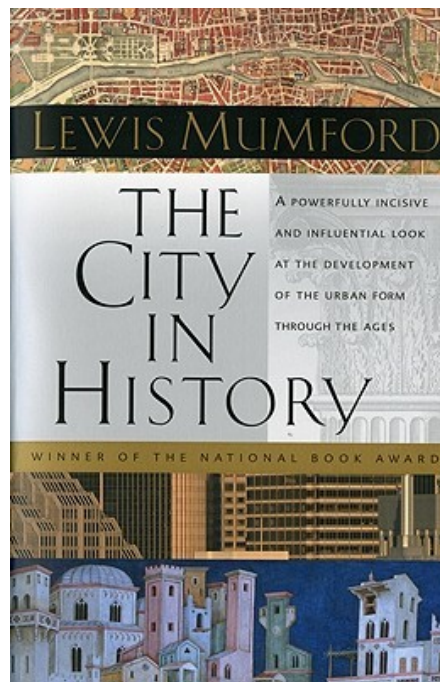




The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects

Lewis Mumford

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The city's development from ancient times to the modern age. Winner of the National Book Award. "One of the major works of scholarship of the twentieth century" (Christian Science Monitor). Index; illustrations.

The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects Details

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James says

Mumford argues that cities arose as the centers of civilization because of the growth of stratified societies, where forced labor and slavery, coupled with destruction and war fueled that growth of cities. He traces the prehistoric formation of cities, the ancient shaping of cities through war and need for labor, the rise of slave societies and free citizens in Ancient Greece and market places, and survival of Roman cities, the formation of medieval cities which he seems to believe is the ideal form of cities in an active organic growth, to the warping of cities in industrial capitalism to a Dickensian Coketown, to finally the suburbanization and the abolition of limits, according to Mumford.

He argues throughout that cities were shaped by rulers need to store the goods of civilization, control labor supply, and as a base of forming military power to project over both its own subjects and rival cities, or in protection from rivals. He postulates that, by the time of recorded history, the pattern of cities was largely formulated and remained unchanged in how they functioned, though they have certainly shifted in their scope and how social relations exist between people within the city. He writes exclusively of classic western civilization cities, completely ignoring Indian, Chinese, African, and Native American cities which developed in differing ways and functions. He also idealizes medieval cities and quite rightly sees industrial capitalism as fundamentally changing social relations to the detriment of city life.

Matt says

Possibly the most valuable book I have read. An education in what a city should be.

Czarny Pies says

Lewis Mumford's "The City in History" is great fun to read. He provides a dazzling show of erudition moving from De Tocqueville to Gilgamesh to Frederick Law Olmsted to Proust and to Vitruvius with dazzling speed somehow always tying his eclectic stable of references into a coherent narrative history. In my case the pleasure of was greatly enhanced by the fact that my prejudices in most instances with those of Mumford which are:

1. The Urban Sprawl of the twentieth century was out of control with profoundly detrimental effects on the environment and the spiritual needs of mankind
2. The current urban sprawl is the result of the tendency noted by De Tocqueville for modern, democratic man to focus only on his personal needs as opposed to the needs of the community
3. The primary role of the city in society is be a "sacred space" in the sense used by Mircea Eliade when man's cultural and scientific power can flourish
4. The history of our cities has been calamitous. The cities are laid with one purpose in mind and then develop in a different historical context. The perpetual contradiction between vision and reality leads to a perpetual cycle of growth, decay and destruction.

Mumford argues that cities grew from an innate desire for man to have a central, sacred place for burial. Nomadic societies all tended to create special holy places for this purpose. Hence the first cities were for the

dead rather than the living.

When man the transition from a nomadic to a sedentary existence, the former sacred places became the first cities. Kingship as an institution appeared at the this time. Accordingly the first cities were laid out with wide avenues and elevated temples as a political statements endorsing kingship.

The trading cities of classical Greece produced a great age in which cities were designed for the citizens.

There was a great deal of thought about the optimal population and physical dimensions of cities. By setting these two parameters correctly the Greeks believed that cities would foster prosperity and cultural development. The period of Classical antiquity produced the greatest urban planning of human cities. Cities were hygienic, prosperous and culturally rich.

In the dark ages, cities become fortresses. True urban planning suffered. Public hygiene and sanitation suffered. The poor were forced into tenements. A long era of catastrophic plagues and epidemics set in.

During the age of the enlightenment, the orientation turned towards showiness. Huge overgrown urban plans like the Place de la Concorde in Paris or the l'Enfant Boulevard in Washington were created.

The age of industrialism in the nineteenth century created the blighted urban concentrations we now live in.

The needs of the transportation system (first trains and then cars) came before the needs of the people. Cities became extremely noisy. Air quality deteriorated rapidly due to the burning of coal and other fossil fuels. In a rapidly, growing industrial societies sprawled created massive conurbations with no centre.

Mumford concluded that at the time of his writing in the 1960s the situation was simply out of control . The urban expansion was accelerating. Cities no longer generated a sense of community and man's cultural development was being suffocated. More than 50 years, later Mumford's description of our urban society still seems to hold. The problems which were once most visible in North America and Western Europe have simply become global.

Unfortunately, Mumford really does not offer much of a solution. He appears to believe that urban planning could be implemented on a national scale so that instead of one massive conurbation, nations would be composed of a network of smaller optimally sized cities. However, there is no road map for getting to this ideal state. Presumably it is the duty of this generation to make such a road map.

The main criticism of this book is that it is based on eclectic, hodgepodge of readings running from Saint Augustine to Daniel Burnham to Marcel Proust and essentially lacks any sort of methodology. It can then be dismissed out of hand as being nothing more than the expression of an opinion, albeit a very erudite one.

Despite agreeing with Mumford on most issues, I myself wished at times that he could prevent or more systematic defense of his case.

Patrick Versteckt says

Cute and Elegant. Boring as entertainment, yet enjoyable. Lots of things, and I like the way he writes them. Five stars for the first half.

Loránd says

Reviewing such a monumental book is in of itself a monumental task, one for which no one is up to task, least of all me. There are many observations that you will simply not find in here. No review, no summary, could ever substitute reading **this** book.

The best one sentence summary of the book is given by this sentence:

"When both the evil and the remedy are indistinguishable, one may be sure that a deep-seated process is at work." — p. 544

To give a sense of scale to each potential reader: the book is partitioned in chapters and subchapters, the latter averaging about 5 pages each. And almost all of which lend themselves to a book of their own.

In order to read Mumford one must understand that we all find ourselves on very murky ground (especially when studying ancient history) in terms of what we know, or even can now, because most of it has been lost to us, as the author readily admits, and makes extremely clear [10]. Therefore, some speculation on the author's part is understandable. Furthermore, Lewis Mumford is very careful not to project our own involuted social theories onto the past, as he deservingly criticizes Thomas Hobbes [20], and contemporary social scientists of doing [30]: *"the supposedly combative 'cave man,' whose purely imaginary traits strangely resemble those of a nineteenth-century capitalist enterpriser."*

Furthermore, Mumford is a generalist, a dialectical thinker, and a moral philosopher. Weaving together the science of many domains with a unique moral acuity [25], [26], [27] in an absolutely beautiful dance of history.

While this book is city-centric, it is by no means a failed analysis of the emergence of civilization itself (given that for most of history most people lived in rural areas). Mumford tries to carefully point out the roots of modern civilization in the early city, and counterpoise this with its potentialities. A staunch critic of hierarchy and centralization, Mumford offers a unique developmental history of the city, and with it of the "container" (as the author calls it) through which the first rigid forms of social organization have evolved and perpetuated themselves through history.

Mumford traces the emergence of the city to the ziggurat and the priestly class — not unlike Abdullah Öcalan. What is interesting is that he considers that this form of organization wasn't reinvented multiple times in different parts of the world, but rather it spread from the cradle of civilization in ancient Mesopotamia [40], and points to the fact that it is again our own biases who find it unimaginable that the city traversed oceans.

The author then goes through the ancient Greek civilization, which he admires, but breathlessly critiques. Espousing some of the best critiques of Plato [50] and Aristotle [60], from which he identifies the lost potentiality of Greek civilization achieving a stable order of social organization through confederation [70] that would counterbalance the parochial nature of a single city, thus giving it the chance of surviving the onslaught of Roman civilization that would eventually overwhelm it.

"All the magnitudes will be stretched in Rome: not least the magnitude of debasement and evil. Only one symbol can do justice to the contents of that life: an open sewer. And it is with the sewer that we shall begin." — p. 214 [90]. Rome stands tall as the first Necropolis in Mumford's analysis: congested by traffic [91], "real-estate" used for speculation [92], and creating a living hell for the most downtrodden of society [93]. Almost a perfect image of the horrors of capitalist society, perfectly present in our past.

I will now elide all the other periods treated by Mumford lest this review go on forever. Do not mistake this as dismissal of the content. If anything, the analysis of the medieval city is the most important part of the book. It dispels myths about their democratic character, its sanitary conditions. Baroque city came as the grave-digger of the organic medieval city, thus laying the ground for the cities of capitalist society [120] with their almost inevitable march towards a new Necropolis.

Ruthless critic of capitalist modernity [121], and of about everything the city has become, Lewis Mumford lifts the fog of the past and gives the reader a unique vision that cuts through time. Laced with amazing poetic language [130] this book is a sheer pleasure to read.

So far I have only praised Mumford, but there is room for criticism. The distinction between speculation and "fact" is a bit muddled, and is hard to discern from the non-specific biography. But this is the consequence of

the broad strokes through which Mumford paints the picture of history.

One might also impute to Mumford that he does not offer any solutions to the boundless critiques (well deserved) of the development of city into Megapolis and towards Necropolis. But the very insistence on universal solutions to such a general problems is part of the problem. What Mumford proposes is a ultimately an ecological process, very much dependent on the particularities each city finds itself in, with the only generalizeable actions of: dispersion, diffusion within the environment, and confederation of cities as a method of arresting the death march towards Necropolis.

References:

[10] p. 55

This inquiry into the origins of the city would read more clearly were it not for the fact that perhaps most of the critical changes took place before the historic record opens. By the time the city comes plainly into view it is already old: the new institutions of civilization have firmly shaped it. But there are other difficulties no less formidable; for no ancient town has yet been completely excavated and some of the most ancient cities which might reveal much, still continue in existence as dwelling places, smugly immune to the excavator's spade.

The gaps in the evidence then, are baffling: five thousand years of urban history and perhaps as many of proto-urban history are spread over a few score of only partly explored sites. The great urban landmarks, Ur, Nippur, Uruk, Thebes, Heliopolis, Assur, Nineveh, Babylon, cover a span of three thousand years whose vast emptiness we cannot hope to fill with a handful of monuments and a few hundred pages of written records. On such swampy ground even the most solid hummock of fact may prove treacherous, and too often one must choose between not advancing at all and being dragged down into a bottomless bog of speculation. Let the reader be warned: he proceeds at his own risk!

In addition to the imperfection of the visible remains, the two great civilizations in which the city first probably took shape, Egypt and Mesopotamia, present disconcerting contrasts, which only become sharper if one includes Palestine, Iran, and the Indus Valley. While all these differences bring out significant alternatives in urban evolution, they make it difficult to give anything like a generalized picture of the origin of the city.

[20] p. 24

The primal war of "each against all" is a fairy tale: Hobbes' bellicose primitive man has even less historic reality than Rousseau's noble savage. As with the birds, 'territoriality' may have amicably settled boundary claims that only later, under more 'civilized' concern for property and privilege, led to savage conflicts.

[25] p. 74

Lack of adequate artificial light remained one of the greatest technical imperfections of the city till the nineteenth century. But by 2000 B.C., at all events, most of the major physical organs of the city had been created. The nineteenth-century observer would hardly have felt at home in the confused mythological conceptions, the bold sexual obscenities, or the bloody sacrificial rituals of the dominant urban religions; but scarcely any part of the physical city would have been unfamiliar to him. Those of us who are sufficiently conscious of the collective irrationality and decadence of the present age would feel equally at ease—or, better, equally ill at ease—in both territories.

[26] p. 176

If we continue in science and technology along the lines we are now following, without changing our direction, lowering our rate of speed, and re-orienting our mechanisms toward more valid human goals, the end is already in sight. [...] Instead of deliberately creating an environment more effective than the ancient city, in order to bring out the maximum number of human potentialities and the maximum amount of

significant complexity, our present methods would smooth out differences and reduce potentialities, to create a state of mindless unconsciousness, in which most of man's characteristic activities would be performed only by machines.

[27] p. 102

Though we apply terms like hunter, miner, herdsman, peasant to Stone Age groups, we are thus actually transferring a later urban usage to an early phase of human development. If we could recapture the mentality of early peoples, we should probably find that they were, to themselves, simply men who fished or chipped flint or dug as the moment or the place might demand. That they should hunt every day or dig every day, confined to a single spot, performing a single job or a single part of a job, could hardly have occurred to them as an imaginable or tolerable mode of life. Even in our times primitive peoples so despise this form of work that their European exploiters have been forced to use every kind of legal chicane to secure their services.

[30] p. 25

The fact that human beings are naturally curious did not lead inevitably to organized science; and the fact that they are given to anger and pugnacity was not sufficient in itself to create the institution of war. The latter, like science, is an historic, culture-bound achievement—witness to a much more devious connection between complexity, crisis, frustration, and aggression. Here the ants have more to teach us than the apes—or the supposedly combative 'cave man,' whose purely imaginary traits strangely resemble those of a nineteenth-century capitalist enterpriser.

[40] p. 90-92 (most content elided)

But what one finds in the New World is not just a collection of houses and buildings, which might have had the same common ancestor in the mesolithic hamlet. One discovers, rather, a parallel collection of cultural traits: highly developed fertility ceremonies, a pantheon of cosmic deities, a magnified ruler and central authority who personifies the whole community, great temples whose forms recall such functionally different structures as the pyramid and the ziggurat, along with the same domination of a peasantry by an original hunter-warrior group, or (among the early Mayas) an even more ancient priesthood. [...]

These traits seem too specific to have been spontaneously repeated in a whole constellation.

[..]

Thus one may account for the many differences between Egyptian, Sumerian, Indian, Chinese, Cambodian, Mayan, Peruvian, and Aztec urban centers, without denying their underlying similarities, and without setting any arbitrary barrier, not even the Pacific Ocean, against the possibility of their slow diffusion from a few points.

[...]

Would it not be more sensible, now that the mobility of early peoples, even on the sea, is becoming apparent, to admit that the idea of the city may have reached the New World from afar,

[50] p. 175

When Plato turned his back on the disorder and confusion of Athens, to rearrange the social functions of the city on an obsolete primitive pattern, he also turned his back, unfortunately, on the essential life of the city itself, with its power to crossbreed, to intermingle, to reconcile opposites, to create new syntheses, to elicit new purposes not predetermined by the petrified structure itself. In short, he rejected the potentiality—not unrelated to what Plato would have regarded as inadmissible confusion of transcending race and caste and overcoming vocational limitations. He saw no way of unifying the divided selves of man without freezing them into so many fixed, graded, and classified parts of the polis.

[60] p. 188

What Lavedan has said of the influence of Plato and Aristotle on later city planning and municipal order errs,

I fear, on the generous side. "It consisted in preparing the mind to accept a certain number of restrictions dictated by the collective interest." But the fact is that they were not, by anticipation, either apologists or publicists for the new order, which shaped the growing Hellenistic cities without their help, and with little respect for their beliefs. Neither Plato nor Aristotle had any just insight into the happy moment that Athens, and in some degree all other Greek cities, had lived through, from the time of Solon to that of Pericles: therefore their ideal cities made no provision for continuing and strengthening these creative forces. They had no vision of a wider polis, incorporating the ideal principles of Cos, Delphi, and Olympia and working them into the generous complexities of an open society. Their ideal city was still just a small static container, under the grim direction of the citadel: for support, it had only a self-contained economy, supported, at least for Aristotle, by a robust middle class. The cultural center of gravity of such a city fell within its own base; but on such terms the burgeoning mind of the actual polis would have withered and wilted.

[70] p. 143

But Greek practice was far in advance of Greek theory: indeed, theory accentuated the separate, the particular, the static, the archaic, and neglected the new tendencies toward dynamic cultural intercourse and political federation. Aristotle examined the constitutions of 158 Greek cities, each sufficiently different to merit separate analysis; but there is no record of his paying attention to the efforts at creating a general league of cities, though this had begun as early as the sixth century, and before Rome had wiped out the last vestige of Greek freedom, Greece would produce some twenty such confederations.

[90] p. 214

All the magnitudes will be stretched in Rome: not least the magnitude of debasement and evil. Only one symbol can do justice to the contents of that life: an open sewer. And it is with the sewer that we shall begin.

[91] p. 218

As soon as the increase of population created a demand for wheeled traffic in Rome, the congestion became intolerable. One of Julius Caesar's first acts on seizing power was to ban wheeled traffic from the center of Rome during the day. The effect of this, of course, was to create such a noise at night, with wood or iron-shod cartwheels rumbling over the stone paving blocks, that the racket tormented sleep: at a much later date, it drove the poet Juvenal into insomnia.

[92] p. 219-220

These tenement houses bore the same relation to the spacious palaces and baths of the city as the open cess trenches did to the Cloaca Maxima. The building of these insulae, like the building of the tenements of New York, was a speculative enterprise in which the greatest profits were made by both the dishonest contractors, putting together flimsy structures that would barely hold up, and profiteering landlords, who learned how to subdivide old quarters into even narrower cells to accommodate even poorer artisans at a higher return of rent per unit. (One notes, not without a cynical smile, that the one kind of wheeled traffic permitted by day in Rome was that of the building contractors.)

[93] p. 230

Even before Rome had changed from Republic to Empire, that city had become a vast collective torture chamber. There, at first under the guise of witnessing the just punishment of criminals, the whole population, as Seneca remarked, daily punished itself. So thoroughly was Rome committed to this evil that even the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the State did not do away with the practice. When the Vandals were hammering at the gates of Hippo, Augustine's city, the groans of the dying defenders on the wall mingled with the roar of the spectators in the circus, more concerned with their day's enjoyment than with even their ultimate personal safety.

[120] p. 507-508

"At the bottom of this miscarriage of modern technics lies a fallacy that goes to the very heart of the whole underlying ideology: the notion that power and speed are desirable for their own sake, and that the latest type of fast-moving vehicle must replace every other form of transportation. The fact is that speed in locomotion should be a function of human purpose. If one wants to meet and chat with people on an urban promenade, three miles an hour will be too fast; if a surgeon is being rushed to a patient a thousand miles away, three hundred miles an hour may be too slow. But what our experts in transportation are kept by their own stultifying axioms from realizing is that an adequate transportation system cannot be created in terms of any single limited means of locomotion however fast its theoretic speed.

What an effective network requires is the largest number of alternative modes of transportation, at varying speeds and volumes, for different functions and purposes. The fastest way to move a hundred thousand people within a limited urban area, say a half mile radius, is on foot: the slowest way of moving them would be to put them all into motor cars. The entire daytime population of historic Boston could assemble by foot on Boston Common, probably in less than an hour if the streets were clear of motor traffic. If they were transported by motor car, they would take many hours, and unless they abandoned their unparkable vehicles would never reach their destination.

Our highway engineers and our municipal authorities, hypnotized by the popularity of the private motor car, feeling an obligation to help General Motors to flourish, even if General Chaos results, have been in an open conspiracy to dismantle all the varied forms of transportation necessary to a good system, and have reduced our facilities to the private motor car (for pleasure, convenience, or trucking) and the airplane. They have even duplicated railroad routes and repeated all the errors of the early railroad engineers, while piling up in the terminal cities a population the private motor car cannot handle unless the city itself is wrecked to permit movement and storage of automobiles.

If technical experts and administrators had known their business, they would have taken special measures to safeguard more efficient methods of mass transportation, in order to maintain both the city's existence and the least time-wasting use of other forms of transportation. To have a complete urban structure capable of functioning fully, it is necessary to find appropriate channels for every form of transportation: it is the deliberate articulation of the pedestrian, the mass transit system, the street, the avenue, the expressway, and the airfield that alone can care for the needs of a modern community. Nothing less will do."

[121] p. 530

'Free competition' which was the slogan that broke the old feudal and municipal monopolies gave way to large-scale efforts to achieve monopoly or quasi-monopoly, now called 'oligopoly,' so that a minority of organizations could control the market and fix prices almost as successfully as if they were in fact one unit. The great metropolis was both an agent of this process and a symbol of its overwhelming success.

[130] p. 527

Sociologists and economists who base their projects for future economic and urban expansion on the basis of the forces now at work, projecting only such changes as may result from speeding up such forces, tend to arrive at a universal megalopolis, mechanized, standardized, effectively dehumanized, as the final goal of urban evolution. Whether they extrapolate 1960 or anticipate 2060 their goal is actually '1984.'

Cat says

After two hundred pages I wanted to give this book five stars, but after finishing it, I was almost ready to give it three stars.

This book is what it says it is, "The City in History". Starting in the neolithic era, Mumford marches through

all of recorded time and place (place being limited to the Near East, Greece, Rome, Europe and America) to bring, you, the reader, his thoughts on the role and "prospects" of the city.

In the beginning, it's an exhilarating ride. Mumford is not shy about advancing bold arguments. Although the book starts with sections on the city in Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, he doesn't really get excited until he gets to Ancient Greece. I'd say it's clear from the text that Mumford is a fan of Ancient Greece, particularly Athens between the 7th and 6th century B.C.

Then it's off to Rome. Mumford is a harsh critic of Roman culture. His critique of the Roman method of burial (take bodies just outside city limits, dump, bury) contrains so much righteous indignation you might think the Romans were still pottering around when he wrote this book.

After Rome, we get an equally stirring defense of the Middle (don't call them "Dark" around Mumford) Ages. Mumford is a big fan of the city in the late middle ages. As an example, Mumford uses Amsterdam. Specifically, what Mumford likes about this time period is the community involvement by the ruling elites.

Like many other social critics, Mumford is not a huge fan of the impact that capitalism and industrialization have had on the modern city. Unlike some of the other reveiwiers below, I don't really hold that against him. He was writing in the sixties, people!!!

However, I do admit that by the last hundred or so pages, when Mumford starts despairing of the future of the city, the whole tirade started to get tired.

I'm not sure I would recommend this for a general reader.

Val says

At a basic level, the book largely consists of the ramblings of a technophobe advocating the humanization of technology (as if there were anything more eminently human than technology). Solutions to the city's woes (housing, congestion) are not provided, nor even suggested, but criticism is freely dished out.

As others have pointed out, Mumford was an advocate of the medieval city, and a more "organic" approach to city planning, as opposed to the more formalistic baroque, and indeed contemporary, method of planning cities. Some interesting points are made regarding the direct relationship of population densities and transportation congestion, or the role of the citadel and city walls in ancient cities.

However, unfortunately, the book manages to branch out to topics only tangentially related to the history of urbanism as well. This includes the university tenure system, the inconveniences of nuclear war, or the monastic movement.

Overall, I would say that although the book contains interesting points, they are diluted in the hundreds of pages of ramblings where one cannot easily distinguish opinion from fact. For, though the author was an academic and the book ends with a copious bibliography, "The City in History" does not reference other works by means of footnotes or endnotes once in all its 657 pages.

Thus, I would only recommend this work to those that, like Mumford, feel that significant improvements to the city will only come through applying art to the city's central human concerns (pg. 575). To those actually

looking for solutions, I would suggest they look somewhere else.

Mjackman says

A massive and intimidating book, but, once you get a bead on his Anglophilic prose style, Mumford is great at bringing to life the story of the city's evolution -- from necropolis (for man's first structures were meant for the dead, not the living) to walled stronghold to industrial megalopolis. It's a damn big book. Even the plates and captions would make a slim volume. But, even though it's huge and high-toned, it's surprisingly accessible: Back in Mumford's day, you could be erudite without jargon, and a good dictionary is all you'll need to slog through the more difficult passages.

Nicholas Moryl says

This book's importance is mainly historical. As a work of urban planning analysis and history, it is a failure.

"The City in History" was written in an era when hand-waving and appeal to "common knowledge" were acceptable ways to argue a point. There is little to no primary source information or data to support Mumford's claims about the causes or impacts of various elements in the evolution of urban design. E.g. on p. 448-9 he points to the addition of new crops to the food supply as a key force behind population growth in the middle ages/renaissance, but provides no empirical data to prove this. Other technological advancements (lower infant mortality rate; better medicine; better sanitation; and so on) are likely also to have contributed to the increase in population. This is one of many arguments he puts forth that is half-baked or presented without data to support it.

In short, if this book was being graded by a contemporary professor of history or urban planning, it would receive a failing grade.

I think it's an interesting book to read for metahistorical perspective, but does little to present a rigorous analysis of the evolution of human settlements.

Andrew says

Mumford is, in many ways, a total precursor to the postmodernists. He maintains a skepticism towards Enlightenment as well as a strong respect for the subjective, vital forces of humanity. Like any good contemporary social thinker, he recognizes that the parsing of culture into numeric bits and pieces is only one among many methods of attaining knowledge.

There's a certain Eurocentrism which is to be expected for a writer from his era, but what troubles me more is what I deem "urbanocentrism." He has a way of viewing all history through the lens of the city, thus excluding the discourse of societies beyond the city-- which was, until a few years ago, most of the world's population-- and consequently only seeing a sliver of humanity. However, if we read Mumford as a meticulous analyst of the course of development of the Western city, we get a much stronger narrative.

Jon says

Lewis Mumford tells us about the spiritual and cosmic origins of the city so that we can get a handle on how we can best forge the city of tomorrow. To do that, he must scope out all of Western history, denoting where the city has been and what it could possibly become. All that said, this was a long and often laborious read that has left me in many ways a bit more befuddled than illuminated. Mumford's own words often take off in poetic flights of fancy that are heroic or elegiac; they are beautiful, but such is not something I'm accustomed to reading in serious sociological nonfiction--and it rarely helps to make the message clearer.

The book starts off especially slowly, because Mumford starts essentially at the dawn of man. Most of this information is prehistory, so there's some archeology and anthropology and a whole lot of conjecture. For Mumford, early cities start with death, with graveyards--places where people go to visit their ancestors. It's these ancient rituals that gather people together and make, eventually, for civilization. An interesting theory, but one based largely on the fact that it's graveyards that mostly survive. What of the things that did not survive? And is all human history rooted in such spiritualism? Is the more secular instinct merely one of modern man?

I could not wait for Mumford to get to the time when there were written records, so that I could read about actual city planning and theory. Although he talks a bit about the Egyptians, it is really only when we get to Greek society that such discussion takes off. Here, several different ideas of the Greeks are unfolded. Interestingly, we learn that the Greeks are among the first to have created checkerboard plans for cities, laying out straight streets on a grid pattern. More interestingly, we learn of various ideas that Greek philosophers had about the ideal city, which was not to be more than about five thousand inhabitants (there's some question as to whether that included women, children, and slaves--probably not); beyond this, the city became too large to manage, unable to serve its purpose. Mumford seems to agree that cities can be too large, that size does not a better city make.

From there, Mumford follows the development of the Roman city, and in one passage writes elegantly of Rome's incredible debauchery (with its coed baths where sex was not uncommon).

But where the book really picks up is with the Middle Ages. It is in the city, as it came to exist after Rome's fall, that Mumford seems to find an ideal. With the destruction of a central government, people looked to the church for protection and to various nobles and dukes that would eventually become kings. The walled city was reintroduced as a means to protect people--to keep people out, to keep people in. But these cities were nicely sized and able to function much better than most historians have given them credit for. Streets were often laid out by function, winding with geography.

It is in the baroque city, what comes after the medieval city, that Mumford begins to find displeasure, for in it he sees the beginning of the modern city. The baroque city came to be as kings gained greater power. With that also came the desire for grand architecture and monumentation. No longer was function the height of city "planning"; rather, it was glory. Streets were straightened or widened to show off military might and government power (and to aid with the quick movement of troops).

We might see similarities to more contemporary cities with their focus on the capitalist and profit-making machine, wherein people are secondary to the function of business. Indeed, modern cities are criticized for just that by Mumford. And for their gargantuan size, which cuts people off from their surroundings.

Mumford sees much hope in Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities. Rather than letting suburban sprawl eat up

all the surrounding land, adding forever to traffic, Howard sets out a plan for smaller towns surrounded by green zones.

Mumford's account of the creation of the suburb is interesting in its own light. It was, of course, founded in the idea of letting people get back to nature. The suburb was at first something for the upper class, so that it could avoid the dirt and grime of the city proper. But like so many things, those desires trickled down to lower classes, and with time, more and more moved to the suburb to be out among nature. This was aided by advances in transportation--first the railway and then the car. But as more people do that, move into the outskirts of the city to be in the trees, the more nature recedes, and the very purpose for which the suburb was founded no longer is fulfilled (sans the creation of new suburbs even further out).

Howard's Garden Cities aim to end this constant growth at the edges. Rather, cities are planned for specific populations of around thirty thousand, enough that there are physical and cultural amenities while still leaving things close enough together that traffic is not a continual muddle. These towns are then surrounded by green space, so that all people can easily leave town to be in the city. And those towns, in turn, are connected across the green space.

Mumford does not think too well of megalopolises either. But he does see potential in sharing culture (interlibrary loan is given as an example, or traveling museum exhibits) across a network of smaller cities. In this manner, culture comes to the city rather than it being hoarded in one large center, and local centers maintain their unique histories and cultural components.

In theory, I like Mumford's ideas and even the concept of the Garden City. Smaller towns are easier to live in from a practical perspective. There is a sense of community. Infrastructure is not overburdened. But scale does seem, to me, to be of some import, even if one town might share with another its various cultural artifacts. The fact is that smaller towns are not always enough of a center to support things that might appeal to obscure tastes, even on an on-loan basis. There is a reason larger cities tend to have arthouse movie theaters and playhouses and museums and sporting facilities and Vietnamese-Mexican fusion cuisine restaurants while smaller towns don't. Sure, one museum might lend part of a collection to another town, but at what cost? And how many people are going to visit the museum to make it worth that cost?

Of course, the Internet has changed many of these concerns. No longer are we as people as dependent on our immediate surroundings for alternative cultural opportunities. But in a sense, that too is a loss, for as we sit in front of our screens engaging the wider world from the limited perspective of our small town, we fail to engage with the immediate community.

Shreedhar Manek says

This has *everything*. I do not want to write anything more.

Dan says

The City in History is a work of impressive scope, presenting nothing less than the development of cities in the Western world from antiquity through the mid-twentieth century.

Overall, Mumford argues for cities based on human scale, organic development, and managed growth, with an attention to function, aesthetics, and human/environmental needs. This perspective leads him to favor

medieval cities as a zenith of urban development, and often critique subsequent changes implemented during the Renaissance/Baroque/Neoclassical eras, the development of capitalism, and the Industrial Revolution. Originally published in 1961, Mumford's preoccupation with the potential for nuclear annihilation pervades the final chapters.

This is not light reading, to be sure — its 576 pages are thick, dense, and full of sweeping connections. But, it is essential reading for anyone interested in urban history.

Karl says

Astonishing in its breadth and clarity. Although the book starts slow (and, unfortunately, with some tired-if-not-upsetting gender stereotypes), Mumford hits his stride with his description of Rome. By the end of World War II, his prose his hard to match.

Doug says

First to contend with is Mumford's pedantic tone. Sometimes I couldn't help but imagine him as a stodgy British aristocrat ramblingly lecturing from the ample study of his prodigious manor looking for the least excuse to wax poetic about the greatness of Elizabethan England--whilst ignoring as much as possible non Western European cities. Even so, Mumford can write very beautifully when he's not side tracked and actually zeroes in on an interesting topic. Unfortunately he's often side-tracked and jumping from topic to topic with very little structure discernible.

Mumford's thesis is murky. He criticizes a wide variety of things from nuclear war to highway engineers. His general prescription for cities includes more variety of forms, fewer highways, and more respect for the pedestrian realm and offers many good ideas, probably very ahead of their time. However, he never ties himself with down with specifics and seemingly contradicts himself at times. Some of his criticisms are pretty spot on, but his ideas would be hard to organize into a theory of urban design. I really liked sections of the book, such as his takedown of suburban expansion, but there's just too much detritus and too many tangents for it to be truly pleasing to read.

Piotr Smolnicki says

It's an obligation to read this book for every urban researcher to know what innovative thoughts are just reinventions of ones in the past.

Ellen Keim says

I found this book fascinating when I had to read it for a college course 35 years ago. Yes, it's been around for that long. (It was written in 1961.) I never thought about cities in the same way again. Mumford not only traces the development of cities, he also explains why they're integral to the functioning of society. He writes about what cities get right as well as what they get wrong and offers suggestions for making them work better. Some reviewers have said that the reading is dry, but I don't remember it that way. I would definitely

recommend this book for anyone who is interested in city planning and/or social issues.

Rosie Tighe says

First half is solid. Second half is what you'd expect from a white historian writing in the 1960s about urban issues.

Michael Holm says

1961 Copyright Harvest Book by Harcourt, Inc 575 pages

Summary:

The author describes the design of cities in Europe and the USA as a place for humans to live by periods: ancient (pre-historical Mesopotamia, Egypt, Crete), classical (historical, Greece and Rome) medieval (8th to 16 centuries), baroque (16-18th centuries, the industrial revolution), suburbia and contemporary (up to 1960). His descriptions include economic, religious, military and ethnic factors that influence the development of cities and their design. His perspective is humanistic, that is, he regards cities as a place for the common person to live and realize his/her full potential. Needless to say, most cities through most of history have not been successful in this regard. What makes this history compelling is just this perspective: it causes one to consider his/her own life and its potential. Social interactions in the city are deemed essential for the social development of one's self. Predictably, Athens is portrayed as a high point, generating the familiar great Greeks such as Sophocles and Socrates. Venice and Amsterdam also win high praise as does the townships and villages of New England. The village is his ideal community size for social development. Community religious pageants are considered very important. In several chapter sections, he opines about democracy and the gap between the rich in control and the poor workers. He is very realistic but his sympathy is definitely for the exploited workers. Most of the grand monuments and structures that we visit today were built on the exploitation of ignorant workers inured to tyranny. Spaciousness, especially green space, as in parks has his recommendation and approval.

His vision: (The purpose of the city:) "That magnification of all the dimensions of life, through emotional communion, rational communication, technological mastery, and above all, dramatic representation, has been the supreme office of the city in history." (- the next-to-the-last sentence in the book).

Evaluation/Commentary:

There is a wealth of information and insights in this history with a good bit of opinion thrown in. It is well-written but somewhat verbose and his opinions are somewhat repetitious. These are opinions about the gap between the rich and the poor, exploitation of the workers and democratic governance. He detests ostentatiousness and conspicuous waste of wealth. The palaces, cathedrals and monuments were built with taxes from the common people. The narrative heats up with some passion at these points which roused me on several occasions in agreement. He has a refreshing evaluation of the Greek culture as exemplified in Athens: Athens was a democracy only for free men, not for women nor slaves. It also was piratical, subjugating other Greek cities to get tributes (taxes), instead of forming a confederation as equals for mutual defense and aid.

His ideal city is rather vague: discussing suburbs he likes openness and greenery and variety of design but complains that they are too insulated from the problems and social interactions of the city. Describing inner cities, he complains that they need green space and more privacy. The ideal still seems to be the prehistoric

village. So his criteria seems to shift somewhat from one case to another.

One glaring deficiency seems to be total disregard for efforts to tolerate and assimilate other cultures within neighborhoods.. His vision is limited to homogenous neighborhoods where a common religion is shared. I imagine that he would support assimilation if he were alive today. But I don't see how the envisioned communal-self can be achieved with large cultural and religious differences.

Credentials:

Lewis Mumford was not a historian on a collegiate faculty, but rather a journalist, serving as an architectural critic for the New Yorker magazine for 30 years. He is the author of many books about design and cities. This book was the National Book Award winner in 1961. He is very well-read in this field as his bibliography testifies.

Rating:

I rated it 4 stars mostly due to vision and scholarship. I did not give it a 5 because of verbosity and some repetition. Actually, 4.5 would be accurate. This is a very thought-provoking read, causing me to reflect on my own life and how to achieve my maximal potential.

Stephen Breton says

I gave up. His writing is so arrogant and tedious and the first chapters on ancient cities are filled with so many unfounded speculative “perhaps”es, the book was unreadable. It’s written in a dated, wannabe-British mid-century New York style of “oh I’m so amused by my own wit”, when I was looking for a historical survey. I love the history of cities, so maybe I’ll try again some day when I have more patience.
