

Asa Briggs

The Environment of the City

NO REFLECTION ON the human odyssey, however sketchy or cursory, could leave out the city—the city as place of survival, often precarious, highly vulnerable survival; the city as centre of civilisation, or rather of richly varied civilisations in time and space; and, not least, the city as metaphor, with the metaphor itself twisting and turning through the centuries into old and new shapes.

The etymological fact that with the Western tradition the words “city” and “civilisation” have a common root, along with “citizenship” and “civility”, points to the second of these aspects of the city as an influence in history—to something far more than survival, to the temple and the theatre rather than to walls or shelters, to the creativity of the individual and of the society, and to the enrichment of human culture. So also does the haunting preoccupation through the centuries with the “Ideal City”, the city of dreams to which restless and striving men should aspire; and at this point, of course, fact turns into metaphor, the metaphor not only of the New Jerusalem but of Babylon.

Yet the first aspect of the city—as place of survival or destruction—also has its scaffolding of imagery: Venice under the sea, T. S. Eliot’s tumbling of the towers. When Lewis Mumford, a leading 20th-century surveyor of cities, wrote his second massive book on the city, *The City in History*, 23 years after the first (*The Culture of Cities*, 1938)—with a World War and the Atomic Bomb in between—it was to the theme of the city as insecure citadel that he returned when pondering characteristically on the relationship between first and last things.

“Urban life spans the historic space between the earliest burial ground for dawn man and the final cemetery, the Necropolis, in which one civilisation after another has met its end.”

Science fiction takes over in the 20th century

where history ends, often attempting a complete rewriting of history in the process. The city can become nightmare rather than dream as “civilised” relations crack. Yet the technology of the citadel can be strengthened. In one of his short stories, “Caves of Steel”, Isaac Asimov envisaged 800 cities on earth with an average population of 10 millions.

“Each city became a semi-autonomous unit economically all but self-sufficient. It could roof itself, gird itself about, burrow itself under. It became a steel cave, a tremendous self-contained cave of steel and concrete.”

In other science fiction the city returns as symbol after disaster . . . in what Arthur C. Clarke has called appropriately “the Aeneas theme.” As the hero in John Christopher’s *The Death of Grass* goes out toward a new settlement, he says to the heroine, “There’s a lot to do. A city to be built.”

THE BUILDING, adaption and transformation of cities has been a major human achievement, providing us in the 20th century with a whole “prospect of cities”, even the newest of them already historically layered. Paradoxically, destruction has often uncovered civilisation: thus, the bombing of London in World War II revealed Roman London for the first time. If the 20th century has changed skylines, the 19th century created a whole new city-network underground, a network of pipes and sewers, a technological triumph even greater than that of the Romans. We are constantly reviewing our assessments of the achievements of previous ages, not only contrasting present with past but finding in historic cities “similes and analogies for the contemporary architect and urban designer.” Napoleon III thought of himself as a new Augustus. Nor is it only autocrats who turn back to the past. As a contemporary American architect said in 1980.

"When this new wave of architects comes out of the schools, with a sense of caring about context, it seems to me that cities are going to have the concern that you see in a place like Florence ... some sense of continuity even with changing styles."

IT IS BECAUSE both city builders and city dwellers can compare one actual city with another actual city and not simply with the Ideal City, however envisaged, that time scales are as significant as the use of space in judging the appearance of cities. There were more 19th-century references to Florence as a particular "place of concern" than there have been 20th-century references. In Britain's industrial Birmingham, for example, "adventurous orators" in the 1860s would "dwell on the glories of Florence and of the other cities of Italy in the Middle Ages and express the hope that Birmingham too might become the home of noble literature and art. . . ." There was, indeed, a double framework of historical reference in the 19th century, with some city reformers and commentators looking back to the city states of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and some looking further back still to the city in the ancient world, the Greek *polis* and the Roman *civitas*. In each case, there was a strong sense not only of continuity—and of community—but of civic pride. At a time when the actual cities of a new industrial society were generally thought of as problem places, this pride was conspicuous. It was in the United States, not in Britain, that F. C. Howe could write (in 1903) that through the city "a new society has been created. Life in all its relations has been altered. A new civilisation has been born, a civilisation whose identity with the past is one of historic continuity." It was in Communist Poland that historic Warsaw was reconstructed after 1945.

City pride most usually meant not pride in the city but in particular cities; each one was recognised as having an individual identity. Philadelphia was different from Boston or Baltimore or Cincinnati or Chicago; Manchester was different from Liverpool or Birmingham; Warsaw from Cracow; Budapest from Vienna. In Britain, the historian Edward Freeman complained bitterly that some of his contemporaries could not understand how "the tracing out of the features and history" of particular cities could be "as truly a scientific business to one man as the study of the surrounding *flora* and *fauna* is to another." In the

attempt to make history "scientific", analysis and imagery could become somewhat confused, as they were when ancient organic metaphors of the city were given new life. Yet the more emphasis is placed on particular cities and the differences between them, the closer we can draw to lost experience. The best 19th-century observers recognised (as clearly as Jane Jacobs has done in recent years) that "city processes in real life are too complex to be routine, too particularised for application as abstractions. They are always made up of the interaction of particulars, and there is no substitute for knowing the particulars. . . ." This is as true of Vienna or Paris or London as it is of New York.

Yet though cities as environments have to be treated separately before we can start to generalise about urban structures and styles—and some, like Venice or Kyoto, are visually unique—the city has never been, in fact, self-contained in history as in Asimov's short story, least of all Venice. The city has come into existence and developed—sometimes declined—through interdependence both with the rural hinterland and within a wider system of cities, linked through trade. The marketplace has mattered at least as much as temple or cathedral, fortress and walls. There have, of course, been capital cities which have been above all else centres of power and display, but for every capital city, rival of other capital cities, there have been many which above all else have been centres of commerce. As we classify cities or rank them in hierarchies, we can never leave economics out, whether we are concerned with buildings or with ways of life. Indeed, the most fascinating feature of the study of cities is that it must take account of so many subjects which are too often considered separately—along with economics, demography, geography, ecology, history, sociology, political science, anthropology, architecture, archaeology, to name only some of the most obvious.

NO SELF-CONTAINED DISCIPLINE can cope with the city or with cities. Nor, moreover, are all the disciplines taken together quite enough. Ignoring for a time the Ideal City—for this we have to turn to the philosophers—the real city has to be explored before it can be explained. Freeman's historian contemporary J. R. Green was once described by Lord Bryce as exploring a strange town and "darting hither and thither through the streets like a dog trying to find a scent." On the other side

of the Atlantic, Robert Ezra Park, pioneer of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology, the first academic school of its kind in the world, was fully aware of the need to find scents even in a city which was not (on the surface at least) "strange." In inviting his students to explore Chicago, he always stressed that

"the city is not . . . merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it: it is a product of nature and particularly of 'human nature.'"

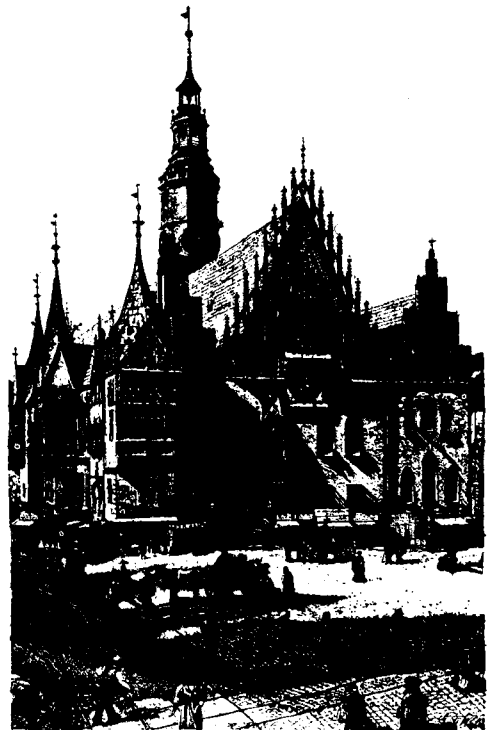
There was a similar awareness in Park's British predecessor, the sociologist Charles Booth, whose vast survey of London (then the world's largest city) during the last years of the Victorian Age entailed as much exploration as that associated with the names of Livingstone and Stanley in Africa.

"It is in the town and not in the country [Booth wrote] that *terra incognita* needs to be written on our social maps. In the country the machinery of human life is plainly to be seen and easily recognised. . . . The equipoise on which existing order rests, whether satisfactory or not, is palpable and evident. It is far otherwise with cities, where as to these questions we live in darkness."

In some respects, we still live in darkness almost 100 years after Booth—despite the boom of the last quarter-century in urban studies, specialised and interdisciplinary—although we are perhaps clearer now than Freeman, Park or Booth were about the influences of the explorer's own attitudes and experience on the selection of facts about the city which he chooses to collect and the images which he seeks to present. The same city means quite different things to different people, even to residents of the city, and in considering impressions we have to distinguish between those of residents and visitors, of privileged and deprived, of reformers and boosters, to note only a few of the relevant categories. If the boom in urban studies has increased our understanding of the city, it is mainly through a sharper realisation of the different elements involved in our diverse perceptions, visual and social, of the city. In other words, we have to add psychology to the list of

associated disciplines necessary for understanding. As one of the most stimulating recent British writers on the city, Peter Smith,¹ has put it, "Experiencing environment is a creative act. It depends as much upon the subject interpreting the visual array as upon the disposition of objects in space."

DURING THE 19TH CENTURY, the collection of facts about the city was one of the most active preoccupations of a new generation of statisticians, some involved in boosting cities, some in problem-solving within the city—and no account of 19th-century positivism would be complete without taking stock of it. During the late 20th century, however, we have focused our attention more on the range of human experience within the city, and the perceived pluses and minuses associated with it. Of course, we have left to experts—who were not there in the early 19th century—the practical tasks of dealing with the city's pressing problems: surveyors, engineers, traffic analysts, housing managers, leisure controllers, social workers, and above all, planners. There is a gulf between the two kinds of approach, and in recent years the "expertise" of each of the expert groups



¹ See Peter F. Smith, *Architecture and the Human Dimension* (1979), *The Syntax of Cities* (1977), *The Dynamics of Urbanism* (1975).

has been subjected to increasing scrutiny. Meanwhile, city tensions multiply as the volume of writing about the city at every level, not least journalistic, increases. The 19th century talked of "the age of the cities". We talk of "the crisis."

Some observers (like Melvin Webber) have been claiming for more than a decade that we are moving into "the post-city age." As Patrick Geddes, Mumford's mentor, put it succinctly in 1905, "A City is more than a place in space, it is a drama in time." Before I dwell on our current preoccupations, which turn as much on survival as on civilisation, it is necessary to acknowledge that in perspective there has seldom been any consensus about the role of the city in human affairs. There has usually been a debate, often crude, occasionally sophisticated, with some crossing of sides. The Christian Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city; and both before and after the Christian Bible, garden and wilderness have been pitted against town, city, and conurbation. At times, classical literature has swayed later generations at least as much as the Bible, both in its portrayal of the urban and of the pastoral. Of course, we quickly move into metaphor here, as we do in Albert Camus's 20th-century *Cahiers*, where he writes that "as a remedy to life in society, I would suggest the big city. Nowadays, it is the only desert within our means."

THE MODERN DEBATE preceded the industrial revolution and was not a by-product of the rise of the industrial city, which was described in one magazine of the late 1830s as "a system of life constructed according to entirely new principles." Go back to the 1770s, the decade of American independence, and you have on the one side William Cowper's unforgettable lines "*God made the country, and Man made the town*", and on the other Dr Samuel Johnson's almost equally famous rebuke to Boswell: "No, sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford."

In newly independent America, too, the city had its detractors and its defenders. One of the best-known passages in Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784-85) is that in which he asserts that

"the mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. A degeneracy in these is a cancer which

soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution."

The conception of the city as cancer—the organic metaphor gone wrong—was never to disappear thereafter. Indeed, for this reason, biology and physiology should doubtless be added to the list of associated disciplines which have been applied to the study of cities . . . and not merely through imagery, as in Jefferson's case, but through theory, like the theory that city growth depended ultimately on the fusion of healthy tissue from the countryside, on different and older demographic patterns.

The late 18th-century debate, which found a place for noise and nuisance as much as for numbers, often looked backwards. Yet it had many new ingredients. Thus, at the very time that there was talk of "cancers", the new word "*civilisation*"—and it is difficult to think that it was a new word—was coming into use. Related though it was historically to the word "city", "*civilisation*" did not come into use until the late 18th century. Johnson might sing the praises of London and question the delights of the countryside; yet as late as 1772 when Boswell discovered him preparing the fourth edition of his folio *Dictionary*, he learned that Johnson would not admit "*civilisation*" as a word, but only "*civility*."

In a decade of dramatic change, which also saw the introduction of the new word "technology" and of Watt's steam engine, not to speak of the drafting of the American Declaration of Independence and the publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, both "*civilisation*" and "*the city*" were already controversial subjects. Indeed, the decade ended in London with urban riot and the open expression of what many Londoners thought of as barbarity in the heart of a great city. Boswell, in talking about the words "*civilised*" and "*civilisation*", did not add that there was already an alternative vocabulary, itself to become controversial, pivoted on the words "*cultivated*" and "*culture*"—words derived not from the city but from the countryside.

Some cultivated people then and later were sceptical about or hostile toward "*civilisation*", as were romantic writers like Rousseau and Wordsworth, the former comparing cities with prisons, the latter pointing to the association of the city both with crime—the adjective he used was "*dissolute*"—and with meaningless bustle, "the same perpetual whirl of trivial objects, melted and reduced to one identity." "*Civilisation itself is but a mixed good*", Coleridge was to write, "if not far

more a corrupting influence, the hectic of disease, not the bloom of health."

Ambiguous responses to the idea of "civilisation" were equally apparent two decades later, when John Stuart Mill in his brilliant essay on Coleridge, frequently discussed more than a hundred years later, attempted to draw up a balance sheet measuring "how far mankind has gained by civilisation." Mill was less interested in centuries-old contrasts between the urban and the pastoral, or in romantic evocations of nature as against culture of the rough against the polished, than in a qualified utilitarian assessment of social and cultural change.

On the credit side, Mill recorded "the multiplication of physical comforts; the advancement and diffusion of knowledge; the decay of superstition; the facilities of mutual intercourse; the softening of manners; the decline of war and personal conflict; the progressive limitation of the strong over the weak; [and] the great works accomplished throughout the globe by the cooperation of multitudes." Not all these manifestations of "civilisation" explicitly or obviously derived from the city context, although there was a tendency then and later—not least within the Chicago School of Urban Sociology—to relate all social indicators, socially favourable or unfavourable, to the influence of the city and of urban life styles. Certainly when Mill, following Coleridge, identified the items on the debit side, he had the city very much in mind. They include "the creation of artificial wants" . . . "monotony" . . . "narrow mechanical understanding" . . . "inequality and hopeless poverty"—even though "monotony", at least, and "inequality and hopeless poverty" had often been and were still being associated as much with the countryside as with the city. Then, as now, it was possible to argue about whether or not the city as such was a causal factor, rather than the society as a whole, and how to weight the different items in the balance sheet. What is curious to note, however, is that there was no specific reference in Mill's balance sheet to the rise of a new kind of city, the industrial city, the advent of which to some extent turned the terms of the argument and in the shadows of which we have lived ever since.

FOR ALTHOUGH THERE HAD BEEN cities since the beginnings of recorded history—and earlier—it was only at the time when Mill was writing that it was possible to speak of "the age of great cities."

In 1800, there were only 22 cities in Europe with

a population of more than 100,000 (and none in America). By 1850, these numbers had increased to 45 and 8; there were also 4 cities in the world with a population of over a million. By 1900, there were 160 cities in the world with a population of more than 100,000 and 19 with a population of over a million. Significantly, there were as many as 23 with a population over 500,000, including new products of the century—often described as "prodigies"—like Chicago in the USA and Melbourne in Australia. The population of London, "the world city", had risen to over 4 million people. Patrick Geddes called it an octopus or polypus, "a vast irregular growth without previous parallel in the world of life—perhaps likest to the spreading of a great coral reef."

In one turbulent decade, the 1880s, the number of cities of between 40,000 and 70,000 in the United States increased from 21 to 35 and the number of still bigger cities from 23 to 39, so that one young American scholar could proclaim in the last year of the century that "the tendency towards concentration or agglomeration is all but universal in the Western world."

Industrial cities constituted only one group of cities in this huge urban expansion, and even the most renowned of them, like Manchester, which was a Mecca for visitors during the 1840s, often became service centres as much as manufacturing concentrations, serving the needs of an adjacent industrial region. It became fashionable, indeed, to classify cities like flora and fauna as well as to deal with them individually or to trace the general processes of urbanisation. Yet it was the industrial city which shocked contemporaries into an awareness of the social implications of urbanisation. Manchester, where facts were worshipped, became a symbol. In Manchester, wrote the most famous of all 19th-century travellers, Alexis de Tocqueville,

"humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilisation works its miracles, and civilised man is turned back almost into a savage."

THERE WERE four features of the industrial city which received particular attention from critics: deterioration of the environment; social segregation; impersonal human relations; and materialism.

The first was obvious enough to the nose as well as to the eye, and it did not need prophets like

Ruskin or novelists like Dickens to identify it. It was a business visitor from Rotherham in Yorkshire's West Riding, itself no Athens, who remarked of Manchester as early as 1808,

"the town is abominably filthy, the Steam Engine is pestiferous, the Dyehouses noisome and offensive, and the water of the river as black as ink or the Stygian lake."

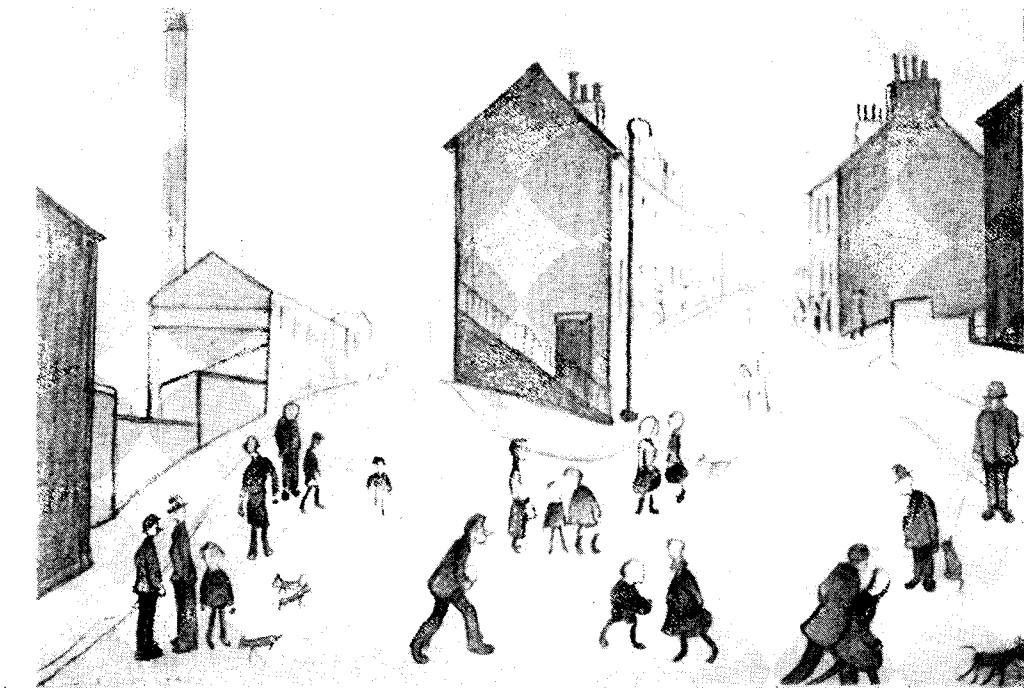
Yet Ruskin, interested as he was in the cities of Switzerland and of Italy, was moved by the experience of the industrial city to probe the relationship between the visual and the social as well as to indict a whole society and culture, and Dickens in his symbolic picture of Coketown—Chapter V of *Hard Times*, where the picture drawn is called "the Keynote"—has caught the sense of something more than appearances.

Like Tocqueville, Dickens places the savage—very much not the noble savage—in the middle of the city. "It was a town of red brick which would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but, as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black, like the face of a painted savage." For Dickens, deterioration of the environment and impersonal human relations were two sides of the same question—they are often separated in the 20th century—and both were related to materialism and monotony:

"It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a trembling and a rattling all day long, and where the pistons of the steam engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness."

This was highly personal imagery, reminding us that Dickens should always be treated as painter rather than photographer; but what satire could do, statistics could do also, even though *Hard Times* was a satire on statistics. The facts of segregation were obvious enough in the industrial city, and they were made the most of by another of the early critics of Manchester, Friedrich Engels. In the pre-industrial city there were social gradations and propinquities. In Manchester, according to Engels—and he was not alone in his analysis—there were hostile classes and socially segregated districts.

"He who visits Manchester simply on business or pleasure need never see the slums, mainly because the working-class districts and the middle-class districts are quite distinct. This



division is due partly to policy and partly to instinctive and tacit agreement between the two social groups."

The word *slum* was another new word, recorded for the first time by the *Oxford Dictionary* in 1825. Characteristically, it had no ancient roots and emerged from slang. Yet everywhere during the 19th century the industrial city became identified with slums as well as with factories.

The processes of segregation are fascinating to trace, whether or not we are dealing, as in 19th-century Britain, with segregation by income or, as in the later 19th century in the United States, with income and ethnic grouping. Indeed, in the Manchester of Engels, Irish segregation was a particular feature which he dealt with at length, and it was from the vantage point of Melbourne in Australia, a land of rural myth and city fact, that a writer observed in 1886 that

"the rich live with the rich and the poor with the poor. The palace and the hovel, except in the imagination of the socialistic romancer, seldom adjut."

THE CHICAGO SCHOOL, operating in a city which was as much the shock city of its time as Manchester had been half a century earlier, interested itself not only in segregation but in all aspects of urban morphology, in the processes as much as in the structures. "Natural areas", Robert Park was to write, "are the habitats of natural groups. Every typical urban area is likely to contain a characteristic selection of the population of the community as a whole. In great cities the divergence in manner, in standards of living and in general outlook on life in different areas is often astonishing." Park went on to talk of a "sorting-out process", and, as memorably as Engels, of "little worlds" in the city "which touch but do not interpenetrate." Indeed, in a city where there was far more change of land use than in Manchester, he went on to claim that it was only because "social relations are so frequently and so inevitably correlated with spatial relations", and because "physical distances so frequently are, or seem to be, the indexes of social distances, that statistics have any significance whatever for sociology."

Many 20th-century urban sociologists—and geographers—have tried to place Park (and for that matter Engels) in social perspective, explaining why they felt as they did. If we wish to see the industrial city itself in perspective, we must not

restrict our attention to the four features of it which received most attention from critics or with the generalisations that Lewis Mumford drew out of their and his own criticisms in his description of what he called (in 1938) the "insensate" industrial city.

It is not true that the new cities of the industrial revolution were really "man-heaps, machine warrens, not agents of human association for the promotion of a better life", as Mumford argued both in 1938 and in 1961. Nor is it true that "there were no effective centers in this urban massing: no institutions capable of uniting its members into an active city life; no political organization capable of unifying its common activities." Can 19th-century English history, let alone French or German history, be written in terms of the judgment that "in every quarter, the older principles of aristocratic education and rural culture were replaced by a single-minded devotion to industrial power and pecuniary success, sometimes disguised as democracy"?

Finally, it is not true that industrial cities were "all the same, variants of Dickens' Coketown, alias Smokeover, alias Mechanicsville, alias Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Merseberg, Essen, Elberfeld, Lille, Roubaix, Newark, Pittsburgh or Youngstown." When night falls it did not fall—and does not fall—on the same urban environment in all these places.

Industrial cities were as varied even in their appearance as pre-industrial cities. They had different social structures as well as different appearances. They drew on different heritages from the past, when they had a pre-industrial past, and they did not always invent the same history or duplicate the same monuments when they sought to create a heritage for posterity. Many of their buildings, monumental and functional, are worth preserving, and since in some societies they represent the whole of the past, the recent effort to preserve them or to adapt them to new purposes has intensified. They generated more voluntary effort in their own great age of expansion than had ever been generated in cities before, and through the focusing of attention on their problems, which were never minimised by contemporaries, they directed attention for the first time in human history to the full possibilities of social control. They were capable of enunciating civic gospels which combined concern, commitment and vigour, and their cultural as well as their social life attracts the interest of historians and today can both command respect and evoke nostalgic regret. Perhaps

one of the most misleading of Mumford's judgments was that in the industrial city "sonorous oratory served the double function of stimulant and anaesthetic; exciting the populace and making it oblivious to its actual environment."

IF I HAD TO generalise in one sentence, I would not be euphoric. I would still fall back on the view I presented in *Victorian Cities*, in which I described the growth of industrial cities in Britain as "a characteristic Victorian achievement, impressive in scale but limited in vision, creating new opportunities but also providing massive problems." I would also want to note the strange co-existence of pride and fear in all the contemporary writing about the industrial city, and the continued preoccupation with the creation of an Ideal City, not least the idea of a "garden city", marrying town and countryside.

If the pride has until recently been somewhat neglected, the fear continues to dominate historical narrative of the period. One British observer during the early 1840s—and he was an optimist about industrial progress—described it for us thus:

"As a stranger passes through the masses of human beings which have been accumulated round the mills [in the industrial north], he cannot contemplate these crowded hives without feelings of anxiety and apprehension amounting almost to dismay. The population is hourly increasing in breadth and strength. It is an aggregate of masses, our conceptions of which clothe themselves in terms which express something portentous and fearful."

The fear could be so great that, as in this case, the observer turned to the upheavals of nature for metaphor, comparing the rise of the masses to "the slow rising and gradual swelling of an ocean", as striking a metaphor as the comparable 20th-century "winds of change."

Yet the mysterious *terra incognita* (as Charles Booth called it) was not, of course, *terra incognita* to the people who actually lived there. Nor, *pace* Engels, did most of the people who lived there think of themselves as "*masses*." The term was originally applied from outside, a new variant in the industrial city of the older term "*mob*", associated with the pre-industrial city. There were wise city dwellers, who appreciated the dangers of thinking in these terms even at the time. For the most part they were doctors, clergymen and

leaders of voluntary movements, who were prepared—indeed, expected—to cross urban frontiers into the *terra incognita*. One of them, a Leeds Nonconformist minister, warned his congregation in the 1840s against using the term "masses" too easily.

"Our judgments are distorted by the phrase. We unconsciously glide into a prejudice. We have gained a total without thinking of the parts. It is a heap, but it has strangely become indivisible."

Not all 20th-century social criticism is so perceptive. We are bound to assess the industrial city, indeed, in the light of our own urban experience in the 20th century as well as in the light of pre-industrial urban experience. It may well be that our cities look more alike than theirs did, that it is we not they who have tampered with the sense of place, that we are more fearful than they were of what we do not experience ourselves within the life of the city, that we are less active in our voluntarism and more disillusioned about our expertise. Mumford has criticised the 20th-century city as sharply as he criticised the 19th-century industrial city, dwelling mainly on what he calls "the increasing pathology of the whole mode of life in the metropolis." The mess is the message.

It is fair to note that Mumford's is not the only view, and that the city generates as much argument now as it did in the 1840s or the 1890s, with first Los Angeles and then Sao Paulo standing out as the shock cities of recent history where all the problems and all the excitements seem to converge. Los Angeles, at least—and it has now passed into a new phase of its history—has always had its passionate defenders as Manchester had, although it was in neutral Palo Alto, not in Los Angeles, that a conference was held not long ago to compare as "shock cities" Manchester and Sao Paulo. The English architectural critic Reyner Banham's fascinating *Los Angeles, the Architecture of Four Ecologies* (published ten years ago and concerned with far more than architecture) explains why the 20th-century city continues to defy consensus. The mobility of Los Angeles can attract or disturb, the visual appearances stimulate or repel, even the weather (apart from smog) seems right or wrong. "Los Angeles has no weather", remarked a journalist in 1969, and added, "Los Angeles has beautiful sunsets—if man-made."

FOR THE PRECEDENTS of comments of this kind we have to turn back not to the 19th-century indus-

trial city but to the 19th-century capital city, particularly London, Paris and (though it was not the administrative national capital) New York. It was of London, endowed with what Henry James called "general vibration", that Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary in 1918, "They say it's been raining heavily, but such is the civilization of life in London that I really don't know." Twenty years earlier the poet Richard Le Gallienne had proclaimed,

*London, London, our delight,
Great flower that opens but at night,
Great city of the midnight sun,
Whose day begins when day is done.*

The 19th-century metropolis inspired more poetry than the industrial city, particularly in Baudelaire. Balzac saw Paris as a stage, the greatest stage in France for human ambition to express itself; Zola saw it as a challenge, where individuals and groups were caught in its grip. Baudelaire, however, saw Paris as a place of perpetual change, of fleeting moments and quickened consciousness, beyond good and evil, and he communicated his vision not only to his often disturbed contemporaries but to future generations of writers. Thereafter, the old formal distinctions between urban and pastoral acquired new dimensions, as they were to do in the 20th-century writings of James Joyce, who (as Harry Levin once pointed out) lived in as many cities as the author of *The Odyssey*, each more polyglot and more metropolitan than the last. Yet his unique vision of the city rested not only on his own experience, but on a rich texture of historical and literary association. We move with him from *Dubliners* not only to Paris but to *Ulysses*. Feelings of attraction, and of recoil, toward the great metropolitan city, of total absorption and complete disengagement, are all expressed in his work, which is not only of immense imaginative power but of the most subtle complexity—as complex, indeed, as the early and mid-20th-century city itself.

The pictorial artist, too, has expressed something of this complexity in the 20th century, so that every serious student of cities must visit art galleries as well as archives or newspaper offices. Even in the 18th century—in the age of Johnson and Cowper—the poet George Crabbe was advising his readers that

*Cities and towns, the various haunts of men,
Require the pencil, they defy the pen . . .*

Yet it is only in the 20th century that Western

artists, beginning with the Italian futurists, turned enthusiastically to cityscapes. The German Expressionists followed, and in New York John Marin anticipated much verbal and visual comment on Manhattan with his paintings of major monuments like the Woolworth Building or Brooklyn Bridge—shaken by a brittle light and seeming to fuse with the sky. They are as much a product of their time as Dutch views of the city in the 17th and 18th centuries, many of them reaching at the city through green fields and across canals. There is an apocalyptic element in some 20th-century paintings—and photographs—of cities, for the camera too has come into history in the 19th and 20th centuries, through films as well as photographs. An appreciation of this apocalyptic element—and it should be added that the camera has brought in a new sense of city beauty also—brings us round by a full circle to what Mumford had to say about megalopolis as necropolis.

I CONCLUDE WITH four reflections on the contemporary scene (reflections on, not prescriptions for). None of them is original, and none of them focuses either on defence or disaster.

First, however rapid rates of urbanisation were in the 19th century, they have been dwarfed by 20th-century rates. *Second*, much urban growth in the last half of this century has been in so-called Third World countries. This brings in different approaches to problems and opportunities, some outside our tradition. *Third*, the position in the West, coexisting at a different stage of development, continues to raise profound questions about the nature of "civilisation"—though we seldom now choose to call it such—as well as about survival. *Fourth*, for various reasons we have a more shaky sense than we used to have of place and what it means, and we find it increasingly difficult to isolate the urban factor either in our analysis or in our policy-making.

The reflections must be brief. On the first—more rapid urbanisation rates than in earlier centuries—reflection starts in places like Hong Kong (if there is any place quite like Hong Kong) where skyscrapers grow together like trees in a forest and where new towns as big as Manchester was in 1900 can be built within a decade. In 1950 there were 75 cities in the world with populations of more than a million; in 1960, 141; in 1975, 191. The figure for 1985, it has been projected, will be 273. Moreover, as a result of the technological

changes of the 20th century, particularly those associated with power and transportation, there are in many countries huge metropolitan areas, scarcely broken by anything which can be called rural, which may contain 25 million people or more. These are so different in scale and in organisation even from 19th-century cities, which were, as we have seen, already breaking with tradition, that (as Patrick Geddes foresaw in the first decade of this century) they seem to constitute a new species.

SECOND, SUCH CITIES and bigger concentrations have emerged not only in the so-called "advanced" countries but outside. The proportion of people in "developing countries" increased from 16.5% in 1950 to 28.3% in 1975. For South Korea, the comparable figures were 18.4% and 50.9%. *Asia Urbanizing* is the evocative title of a recent collection of essays, yet in Africa, too, and above all in Latin America, urbanisation has moved faster than it ever moved in Europe in the 19th century. The shock effect has certainly been great, at least to visitors. As Richard Meier put it in *India's Urban Future*, "the restrictions placed by poverty upon urban design always come as a

shock to Western visitors", and it is interesting to compare Lévi-Strauss with Tocqueville. Noting—and, as we have seen, it is only one side of the picture—that we are accustomed to associate our highest values, both material and spiritual, with urban life", he found in India

"the urban phenomenon reduced to its ultimate expression . . . filth, chaos, promiscuity, congestion; ruins, huts, mud, dirt . . . all the things against which we expect urban life to give us organized protection, all the things we hate and guard against at such great cost."

This, too, is one side of the picture, for a very different reason. It relates Indian experience entirely to our own views of the city in history to the tradition that stretches back to Greece and Rome. The Asian or African city continues to provoke clashing reactions within and between societies and cultures, not least between generations. Thus, in a study of Korean urbanisation, a particularly striking phenomenon, the authors insist that it would be much more accurate to refer to Asia's "teeming countryside" than to its "teeming cities", and that while all countries that urbanise rapidly have urban problems—of dislocation, adjustment and serving—urbanisation itself is "a normal and desirable concomitant of economic growth."

"Korean urbanization [they conclude] has been a great success story during the third quarter of the 20th century. The basic reason is that the national government has focused its efforts on the promotion of economic growth instead of on control of urban growth and structure."

However different the traditions, the same remark might have been made in 19th-century Europe or America. On the other side, we have Jose Arthur Rios's comment on the Rio de Janeiro of the late 1960s, which recalls comments on London in the 17th and 18th centuries before the rise of modern industry:

"Rio is the product of a vast maladjustment. Its growth is unparalleled by any other city in the nation. The tendency has been to enslave the whole country to this abnormal growth, like a tumor which drains all the energies of the body. Its high life is fed upon by the misery and backwardness of the rural population."

MY THIRD REFLECTION is renewed, if not inspired, by almost every magazine and Sunday colour supplement. Mumford's contemporary pathology



also seems to dominate newspaper headlines when they deal with crises in urban finance (common to many parts of the world) or with riot (ethnic or social, or both). Biology seems to reinforce history. Thus, from a different angle from that of Mumford—though with equal concern—René Dubos has complained that “life in the modern city”—by which he meant the so-called advanced city of the West—“has become a symbol of the fact that man can become adapted to starless skies, treeless avenues, shapeless buildings, tasteless bread, joyless celebrations.”

Such generalisation always invites *riposte*. The inner cities remain problem areas, particularly in Britain, but there have been immense changes in these inner areas—too few in Britain—not all for the worse, since the 1950s. The number of groups of people concerned not with being adapted, but with themselves adapting the urban environment, has greatly increased. There are more trees in the avenues and more people walking on them, more buildings with shape, and not all celebrations are joyless. There is more scepticism about accepted policies and more willingness to look for new answers. The awareness of the visual has been sharpened, although there is still a serious deficiency in visual education.

FOURTH, AND LAST, we have a more shaky sense than we used to have of place and what it means, and we find it increasingly difficult to isolate the urban factor in our analysis and in our policy-making. There has always been a tendency to attribute causal influences to the city which would be

better attributed to the society and the culture, not to speak of the economy. Melvin Webber, who has hailed “spatial dispersion” in a new post-city age, argues that

“neither crime-in-the-streets, poverty, unemployment, broken families, race riots, drug addiction, mental illness, juvenile delinquency, nor any of the commonly noted ‘social pathologies’ marking the contemporary city can find its cause or its cure there. We cannot hope to invent local treatments for conditions whose origins are not local in character, nor can we expect territorially defined governments to deal effectively with problems whose causes are unrelated to territory or geography.”

It is a salutary remark, yet merely a first point in an argument. If the city cannot deal with all these problems, neither, by itself, can the nation state. There are too many interdependencies. Cities have always been part of a network, even when nation states have been at war. Moreover, we cannot afford to leave out the local from our reckoning. Even with spatial dispersion, it is useful to have senses of belonging which extend beyond the private or the national. Indeed, we have to work out new relationships between the local (through our involvement in a particular place) and the global (through our involvement, whether we like it or not, in our whole planet). A touch of pride in where we are as well as where we came from is not out of place. At the end of our odyssey, however, we might not all agree with Euripides that “the first requisite to happiness is that a man be born in a famous city.”

Attics

A room, unutterably feminine,
A room she dreamed, but painted by Gwen John—
I see a white-distempred attic in
Her mind, pastel, and faintly put-upon
By men, who cannot understand the light
From the window lingering on the lace
Curtain's folds, or the disturbing woman-white
Illumination on the mirror, almost a face.
A girl is sitting on a fragile chair
With her sad brushes and her thoughts, her hair
In tints of autumn, and her skin says, *Kiss,*
Kiss, kiss my skin, for I am touch and sense
Brushed womanly into this eloquence,
Unclothed in paint to teach you nakedness.

Douglas Dunn