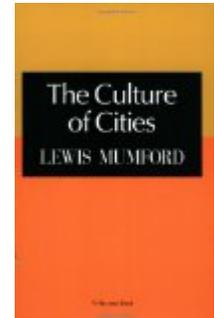




Lewis Mumford. *The Culture of Cities*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996. xii + 586 pp. \$24.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-15-623301-9.



Reviewed by Robert Wojtowicz

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.

As a journalist and writer, Mumford rose steadily to a position of prominence during the 1920s and 1930s. His articles and criticism appeared in a variety of architectural and general-

interest periodicals, and he proved himself an authority on a staggering array of subjects. Mumford's first book, the *Story of Utopias* (1922), introduced an idea that was to become the overarching theme of his career: the goal of "eutopia", the good--as opposed to the perfect--place, a goal that was indeed possible with sound, organic planning. Other pithy books followed on American culture, in which he surveyed and reevaluated key historical figures in American literature, art, and architecture whose example might still guide creative activity in the twentieth century.

By the early 1930s, having blazed a major path in a well-defined terrain, Mumford was ready to embark in a new direction: the writing of a multi-volume work on Western civilization. The first volume of what became known as the *Renewal of Life* series, *Technics and Civilization* (1934), examined the historical basis for technology's dominance of twentieth-century life, a trend that Mumford found to be both alarming and in need of more precise human control. The two subsequent volumes in the series, the *Condition of Man* (1944) and the *Conduct of Life* (1951), surveyed

human beliefs and values and prescribed organic remedies for the rebuilding of society in light of his previous forays into the fields of technology and urbanism.

Thus, the *Culture of Cities*, while independently a book of great importance in the historical discourse on cities, must be viewed as part of a larger synthetic series that sought to address the ills of modern life in total by uncovering their root causes in the past and identifying potential courses for their treatment in the present. The framework for the entire series was greatly indebted to Patrick Geddes, the Scottish polymath who acted as a mentor to the young Mumford, and who advocated a method of direct observation known as regional survey. Mumford, who had trod the sidewalks of most of America's major east-coast cities as well as many in the Midwest, spent part of 1932 in Europe, observing a wide variety of medieval towns, baroque capitals, and industrial quarters in preparation for his ambitious series. The new housing, much of it inspired by the British Garden City movement, pleased him enormously, just as he had expected, but he was especially surprised and delighted by the human scale of medieval towns such as Lbeck, in which town and country remained in healthy proximity. Although Mumford encountered an emergent Nazism on this journey, he had yet to realize its full implications on the urban and social order.

What distinguishes the *Culture of Cities* from the other works in the series is Mumford's ability to weave facts and figures, prose and illustrations into an elaborate and evocative carpet that transports the reader to the time and place under examination. His observations are both broadly cast and narrowly focused. The impact of ever-more expensive military fortifications to urban life is discussed as is the replacement of curtains by doors within the domestic household. Spatial relationships, moreover, are his special purview.

Mumford borrows a Geddesian framework and even some Geddesian vocabulary to support

his survey, which begins in the middle ages and concludes just before the outbreak of World War II. In the first chapter, Mumford reveals himself to be a champion of the medieval town for its compact size, plan, and population and its organic irregularity. In one particularly stirring passage, he describes the changing appearance of the townscape as one processes through it on foot: "Here is no static architecture. The masses suddenly expand and vanish, as one approaches them or draws away: a dozen paces may alter the relation of the foreground and background, or the lower and upper range of the line of vision. The silhouettes of the buildings, with their steep gables, their sharp roof lines, their pinnacles, their towers, ripple and flow, break and solidify, rise and fall, with no less vitality than the structures themselves. As in a fine piece of sculpture, the silhouettes are often inexhaustible in their variety: the outlines vary no less constantly than the relations of the planes (p. 62)."

He was less generous when discussing the Renaissance and Baroque city in the second chapter, no doubt because many of its most obvious forms-- the symmetrical plan, the straight avenue, and the neoclassical architecture--had yet to wither completely even in the 1930s. In fact, the militaristic impulse behind such forms was at that very moment giving them new meaning in capitals as far afield as Berlin, Rome, and Washington (p. 273). In chapters three and four, respectively, Mumford examined the squalor of the nineteenth-century factory town, with its "minimum of life" (p. 179), and the burgeoning, early twentieth-century Megalopolis, in whose sheer scale lay the seeds of its own collapse into "Nekropolis" (pp. 291-292).

Yet, from his vantage point in the mid-to-late 1930s, Mumford could imagine a different outcome, so long as the distant rumblings of war could be silenced. The book's remaining three chapters are devoted to Mumford's vision of urban, and by extension, cultural renewal. Techno-

logical inventions powered by clean, electric energy would render the factory town obsolete. Intelligent, rational planning would result in regional cities garden cities integrated fully with their surrounding regions that would reduce the pressures on existing megalopolitan centers. Modern housing, based on progressive experiments in Germany and the Netherlands, would shelter the working classes in comfort and without false ostentation. Most important, the spirit of community that pervaded the medieval town under the protective arm of the Church would live again, only now beneath the protective umbrella of modern culture. "The culture of cities is ultimately the culture of life in its highest manifestations," Mumford concludes in the book's final pages (p. 492).

Mumford's optimism crumbled over the next several years. In the United States, the dismantling of the New Deal dashed his hope for comprehensive coordinated planning. Europe again erupted in war, and by its conclusion his son was among those killed in battle. The atomic bomb was invented and detonated. Mumford continued to survey and write about cities in these years, but he became increasingly concerned about the damage inflicted on them by the automobile and the multi-lane highway. The *City in History*, although it provides fascinating new material, particularly on prehistoric and ancient sites, is the work of an embittered, older man who believed that his ideas were being ignored by his contemporaries. The framework for a new urban order is largely absent in this later 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.

Commissioned and edited for H-Urban by Barbara Hahn, University of Cincinnati.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Robert Wojtowicz. Review of Mumford, Lewis. *The Culture of Cities*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2666>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.