The City in Mind
Meditations on the Urban Condition

JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER
This book is for Andres Duany, the restless warrior.
The City in Mind

My own prediction is that Boston will be America's most habitable big city in the first quarter of the new century. It is way ahead of almost all the others. In Boston, there seems to be a new and clear consensus that city life can be wonderfully rewarding, and that we possess the means to make it so. That kind of civic self-confidence and self-consciousness is exactly what is missing in so many other cities across America.

LONDON

Landscape as the Cure for Cities

The English are a rural-minded people on the whole, which perhaps explains why our rural domestic architecture is so much better than our urban. Our cities, generally speaking, are deplorable. There is a lack of design which must make the French smile.

Vita Sackville-West
It is probably a good thing that the mistress of Sissinghurst did not live to see the likes of millennial Las Vegas, with its lugubrious eight-lane motor vistas of the mega hotel-casinos and the imperial median strips of embalmed tropical foliage, but she illustrates an interesting point of Anglo-American culture, namely, that we have very ambivalent feelings about city life as a general proposition and view rural landscape as the sovereign antidote to the baneful necessity of urbanism.

We Americans, of course, being the naive, prideful, narcissistic extremists we are, have taken these ideas to ridiculous new frontiers. We have devised a new kind of city perhaps more repulsive than the archetypal English industrial Coketown (a name coined by Dickens) and tried to mitigate it with expropriations of landscape symbolism, and the entire system is a goddamned mess both materially as a thing made for our daily use, and as a way of thinking, as expressed in a range of mentalities from the venal dreams of the most swinish Sunbelt land developers to the noble agendas of the "environmental" elite. Nature is sacred and everything else is hopelessly profane, and that's the end of it. This limited view of the human condition has prevented us from doing anything about the aforementioned goddammed mess that America has become, and it is worth tracing some of its origins if we are going to ever get past this predicament and find a way to construct civic surroundings that are worth living in.

London's Great Fire of 1666 is a good starting point for our considera-
by architects and civic designers for its baroque clarity, would have transformed the city from an overgrown medieval termite mound of narrow passages and miserable transport routes into the sort of spacious capital that Paris would become two centuries later under the regime of Louis-Napoleon and his prefect, Haussmann.

The king liked Wren's plan because it was devised in the spirit of André Le Nôtre, designer of Louis XIV's gardens at Versailles, and also of the Champs-Élysées, the monumental and as-yet-unbuilt-upon new boulevard leading west out of the Tuileries in Paris. In exile before the restoration of his crown, Charles II had become a great admirer of Le Nôtre and of the French design manner in general. But neither the king nor his commission could impose Wren's plan on the other bickering parties, and except for two new thoroughfares, King and Queen streets, Londoners eventually rebuilt the heart of the city along its old medieval lanes. Meanwhile, the royal treasury was strained from carrying on a war with The Netherlands, so even the sensible proposal to construct a stone embankment along the noisome Thames had to be put off. In the Great Fire's aftermath, the crown managed only to introduce a set of building codes regulating materials (brick or masonry, not wood), number of stories, overhangs, shopfronts, and signs. But the old central district, ever after called "the City," did change permanently after all. Many merchants and prosperous professionals indeed took up residence elsewhere, relocating in the country towns beyond the fortifications left over from the recent civil wars, or in new houses sprouting in the fields beyond Westminster, both upstream and upwind from the City. These would become, and remain to this day, the most desirable residential neighborhoods of London. In any case, a potent counterforce to the civic ideal was flourishing in the countryside well beyond the outskirts of London town.

**Arcadia**

The religious (and political) crisis Henry VIII had set off when the Pope refused to grant him a divorce from the barren Catherine of Aragon smoldered like a root fire for a hundred years and finally burst out above

ground in the Civil War between Protestant parliamentary factions and the Catholic Stuart kings. Parliament had brought to trial and beheaded the intransigent Charles I in 1649. Cromwell's parliamentary "protectorate," a disorderly dictatorship really, succeeded hardly better in holding together the new commonwealth than Charles I had his kingdom, and by little more than the force of personality. Cromwell's fractious government achieved little. A Council of State under Parliament managed to abolish the House of Lords (though not aristocracy itself).

This aristocracy derived its wealth largely in land rents from large estates and in the political commotion of the mid-1660s many aristocrats fled London to lie low in their country seats. Some royalists were banished outright from the capital. Thus a generation of English aristocrats made a virtue of necessity and developed a way of life quite different from, say, the contemporary French court at Versailles, where the entire aristocracy resided under one roof in a kind of theme park with their domineering king. Apart from the most obvious advantage of being removed from the political quarrels of the day, the English country lords found tremendous solace and pleasure in their rural surroundings. They ruled little realms of their own. They developed a rich culture of country pastimes, in particular hunting, riding, and gardening. They became very intimate with their lands and the other people and things that lived there. They applied their wealth to the improvement of their homes and of the terrain that surrounded them.

In the aftermath of the regicide, there was a consciousness among these landed lords that they were living through a time similar to the period of political chaos in classical Rome that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar, when many Roman nobles had retreated to their farms and country villas to stay out of trouble. Virgil's *Georgics*, extolling the delights of rural retirement, became a popular text among the wealthy rural English, who sought meaning in many other classical themes, especially the Greek myth of Arcadia, the ideal place, where nature and civilization existed in perfect balance, and the landscape was beautiful, familiar, always interesting, but never a menace to existence—in short, heaven on Earth.

The country seats became worlds unto themselves, and their squires
had the means to fashion them to suit their fantasies. This became a principal preoccupation for many of them, and an elaborate new culture of landscape garden design evolved to serve their aspirations. The movement involved many hundreds of great estates, some comprising thousands of acres, and coincided in the 1700s with the Enclosure Acts that altered the social organization as well as the landscape of agricultural production. In many cases, the private estate parks were created out of the less desirable lands left over from the enclosures, and the only thing that could be done with them in the absence of good tillage or pasturage was to make them beautiful.

The geometric formality of pleasure gardens modeled on the example of Versailles, itself based on Renaissance Italian and medieval ideas—or a little later on Dutch gardens when William of Orange was installed on the throne in 1688 by a Parliament desperate to be rid of Stuarts forever—gave way in England to an irregular, informal, “natural” style that was no less entirely an artifice. There are rumblings of this in the writings of John Evelyn and William Temple, whose own Moor Park was executed strictly in the Dutch manner, and the landscape sketches of Stephen Switzer. But the first true practitioner of the informal and irregular style was William Kent, who came as a house guest to Lord Burlington’s Palladian villa at Chiswick in 1725 and stayed for twenty years as its landscape gardener. It was Kent, with the very active Burlington, who began to formalize the vocabulary of the English landscape “park” with its lawns gently meeting placid water in serpentine shapes, strategically deployed clumps of oak and beech, the insertion of little classical buildings—just as in the idealized canvases of the new school of landscape painters: Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin, and Salvador Rosa. Kent himself had begun his career as a landscape painter, and had met Burlington first while painting in Italy. In fact, the arts of landscape painting and landscape gardening became so mutually reinforcing that their character as essentially abstract exercises lay open to ridicule, as a character in Tom Stoppard’s play Arcadia (1993) suggests:

English landscape was invented by gardeners imitating foreign painters who were evoking classical authors. The whole thing

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Lancelot Brown (1715–83), Kent’s successor, was called Capability not because he was conceited, but for his habit of exclaiming, when inspecting a client’s property for the first time, “It has capability!” (that is, of being composed by Brown into an Arcadian landscape). Brown called himself “a placemaker,” not a gardener. He was renowned for destroying extant formal gardens in order to install his lawns and serpentine pools—achieved by damming natural streams and brooks. Stoppard, again, captures it nicely:

The whole Romantic sham. … It’s what happened to the Enlightenment, isn’t it? A century of intellectual rigor turned in on itself. … There’s an engraving of Sidley Park in 1730 that makes you want to weep. Paradise in the age of reason. By 1760 everything had gone—the topiary, pools and terraces, fountains, an avenue of limes—the whole sublime geometry was ploughed under by Capability Brown. The grass went from the doorstep to the horizon and the best box hedge in Derbyshire was dug up for the ha-ha so that fools could pretend they were living in God’s countryside.

Stoppard is perhaps a little harsh. Most striking, though, is his observation that a severe reaction to the Enlightenment set in so early, really while all the great figures of the age were hitting their stride—Voltaire, Burke, Jefferson, Frederick the Great, Catherine of Russia, and her gifted prime-minister-and-boyfriend-in-chief Potemkin—while Diderot had barely gotten started on the Encyclopédie. The world already was growing tired of reason, perhaps had been overly dazzled by it in the first place, and began to feel twinges of regret when it began to undermine the institutions that held civilized society together. One of the principal characters of the age, the odious Rousseau (1712–78), fomented diligently against reason and civilized institutions his whole career. In fact, it was his
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career—when not mistreating his family, dodging his imagined enemies, and swelshing on his debts. Harold Nicolson writes of Rousseau:

The fact remains that Rousseau and his doctrine of “natural” emotion and the equality of man succeeded in destroying the age of reason and in substituting a universe of fantasies that introduced much confusion, much unhappiness, much cruelty, and many illusions into the civilized and even into the uncivilized world.

All this is curiously anticipated in English landscape as carried on by Capability Brown, Sir Humphrey Repton, and Henry Hoare, master of the exemplary Stourhead estate in Wiltshire. There came to be, as Nicolson put it, “a growing preference for the element of surprise over the element of expectation.” And then absolutely coincident with the French Revolution—that triumph of inflamed popular emotion over reason—the English turned even further to an even more wild and spooky form of landscape composition, as though everyday life should be lived like a ghost story, full of delicious morbidity and plangent melancholia. Of course, it too was artifice, what we today would consider a form of show-biz. This was the landscape of William Gilpin, Richard Payne Knight, Uvedale Price, J. C. Loudon, and eventually, by association if not practice, John Ruskin, all gothic ghouliness, scenographic melodrama, the awesome and the sublime, emotion rampant—a world ready for Sigmund Freud. It was England trying hard to be someplace other than England.

Now, it is necessary to pause in this elaborate argument—and you shall see by and by that it is an argument—to graze in a couple of related pastures. One rumination is that whatever fine artistic point any of the landscapists might have made about naturalism or wildness, the English landscape of the eighteenth century was, in reality, thoroughly domesticated, tamed, housebroken—much more so even than that of France, where wolves still roamed, and certainly in stark distinction to America, which to a great extent remained unexplored in 1800. England was settled, comfortable, and familiar. A second point worth chewing on is that throughout the eighteenth century, roughly the period of the Enlightenment, the English upper classes continued to elaborate a form of social organization markedly different from that of France, the leading continental power and the intellectual hot-spot of the Enlightenment. The English aristocracy had succeeded in becoming detached from the life of their cities, principally London, and could exist in a realm beyond politics, while the French aristocracy, penned up in the fantasy camp of Versailles, had nowhere to go when the mob rose, and were rounded up like so many spring pullet—and lost their heads like them, too. A few lucky ones got out of France early and had to stay out for quite a while. In the meantime France imploded institutionally while Paris became a grand guignol, a theater of blood. It took the exceptionally powerful personality of Napoleon Bonaparte, barely thirty years old and barely French, to smack the French nation upside its head and get it to stop the hysterical nonsense of the permanent revolution—and then, of course, Napoleon embarked on twenty years of his own nonsense on a continental scale. The upshot of all this mischief was that it kept Europe too preoccupied with the Napoleonic Wars to do what England and the new United States of America had set about doing by the early 1800s, namely, industrialize.

The picturesque romantic landscape, therefore, is a kind of precognitive metaphor, expressed in painting and real property, for the massive disruptions about to come about through industrialization and the raw emotion it aroused in a new age where emotion would have to take a backseat to science, technology, and a society ever more strictly and rationally organized for production.

By the early 1800s, Capability Brown’s leading professional descendant, the Scotsman John Claudius Loudon, sneered at Brown’s design method as “one uniform system of smoothing, leveling, and clipping of the most tiresome monotony joined to the most disgusting formality.” He could have been describing the new type of city about to be built. Let’s consider the industrial leviathan that London was becoming.
of human slaves. But the new industrial city of machines, factories, steel, and slums produced overwhelmingly worse living conditions for far greater numbers of people than any kind of city ever seen before, and it established a shocking new base level of urban squalor for all ranks of society. For instance, the Rome of Hadrian was a city of great public baths. In the London of Victoria public baths barely existed, except as exotic entertainment spots, and until the nineteenth century, the vast monotonous blocks of worker barracks housing almost never included so much as running cold water. The supply of labor was so bottomless, and the pay so minuscule, that standards in housing virtually disappeared. Landlords could rent anything with a roof and walls. Typhus, cholera, and other diseases of bad sanitation burned through the city, killing rich and poor indiscriminately. Tuberculosis especially thrived in the dark, dirty, moist, overcrowded conditions of the slums, where one room per family remained the rule for decades among the working poor, and perhaps 10 percent of the population lived in lightless basements.

Living conditions that would have seemed less than human two centuries earlier became absolutely normative in the new industrial London, as did the din, stench, and dirt of the factory. Oily coal dust got into everything. Black coats became the predominant male costume of the managerial classes and upward because the soot didn't show. Smogs of coal smoke persisted all winter long and killed thousands. The technical innovation of industry and the degradation of urban life advanced at a steady inverse ratio.

Lewis Mumford became a mad dog in his writings on the subject of nineteenth-century urban life. “In these new warrens,” he wrote of the London slums in The Culture of Cities, “a race of defectives was created.” He went on:

There have been periods in the past that exhibited greater animal ferocity, gashing or burning the flesh of people who had sinned against the prevailing moral code or theological beliefs. But the nineteenth century, smugly conscious of its new humanitarian principles, converted such outright brutalities into a slow quiet process of attrition and inanition. A minimum of schooling: a
minimum of rest: a minimum of cleanliness; a minimum of shelter. A gray pall of negative virtue hung over the urban improvements of the period, and its highest boast was the expansion of these minimum conditions and these negative gains. . . . [N]ever was human blight so wide-spread; never before had it so universally been accepted as normal—normal and inevitable . . . not only the absolute unfitness of this environment, but its extraordinary quantitative multiplication.

The development of neighborhoods for the middle class and the rich occurred, too, of course. With the growth of enormous business bureaucracies, the multiplication of huge hierarchies of middlemen, managers, and merchants, a particular system of housing development evolved. It was exemplified in London by the hereditary owners of large tracts of urban land, for instance the duke of Bedford, who converted his estates of Bloomsbury into an urban quarter of row houses for the better-off, typically arranged around little green squares that brought light and putatively better air into buildings that otherwise differed not much typologically from the tenements of the poor—except that fewer people inhabited them. Almost all the housing of this kind was built under leaseholdings of as long as ninety-nine years, an arrangement unknown in America. Its other salient characteristic was its remarkable monotony. Not only did the buildings possess a numbing uniformity—even the austere townhouses of the very rich in blocks like the Wilton Crescent—but in the “better” streets’ shops and services were kept away from their ground floors (an extension of the aristocratic bias against “trade”), diminishing convenience, amenity, and variety for pedestrians. The English showed, too, an extreme bias against apartment living (as opposed to the French, who would make an art of it). In London toward the end of the nineteenth century, even the row house typology would be abandoned in favor of single-family detached houses on tiny lots, in endless insectile agglomerations that spread far out into what had not long before been the distant countryside of “green England”—now turning coal-black, smoke-gray, and hardscaped.

The great torment of the nineteenth-century city, apart from its sheer shocking hypertrophic growth, was “congestion.” And apart from the efforts of housing reform—which often backfired in unanticipated economic consequences—and the use of zoning to segregate obnoxious industrial land uses, the main response was the movement to try to ruralize the city. Hyde Park in London had been given to the public by Charles I. At the time, it lay on the western edge of the city proper and lay farthest from what would become the East End slums. It was at first essentially a promenading and equestrian park for the hangers-on to the Court of St. James. The adjoining Kensington Gardens were the grounds of Kensington Palace and not open to the public until 1790 and then only on Sundays (until the reign of Victoria, when it was opened year-round). Both Hyde Park and the grounds of Kensington were infested with thieves. Hibbert writes that George II was robbed personally of his purse, watch, and shoe buckles by a bandit who boldly climbed over the Kensington Garden wall, and Horace Walpole, aesthete son of Prime Minister Robert Walpole, was robbed and shot at—the bullet missed—in Hyde Park. Fairs were held at Hyde Park, gentleman skaters enjoyed its Serpentine lake in winter (note the cooler climate of “the little ice age” in the 1700s), and it was a popular place for duels. Both nearby Green Park and St. James’s Park composed the formal public approaches to Buckingham Palace along the axis of the Mall—the original Buckingham House having become the favored royal abode of George III. It was greatly enlarged by George IV and is now the main royal residence in London. St. James’s Park became, with development of the West End and the concentration of government offices in adjacent Whitehall, the notorious haunt of prostitutes, as recorded many times, for instance, by Boswell.

Regent’s Park, roughly a half mile north of Hyde Park, was conceived as a real estate development by the Prince Regent and his architect John Nash on what was in 1810 still open land. By creating a landscape park frontage for substantial numbers of up-market row or “terrace” houses, Nash was, in effect, creating a communal manor park for the rich within the context of the city. There would be a lake and clumps of trees, à la Capability Brown, Repton, and Company, to look out upon from the urban drawing room as though surveying one’s country domain. In addi-
tion, Nash expected a few very exclusive freestanding villas deployed within the park itself, giving it an additional flavor of the domesticated countryside. The animating idea behind the project, never explicitly articulated by Nash or the prince, was the ruralization of urban life for the well-born, so that the city might conform to the terms and norms of country living that the aristocracy has grown used to. The lords were happiest on their own rural estates. The fouler and bigger industrial London became, the less inclined they were to visit or remain there. Nash's Regent's Park project surely must have been a way for the convivial prince to entice this class to spend more time in the city, with him, where duty constrained the head of state to remain much of the year. But by the time Regent's Park really started coming together as a real estate venture, the industrialization of London had accelerated shockingly, with new railroad lines radiating all around the new development, and even the rest of the city leapfrogging far beyond it, and in a few decades Regent's Park would no longer be the edge of town but near the center of a completely unanticipated, suddenly gargantuan urban organism. "In this new environment," Mumford wrote, "only machines could be quite at home; for they express order, purpose, regularity, without the mechanically irreligious need for love, or sympathy, or beauty."

Meanwhile in America

The purpose of this chapter has been to describe the origins of the conflict between urban and rural life, to show how this conflict manifested itself in the practical living arrangements of Industrial Age people, using London as the prime case in point, and to discuss how these ideas about rural and urban life evolved and mutated over time to leave Americans of the twenty-first century in a special predicament where the quality of our everyday environment is concerned. The argument now shifts ground, so to speak, to America, where we find ourselves stuck with the consequences of these attitudes and ideas in an increasingly debilitating condition of permanent placelessness—where the urban and the rural have cruelly canceled each other out and left only a void of abstraction that fails to add up to any places worth living in.

New York City in the 1840s and 1850s was growing as relentlessly as London was then, and under the same remorseless regime of industrialization. Only the pattern of growth was a little different. Under a plan drawn up as early as 1811, the entire eleven-mile-long island of Manhattan was platted into a gigantic mechanistic grid of rectangular blocks unresponsive to the rugged topography and unrelieved by a single device of urbanistic scenicographic diversity, no squares, no round-points, no terminated vistas. Just a checkerboard of streets off into the horizon. Where London's explosive growth was both monotonous and incoherent, New Yorkers settled for unadulterated monotony. Besides, extreme regularity of lot size and shape was better suited to our land tenure traditions and speculative real estate practices.

Manhattan therefore presented a special predicament in the relation of urban people with their surroundings. As an island between rivers then considered unbridgeable, its full development according to the municipal plan would leave its inhabitants cut off absolutely from access to any countryside whatsoever. What's more, the development of the island was occurring at such a furious rate that adults living, say, in 1857, could realistically expect the whole island to be filled up with buildings and pavements within their lifetimes. The prospect was dreadfully bleak, especially within the forms dictated by industrial urbanism: block after block of walk-up row buildings for hundreds of blocks, all deficient in air and light, and no relief except by taking a boat off the island city. Even at the time, when building was just pushing north of Thirty-fourth Street, New York was shamefully devoid of public parks for a city of its size. There were no royal gardens to be given over to public use, only a tiny residue of lands that speculators had been unable to seize and sell—the Battery, which had been a fortification for so many years, the Bowling Green (a drinking and gambling spot, really), and the scruffy parade ground confronting City Hall, all gone to weeds and horse droppings. Gramercy Park, then as now, required a key to get in. The social and aesthetic need for relief was only taken seriously after the repeated cholera epidemics of the 1840s brought the public health shortcomings of the industrial city to public attention, and then the argument could be made to the land speculators that parks not only improved the public health, but
increased the value of real estate on park frontages—which happened to be true.

I have told the story of Central Park and Frederick Law Olmsted in my previous book, Home From Nowhere, and will not repeat it here except to emphasize for the purpose of this argument that the great park was the particular product of a very special set of circumstances. While Olmsted is revered in American urban history and in the practice of landscape architecture, and Central Park considered the foremost model of an urban park, his work presented new problems of urbanism that we have still not overcome 150 years later, and that are reflected in the increasingly abstract and peculiar thinking in our own time about the relation between city and country.

Olmsted's conception of Central Park sprang from several sources. First from the long tradition of English landscape practices already discussed, as modified in America by the different kinds of terrain and social relations in the New World. Olmsted's methods arose from the problems of urban development specific to New York City in the mid-nineteenth century. He was influenced by developments in American landscape painting and its wilderness-worship branch called the Hudson River School (itself an outgrowth of Old World landscape painting). Olmsted was familiar with the preaching of Andrew Jackson Downing, the first self-consciously professional "landscape gardener" America produced, and an originator of American-style suburbia as a distinct idea (Downing drowned in a Hudson River steamboat explosion, 1850). Olmsted took further cues from the cemetery landscaping movement as exemplified by Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. All of these influences came together for Olmsted and synthesized into a new vision when he visited Birkenhead Park in Liverpool, England, in 1850.

Birkenhead Park's 120 acres in a Liverpool suburb were laid out in 1844 by Joseph Paxton, who would go on to design London's Crystal Palace for the Great Exhibition of 1851, the first modern world's fair. Witold Rybczynski tells us that Olmsted discovered Birkenhead by accident days after his arrival in Liverpool, when he had set out for a hike in the new precincts across the Mersey. Rybczynski also says that what most impressed Olmsted was that Birkenhead was entirely man-made,
place and would make urban life at least tolerable and perhaps splendid. He was also filled with ideas about how the future suburbs would develop, as a new type of place with all the benefits of both the country and the city, and none of the drawbacks of either. His vision was complete, and he would see significant aspects of it built out in his lifetime. But he got a couple of things wrong, and he certainly never imagined the mess that the twentieth century would make of both the city and the country (including some of his signature works), leaving both nearly unlivable. We will return to this issue after a glance back at England.

Garden Cities of Tomorrow: Utopia not Arcadia

Ebenezer Howard (1850–1928) was the quintessential eccentric British progressive reformer of the industrial zenith. He came from a humble background. At twenty-one, he ventured to America—the Nebraska prairie, of all places—where he idealistically tried farming with two partners, ended up miserably in the employ of one of them, and eventually gave up the enterprise in despair. Having learned shorthand, he got a job as a court reporter in Chicago, eventually returned to England, and worked at that vocation the rest of his active life while he campaigned for urban-planning reform on the side.

Howard's imagination was inflamed especially by the utopian novel Looking Backward by the American Edward Bellamy, published in 1887, which sought to depict the way life would be lived in 2000. To the reader today, Bellamy's book is laughable. For instance, he predicted that the entire city (in this case, Boston) would be rigged with speaking tubes connected to a central symphony hall that would broadcast music into every home—completely overlooking the future role of sound recording technology that Edison had already pioneered ten years earlier, not to mention the telephone, patented in 1876. Bellamy also imagined that the entire city population would gather for meals in great central refectories. In fact, his vision exemplifies the particular kind of myopia found in utopian visions: the tendency to project linear extrapolations of current conditions into the future, in Bellamy's case the centripetal and centralizing tendencies of the industrial city as it operated in the late 1800s.

London

Howard, who was a kind of highly intellectual tinkerer rather than a philosopher or technocrat, viewed the ghastly mess of expanding industrial London at its height and devised a hypothetical unit of new and improved development, which he called the Garden City. His instinct was probably correct at least in these respects: that ideally a city should grow by the replication of organically integral neighborhoods, rather than incoherent sprawl of monocultures, that the neighborhood unit should come complete with workplaces, homes, and shopping strategically deployed for health, convenience, and the reward of the human spirit, and that the lands beyond the urban edge ought to be maintained in rural condition, ideally for farming, that is, for the production of food for local consumption. He called this the “greenbelt,” a term that still reverberates in our despair-laden public debates today, a century later.

Two elements of Howard's Garden City were a little screwy. One was the elaborate system of public ownership and finance that he must have spent far more hours working out than the actual design aspects of his utopia. They smacked of the kind of naïveté about human nature that would eventually lead Fabian socialism down the road to Lenin and Stalin. Howard's economics were based also on a calculus about the price of things, such as skilled labor, that are not necessarily constant over long periods of time. In short, Howard wasted a lot of energy on these financing details—as though the design of a new house in the year 2015 might be based on the hourly wage of sheetrock hangers and the cost of home heating oil in 1965.

The other screwy element of Howard's scheme was that his actual drawn plan of the proposed Garden City was completely diagrammatic, little more than a series of compass scribes transected by ruler lines with labels attached: "houses and gardens," "Boot factory," "Grand Avenue," "farm for epileptics." It made no more sense than the notorious "bubble diagrams" used with such profligacy by the suburban-planning officials of our day. Yet Howard's schematic idea was taken seriously and, miraculous to relate, brought to life in two actual new towns: the Letchworth and Welwyn Garden suburbs outside London. Howard even got to live for several years in each of them. He was a persuasive public speaker and a sedulous civic organizer.
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Neither Letchworth nor Welwyn would have been possible without the work of the great civic designer Raymond Unwin and his partner Barry Parker, who were hired to translate Howard's crude schemata into actual street-and-block plans based on what was then state-of-the-art town-planning technique associated with streetcar and railroad suburb design, united with comprehensive plumbing, electric, and telephone service, and with provision for yet another new marvel, the automobile. Unwin and Parker's work was very similar in kind and execution to the suburban design work that could be seen all over the United States during the same period in new streetcar suburbs such as Shaker Heights, Ohio; Country Club Plaza in Kansas City; and Pasadena, California—an inevitable product of its time and circumstances. Howard succeeded in getting the suburban London municipalities to acquire the necessary land for Letchworth and Welwyn because there was a growing consensus in England by the turn of the twentieth century that industrialism might utterly ruin the little country if something was not tried to modify its effects on the landscape. Howard, therefore, eccentric dreamer that he was, came off as a brilliant prophet and successful innovator. He, personally, had not even anticipated the motorcar in his writings. In the original 1898 edition of Garden Cities of To-morrow (sic), he didn't mention the automobile once. Ebenezer Howard was knighted the year before his death.

A more complex actor in these issues was Howard's contemporary, the Scotsman Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), less concerned with experimental housing policy than with attempting to describe and comprehend the urban fiasco that industrialism had produced and prescribing future therapies. Both Howard and Geddes were in thrall to the terminology and methodologies of science—Howard with statistics and Geddes with charts—making them characteristic personalities of their age but also captives of its conventional thinking, a little too infatuated with the simple nostrums of efficiency and economic rationality that reflect ultimately the worst excesses of Taylorism and the assembly line. This was particularly a loud and ironic chord in the work of Geddes, who understood how problematic industrialism had been, but still looked to scientific advance and technical solutions to mitigate the mess that had been made of the human habitat by previous technical advance. Both Howard and Geddes represent the still-keen faith in scientific progress tied to inevitable social progress that would be smashed by the industrial slaughter of a whole generation in the trenches of World War One.

Among other things, Geddes coined the useful pejorative terms "conurbation" and "megalopolis" to describe the urban condition at the turn of the twentieth century. He identified the previous two-hundred-odd years of industrialization as "paleotechnic" and the age just dawning around 1900 as "neotechnic." In this he was also visibly a captive of current intellectual fashion, as his terms obviously parallel the evolving ars of anthropology and sociology and remain in thrall to the notion of inevitable scientific progress. Geddes viewed town planning, too, as a scientific discipline that would evolve in the neotech "euphoria"—and, seeking to make itself more "scientific" and hence respectable, the planning profession did indeed lose itself in the abstract wilderness of statistical analysis, where it has remained mired since Geddes's time. Geddes approved of the Garden City ideas of Ebenezer Howard, and of the work of Raymond Unwin. He gave very little attention to the effect that the automobile was having on the physical organization of life in Europe or America—though he lived until 1928, when cars had already become a nuisance. He made three trips to the United States in his life, the last in 1923 to lecture at the New School for Social Research, where he made a dazzling impression on twenty-three-year-old Lewis Mumford, who would elaborate Geddes's ideas about the history and meaning of toche in several books, while he absorbed and attempted to transform Geddes's town-planning theories (along with Howard's) for practical application in the period following the debacle of World War One. (Mumford would name his son "Geddes," and the boy would be killed in World War Two.)

The Olmsted Legacy and Its Strange Repercussions

Central Park settled Frederick Law Olmsted's career uncertainties and he spent the rest of his long life as America's leading landscape designer. Though he designed his park and parkway systems in some of America's great cities I do not think he can be called an "urbanist" in the sense Ryb-
czymski would have us believe. In fact, I would consider him an unwitting antiurbanist because he established several ideas that made city life worse in general and exacerbated the public’s confusion about the nature of place and the place of nature in the everyday environment. In trying to bring the country into the city, Olmsted to an unfortunate degree devalued the idea of the city per se, a condition that lingers in the goofy debates of our own time.

As I have said, Central Park, Prospect Park, the Emerald Necklace of Boston, and other major Olmsted landscape parks are all true works of art, and there is much about them that remains wonderful. But they must be understood as products of a period in history when the familiar countryside—and traditional ways of life associated with it—seemed to be vanishing under the urban industrial juggernaut. Olmsted’s work was an attempt to preserve an artifact remnant of that beloved rural landscape within the city. This had at least two unfortunate repercussions. First, the Olmsted park, a large, rambling, picturesque construction, became the predominant, really the sole, model for park-making in America, the problem being that Olmsted’s methods—indeed the methods and tradition of the rural English landscape park—cannot be used for other urban park typologies, especially at small scale. A neighborhood square cannot be composed of rambling vales and rocky defiles. The paved plaza is obviously unsuited to the vocabulary of picturesque earthworks decorated with botanical plantings. Olmsted’s methods omit the one device that can avail on the small scale, and that is conscious rigorous formality of the kind that the French use so well to make trees, shrubs, flower beds, fountains, paths, pavements, and statuaries integral with the surrounding urban hardcape of buildings. This kind of fine-grained formality is absent in American landscape design, and hence our dearth of small parks, squares, and small urban gardens. The only other element commonly present in American urban park design is sports facilities—ballfields, swimming pools, running tracks, and so forth.

The second unfortunate consequence of Olmstedism is partly a consequence of the first. Having left us with no tradition for creating the small urban park, or square, or modest green intercession in the hardcape at the scale of the block, the street, or the neighborhood, and combined with some of our other national proclivities, such as our monotonous use of the grid, and our zeal for real estate money-grubbing unchecked by aesthetic concerns, American cities compare very unfavorably with other American environments, namely the noncity, the rural and wild lands. We have a tradition since Olmsted of venerating the places of “nature” and holding in contempt the abode of human beings, loving the wilderness and hating the city. This is as deeply ingrained in American culture as the idea of free speech.

The Garden City movement in England was an attempt to mitigate huge, overwhelming forces of technology and explosive population growth by imposing something like the traditional neighborhood or village pattern out of England’s own tradition against a background of runaway urban incoherence. The Garden City movement was plucky, quaint, and a bit pathetic in a way that reflected perfectly Britain’s national situation at the time—being on the verge of losing her empire, of becoming decadent, of being stuck with a vast, hideous landscape of obsolescent industrial urban infrastructure, and of falling into the backwash of history. America, on the other hand, entering its high imperial moment after 1900, chose instead to ride the technological juggernaut.

Having established, through Olmsted and his disciples (including his son and nephew, who carried on the family business), the superiority of composed rural-style landscapes and the hopelessness of urbanism proper, America embarked on the project of wholesale suburbanization, a process that still continues—really forming the basis of our millennial economy. I have described its perversities and shortcomings and will not rehearse even the aftertones except to make the point that the current reaction to suburban sprawl by politically progressive so-called “environmentalists” grows more abstract and futile every day.

This reaction proceeds in a direct line from Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City movement, through Geddes, Mumford, and Benton MacKaye, the forester, “regional planner” (if there is such a thing), and godfather of “environmental conservation,” through Ian McHarg’s Design With Nature movement of the 1960s (which might have just as well been called the Design Without Towns and Cities movement), to the “environmental” policy victories over air and water pollution of the 1980s, to the current
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generation of “green space” and “open space” advocates, who are all deeply concerned about the unbuilt, rural, and wild places but show no interest in the subject of urbanism, of the design of the place where the people ought to live, namely the town, the city, the neighborhood, or the village.

Open Space, Green Space, and Other Fatuous Abstractions

I was in Missoula, Montana, a few years ago to give an illustrated talk called “Can America Survive Suburbia,” and, having come in early the night before, was invited to attend a meeting of the city council the day of my spiel. There, in the kind of typically ignoble municipal meeting room that could as easily have been a wholesale beverage warehouse, the citizens and officials divided into two factions, Pro-Growth and Anti-Growth, and sat or stood hollering at each other about the issue of the day, which, naturally enough, had to do with a new proposed “development.”

The Pro-Growthers predictably ranted about “property rights” because in the American West the idea that there is plenty of space to be left alone in has been extended to include the incongruent notion that land ownership therefore entails no duties, obligations, or responsibilities whatsoever to the public interest. It is enough to simply state that this argument is without merit or precedent in U.S. history. Anyway, the opponents of the development at issue, the Anti-Growthers, one by one got up and made impassioned speeches about “open space.” The problem with Missoula, they contended, was that it did not have enough “open space.”

This was very funny because Missoula happened to be located in a part of the country where you could walk five minutes out of town in any direction and find yourself facing the greatest contiguous wilderness in the lower forty-eight states, including man-eating bears, cougars, and other bioregional incunabula. The problem as I saw it from a civic design point of view was that Missoula had too much “open space” right there in the center of town. As in many towns of the American West, Missoula’s streets were uniformly too wide and its buildings too low and too spread out with too many parking lots between them. Civic space in Missoula was poorly defined, the building façades were of a uniformly dreary, artless quality, on the whole poorly maintained, too, and there was no systematic planting of street trees. The only dedicated park was located in the flood plain of the Blackfoot River, and its only design feature, besides an absence of houses and stores, was a lonely carousel standing in the slush-covered hardpan. The edge of the city—indeed much of the land along its main traffic arteries, too—contained the usual horrid clutter of chain stores, franchise fry-pits, muffy shops, parking lagoons, and the rest of the typical nauseating furnishings of drive-in commerce found in every American town, big and small. The trouble with Missoula was not a lack of open space. The problem was that everything it contained was poorly made, not worth caring about, and unworthy of the condition of collective self-respect called civilization. But there was nothing special about it by American standards. They asked my opinion, of course, and I told them what I thought. I hasten to add that I did not change their minds. The Open Space fanatics complained that I was cracked in the head, and of course their opponents thought I was slandering the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave.

Wherever I go in the United State these days, it’s the same story. We want Open Space, that’s all. We ask for an abstraction, and an abstraction is delivered—in the form of berm-mulch berms planted with juniper shrubs and other such landscape “buffers” between the Kmart and the apartment “complex.” We get these little cartoons of the countryside deployed everywhere, and we are no better off for them. We want these “nature” Band-Aids because the wound to our urbanism cannot heal. We cannot even imagine it will heal. The scores of thousands of discount malls, and the subdivisions of vinyl doublewide manufactured “homes,” and the tragic collector boulevards lined with “power centers,” and the high schools with ample parking for the whole senior class, and all the rest of the cheap, ugly, provisional stuff that we’ve filled our world up with is too much with us. We gave up on the human habitat in America generations ago. Now we just grimly put up with what we’re stuck with until the next annual trip to admire the scenery in a sacred “wilderness.”
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such as Yosemite. Heaven, for Americans, is a landscape by Capability Brown with sand traps, numbered holes, and convenient free parking.

It's not hard to believe that we are hopeless.

In a Little Hampstead Wood

A few months after that depressing visit to Missoula, I found myself exploring London again, that immense stately pudding of a city, its plumbing and sanitation substantially improved since Queen Victoria's day, but its layout still completely disorienting—even to someone with a confident sense of direction. Its nineteenth-century neighborhoods of houses originally built for the likes of maritime mutual assurance clerks and tea company regional merchandise inventory managers are now occupied by internet hotshots and performance artists. Its Dickensian slums have been replaced by the infamous postwar council flats where the superfluous poor are now organized vertically instead of horizontally and have become accustomed to plumbing. England has enjoyed a twenty-year swim in North Sea oil profits. When those fields of petroleum pass peak production—and they are expected to do so after the year 2001—then we shall really see about the age of neotech and the global economic miracle.

I entered the great park called Hampstead Heath at the north end in the vicinity of Hampstead Lane and Bishops Avenue. I came shortly into an area called the North Wood. It had the character of a real woods, too, not like the bosky little rambles of Central Park where the understory is all worn away from the traffic of basketball shoes, but as though you were truly in an ancient natural landscape of mature forest. You could not see through it to the open meadows and verges on the other side. It was rather dim under its full July canopy of foliage. Though a little damned by some residual primate fear of a dark and gloomy wood, I pressed forward a little gaily and into the thick of this pretend wilderness. Seconds later, I was surprised—a little shocked really—to see the shadowy figure of a man pop out from behind a stout tree. I quickly ascertained that he was dressed in a business suit, and a rather well-cut one at

London

that, perhaps even Armani. I went on to surmise that he had been taking a leak behind a tree. I kept my eyes on him as I passed by. He returned my gaze intently in a way that left me less than entirely comfortable. Perhaps, I mused, he was some sort of park detective, and it was I who looked suspicious to him. Who knew I was a foreigner in a strange land with different customs.

But I'd proceeded barely a few steps further along my way when out from behind another tree popped another man, this one dressed in the kind of banlon shirt and tight trousers of the working class. He at once started combing his ample head of hair in a rather strangely demonstrative way, as though he were giving a lesson in hair-combing. I passed him by, too. And then I saw a third man and a fourth, popping out of the greenery like characters in a penny-arcade shoot-em-up game. Or like figures in one of those spooky George Tooker paintings that describe with such intense, cold-blooded perfection the loneliness of crowds in a world with different customs and that's when I finally understood: I had just passed through a pick-up glade.

It suddenly seemed fitting, here, in an anomalous interruption of the great city's dense fabric, in an archetypal place of gloom and mystery, to come upon a market for the more furtive, shadowy assertions of human desire. It seemed oddly logical to think that all the lofty Arcadian dreams of the English placemakers, through all the vicissitudes of landscape, had led finally to this somewhat sordid destination. The human spirit is a deep vessel and the human heart is a strange engine. Put them in a darkling wood and all the lights of the surrounding city may not avail to guide home the personality that has truly lost its way. The same is true of a culture in general.

Me, I came out of those woods and made my way through a series of lovely sunlit hay meadows, strangely uncropped, and down a little dirt lane that might have been a farm-to-market road not much more than a century and a half before, which eventually opened onto the grand sweep of Parliament Hill, with the immense groaning city spread out in a gray haze below, and then past the groomed grounds of the cricket players and the soccer players and the bathing ponds surrounded by their lovely old
trees swaying like women gathered at a sacred pool to wash their hair, and I burst out of this strange rural fragment of territory back into the streets of bustling London town and caught a bus back to the little hotel on Frith Street to meet my wife for whiskies in soft leather chairs by the bumpered fireplace and tell her all about my adventures.

Notes

Paris

1. In July 1830, Charles X was thrown out by the postrevolutionary rich who had inherited much of the wealth of the Ancien Régime and resented Charles’s attempted to re-Bourbonize the nation. Louis-Philippe, duke of Orleans, was installed on the throne and remained there until 1848, when the widespread upheavals of burgeoning industrialism sent him packing. Louis-Philippe’s eighteen-year reign was ever after known as the July Monarchy.

2. Louis-Napoleon was the son of Napoleon I’s brother Louis Bonaparte (king of Holland, 1806–10) and Hortense de Beauharnais Bonaparte, stepdaughter of Napoleon I. “I am my uncle’s nephew,” he liked to proclaim ironically about his fate.


4. They still reverberate in the shrill cries of suburban American NIMBYs in their quixotic war against “density,” a curious testament to the persistence of cultural memory.

5. The masonry walls and bastions formed a thirty-five-kilometer ring around the city. They proved utterly ineffective during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, when the Germans easily lobbed artillery shells over them into the city. The last of the fortifications was not entirely demolished until 1932.

6. Sebastiano Serlio (1475–1554), Italian architect and theorist who introduced the principles of classical architecture into France.

7. Charles X (b. 1757, d. 1836), brother of Louis XVI, former Count d’Artois.

8. Olsen.

9. The second floor sometimes came in the vestigial form of the entresol, which in former times was a second-floor business loft or storage area for the ground-floor trade establishment.
Notes

typefaces on it. A shrewd businessman, he eventually became rich and was treated as a friend and intimate equal of Cosimo de' Medici. The Rise and Fall of the House of the Medici, by Christopher Hibbert (New York: Morrow, 1974).

16. Michelozzo (1396-1472), a colleague and collaborator of Donatello, was primarily a sculptor. There should be little question that he was familiar with the ideas contained in the Medici Vitruvius, if not with the text itself. The artistic and intellectual world of Florence in the age of Cosimo was a very tight circle.

17. Gutenberg (1397-1468) worked slowly, systematically, and secretly on his invention, taking on partners and investors along the way. He had intended to become rich mass-producing Bibles. His first was printed in 1455. A lawsuit brought by one investor, Johann Fust, a goldsmith, compelled Gutenberg to reveal in court exactly what he was working on. Fust was awarded Gutenberg's equipment in addition to cash and went on to print Bibles himself.

18. Antonio da Sangallo the Younger (1483-1546). The whole family was a development and architecture firm. His Farnese Palace in Rome, completed by Michelangelo, codified many of the conventions of the High Renaissance.

19. As seen in the chapter on Haussmann's renovation of Paris, residences for different income groups can be organized vertically to occupy the same building, too.


Boston


2. Beacon Hill was originally named Sentry Hill, while Mt. Vernon was sometimes called Mt. Howard or Whoredon on account of activities that took place there during the Revolutionary War.

3. There is a different Fort Hill in Roxbury today.

4. Walter Gropius (1883-1969). Seminal modernist guru. Director of the German Bauhaus (formerly Weimar School of Art), and from 1937 to 1952 head of the Department of Architecture at Harvard Graduate School of Design. After that, an architect in private practice. His most visible work was New York's Pan Am Building (now called the Met Life Building).

5. The full gruesome story, with admurrations both forward and back, is told in Planning the City Upon a Hill, by Laurence W. Kennedy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992).

6. This is the theory of John R. Stilgoe, author of Borderlands and other books on urban history and professor at Harvard.

Notes

7. Major tourist attraction sounds hopeless, I suppose, but American cities, by and large, are so uninviting that any decent fragment of civic form is apt to be regarded as extra special.


10. When air moves over a surface, pressure decreases on one side, causing "lift" from the now relatively greater air pressure on the reverse side, as with the wing of an airplane.


London

1. Charles II had agreed to support Presbyterianism when he accepted the throne of Scotland in 1651, but he married Catherine of Braganza, a Catholic, in 1662. He formally declared himself a Catholic in 1670 to pursue a third war against the Dutch.

2. Upon the Gardens of Epicurus, by William Temple (1688).

3. The ha-ha: a kind of ditch and bastion intended to contain livestock without disturbing an open field of view.


6. Mumford was born in New York City in 1900, on the eve of the Progressive Era in politics, when the problems of the industrial city began to be recognized and addressed.


10. Frederic Winslow Taylor (1856-1915), the father of "scientific management" in the industrial factory. 11. By "traditional neighborhood or village" I mean a unit of urban development based on a quarter-mile radius from the center, composed of a street-and-block pattern, with streets interconnecting, and ranging in transect from dense building at the center to sparser building at the edge. One traditional neighborhood of this type will make a hamlet or village, several a town, many (plus special-use districts) a city.