



## PROLOGUE

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This book is for many people, for those who face a challenging profession or are studying with the feeling that the pearl lies in other shells. But it is directed not only to professionals and academicians. It is for those who love cities; it is for politicians and decision makers who can influence the cultural and socioeconomic forces that affect urban areas; it is for those who are studying history or sociology and are concerned with the future of cities; it is for those who appreciate beauty and have to close their eyes to our environments; it is for those who are struggling for democracy and equality and are seeking ways to create a more human community; it is for those who are shaping new societies and realize that they should not follow the industrialized countries' footsteps; it is for our children and generations of yet unborn children for whom we may leave either a mechanistic world of materialism and exploitation or a civilized community with human, spiritual, and aesthetic values.

Community life should span a continuum of experiences, from climactic urban environments to more intimate, smaller-scale settlements. If community life and urbanity are missing from human experience, there is a serious flaw in society. The purpose of this book is to highlight how community design affects the environment of almost everyone and how community design can fail – indeed, betray – its purpose in societies that ignore urban life. Lovers of cities will understand this book very easily; those who do not know about urbanity and community will be challenged in their beliefs.

Community design should be concerned with the organization of human communities – of entire cities and small towns, of central business districts and suburban areas. I prefer to use the concept of “community” design instead of the

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better known “urban” design to acknowledge the need to reach villages and small settlements as well as larger urban areas. I also prefer to focus first on “organization” and only later on “form” to stress the systematic basis of community design.

Given the nature of postindustrial society, what is the role of community design? How can the design of human settlements restore the opportunity for choice and exchange that characterizes successful cities? This book is about the sort of community design that will have to come into being within a framework of humane and democratic goals.

If I have tapped many sources and ventured into many fields – sometimes tentatively, always searching for multidisciplinary bridges – it is because the design of cities and urban areas requires a broad, yet profound understanding of the way cities function. Community design must be based on good technical knowledge, imagination, analytical understanding of the systematic nature of cities, and political commitment to social justice and democracy.

Three major theses are presented in this book: first, that the task of community design is foreign to professional designers, who have lost sight of the accumulated tradition of history; second, that professional designers do not have sufficient insights into the systematic organization of urban areas, and thus lack analytical capacity; and third, that professional designers seem unable to recognize antiurban cultural trends.

The book is organized into four parts. The first is an introduction, dealing with the origin of community design and an initial statement of urban form. The second probes the nature of urban systems, the organization behind urban form and urban processes. The third discusses substantive urban issues, as well as the pervasive influence of antiurban cultural trends. And the fourth returns to urban form, and the rediscovery of lessons from traditional settlements that are applicable to our time.

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0521380677 - Community Design and the Culture of Cities: The Crossroad and the Wall

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Excerpt

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## PART ONE



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*Which deals with urban problems today,  
community design as a profession, and the  
nature of urban form*



## CITIES TODAY

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Cities are civilization; the word “civilization” – related to the Latin *civilitas*, *civis*, and *civitas* – refers to the culture of cities, places where a heterogeneous mixture of people are concentrated in clusters of meaningful size to exchange – exchange goods, services, and ideas. Cities are not simplistic homogeneous communities with single-minded purposes; those are military camps or company towns, not urban communities. Cities are places where people both compete and cooperate with one another, but they are not merely profit-making corporate entities. And regardless of the differences among their citizens, cities always define their community, as against the outside world; a settlement with internal defense walls cannot be called a true community.

Urbanity is the quality of a civilized community. It is characterized mainly by choice – a civilized community offers its citizens a range of lifestyles – and is expressed in ritualized behaviors of symbolic value. True cities need not be large; it is important to remember that the cities that cradled civilization were small by contemporary standards, and that even today small towns in many parts of the world still display far more urbanity than some vast metropolises. Small settlements can provide opportunities for choice, exchange, and interaction. Indeed, the potential for urbanity in communities of widely different sizes suggests the clear possibility of re-shaping postindustrial settlements in physical settings that maximize opportunities for exchange and choice.

If one judges cities today by the universal standards of urbanity and civilization, the conclusions are distressing. Even though affluence is at a peak in history, education is widespread, and there is a tendency to think that we have reached the highest point of civilization, many cities appear

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to be disintegrating. In industrialized countries, and especially in the United States, the middle and upper classes are abandoning cities to the poor, and large parts of urban areas are slowly becoming live-in ruins. A majority of the affluent population has been resettling in a segregated and dispersed suburbia that is neither urban nor rural and commuting daily to work. Suburban life in a dispersed, homogeneous environment is expressed in routines devoid of symbolism or spontaneity; here is a functional simplification that has reduced personal contact and the exchange aspects of the community and, with them, a sense of belonging. Some wealthy groups have been returning to a few cities – New York, Boston, San Francisco – gentrifying the most desirable areas and, in the process, expelling the poor from them. Whereas traditional cities built external walls against outsiders, cities in industrialized countries have become the first to build internal walls against themselves: The wealthy fear the poor, while the poor just fear.

In some metropolitan areas, glimpses of a postindustrial city have appeared, with the development of exurban centers combining employment and residential uses with automobile transportation. These centers offer an upgraded version of the suburban ideal through a greater variety of land uses, improved recreational facilities, and isolation from the old urban centers; this isolation is reinforced by social segregation and lack of metropolitan transit systems. The new exurban centers are trying to recapture small-town qualities with a very different scale, technology, and values, which explains not only their attraction to many but their structural contradictions as well. In other regions, communities have managed to maintain a small-town atmosphere, because they have been bypassed by economic development; as a result, their young people are leaving for the big cities.

Is the disintegration of cities the fault of designers – architects, urban designers, and city planners? In one sense, clearly it is not. There are limits to what community design can do. Powerful technological and socioeconomic forces have been critical in determining the evolving organization of human settlements – suburbanization of jobs and housing ostensibly resulting from new industrial production and information technologies, new transportation modes and facilities, and conscious public policies. This has resulted in permanent inner-city poverty stemming from declining numbers of entry-level jobs, lower educational quality, and segregation. In another sense, however, designers are at fault.

The failure of community design to recognize these forces and try to (re)create humane physical environments within the new framework has added to the disintegration of cities and increased the sterility of human life. Designers have passively followed trends without seriously questioning their causes and effects, and in this process, they have often aggravated the outcome. That the built form can aggravate social and environmental problems is established by two examples: the high-rise building for family public housing and the auto-oriented shopping-strip area.

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Clearly, “better” design is no panacea for the ills of modern society; it is a simplistic approach that disregards the limited capacity of design to correct problems and often leads to attempts at superficial “embellishments” of wrong solutions. But design can, and must, be a tool of change, reorienting physical solutions toward more humane goals and challenging programmatic assumptions that would be at odds with urbanity and better communities. As one of the components of culture, design should have an active role in shaping human settlements, rather than passively echoing other factors. The central thesis of this book is that a community design that builds upon the lessons of the past and is cognizant of the complexity of current realities not only can improve human environments and alleviate social and economic ills, but can also help to reshape cultural goals. These goals must be selected not on the basis of the personal preferences of a single group, but on an understanding of what a civilized pluralistic community should be.

A closer look at the signs of urban disintegration indicates the complexity – and significance – of the job to be done. Community designers face an inherently antiurban society. Fewer choices and deterministic urban routines are signs of the widespread lack of community cohesion and urbanity. Shopping, for example, is now a strictly functional act of purchasing that involves a simple trip from one’s home to a shopping center. However, urban shopping was once also a social ritual that included window shopping, promenading, meeting friends informally, and exchanging information. There is still some ritual shopping in a few downtown areas, but the links to community are weakened; many shoppers are suburbanites on an expedition to the city and are thus isolated from the community around them. Similarly, for many people recreation involves, for example, a strictly functional trip to an eight-screen moviehouse in a shopping center. However, true urban recreation was once also a ritual

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with ancillary stages before and after, in which people met at cafés and restaurants to talk and interact. Spontaneous meetings, exchanges, and unplanned enjoyment of the many activities and spaces of a city are no less important than purchasing goods or watching a movie.

Contributing to this breakup of urban life have been a host of technological developments. Instant communication has eliminated the need for people to go outside – they can watch everything from films to sports events on television and can shop, bank, and work via personal computer. No community remains – no excitement or expectation, no choice or chance – there is only a box that brings the world into the livingroom; the boundaries of reality becomes blurred. Much human contact – which used to take place in streets, plazas, and parks – has become prepackaged; romance has been replaced by singles bars or computer dating services, as another functional task to fulfill. Press conferences on television feed whatever political needs exist, replacing the lively debate that was always the basis for a true democratic community.

The evolution of homo urbanus to homo in cocoon reaches beyond the community to our cosmic relationship with the world around us. Nature is so far removed that many children have never seen a farm and do not know the source of foods; packaged food and pets are nature for millions. This alienation from nature implies more than a lack of information; it is an uprooting from the earth, from the cycles of nature, from life itself. Cities come into being because there was countryside, civilization against wilderness in a majestic play of contrasts. In a fully heated and air-conditioned world, bad weather is merely a nuisance, an obstacle to travel; good weather is simply an opportunity to enjoy a weekend. The seasons have lost their cosmic and ecological meaning; we no longer celebrate the wealth of events related to harvest and climate. It is only when nature shocks us with enough strength to break a glass wall that people notice it, and then usually with grief.

At the same time that technology is becoming more complicated, the new nonurban lifestyle has become an oversimplification of urban life in that the sense of regional identity has been eliminated and many communities are of the same homogeneous quality. Someone can travel around the world and arrive at the same airport and stay in the same hotel anywhere. In every city, suburban areas tend to be increasingly homogeneous, with the result that people do not have contact with different groups, and children grow up with

limited social experience. Residential areas are subdivided by class, race, and even age, resulting in monotonous environments, a weak sense of community, and, in many cases, isolation. The pressure of a homogenized lifestyle has forced people to live fantasies of power and success by proxy. Fantasies that compensate for the sterility of life have resulted in the star myth, the elevation of sports and popular music idols to the forefront of culture, as well as the vicarious living of a “fuller” life through television soap operas. The major “landmarks” of other cultures have been diminished: Religion, morality, ethics, and the supernatural are stored in the Saturday-and-Sunday file, and only the short-term heroes of sports and popular music are venerated.

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Ours is a culture of short lives. There is no permanence, only cycles of fashion – in clothing as well as in politics, art, and even some sciences. This ephemerality is particularly damaging to community designers, who must deal with settlements that span centuries and not with painted stages. It is even more damaging to society itself, because the culture demands a constant stream of novelty. To feed the fashion cycle, for example, symbols are fast appropriated and then discarded as they fall out of favor with the avant-garde. Comparing U.S. health clubs – one of the latest fashions – with the Roman baths, it is clear that whatever advantage we hold in affluence and technology we lack in social imagination and urbanity.

The degradation of cultural symbols is an indication that there are no visible community hierarchies in the city; urban elites are still elites, but they are no longer urban. Traditionally, elites appropriated power as well as responsibilities; the Medicis in Florence, the pope in Rome, the king in London or Paris, the small lord in a village, the bourgeoisie in a mill town – they were all visible heads of a local hierarchy in a relationship of give and take with their community. Regardless of their tyrannical tendencies, the elites lived in the community and returned to the community part of what they extracted in the form of buildings, art, and institutions. It can be argued that they escaped to rural villas as soon as they could, but these were their second homes and not the true seats of power.

In contrast, the elites of U.S. cities have fled without abandoning power, becoming rural squires with urban power. Their social responsibility flows to charitable foundations – often with tax benefit – without any direct link with communities. These elites have kept their power and continue to



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extract benefits from the urban system, but they return little in terms of personal presence, taste, or culture. On weekdays they occupy the corporate towers that house their offices, but they do not live in, nor are they committed to, the communities around them, which they seldom see. And thus cities evolve aimlessly in a vacuum lacking community objectives but with constant economic pressures; cities continue to develop, deteriorate, and redevelop with decreasing identity and symbolic values.

Without the patronage of the cultural elite and a truly democratic culture, ephemerality typifies most urban designs; fashions arrive and depart, leaving little more than cultural debris behind. For a few years we trumpeted new towns as a solution, only to build a few oversized subdivisions that were quickly forgotten; urban renewal, reputedly the salvation of cities, resulted in a number of ambitious projects with scarce urban value but with painful relocations for thousands of poor people. Most of the buildings in downtowns have a machine product look, shiny and anonymous as industrial products should be, a boredom of glass and steel blocks that establish no empathy with human beings. Here, as if in giant file cabinets, the country squires of suburbia work in corporations, banks, and government agencies. But some corporations wanted to have their own identity, and soon designers began to appropriate historical architectural symbols and apply them to the huge boxes as superficial decoration, leading to the rapid degradation of those symbols. The social art of architecture has been reduced to another parade of fashions.

The design of cities has suffered from the lack of care of a basically antiurban culture. The private automobile, tool and symbol of individual mobility, has been ruthlessly introduced inside cities with the result that the pedestrian scale and urban pattern have been disrupted by garages and highways. Urban public transit systems are considered marginal, second-rate options. There are, indeed, signs of a suburbanization of central cities, where some urban streets have become high-speed roads and human meeting places do not exist in urban spaces or public halls, but in private “atriums” and “malls” built within corporate headquarters, hotels, and shopping gallerias: atriums and malls built with such conspicuous consumption that one is shocked by the contrast with the nearby slums. This suburbanization of central cities brings with it all the contrived artificiality of the spot-lighted

water cascades and manicured trees that appear everywhere as a reminder of nature held captive for consumers' pleasure.

There are signs that the shift of economic activities toward outlying areas is being consolidated. Major highway developments have been under way for some time. New, non-urban "centers," based on automobile transportation and attracting some of the most dynamic sectors of the economy, but lacking the key characteristic of urbanity, are emerging around metropolitan areas. It is as if a subconscious realization that cities are necessary is being distorted by an antiurban culture.

On the one hand, hedonism and banality have resulted in a culture that is negating urban life and the essence of cities. Although power is more concentrated than ever, the "trickling down" of affluence has allowed massive consumerism in the midst of dying traditions. On the other hand, city slums are growing, becoming ghettos of poor, unemployed welfare clients and poorly paid workers, in striking contrast to the islands of unrestricted affluence. This scenario of the U.S. city is echoed in many Third World countries, where masses of landless peasants are crowding around the cities and elites are fleeing, partly in cultural imitation of their U.S. counterparts and partly in fear of the masses; old, established cities are evolving into metropolises of villages in a historical reversion to primitive ruralism.

Is it possible – indeed, does it make sense – to talk of designing cities within such antiurban cultures? Yes, but not in the conventional sense of producing immediate plans for the immediate problem. Yes, because cities are the base of civilization and communities are the base of society. Yes, because by probing and searching and proposing we might be able not only to produce valid and viable community designs, but also to call attention to the antiurban and anti-human forces at the root of so many of our problems and, in turn, to spur action to redirect these forces. Yes, because the task of building humane communities for the twenty-first century represents a major challenge to society and designers.

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