

## ***THE CITY IN HISTORY, Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects.***

Lewis Mumford [1895 - 1990]

Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1961.

Though Mumford has come into much criticism, *The City in History* is a must read for those interested in knowing about and understanding the fundamentals of city formation.

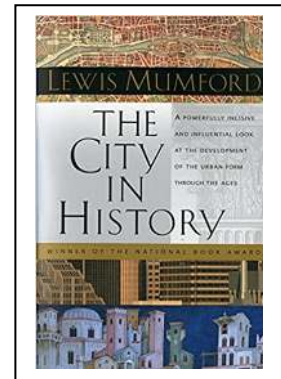
### **Character Town Commentary.**

Lewis Mumford became famous because of this book; he won the National Book Award for non-fiction in 1962. *The City in History* parallels the history of mankind. Mumford starts the story when a reliable supply of food arose perhaps 15,000 years ago [YA]; at that point signs of permanent habitation began to appear [p.10] even though agriculture as we know it was still thousands of years away. The ice cap was still near its maximum and the ice did not begin to melt until around 11,500 years ago. The first signs of collective living appear some 10,000 years ago; Jericho and Damascus can be traced back to this time. New discoveries continue to find even earlier evidence of collective living. But, the point is, for the last ten millennia, mankind has been building cities.

The City in History is a big book covering a full range of civilizations and their cities. The focus of this Commentary is on the beginning of city formation, the transition from nomadic life to that of a villager to an urbanite. This long building process is fascinating because it reveals the core needs of humanity. The reasons people decided to live together four hundred generations ago still underlie today's civilization. Mumford pieces together the story in a way that is useful in modern city planning and design. The insights and concepts are useful in contemporary city planning, design and management.

**Villages and Cities.** Before the city came the village. The distinction between a village and a city draws much of Mumford's attention and his discernment is useful. Villagers are generalists who know and do everything required for daily life; cities spawn specialists. Cities emerged from villages that developed granaries, canals/irrigation systems, libraries and other functions that required someone to take care of them, a specialist. The differences between villages and cities, to paraphrase Mumford, are as follows:

- The city is not a big village,
- The village is a cluster of families, there is no division of labor,
- "...the embryonic structure of the city already existed in the village,
- House, shrine, cistern, public way, agora – not yet a specialized market – all first took form in the village [p. 19]",
- A village is of equals; cities have hierarchies with rulers and subjects,
- "The early city, as distinct from the village community, is a caste-managed society, organized for the satisfaction of a dominant minority, no longer a community of humble families living by mutual aid" [p.38],



- “...the city broke down the parsimonious self-sufficiency and dreamy narcissism of village culture” [p. 96].
- As the village mutates into the city, “...the maternal enclosure and intimacy and its oneness with the forces of nature were carried over to the city...” “When these primary bonds dissolve, when the intimate visible community ceases to be a watchful, identifiable, deeply concerned group, then the ‘we’ becomes a buzzing swarm of ‘I’s’ and secondary ties and allegiances become too feeble to halt the disintegration of the urban community [p.15]”.
- Cities emerged about 3,000 BC, following the earlier Jericho and Damascus, they created surplus that gave time for rulers to monopolize the creative process [p.100]. Rulers and priests emerged at the same time, about 3,000 BC, or 5,000 years ago. The city enabled and required specialization of skills, markets and institutions, and the city became the symbol of the possible.

The Sumerians coalesced around 3,000 BC. Stabilized food supplies led to larger populations which demanded more food. The ever-growing appetites led to irrigated farming which was beyond the means of an individual; ergo collective actions and cooperation to achieve a societal goal. Collective action required contracts to guarantee equitable distributions of effort and benefit which led to bookkeeping and writing – the beginning of history.

#### Episode 8

##### The Sumerians - Fall of the First Cities

In this episode, we travel into the extremely distant past to look at the Sumerians. These ancient people invented writing and mathematics, and built some of the largest cities that the world had ever seen.

Youtube <https://youtu.be/d2IJUOv0hLA>

“By 2,500 BC all the essential features of the city had taken form.” [p.90] The walled enclosure, the street, the house-block, the market, the temple precinct with its inner courts, the administrative precinct and the workshop precinct. Euclidean zoning formalized this district approach once the market and workshop precincts became beyond obnoxious to neighbors. Once the factories and economic offenders subsided, the balance shifted back to a more integrated urban form.

**Magnets, Containers and Transformers.** The “magnet” and the “container” are the basis for much of Mumford’s discussion. He also uses the word “transformer” to describe the ultimate function of the city. The terms are useful since they mean what one thinks they might mean. Mumford’s approach says that at times, the magnet precedes the container, at other times the container plays the primary role.

- *“So far, in analyzing the components of the city, I have emphasized the essential function of the closed container, which concentrated the social agents and gave them a closed field that promoted the maximum interaction. But the city is not merely a container: before it has anything to hold, it must attract the people and institutions that carry on its life [p. 82]. “*
- *“Thus even before the city is a place of fixed residence, it is a meeting place to which people periodically return: the magnet comes before the container, and this ability to attract non-residents to it for intercourse and spiritual stimulus no less than trade remains one of the essential criteria of the city, a witness to the inherent dynamism as opposed to the more fixed and indrawn form of the village, hostile to the outsider.” [p.10].*

- *“For a great part of urban history, the functions of the container remained more important than those of the magnet: for the city was primarily a storehouse, a conservator, and accumulator. It is by its command of these functions that the city serves its ultimate function, that of a transformer. [p.97].”*

“The city, as Emerson observed, ‘lives by remembering’”. The city transcends time, unites past with the present [p.98]. The implication is that cities go on forever; long term investments, policies and multi-generational attitudes make sense. As Thomas Jefferson professed, we should act and plan with love for our seventh generation.

Mumford concludes the container – magnet saga with a commentary of contemporary cities, “The walled urban container indeed has not been merely broken open: it has also been largely demagnetized, with the result that we are witnessing a sort of devolution of urban power into a state of randomness and unpredictability [p.34].” His thoughts stop short of directly exploring the transformational aspect of cities which, as he notes, is a city’s ultimate function, but transformation is his concluding value of the city. Giving Mumford the final word:

*“We must now conceive the city, accordingly, not primarily as a place of business or government, but as an essential organ for expressing and actualizing the new human personality – that of ‘One World Man.’ The old separation of man and nature, of townsman and countryman, of Greek and barbarian, of citizen and foreigner, can no longer be maintained: for communication, the entire planet is becoming a village; and as a result, the smallest neighborhood or precinct must be planned as a working model for the larger world. Now it is not the will of a single deified ruler, but the individual or corporate will of its citizens, aiming at self-knowledge, self-government and self-actualization, that must be embodied in the city. Not industry but education will be the center of their activities; and every process and function will be evaluated and approved just to the extent that it furthers human development, whilst the city itself provides a vivid theater for the spontaneous encounters and challenges and embraces of life [p.573].”*

**YouTube:** In addition to the reviews cited below, check out an interview with Lewis Mumford on YouTube at [karenchristensen.org/2011/06/27/lewis-mumford](http://karenchristensen.org/2011/06/27/lewis-mumford).

### Published Reviews.

“The City in History” is a tour d’force presenting concepts for the purpose of cities along with a historic review of city development in many of the world’s cultures since the founding of Jericho. As a result, much has been written about this book; several reviews are presented below.

#### Reisman and Mandelker.

“**Some Observations on Lewis Mumford’s ‘The City in History’**” by David Reisman published in the Washington University Law Review, Volume 1962, Issue 3 Symposium: The City in History by Lewis Mumford. “A Review of Lewis Mumford, The City in History” was also provided by Daniel R. Mandelker in this same issue.

### Amazon.com Review

Lewis Mumford's massive historical study brings together a wide array of evidence--from the earliest group habitats to medieval towns to the modern centers of commerce (as well as dozens of black-and-white illustrations)--to show how the urban form has changed throughout human civilization. His tone is ultimately somewhat pessimistic: Mumford was deeply concerned with what he viewed as the dehumanizing aspects of the metropolitan trend, which he deemed "a world of professional illusionists and their credulous victims." (In another typically unrestrained criticism, he dubbed the Pentagon a Bronze Age monument to humanity's basest impulses, as well as an "effete and worthless baroque conceit.") Mumford hoped for a rediscovery of urban principles that emphasized humanity's organic relationship to its environment. *The City in History* remains a powerfully influential work, one that has shaped the agendas of urban planners, sociologists, and social critics since its publication in the 1960s.

**H-Net Reviews**, Humanities and Social Sciences Online, Department of History, Michigan State University; <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2666>

Lewis Mumford. *The Culture of Cities*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1938. xii + 586 pp. \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-15-623301-9.

Reviewed by Robert Wojtowicz (Old Dominion University)

Published on H-Urban (January, 1999)

The *Culture of Cities* is arguably Lewis Mumford's greatest work. Its publication in 1938 marked a turning point in his extraordinary six-decade writing career, thrusting him into the international spotlight and onto the cover of *Time*. So sweeping and insightful was Mumford's analysis that thereafter he was acknowledged as an authority on urbanism in its multitudinous aspects: historical, formal, social, economic, and political. He even parlayed his expertise into a brief stint as a planning consultant for the city of Honolulu. Mumford later revised and greatly expanded the *Culture of Cities* as the better-known *City in History* (1961), a winner of the National Book Award for non-fiction in 1962. The latter book, however, lacks the freshness and optimism of the former, which still has the power to move the present-day reader to dream of a better urban environment, integrated with surrounding region and attuned to the essential rhythms of daily life.

### Annotations: The NEH Preservation Project

The Decline of American Cities: Lewis Mumford's  
'The City in History'

Friday, November 23, 2012 - 01:00 PM

New York City Municipal Archives

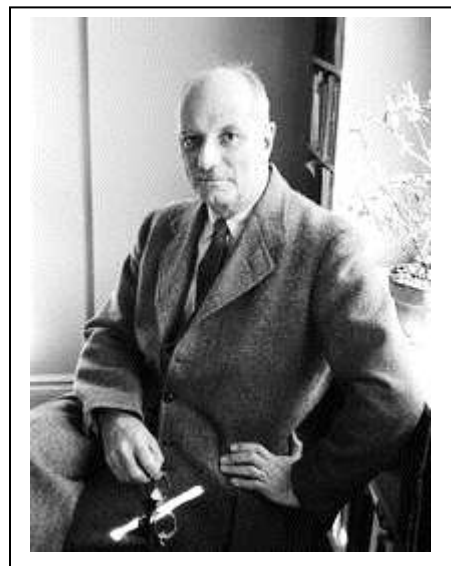
WNYC Collection, [WNYC Catalog Record of Full Broadcast](#)

National Endowment for the Humanities

**Audio courtesy of the NYC Municipal Archives WNYC Collection.**

**"Like a stopped clock," the author Lewis Mumford asserts in this 1961 appearance at a Books and Authors Luncheon, he has been exactly right twice.**

The first time was when he wrote *The Culture of Cities* in 1938. This book "pointed out the imminent disaster of cities" in face of the rising tide of Fascism.



Mumford recounts with pride how his book was smuggled into Occupied Europe and used by many underground networks to educate the young town planners in how they would reconfigure their urban environment after defeating the Nazis. This time, Mumford claims, we in the United States face a similar threat, not from Fascism, but from "the motorcar."

The city, he warns, "has been disintegrating before our eyes." He uses, as a warning, Greensboro, N.C., which is called the Parking Lot City. What this increased emphasis on cars has done is diminish the value of the city as "a place where people meet face-to-face." European cities are also becoming Americanized, to the extent that one can no longer enjoy a drink outside a Parisian café without being overcome by noise and fumes. Confronting this gloomy future, Mumford hopes his current book, *The City in History* (1961), will offer some hints for deterrence. He also points out two recent glimmers of hope: the movement thwarting Robert Moses' plan to have a four-lane highway go through Washington Square and the residents of New Jersey rising up against a proposed "jetport" in the Meadowlands.

Born in 1885, Mumford was that rare and peculiarly American phenomenon, the self-educated scholar. Though he studied at the City College of New York and the New School For Social Research, ill health prevented him from taking a degree. It did not impede, however, his far-ranging intellect. His early works were of literary criticism, rediscoveries of the Transcendentalists and Herman Melville. But what he is chiefly remembered for today is his fascination with the city, its architecture, and the study of the urban phenomenon in general.

As Mumford indicates in this talk, the subject was clearly one whose time had come. The Humanities and Social Sciences website [h-net.org](http://h-net.org) notes: The *Culture of Cities*...publication in 1938 marked a turning point in his extraordinary six-decade writing career, thrusting him into the international spotlight and onto the cover of *Time*. So sweeping and insightful was Mumford's analysis that thereafter he was acknowledged as an authority on urbanism in its multitudinous aspects: historical, formal, social, economic, and political.

Mumford de-emphasized technology as man's defining achievement, arguing that language and communication were the essential elements of civilization and that the city, where all kinds of relationships could be established, was in fact the great invention of society. For this reason he eschewed the word "technology" and preferred the word "technics," which encompasses both the human and social aspects of invention and tool-building progress. Although a prolific writer (he was for many years architecture critic for *The New Yorker* magazine) Mumford also gained a considerable following from his personal appearances. His biographer Donald L. Miller noted: "As a lecturer, he exuded strength and power, and an almost Olympian certainty."

Mumford's opinions often epitomized the direction of progressive thought at the time, arguing vehemently for the United States' entrance into World War II and just as forcefully, 30 years later, for the country's exit from Vietnam.

His early work extolled the potential the new urban lifestyle held, while his gradually souring on the city over time reflects the disillusionment of a generation. (Ironically, he left New York City rather early, settling in a small house in the town of Amenia in Dutchess County. This too could be seen as presaging the "white flight" that so devastated cities after World War II.) But, as the *New York Times* architecture critic [Paul Goldberger](#) notes:

Mumford was among the first critics to remind us that bigger is not always better; in his later years, he came to exaggerate that view so much that he seemed almost to be saying that big must be bad. Yet even at his most angry, Mumford's criticism was always informed by a desire to see architecture in a social context. His eye was never seduced by the beauty of form; he consistently sought to view architecture in terms of social purpose, and made his judgments accordingly. Today, as we come to the end of a decade of visual overkill and social indifference, his standards seem in one sense out of step, in another, desperately needed.

Indeed, the problems Mumford posed in *The City in History* (which won the National Book Award) are still those bedeviling urban planners and city-dwellers today. In their holistic approach to technology and its place in the social fabric, his arguments have taken on an even greater urgency in the computer age. Eugene Halton, writing for the [University of Notre Dame website](#), recounts how:

*...he shows in lucid detail how the modern ethos released a Pandora's box of mechanical marvels which eventually threatened to absorb all human purposes into the Myth of the Machine, the title he used for his two-volume late work. Mumford strongly believed that so long as men and women desire face-to-face contact, cities will endure in one form or another. Accordingly, the Culture of Cities will remain a relevant text for the present-day and future reader who will necessarily place a higher value on such contact as cyberspace renders it less frequent. Cities can become "eutopias", good places, but only if men and women will them to be so. Never was a goal so simple or so elusive.*

