely preindustrial. The postindustrial city of the late twentieth century, on the other hand, may be a throwback to the open town of antiquity. The physical distinction between the city and its surrounding territory—that is, between central cities and suburbs—is blurred; the legal definition of the city remains, but the reality of metropolitan life has become mobile and decentralized. Will history repeat itself, and will the open, postindustrial city be followed by the information-age city, dominated by the multinational corporations who are increasingly locating their headquarters in suburban areas? Will these suburban cities with their gated communities and security-conscious office parks be the model for a new kind of "subjugated" city?

Whatever future cities look like, they will still be cities. According to Braudel, "A town is always a town, wherever it is located, in time as well as in space." He goes on, "I do not mean that all towns are alike. But over and above their distinctive and original features, they all necessarily speak the same basic language: common to them all are the continuous dialogue with their rural surroundings, a prime necessity of everyday life; the supply of

manpower, as indispensable as water to the mill; their self-consciousness—their desire to be distinguished from the others; their inevitable location at the centre of communications networks large and small; their relationship with their suburbs and with other cities.” At the same time, Braudel does not lose sight of the fact that cities are always a reflection of the culture of a particular period. “Urban development,” he writes, “does not happen of its own accord: it is not an endogenous phenomenon produced under a bell-jar. It is always the expression of a society which controls it from within, but also from without.”

It's useful to keep both Lynch's and Braudel's ideas in mind when looking at our own cities and how they have developed. Lynch is right: there are only a certain number of ways that streets and buildings can be organized in space. Cities are man-made things, and because they are man-made, we can recognize a continuity of the ideas that went into their making. When I walk down a street in Philadelphia, I see many elements—streets, sidewalks, street corners, blocks of buildings—that were present in ancient Pompeii. Philadelphia and Pompeii are both gridded cities, so in that sense they represent a similar model. But we must see cities in their cultural and historical context. Philadelphia and Pompeii adopted the grid plan for different reasons and used it in different ways. Cities and towns, like customary dress and food, have always been local responses that incorporate local needs and local dreams. In order to understand our own cities—to understand why they are not “like Paris”—we need to examine our own urban past.