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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### AMERICA'S NEW CITY

America's big cities, Lewis Mumford declared in 1938, represent "a general miscarriage and defeat of civilized effort."

In **The Culture of Cities** (Greenwood, rev. ed. 1981), the polymath social philosopher and prophet of decentralization inaugurated a debate over the nature of cities that has continued to the present day. Mumford was no partisan of the suburb—like virtually all intellectuals, he was appalled by it. His ideal was the medieval city, which he argued had been unjustly maligned.

Our images of plague-ridden city dwellers clad in filthy rags come from a later era, Mumford argued. He insisted that life in the medieval city was generally healthy and fulfilling, rich in architectural beauty and civic life. Most important to him was the openness to nature that the cities' "clustered" housing made possible. "Gardens and orchards, sometimes fields and pastures, existed within the city," he wrote, as if scenting the moist earth from the far remove of his own New York apartment.

But Mumford held that the medieval city was perverted during the 15th century by the centralization of political power and the invention of the cannon. The need for massive fortifications made it too costly to found new cities, forcing the residents of old ones to live in ever more crowded and unpleasant circumstances. The forces of politics and "technics" were thus unleashed, a dynamic which Mumford traced in *Culture* and in his later, more comprehensive work, **The City in History** (Harcourt, 1961). City and suburb, he argued, would culminate in what he referred to as Megalopolis, Tyrannopolis, and Nekropolis.

Like others before him, notably the English city planner Ebenezer Howard, Mumford advocated a radical reorganization of the landscape—the creation of innumerable small "garden cities" of 30,000 souls or so, modeled on the medieval city. No mere dreamer, he managed, along with like-minded planners in the Regional Planning Association of America, to secure private financing during the 1920s to build just such a city in Radburn, New Jersey. As Daniel Schaffer notes with regret in **Garden**

**Cities for America: The Radburn Experience** (Temple Univ., 1982), the Great Depression struck before Radburn could be completed. Today, that fragment of Mumford's vision is a unique island "surrounded by the endless expanse of northern New Jersey's suburbs."

During the Depression, many veterans of the Radburn effort wound up in the New Deal's Resettlement Administration. There, as Paul Conklin writes in **Tomorrow A New World: The New Deal Community Program** (Da Capo, rev. ed. 1976), they planned to build 50 "greenbelt" towns at various sites around the country. But the plan foundered on Congressional opposition to the "socialistic" scheme. Only three new towns were built: Greenbelt, Md.; Greenhills, Ohio; and Greendale, Wis. Like Radburn, they have since been swallowed up by encroaching suburbs. Yet Mumford's ideas were later put into practice in places like Irvine, California, and are routinely incorporated in many less ambitious housing projects being built today throughout the country.

Mumford's influence was felt in less benign ways as well, according to Jane Jacobs. In **The Death and Life of Great American Cities** (Random, 1961), she rather unfairly lumped Mumford together with the Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier and other modernist urban planners, and blamed them for inspiring the disastrous urban renewal efforts of the late 1940s and '50s. The Decentrists, as she called them, were anti-city. (The garden cities they advocated, Jacobs sneered, were "really very nice towns if you were docile and had no plans of your own.") Yet, Jacobs lamented, their ideas became orthodoxy, not only among planners and architects but also in Congress, state legislatures, city halls, and in the banks and government agencies that provide most of the nation's mortgage dollars.

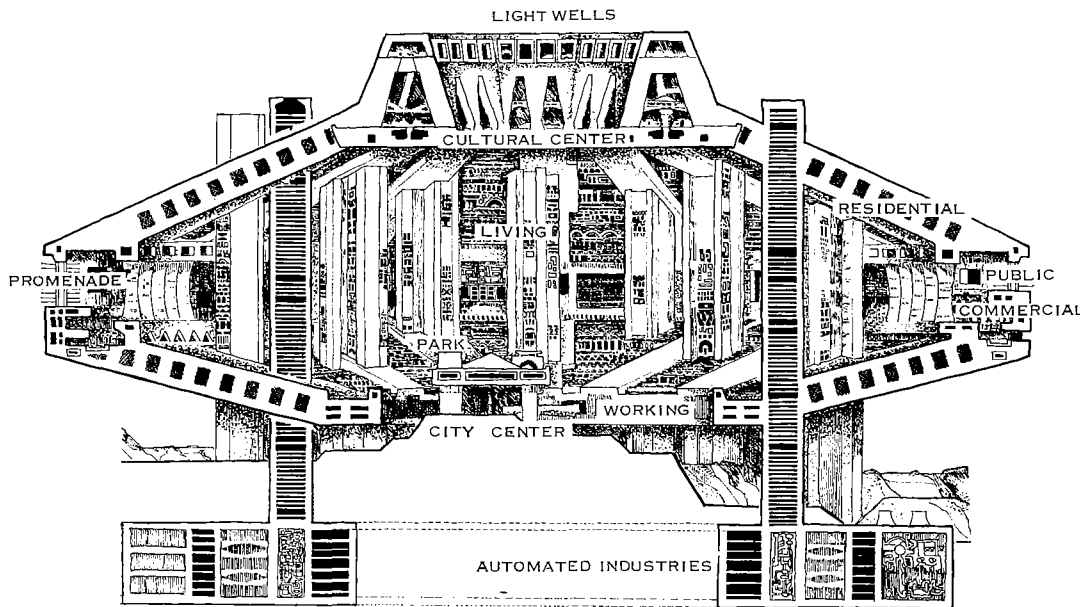
Adapted to the realities of the nation's existing cities, Jacobs argued, the Decentrists's anti-urban principles led to the replacement of poor but lively urban neighborhoods with monolithic apartment tower projects designed to keep the home separate from the hectic city streets. Jacobs, a passionate advocate of city

life, said that was all wrong. She proceeded to dissect in fascinating detail the characteristics of successful urban neighborhoods. She favored more of everything that she accused the Decentrists of disliking: more density, more activity, more intensity.

Only in America (and possibly Britain) would she get much argument. As Kenneth T. Jackson of Columbia University notes in **Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of America** (Oxford Univ., 1985), Europeans (and others) are astonished by the American preference for suburban life. In some European cities, suburbs simply do not exist, thanks in part

ferry and horse-drawn omnibus, each with its own characteristic pattern of residential settlement. The railroad created exclusive suburbs (along Philadelphia's Main Line, for example), the trolley fostered leafy middle-class suburbs, and the streetcar mostly served working-class neighborhoods close to the city center.

The trolley system in particular was vast and inexpensive, recalls Harvard historian of landscape architecture John Stilgoe in his wistful, evocative **Metropolitan Corridor** (Yale Univ., 1983). In 1904, newlyweds Clinton and Louisa Lucas, seized with "trolley mania," managed to make their 500-mile honeymoon trip from Del-



*A city of the future by Paolo Soleri (1969).*

to forceful government planning. "The outer boundaries of Copenhagen, Moscow, Cologne, and Vienna abruptly terminate with apartment buildings, and a 20-minute train ride will take one well into the countryside," says Jackson. In the sprawling "megacities" of Latin America and Africa, the outlying areas frequently lack running water, sewers, and police and fire protection.

As Jackson observes, there was nothing inevitable about the American pattern of suburban development. Over the years, suburban growth has been built around several different forms of transportation, beginning with the

aware to Maine almost exclusively by trolley, with a bagful of nickels and only a few brief interludes of railroad travel. Sam Bass Warner's **Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston** (Harvard Univ., 1969) remains the classic work on the effects of that form of transportation.

By the 1920s, however, the romance was over. "Most people," Jackson writes, "agreed with New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia that the automobile represented the best of modern civilization while the trolley was simply an old-fashioned obstacle to progress." Who could have guessed that Americans would so quickly

use their new Fords and Chevies to follow "progress" to the suburbs?

Why this American romance with the suburb? The usual answer is our legacy of Jeffersonian anti-urban sentiment. But in **Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia** (Basic, 1987), Robert Fishman traces its origins to British ideas about home and family. He says that the three Americans most responsible for popularizing the suburban ideal during the mid-19th century—writer Catherine Beecher and architects Andrew Jackson Downing and Calvert Vaux—were deeply influenced by such English Evangelicals as William Wilberforce (1759–1833). The Evangelicals, writes Fishman, laid the foundation of Victorianism and, not coincidentally, also founded the prototypical suburb in Clapham, south of London. The suburb was meant to remove the nuclear family from urban vices—crime, taverns, dance halls, the petty corruptions of the workaday world—and to provide a haven where women, the "faithful repositories of the religious principle," as Wilberforce wrote, could tend to the moral and spiritual well-being of their children and husbands. Clapham and other towns like it became the model for the first American suburbs, such as New Jersey's Llewellyn Park (1857).

But for nearly a century, the suburb was as distant from the average American's experience as Palm Springs or Martha's Vineyard are today. The great geographical contest for people and preeminence was between city and country, a clash played out through populism at the ballot box and in the cultural politics of books such as Sherwood Anderson's portrait of small town grotesques, **Winesburg, Ohio** (1919). Not until 1920 did the U.S. Census Bureau certify the city's victory in the battle for bodies, if not souls.

It was not long before the suburb replaced the countryside as the city's prime competitor. No sooner had the first moving vans from the Bronx arrived in Levittown, it seemed, than urban intellectuals began publishing furious indictments of the alleged sterility of life in the subdivisions. Among them were David Riesman's **The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American** (1950) and William H.

Whyte's **The Organization Man** (1956). Exceeding all others in vitriol, Betty Friedan's **The Feminine Mystique** (1963), assailed the "domestic ideology" propagated by Wilberforce and his intellectual successors.

Still the exodus to suburbia continued. As Carl Abbot of Old Dominion University observes in his survey of **The New Urban America: Metropolitan Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities** (Univ. of N.C., rev. ed. 1987), the big city's demographic reign over American life lasted a brief half century. In 1970, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that suburbanites accounted for 37 percent of the U.S. population, city dwellers only 31 percent.

Beginning with Kevin Phillips's premature celebration of **The Emerging Republican Majority** (Anchor, 1970), political analysts have generally pronounced the population shift to the suburbs and the decentralized cities of the Sunbelt a conservative trend, though few have shared Phillips's satisfaction with it. Dissent of another kind was heard from neoconservative writer and editor Irving Kristol, who argued in **On the Democratic Idea in America** (Harper, 1972) that television and mass higher education were transforming all of America into an "urban civilization." The nation could do without the philistinism of provincial America, he said, but he worried about how it would fare without the ballast of the heartland's agrarian notions of piety and virtue.

Another line of argument concerns the fate of the poor in America's new geographic dispensation. Thus William Julius Wilson, a University of Chicago sociologist, argues in **The Truly Disadvantaged** (Univ. of Chicago, 1987) that the shift of people and jobs to the new cities is partly responsible for the growing isolation of inner-city ghettos and the creation of an urban underclass.

All of these books, from Mumford's to Wilson's, remind the reader that where and how Americans choose to live are not just matters of economics or convenience. Each step—from countryside, to city, to suburb, to "new city"—has involved an argument over what values we as a nation hold dear, a redefinition of what we call "the American way of life."

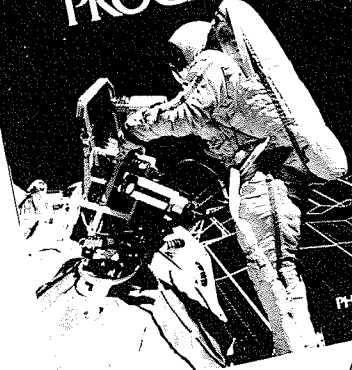
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*EDITOR'S NOTE: Many of the titles in this essay were suggested by Robert Fishman.*

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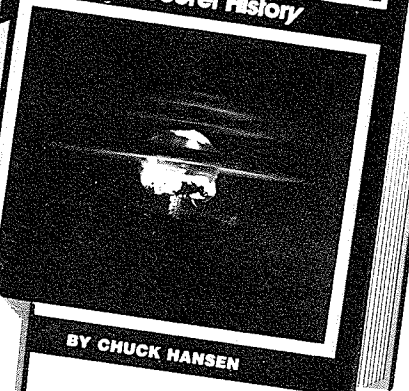
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