

HOW CITIES

SUBURBS, SPRAWL, AND

THE ROADS NOT TAKEN

WORK



ALEX MARSHALL






A suburban boulevard outside Lyon, France, shows the galloping suburbanization that has occurred even in Europe. Photo by Alex Marshall.

CHAPTER 2

THE END OF PLACE



THIS EXERCISE WORKS best in Europe. Begin in the oldest part of a city, say Florence, Barcelona, or Lyon, and walk outward. You'll start in the center, in the medieval section, with narrow, tiny streets built for the foot. You'll move into the Renaissance, where the streets and plazas gain more stature and nobility. Then you'll arrive at the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where you come to wide, tree-lined boulevards built for carriages and streetcars. Then you arrive at the bulk of the twentieth century, where the streets . . . fall apart, lose themselves, become patternless.

The same thing works in New York or almost any American city older than a century. It just lacks the European drama. You'll start on a main street, with shops built for people to walk up to their doors, and then you'll eventually come to the parking lots, subdivisions, and malls designed for the people who drive. It's a world of looping freeways and

roads accompanied by a random placement of homes, shopping malls, and businesses. All visible sense of order and structure is lost.

What's different about the postwar places compared to all that went before? How do a strip mall in Kansas City and a warehouse-style supermarket in Lyon—a hypermarché—differ from a traditional “main street” in either place? What has changed?

They lack what I think of as a sense of order or place. In almost any space created before World War I, a sense of enclosure and stability is part of its fabric. Newer places have no fabric at all. It's the difference between a well-knit sweater and a pile of yarn. The modern structure of highways and assorted destinations tied to it lacks any sense of being there. And it's not just an American phenomenon. French sprawl looks a little different than American, and there isn't as much of it, but it's still sprawl.

Our cities have become unbound, and with them, our sense of place and home. And this horrifies us. I know of no one who receives the sight of car dealers and Wal-Marts on a busy boulevard with a warm glow. We look around, whether we are in Cleveland or California, and say, “What have we wrought?”

I am here to give us absolution. Our contemporary cities both are, and are not, our fault. We have created them, but their placelessness was not a consequence that we could have avoided unless we understood the dynamics of their components far more thoroughly.

Before World War I, cities produced a feeling of place as effortlessly as a tree produces bark. It was an inherent attribute of their existence, not something that had to be consciously designed into them. All places were designed as accessories to the human foot and various forms of mass transit, from sailing ships to train lines to carriages and streetcars. The street was the bottom line of place, even though its form changed some over time.

The car changed all that. The parking lot and the tire, not the street and the foot, became the baseline of a city. And with that, everything changed. The best, most elegantly designed shopping center lacks a sense of place. The most mechanistic, reflexively built nineteenth-century company town will have it. The context was different.

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in his seminal book *The Geography of* ed statement, “Eighty percent of every-

thing ever built in America has been built in the last fifty years, and most of it is depressing, brutal, ugly, unhealthy, and spiritually degrading.”¹ This is basically true, but also basically beside the point. Our automobile suburbs could never have created the sense of place that Kunstler loves. Even if Frank Lloyd Wright, Thomas Jefferson, and Vitruvius had designed them, they would still have the “Nowhereness” that Kunstler decries. The designers of a Woolworth's or pharmacy in 1910 had no more aesthetic sense than a designer of a Wal-Mart or a Revco today. But they did have a different context.

The challenge is to understand this dynamic, and then decide how much we want to grapple with it. Changing it is possible, but it involves taking on our entire transportation system.

THE NATURE OF PLACE

Before the car, or more particularly before the highway, the essential challenge of cities was to keep everything from being in the same place. The city was centripetal. Like a black hole, the nature of a city or town was to suck everything to one point. People needed to be near the railroad, the port, the factory to get to their jobs, and factories needed to be near the people and transportation links. This was why reformers championed public parks. Called the lungs of the cities, they were spots of greenery in the tightly packed clumps of buildings and streets. And it took real community effort to put them there. Valuable and scarce land, which could have been converted into homes and businesses, had to be set aside by the public. The tendency of the pre-automobile city to suck people to specific points only intensified with the transportation advances of the nineteenth century, which drew people, machinery, businesses, and money toward the subway stop, the streetcar stop, the railroad terminal.

Just the opposite conditions prevail today. The city is centrifugal. The city is more akin to a giant salad spinner, spraying growth out over the countryside indiscriminately. Growth still clusters around transportation sources, except that it is now the freeway off-ramp rather than the subway stop or train station. But the growth circle of a streetcar is measured in blocks because people have to walk there. The growth circle of a freeway off-ramp is measured in miles, because people drive there,

and need places to put their cars at each end. Consequently, there is no particular advantage to being right near one's workplace. In fact, there is considerable advantage to being as far away from work or other necessities as possible. The person who locates himself on the fringes gets the advantage of bigger lots and more peace and quiet, while still being able to "raid" the jobs and commerce of the metropolis as a whole. Thus the city expands ever outward, with each person and developer reaching the short-term gain of being the farthest out.

The drive to establish parks is anachronistic now, because we no longer live packed in a block with no green space nearby. Now, most of us live surrounded by green space, from our backyards to the berms and shrubbery that surround the shopping mall and local gas station. We are enveloped in greenery, because the low-density environment has plenty of spaces for trees, shrubs, and spare land that is left as forest or fields. Now, a park is just about providing recreation, not relief from crowding and congestion.

The essential dynamic of cities and places has changed. The fundamental challenge of cities today is to keep everything from being everywhere at once. The modern push to establish growth boundaries can be compared to the drive in the past to establish parks. Each movement is attempting to check a fundamental tendency of the form in favor of the public good. The public good now concerns containment, whereas before it was the reverse. Kenneth Jackson, a historian of the suburbs, said, "The effect of the auto on the city is analogous to what astronomers call the big bang theory of the universe."² In the past, cities sucked inward. With the car, they exploded outward.

This big bang has increased exponentially the rate cities consume land. Urban historian Robert Fishman noted, "The basic unit of the new city is not the street measured in blocks but the 'growth corridor' stretching 50 to 100 miles. Where the leading metropolis of the early 20th century—New York, London, or Berlin—covered perhaps 100 square miles, the new city routinely encompasses *two to three thousand* [square] miles."³

A news article about contemporary Atlanta, a particularly acute case, gives a glimpse of the dynamic. "Over the past six years, Atlanta has gobbled up more land than any metro area, anywhere. Each year, the region's suburban boundaries grow by 38 square miles. . . . As a

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result, commuters . . . pile up more car miles each day, per capita, than residents of any U.S. metropolis, including Los Angeles. They also breathe the worst air of any city in the Southeast." The fastest-growing county, Gwinnett, has tripled in population in sixteen years to 460,000. "Seen from the air, Gwinnett looks like a vast sea of cul-de-sacs—an estimated 9,000 of which are spread across the county." The growth of Atlanta, the writer correctly observes, was fueled by three Interstates built in the postwar era that converge on the region.⁴

Victor Gruen, father of the first enclosed shopping mall, in Minneapolis, precisely describes the centrifugal nature of suburban development in a long piece, which he apparently writes with some regret, about the children he has sired. In a chart entitled "The Vicious Circle," he shows an arrow from "Sprawl" leading to "Increased Use of Automobiles" leading to "Decreased Use of Public Transportation" leading to "Separation of Urban Functions" leading to "Increased Road Surfaces" leading back to "Sprawl."⁵

The End of Place saddens us, I believe. We have had thousands of years living with "walls" around us in the form of streets and buildings. It's only in the last fifty that most of us have been able to leave them. Now, like a prisoner yearning for his old jail cell, we miss the places that once involuntarily confined us. Although we chafed at our old constraints, we find now that we might need them. The car and the highway have allowed us to leave our old confines, but they also have meant we could not go back.

Is the End of Place an unavoidable consequence of the car? To answer this, we need to understand why one method of transportation is chosen or can be chosen.

WHERE PLACES COME FROM

Cities and places are created by the methods we choose for moving people and goods and services from place to place. In other words, their transportation systems. How we get around determines how we live. It doesn't work the other way around. Cities are born from their transportation systems. These systems drive the economy of a city, and determine how people live. If James Carville, the fast-talking Cajun who led President Bill Clinton's 1992 election campaign, had been a city plan-



ner, he would have reworded his campaign message of "It's the economy, stupid" to read, "It's transportation, stupid."

In many of the efforts to redirect city planning, there has been a misplaced emphasis on zoning, as if zoning caused our cities to be laid out a particular way. This mistake is understandable, because this appears to be true at first glance. Usually, zoning and codes require the standard suburban form of separated uses, mucho parking, and so many curb cuts. But in reality, zoning no more causes this than a posted speed limit causes cars to drive fast. Like most government regulation, zoning just tidies up what would be the basic form of the city anyway. The essential dynamic of the suburbs, which is separation of uses, and the essential dynamic of inner cities, which is mixed uses, are determined by their transportation systems. No amount of rewriting zoning codes will change this.

New York City can be said to be its subway system. Its network of dense buildings would be impossible without it. In a similar way, the network of highways in a suburban metropolitan area makes possible both cheap, big houses on half-acre plots of land and the big-box stores with huge parking lots. If a region could control nothing else, controlling the transportation system would still be an adequate tool to shape development. Land-use laws, like zoning, are secondary to the effects of a transportation system.

"Housing patterns, land utilization, and employment and commerce centers are all shaped by the transportation system. . . . The rise and fall of cities throughout history and especially in the United States can also be accounted for largely through changing technology in transportation," say Delbert A. Taebel and James V. Cornells in *The Political Economy of Urban Transportation*. Cities built around railroads have risen and fallen, they note, while "the boom towns of America today are frequently located at the intersections of the major interstate highways."⁶

Every city built has grown from the spine of its transportation system, like flesh around bones, whether it be a river, a trail, a railroad, or a highway. If we want to shape a city, we have to shape its transportation system.

Why do I speak so loudly about this? Because so many efforts dealing with cities do not recognize this. If we want a particular type of place, then we have to look at what kind of transportation system pro-

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duces that kind of place. If we want to control or shape the type of devel- opment in a metropolitan area, we have to grapple with the highways, rails, and other systems that move people around within it.

GETTING AROUND VERSUS GETTING AWAY

So who decides the transportation systems of a city, state, or nation, and on what is the decision based? It is primarily a political act. From the Erie Canal to the Interstate Highway System to the Manhattan subway, the way we get around has primarily been determined by politicians and the public will, even if with the cooperation and participation and profiting of private developers.

These political efforts, and their effects, can be broken down into intercity transportation, which is necessary for economic growth, and intracity transportation, which determines living styles but which is a secondary system that is dependent on the economic growth of the former.

Cities are born from intercity transportation—that is, major transportation links to other cities, regions, and countries. New York was created by its natural harbor to the Atlantic, and by the Erie Canal, which opened up the entire Midwest to shippers bringing goods to and from Europe. Detroit was born from its position at the headwaters of the Great Lakes. My own city of Norfolk and the surrounding region are a product of a great port. This isn't to say that great transportation links automatically create great cities, but they are a prerequisite.

The contemporary city is at the center of Interstate crossings. Interstates are our modern rivers of commerce, and proximity to them is probably more important now than being on a train line or a river. Major transportation links create the possibility for industry, which in turn brings people and money to a city. Industry depends on the transportation links to the outside world.

The vital transportation components of the contemporary city, both here and in Europe, are a major airport, an Interstate highway link, a train line, and a port. A city must have at least two of these to thrive, and preferably all four. It is these external links that are necessary to ship products and bring them in. Improving these links is the quickest way for a city to generate economic growth.



Cities are export entities, said Jane Jacobs in *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*.⁷ They exist because they provide people a way to make money, or in more abstract terms, to gain wealth. When two or more people are gathered together, you usually do not find religion but a way of producing wealth.

It's important to understand this, because only when there is industry present can we then begin talking about housing and shopping malls and dentists' offices and accountants and newspapers. These are all secondary activities, dependent on the export industries of a city, whether producing grapes or producing computer chips. Residents of the same place buying and selling things to each other will not produce a city.

People discuss growth as if it were fueled by available land, or by the presence of a road. Opening up more land for development in a region will not fuel growth, it will only shape the pattern of growth.

"New residential development is usually cited as the reason for growth, but no one moves here because there is a new subdivision. They move here because of job opportunities," said Jim Wahlbrink, executive officer of the Home Builders Association of Raleigh-Wake County, in commenting on that region's explosive growth.⁵

A true statement. Of course, a city or even a small town is in a constant churn as people start businesses and close them, move into town and leave it. But the basic dynamic is still there. To observe this, just look at any ghost mining town in Wyoming. Or remember how people talked about "the last people leaving Seattle please turn off the lights" when a slump in Boeing triggered a vast exodus from the city.

People come to a region because there are jobs and money, not because there is available land. Montana and South and North Dakota are still among the least-populated areas in the country because no one has figured out how to make a living there yet, even though these states have some of the prettiest countryside in the nation. The Dakotas actually have fewer people in them today than in 1900, when expectations of a big farm economy fueled the last of a homesteading boom.

STREETS VERSUS TROLLEYS VERSUS HIGHWAYS

The internal transportation of a city is a different question. It determines how people live, and is more a matter of taste. These internal transpor-

tation decisions—whether to build a beltway-style freeway, whether to widen a road, whether to build a commuter train line—determine the pattern of homes, offices, and shops. The people who make computer chips in the Silicon Valley could live in row houses and take a streetcar to work, or live in automobile suburbs and use the freeway, as is the case now. The important thing is that the chips have a way out of the Valley by either Interstate or rail. Which they do. Internal and external transportation systems overlap, but the distinction is still useful.

By using the word “taste,” I don’t mean that a city’s internal transportation system is unimportant; only that there is choice. The pattern of sprawl that most American metropolises have chosen is environmentally destructive, harmful to the poor and elderly, inflexible, and less livable than a more compact form. But sprawl is compatible with Interstates, airports, ports, and train lines, and so is supportable economically.

Talk by reformers of how we have “subsidized” suburban development obscures the true nature of growth. In reality, government “subsidizes” all forms of growth because it makes the principal transportation decisions and pays for them. The construction of subway lines in New York City, with government help, “subsidized” the manufacture of Queens and Brooklyn and the Upper West Side. The construction of streetcar lines in Norfolk “subsidized” the creation of my neighborhood of Ghent, an old streetcar suburb.

It is true that the federal government fueled the growth of big highways. But then, it did the same with construction of railroads, which produced a series of railroad towns. Government builds place through its choices of transportation. Most of the changes that have so radically altered our ways of living have had to do with internal means of transportation within a metropolitan area. That being the case, they have been more a matter of choice than necessity. The classic street was murdered by the car and the highway. The seminal modern architect Le Corbusier predicted and advocated this when he scrawled on a drawing, “We must kill the street!” And without a street, there is no sense of place. Bringing back the street is not possible unless we bring back the types of transportation that once made it essential.

and Jane Jacobs in *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* provide people a way to make money, or health. When two or more people are gathered around religion but a way of producing wealth, and this, because only when there is industry talking about housing and shopping malls, tenants and newspapers. These are all sectors of the export industries of a city, whether computer chips. Residents of the same city do not each other will not produce a city. If it were fueled by available land, or by buying up more land for development in a city will only shape the pattern of growth. Sprawl is usually cited as the reason for sprawl because there is a new subdivision. They are “opportunities,” said Jim Wahlbrink, executive director of the Association of Raleigh-Wake County, in a report on explosive growth.⁸ In a sense, a city or even a small town is in a state of flux. Businesses and close them, move into a new dynamic is still there. To observe this, look at the town of Casper in Wyoming. Or remember how the city of Seattle leaving Seattle please turn off the lights triggered a vast exodus from the city. Because there are jobs and money, not just in Montana and South and North Dakota but in the entire country because no one is leaving there yet, even though these states are on the west side in the nation. The Dakotas actually had more people in 1900, when expectations of a vast homesteading boom.

VERSUS HIGHWAYS

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THE HISTORY OF PLACE

Mark Kingwell, writing in *Harper's*, noted that both "Alexander the Great and Napoleon moved through their respective worlds . . . at precisely the same speed. Top velocity for them, or anyone, was the gallop of a horse."⁹ Before the industrial revolution in the latter part of the eighteenth century, cities and their dynamics hadn't changed much in several thousand years, because the technology of transportation had not changed much.

There were stylistic differences among the Italian Renaissance city of Florence and the Arab city of Fez and the streets of London. Defense strategies shaped the exterior of cities and squeezed people within the mandatory walls. But the basic form of a city or town—tiny, narrow streets built mostly to accommodate people on foot—stayed the same for five thousand years.

The industrial and technological revolutions changed all that.¹⁰ Their innovations initially would catapult the form of the classic city to its zenith, and then swiftly bring about its downfall with the invention of the car and the subsequent decision by governments to build roads for it. In between, one saw the steamship, the railroad, the horse-drawn tram, the streetcar, the elevated train line, the elevator, and the subway, all inventions that would torque the form of the traditional city into new shapes, while keeping the street built around pedestrians as the bottom line.

Each of these past revolutions—the canal, the railroad, the subway—remade the city, although within the context of a traditional grid or other urban street pattern.

People despaired when trains entered the heart of the great cities in the mid-nineteenth century, Mumford wrote, destroying and transforming places where generations of people had lived and died and loved. "The rushing locomotives brought noise, smoke, grit, into the hearts of the towns: more than one superb urban site, like Prince's Gardens in Edinburgh, was desecrated by the invasion of the railroad."¹¹ The earlier introduction of canals, said Mumford, beautified cities. "With their locks and bridges and tollhouses, with their trim banks and their gliding barges, [canals] had brought a new element of beauty into the rural landscape, the railroads of the paleotechnic phase made huge gashes."¹²

It's an ironic statement to read, because urbanists now praise railroads as preservers of urban form, which they are in the contemporary context. Colonial cities and towns of America were wrenched into new shapes by the forces of "coal, iron, and steam,"¹¹ which swept away the time of simple agricultural markets, craftsmen, and handiwork. Along with objecting to early skyscrapers blotting out the church steeples in New York, Henry James found Paris in 1904, freshly urban renewed by Baron Haussmann, to be marred by "The deadly monotony that M. Haussmann called into being . . . its huge, blank, pompous, featureless sameness."¹⁴

But the lesson is not just that things change, get used to it. While cities and place changed in the past, they did not change as fundamentally as they have with the introduction of the car and the freeway. While the train, the streetcar, the canal, and the subway transformed the city, they did not end the primacy of the street. The car, on the other hand, would eventually kill it. Railroads tore at the fabric of cities, but would ultimately reknit and enhance this fabric, making it even more essential, more packed with life. Highways were different. They would serve as giant antimatter objects, repelling everything around them. To be compatible with them was an impossibility for cities; it would mean altering every one of the basic urban characteristics—reliance on feet, density, and structuring around the conventional street and sidewalk. Most cities destroyed themselves trying unsuccessfully to make this leap. Can we blame those cities for not foreseeing this? Their planners were just doing what every other generation of planners had done: thrusting the latest transportation innovation into the heart of the city. In past generations, the city would regroup around the new system. This time, it could not.

NORFOLK

My own city of Norfolk is a particularly egregious example of this. In 1951, it had the dubious honor of being the first city in the country to apply for and use urban renewal money.¹⁵ Authorized by the misnamed U.S. Housing Act of 1949, the federal program gave money to cities to tear down older areas and redevelop them. The feds paid 80 percent, the cities merely 20 percent, and even that 20 percent was construed very loosely. Norfolk pursued the policy with a vengeance. Over the

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next decade, this city that dated back to the seventeenth century would tear down roughly a thousand acres in and around downtown. The first phase, begun in 1951, tore out mostly decrepit shacks. But as the taste for destruction was whetted, the destruction grew indiscriminate. In 1958, the city tore out two hundred acres in the oldest part of the city, destroying more than five hundred commercial buildings and displacing twenty thousand people.¹⁶

By the early 1960s, gone were the century-old burlesque theaters, the old train station, and the fabulous city markets, one built Art Deco-style in the 1930s and the other with medieval turrets in the 1880s. Gone were the often elegant buildings near the water where brokers and other businessmen bargained over the tons of coffee and coal that made their way in and out of the port. Most of all, gone was the tiny network of streets, many of them still cobblestoned, that invoked the memory of the city's oldest days, dating back several centuries. As one historian put it, "Nothing remained to suggest that the city had not descended full-blown from the sky from the 1940s, a place with no discernible past."¹⁷

While tearing stuff down, the city was facilitating the insertion into downtown of giant freeways, many of which were laid atop the oldest neighborhoods. As part of the redevelopment, the old city hall and courts, which formed a central square at the city's heart, were closed, and a giant, windswept plaza with modernist skyscrapers of concrete and glass was built as the new municipal center. It sat at freeway's edge, with the mayor's and councilmembers' parking spaces appropriately placed under a freeway off-ramp. The downtown was left with only a few old churches that the city couldn't quite bring itself to wipe out. They sat like lonely monks, ornate spires in a sea of concrete, refugees from a massacre.

And what can we say about Norfolk's action? First, that it was a tragedy, if a common one. Norfolk went farther and further with its urban renewal than perhaps any city in the country. But most cities did something similar to Norfolk. More importantly, however, we should understand that it was a tragedy not only because it occurred, but also because *it didn't work!*

In its actions, Norfolk was merely doing what other cities had done over the past two centuries of industrialization and technology—which

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 In the 1950s, this was the Interstate-style highway. Norfolk was acting no
 differently than London or Paris in the nineteenth century, when they
 destroyed some of the prettiest parts of their cities by laying down train
 tracks into their cities' hearts. With the introduction of every other trans-
 portation advance—canals, trains, subways, and streetcars—buildings
 would be lost, the city would change, but the city would ultimately re-
 knit itself around the new method of transportation. The king is dead,
 long live the king. But that didn't happen this time.

Norfolk tore down its oldest, most historic quarters, and then stood
 back . . . and nothing happened. The consultant Charles Agle, who led
 the process, had painted grand visions of a Corbusier-style city, with tall
 towers springing up from plazas while the gentle curve of an elevated
 freeway passed nearby. But it was a false vision. Oh, the city built a lot of
 stuff. A municipal center, a sports arena, a concert hall. A new tradi-
 tional urban office sector would emerge. But the heart of the city, a
 windswept parking lot of twenty acres where the city foresaw its grandest
 visions emerging, would stay vacant for almost forty years. Finally, in
 the spring of 1999, a three-story, enclosed suburban shopping mall,
 flanked by giant parking garages bigger than the mall itself, opened. It
 was built by the Taubman Company and seeded with \$100 million of
 city money.

What Norfolk and other cities did not foresee was that the new
 transportation system—the limited-access, Interstate-style highway—was
 too radical for the city to ever re-form around it. Their intended savior
 would destroy its intended beneficiaries. What development around
 highways needed was plenty of open land for giant parking lots, vast
 separation of uses, and giant cloverleaves. With space demands this ex-
 treme, older city centers, built on the scale of the human foot, could
 never compete. They killed themselves trying.

The beloved status of older, urban-style neighborhoods and city
 centers today derives precisely from our realization that they are a past
 art form that will not be built anew. In the words of Joel Garreau, they
 are "antiques," and like that seventeenth-century rocker, we can bestow
 love, care, and attention on them.

CITIES MAX OUT

The nightingale's song is most brilliant and sweet near its death, goes the saying.

Such was true with the early-twentieth- and late-nineteenth-century city. The streetcar, the subway, and the railroad pushed the classic city form to its summit. The streets themselves were at their most fetching, as cities played with Beaux Arts-style circles and avenues. It was a hyperdense but dramatic place of grand apartments lining streets that led to magnificent department stores and train stations. It was the city of Haussmann's Right Bank, Grand Central Station, and the first skyscraper. The city was the center of the world.

The new transportation technologies created the classic streets that surround the older cores of cities in both the New and Old Worlds. Every major city in the latter half of the nineteenth century saw what were essentially new cities created outside or, in the case of the Right Bank of Paris, on top of their older cores. They include the Eixample in Barcelona, the lovely grid of soft-cornered streets that has Antoni Gaudí's creations in it. The bulk of New York was created during this same time period and into the early twentieth century. In fact, what's fascinating is how relatively new are such urban icons as Las Ramblas in Barcelona or Fifth Avenue in New York or the Champs Élysées in Paris. They were all products of the latter half of the nineteenth century and the explosive new forces of the train, the steamship, the streetcar, and the elevator that were "force multipliers" for the classic form of the street.

The narrow medieval and Colonial-era street, often built just a few arm's-lengths wide, broadened into the boulevard and the avenue and carried loads unimagined in centuries past as trains, streetcars, subways, and elevators put more and more people on it. Rather than relieving congestion on streets, as in centuries past, the new methods of transportation increased it. In paradoxical fashion, "every major advance in transportation merely made the streets more crowded."¹⁶ Water and rail terminals provided central locations for industrial and commercial activities. People lived near these activities because they had to walk to work. Factories and houses were jammed together, and both workers and managers lived near the factories. Cities like New York achieved a

most brilliant and sweet near its death, goes

the early-twentieth- and late-nineteenth-century subway, and the railroad pushed the classic streets themselves were at their most fetching: the Arts-style circles and avenues. It was a place of grand apartments lining streets that were lined with department stores and train stations. It was the city of Grand Central Station, and the first skyscraper in the world.

These technologies created the classic streets of cities in both the New and Old Worlds. In the latter half of the nineteenth century saw what was created outside or, in the case of the Right Bank, inside the older cores. They include the Eixample in Barcelona and the off-cornered streets that has Antoni Gaudí's Sagrada Família in New York was created during this same time in the early twentieth century. In fact, what's fascinating is that the urban icons as Las Ramblas in Barcelona or the Champs Élysées in Paris. They were the product of the nineteenth century and the explosion of the steamship, the streetcar, and the elevators—"the classic form of the street."

The nineteenth-century street, often built just as the automobile was being invented, had been replaced by the boulevard and the avenue. In the centuries past as trains, streetcars, subways, and more people on it. Rather than relieving the streets in the centuries past, the new methods of transportation in a paradoxical fashion, "every major advance in the streets more crowded."¹⁶ Water and electricity were located for industrial and commercial activities because they had to walk to work. They were jammed together, and both workers and factories. Cities like New York achieved a

hyperdensity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries never seen before or since. In 1905, New York's lower Manhattan district housed 742,135 persons on 2,415 acres, or 195,000 people per square mile.¹⁹

In a fashion identical to today's highway construction, the building of a streetcar or subway line generated its own demand. The new housing, businesses, and apartments created by building a new line were enough to crowd the line and to further crowd the center city, where the lines ended. Social reformers hoped that the streetcar would open up the suburbs to the poor, but "the poorest remained the least mobile, locked into their ghetto area."²⁰ As with white flight in the 1950s and 1960s, the middle class left the poor behind. A half-century later, the rich and the middle class would leave their new neighborhoods to be taken over by the poor.

A glimpse into urbanism around 1900 shows how clearly new forms of transportation—in this case the streetcar or its brethren—create new forms of living. The effect of streetcars, trains, and subways to increase density prompted the rich and upper classes to live in apartment buildings, rather than individual houses. As Elizabeth Hawes notes in her excellent book *New York, New York: How the Apartment House Transformed the Life of the City*, before 1870, only the poor and the working class lived in multifamily buildings. They were called tenements, or for slightly better dwellings, "flats." By 1930, that had all changed, and 95 percent of even the upper classes in New York City lived in apartments—which was a new word imported from France to make respectable a lower-class custom.²¹ Similar changes were happening in established cities all over the country as the invention of streetcar lines both extended and densified cities.

Although the apartment revolution started in New York, it gradually spread to the provinces. Smaller cities in the South, East, and West were also building their first streetcar lines, and developers attempting to profit off this new form of transportation looked to the major cities and copied what their colleagues had done there.

At the turn of the century, elegant apartment buildings with lavish molding began to sprout around the new streetcar lines in Norfolk. An unsigned article from *The Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk, dated October 15, 1911, speaks of the origin of these new places. The unnamed author speaks

with clear knowledge of urban cause and effect, as if he were a trained urban historian rather than a low-paid, ink-stained wretch.

"The age of the apartment house life has come here to stay. It is a recent institution even in the larger centers, this apartment house living. It is new for the reason that there is a distinction between an apartment and a flat, just as there is between a flat and a tenement. And the first is an outgrowth of the second, which evolved from the third." The writer says that in these new, more luxurious apartments "any stigma that might be attached to a tenement dweller, any social descendancy that be held against the flatite has no reflection upon the apartment house family."

The car and the highway killed the urban apartment building and its broad, graceful avenues. The city was cut down at the top of its form.

The age of the car separates into the era of the road and the era of the freeway. Although they extended and enlarged the city, the first paved roads did not immediately kill the street. If you look at Seattle and parts of other cities formed in the early twentieth century after the car had been introduced, you'll still see a coherent grid of streets and shopping districts formed around businesses fronting on a sidewalk and street with minimal accommodation for parking. This was partly because this was a transition stage between forms. But it was also because the car can be accommodated in a limited way within an urban fabric. San Francisco was rebuilt after the earthquake and fire in 1906, and so largely in the age of the car. It's surprising, but makes sense, how relatively low in density the city center is, and how many of those beautiful Victorians have garages carved underneath them that were part of their original construction. The relatively low density of San Francisco is one reason why it's more difficult to make a public transportation system there work, in comparison to New York, Boston, and Chicago.

It was not until the introduction of the raised, limited-access freeway after World War II that the era of place, of urbanity and cities, was truly swept away. An Interstate highway is incompatible with any form of street-based activity. This postwar invention swept away streets and the need for them. We enter a world of pods placed off freeway ramps, the pods ranging from subdivisions to shopping malls and office parks.

COULD IT HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT?

Were there alternate paths the form of the city could have taken, rather than that it took which so destroyed the primacy of the street? I think so. Certainly the car had to have been adopted, but the elimination of all other forms of transportation, and the accompanying physical changes to the form of cities, were not predestined.

As so often is the case, Mumford was an unheeded Cassandra on the subject. He was particularly prescient in his brilliant essay "The Highway and the City," originally published in 1958 in *Architectural Record*. It was written after Congress had passed and President Dwight Eisenhower had signed the Federal Highway Act, which would kick off the Interstate Highway System. Over the coming decades, the federal government would spend hundreds of billions of dollars for what some say is the largest public works project in history. Mumford deplored the approval of such a monochromatic transportation system, and he laid out how it would lead, paradoxically, to more traffic congestion and dysfunctional places that offered residents no alternative to the car. This essay is unnerving to read because it is so insightful, yet apparently so ineffective.

"What's transportation for? This is a question that highway engineers apparently never ask themselves: probably because they take for granted the belief that transportation exists for the purpose of providing suitable outlets for the motorcar industry."

Mumford answers his own question.

"The purpose of transportation is to bring people and goods to places where they are needed, and to concentrate the greatest variety of goods and people within a limited area, in order to widen the possibility of choice without making it necessary to travel. A good transportation system minimizes unnecessary transportation; and in any event, it offers change of speed and mode to fit a diversity of human purposes."²²

His opening question should be stapled to the head of every policy maker in every city hall and state capitol. With it, he opens a door which can lead one to a sense of how transportation shapes the overall dynamic of a place. Mumford saw that each transportation system is like a medium in art or music, producing its own peculiarities in tone, style,

and color. He says a page later, "The fatal mistake we have been making is to sacrifice every other form of transportation to the private motor-car—and to offer, as the only long-distance alternative, the airplane. But the fact is that each type of transportation has its special use and a good transportation policy must seek to improve each type and make the most of it. This cannot be achieved by aiming at high speed or continuous flow alone."²³ Mumford saw that highways should not be "thrust into the delicate tissue of our cities";²⁴ that within metropolitan areas, as opposed to between them, a freeway has little use.

It's interesting to contemplate what America's landscape would be like if Congress had divided the money for the Interstate Highway System between it and improving and upgrading the country's rail system. If this had been done, then the passenger-train lines like Penn Central might not have gone broke, and our cities would not have sprawled so widely and far.

Looking to the future, there are some chances that cities may end their outward orbits, and reconstitute around new centralizing forms of transportation. The most likely is the high-speed train line. Tom Downs, former head of Amtrak, makes the accurate observation that rapid rail "will be the first urban recentralizer of our time."²⁵

In France, the world's most extensive rail network, whose high-speed trains travel at close to 200 miles per hour, is actually altering life in that country in new and unexpected ways. When I was in France in 1996, a university student on a conventional train in Tours blithely commented to me that she seldom saw her professors outside class, because they all lived in Paris. The professors, preferring the more cosmopolitan city, *commuted* roughly 150 miles each way to their classes at the university in Tours. They took one of the high-speed trains that depart on the hour from Paris, and arrived in Tours fifty-eight minutes later.²⁶

These trains would be perfect on the East and West Coasts, where the bulk of the population lives and the cities are close together. But they may never happen here. The extended form of our cities makes building them much more difficult. Secondly, the airlines and highway builders are sure to mightily oppose their construction. A high-speed train between Washington and New York would cut airline traffic in half, if not more.

er, "The fatal mistake we have been making is the form of transportation to the private motorist. The only long-distance alternative, the airplane, is not a form of transportation has its special use and a form of transportation must seek to improve each type and make each type achieved by aiming at high speed or comfort. The Ford saw that highways should not be "thrust into cities";²⁴ that within metropolitan areas, as the freeway has little use.

template what America's landscape would be. We spent the money for the Interstate Highway System, moving and upgrading the country's rail system, then the passenger-train lines like Pennine broke, and our cities would not have

there are some chances that cities may end up coalescing around new centralizing forms of transportation. The high-speed train line. Tom Downs, writes the accurate observation that rapid rail is the centralizer of our time.²⁵

The most extensive rail network, whose high-speed trains travel 200 miles per hour, is actually altering life in unexpected ways. When I was in France in 1970, I saw a conventional train in Tours blithely coming in and out of the city, and I saw her professors outside class, because they were professors, preferring the more cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city to their classes at the university. The high-speed trains that depart from the city in Tours fifty-eight minutes later.²⁶

perfect on the East and West Coasts, where the cities are close together. But in the interior. The extended form of our cities makes it difficult. Secondly, the airlines and highway systems oppose their construction. A high-speed rail line from New York would cut airline traffic in

High-speed trains are the first major new form of transportation in almost a century. Both cars and planes have been around since the 1920s. Air travel has improved since then, it's true, but cars, except in exceptional circumstances, travel the same speed they did in the 1920s, or perhaps even more slowly. It actually takes me longer to drive the 20 miles from Norfolk to the oceanfront in Virginia Beach than it did my father in 1928. He traveled a two-lane road with little traffic. I have an Interstate but face traffic jams and a gauntlet of stoplights and intersecting boulevards.

THE DEATH OF PLACE

Contemplating the Death of Place and the fractured, incoherent places our cities have become, we have the choice, as with so many things, whether to groove on it or gag on it, to quote comic-strip artist R. Crumb. I myself am undecided. There are times when I look around at the boundless boxes of suburbia, the sweeping freeways, the glittering signs, and say, "Ain't it a gas?" You'll notice I don't say, "Ain't it wonderful?" I can't quite bring myself that far. It's more like admiring a good car crash.

Is it possible to admire our distended cities and places without irony? I come to the same doorway that Robert Venturi, Joel Garreau, Deyan Sudjic, and others have arrived at. These commentators have walked through the doorway and learned to love that which they once feared and loathed. Sudjic notes with approval that "we have begun to see the first steps towards an urban architecture that accepts the contemporary city for what it is, a fractured, incoherent place."²⁷

I myself am not able to. Not yet. I am still unable to look at a K-Mart with the same fondness that a Woolworth's on a downtown street would inspire, even though both have the same mission—to deliver basic goods cheaply. I do see that the suburbs are a new form of city and not a product of malevolent forces. But the disappearance of place is not something I love.

The ancient Greeks may have poisoned themselves by the smelters that produced the lead that they put into the bronze they relied upon. In a similar way, we may be poisoning ourselves in our pursuit of the most and the cheapest, and by resisting any attempt to examine

whether those efforts have the side effect of destroying something we may vitally need. A place, a square, a home.

It's tempting to ponder whether the Death of Place is linked with some general withering away of coherency and structure in nearly every field of artistic endeavor. Poems no longer rhyme. Sonnets are a dead art form. Representational painting is one small side road in contemporary painting, rather than a central avenue. Architecture, as we have been told so many times, has dropped any sort of rules or structure. Contemporary classical music jettisons melody, harmony, rhythm, and sometimes even the standard fifteen-note chromatic scale.

In a similar way, the narrative line of cities has broken down. Streets, which have been the pages on which the storylines of cities have been written, have been traded in. They are no longer the continuous theme on which human settlement is built, moving on up from tiny walkways, to wider streets, to boulevards and avenues. No longer.

The death of the street has in turn killed related unifying devices, like the central town hall and the neighborhood bar. At the same time, transportation and technology have globalized industry and capital, which means people and industry move more, and communities are even less confined to a physical place. Our communities are becoming more conceptual than actual, as characters and actors move in and out of job descriptions like "mayor," "newspaper editor," and "industrial leader," only to be replaced by someone else a few years later.

People no longer know their neighbors. One could write a book on all the reasons why this is true. My own hunch is that a variety of societal trends have added up, building to the "tipping point," as statisticians say, where suddenly it's just too difficult to walk the few feet to the homes around you and get to know their inhabitants. People move frequently; family patterns have fragmented; religions are diffuse and many, with no one faith dominant anymore in a community, the way some towns were once ruled by Episcopalians or Methodists. If you make that walk, carrying a home-baked pie to the newcomers, chances are they'll like different music than you, different art, different religions. And even if you were to hit it off, they would probably be gone, moved to another job, just as the friendship flourished.

Unfortunately, the storyline for people has not broken down. It's still pretty simple. We live, we die. We do some stuff in between. Han-

the side effect of destroying something we square, a home.

Whether the Death of Place is linked with a loss of coherency and structure in nearly every form seems no longer rhyme. Sonnets are a dead end; maintaining is one small side road in contemporary central avenue. Architecture, as we have known it, has dropped any sort of rules or structure. Music jettisons melody, harmony, rhythm, and the traditional fifteen-note chromatic scale.

The narrative line of cities has broken down. Streets, the backbone on which the storylines of cities have been built, are no longer the continuous theme. The city is built, moving on up from tiny walkways, streets, and avenues. No longer.

Technology has in turn killed related unifying devices, like the neighborhood bar. At the same time, technology has globalized industry and capital. Industry moves more, and communities are becoming more fluid. Our communities are becoming more fluid, as characters and actors move in and out of roles, "newspaper editor," and "industrial worker" by someone else a few years later.

Technology has killed their neighbors. One could write a book about this. It is true. My own hunch is that a variety of factors are building to the "tipping point," as statisticians say, but it's just too difficult to walk the few feet to get to know their inhabitants. People move more, and neighborhoods are more fragmented; religions are diffuse and no longer dominant anymore in a community, the way they were by Episcopalians or Methodists. If you make a pie for the newcomers, chances are that the pie baked for you, different art, different religions, different people, if they were taken off, they would probably be gone, moved elsewhere, and their friendship flourished.

The narrative line for people has not broken down. It's not dead. We do some stuff in between. Hand-

ling this simple narrative line, in the midst of a society where all is possible, is difficult and often tragic. Riding the tiger of modernity, as Marshall Berman says in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, is a tough job.

This difficult ride continues in the forms of city and community. We live . . . anywhere, anywhen, with anybody. Much of the alienation and anger harnessed by New Urbanism comes out of this. The incoherence of our places matches the incoherence of our lives. This disgust with our physical form comes with having no narrative line on which to hang our hat.

But if we want to build order into our world, then having a family leave policy and universal health care may be as important as a good street system. To really build a more ordered world we have to tackle those forces that contribute to disorder, which is as much about our economic and political life as it is our urban or suburban life. Can you decrease the fluidity of capital and the rate of business change, in order to increase other choices, like the possibility of staying in one place, and getting to know one set of people?

Even though the traditional "place" has died, it remains embedded in our collective memory. It's fascinating how many standard television shows and movies still organize characters and plots around a Main Street, with a corner store or bar, even though those things don't exist in most people's lives. A standard television show, like *Beverly Hills 90210*, still has its pretty teenagers Jason and Kelly hang out at an urban-style soda shop, which wouldn't exist in the automobile-oriented Beverly Hills. The camera never shows the exterior, but one imagines Jason or Kelly walking in from a traditional sidewalk through a traditional front door. The show gets away with it by stylizing the retro soda-and-hamburger joint as one that is being consciously nostalgic. Feminist writer Naomi Wolf talks about this when she notes that disaster movies seldom show tract housing or a suburban shopping center getting blown up, flooded, or burned. "The 'edge city' is practically invisible right now in movies and TV. Why is that? Because, on the visceral level at which we recognize archetypes, we all know that the bleakness of American life is connected to the hideous artificial environment. No one can work up a good goddamn about whether the lava is going to get the Wal-Mart."²⁸ She has a point, although I part company with her about the "bleakness of American life" being connected to its "hideous artificial environment."

A Wal-Mart is no more artificial than the brick department store downtown. It just comes from a different system.

Bart Simpson is one of the most honest characters on television. He and his cartoon family, the Simpsons, relentlessly peel away the white lies and fig leaves of American life. Yet this cartoon world is a curious mixture of suburbia and a traditional Main Street-style town. The Simpsons live in the prototypical two-story-with-attached-garage suburban home, and shop at the Quiki-Mart run by the Indian clerk. Bart skateboards to school, almost surely an impossibility in the suburban community that the Simpsons live in. And on this skateboard journey, he passes traditional storefronts built on traditional-style sidewalks and streets. His school occupies a central square in a park. The town of Springfield is seen as possessing a classic city hall and square, rather than a faceless office complex on a parking lot, which is the style in so many suburban cities. It's as if a town were impossible to construct conceptually without a Main Street, even though Bart's counterpart in real life almost surely does not know one.

The classic form of the city, and its clear order of town square, neighborhood bar, etc., still serve as a unifying narrative even if in reality its thread has been erased. We have lagged in producing art that accurately reflects the Death of Place. Film director Michael Tolkin, writing in *The New Yorker*, notes that there is a dearth of novels or literary works that take place in Los Angeles.

For a city to produce a great novel, more than a few people have to agree about the city, and Los Angeles does not offer a clear harmonizing of its themes. This is why our literature fits onto a short shelf, and why the movies can grow here, unencumbered by a shared social history. . . . A great novel might yet be written if a song could take the 1-10 [expressway] for granted the way the world takes Central Park or the Champs Élysées or the Nevsky Prospect for granted, those real places that exist for everyone because someone saw them and loved them.²⁹

Joel Garreau is right in saying that the new formless places, like Tyson's Corner, are cities. He calls them Edge Cities. But I think he is wrong in predicting that with time, the patina of age will soften their

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sharp corners and turn them into places that we can love. Tyson's Cor-
ner, the classic Edge City, is approaching a half-century in age. By that
time, a place like the East Side of New York or midtown Manhattan had
acquired the seeming permanence of centuries. Tyson's Corner still feels
like an afterthought, a nowhere land. The places we are creating in this
latter half of the twentieth century are fundamentally different than those
before. Their incoherence, which is a product of the transportation sys-
tem that produced them, makes them difficult to love.

Cities with a sense of place go back to the dawn of recorded his-
tory. The stories of cities without a sense of place began about 1945. We
are in a new era, one that poses new challenges and the opportunity for
new narratives.