



# *The Man Who Loved Cities*

*by Nathan Glazer*

**W**illiam H. Whyte seems fated to be known as *The Organization Man* man. His death, on January 12, 1999, inspired numerous reflections on his sociological bestseller of 1956. Recognized as a benchmark in its own time, *The Organization Man* gave new meaning to a watchword of the decade, “conformity”: Whyte’s book put a carefully tailored suit of clothes on a vaguely defined but worrisome phenomenon of midcentury America. He identified what he saw as a “major shift in American ideology” away from an individualist Protestant Ethic. But his book was not a nostalgic lament. Rather, Whyte’s mission was to reveal the dilemmas at the heart of a new group ethos—which he

called the Social Ethic—that he saw emerging in the corporate and social world of the postwar era. The organization man was expected to be loyal to his organization, and the organization to be loyal to him. This was hardly a recipe for stability, however. He was required to pull up roots at a moment's notice and relocate himself and his family wherever the corporation thought it needed him. For these “transients,” a new ideology of adaptive harmony beckoned.

The “tremendous premium on ‘adjustment,’” on the “co-operative,” on the “social,” promised to make life and work proceed smoothly in “an age of organization”—and, Whyte observed, often did indeed help to do so. Yet he believed that the new group imperative, enshrined in social science and pop psychology and management theory, had also become “an ethic that offers a spurious peace of mind” and that should be resisted. And could be resisted: Whyte was convinced that “we are not hapless beings caught in the grip of forces we can do little about.” The burden of his book was that “the fault is not in organization . . . it is in our worship of it. It is in our vain quest for a utopian equilibrium, which would be horrible if it ever did come to pass; it is in the soft-minded denial that there is a conflict between the individual and society. There must always be, and it is the price of being an individual that he must face these conflicts.”

Four decades later, amid alarms about “downsizing,” remembering Whyte has meant revisiting the well-known classic of his career: what changes have occurred in the relationship between corporations and those who serve them since Whyte first described the rather uninspiring bond? A great deal, was the not very surprising consensus. On the *New York Times* op-ed page, Virginia Postrel, the editor of the libertarian magazine *Reason*, and the sociologist Arlie

Hochschild rendered opposing verdicts on the transformations that have left us with a world in which neither newly lean corporations nor those who serve them feel very deep loyalties.

We can conceive of the change as opening new vistas of freedom, as Virginia Postrel did. (Consider the entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley, no organization men they.) Or one can still find Whyte's portrait of the unanchored organization man affecting and relevant, as Hochschild did. And one can argue, as the sociologist and social critic Richard Sennett does in his new book *The Death of Character*, that the decay of the old ties uniting corporations and employees has introduced new strains into the life of the uncertain organization man and woman. This late-century anxiety is different from the old conformist strictures, which could so easily crimp creativity and autonomy, but it is no less damaging.

There is no question that Whyte's book had an enormous impact when it appeared. When the paperback came out, I was an editor at the then-young Anchor Books—which had also published the other great sociological bestseller of the 1950s, David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd* (of which I was a junior author). Sales of *The Organization Man* were explosive. It was remarkable in the exhaustiveness of its research. Who else would have read “every single one of the social notes” that appeared in a suburban newspaper over three-and-a-half years (“believe me,” Whyte wrote, “that's a lot of social notes”), in order to find out whether meaningful patterns emerged from the parties and other gatherings that took place? Whyte did, and made a significant discovery: that physical layout—arrangements of cul de sacs, courtyards, driveways—dictated “a set of relationships . . . that were as important in governing behavior as the desires of the individuals in them.” *The Organization Man* wove

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such data into an ambitious and very readable analysis that shed light on the erosion of the entrepreneurial ethos so central to American identity. It was misleading, Whyte emphasized, to see the problem as a new demand for conformity. The real danger was an alluring, and unrealistic, promise of group harmony, which all too easily tempted corporate Americans to surrender their independence.

Whyte's book identified tensions between the demands of organizational loyalty—which meant an often dizzying degree of mobility—and the desire for stability that certainly have not disappeared from corporate life in America. Yet events have moved beyond the book, as Whyte himself moved beyond it. The truth is that *The Organization Man* was more a prelude than the pinnacle of his career. Whyte deserves to be remembered, I believe, more for a second endeavor that was in many ways less sweeping than his signature book—a project that quite literally kept him much closer to the ground.

In the 1960s and 1970s, after leaving *Fortune*, where he'd been assistant managing editor, Whyte emerged as one of America's most influential observers of the city and the space around it, an observer whose distinctive contribution to our understanding of the American metropolis lay in his avoidance of anything so grandiose as a vision. Whyte, who became a distinguished professor at Hunter College of the City University of New York, advised Laurance S. Rockefeller on environmental issues and served as a planning consultant for various cities. What he set out to do was to become the best kind of expert, concerned with improving the way we live by paying close attention to the details: how we build our suburbs, how we choose sites for our houses, how we arrange our streets and plazas. This was a man who couldn't wait, on his many visits to many cities, to rush to a downtown street corner at midday and count the passersby! It was his way of taking a city's pulse.

Whyte began his career as an analyst, and became an activist. He turned his

attention to the fate of cities and their surrounding countryside in the late 1950s, when the suburban boom was well under way, and when the errors of planners and developers were beginning to become evident to sharp observers. In his writing on the city, Whyte ranks with Jane Jacobs, though her efforts to show the way cities work when they work well are better known. Indeed, they both began writing on the city in the same volume, *The Exploding Metropolis*, a joint work by the editors of *Fortune* (where Whyte and Jacobs were working at the time) published in 1958. Whyte edited the book, and also contributed an introduction and two chapters, "Are Cities Un-American?" and "Urban Sprawl?" Jacobs wrote a chapter titled "Downtown Is for People," which set forth the main lines of her criticism of postwar city rebuilding, which she went on to develop in her classic 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

Whyte's second career grew naturally out of the blockbuster that launched him. Part of *The Organization Man* is devoted to examining one of the large planned developments sprouting up on the suburban fringes in the 1950s. These new bedroom communities were "the packaged villages that have become the dormitory of the new generation of organization men." Whyte viewed them, and so (he found) did their self-conscious inhabitants, as "social laboratories" where "we can see in bolder relief than elsewhere the kind of world the organization man wants and may in time bring about." What most interested him was the way the transient inhabitants went about creating, "through a sort of national, floating co-operative, . . . a new kind of roots"—a kind of tie that gave them security and at the same time encroached on their autonomy.

Social connections in these classless communities, Whyte showed, were all-pervasive yet shallow, linking wives and children into a conveniently encompassing support system that demanded and rewarded constant group participation, from cof-



A Whyte's-eye view of the world: a 1988 study showed where New Yorkers paused in front of Alexander's Department Store.

fee klatches to school boards. "Suburbia is the ultimate expression of the interchangeability so sought by the organization," Whyte wrote, and of the social adaptability required to thrive within it. When the time came to move, families could be sure they would be spared a jolt in settling into another, not very different habitat. The suburban development in question was Park Forest, near Chicago, which plays an important role in the history of American sociology. (Herbert Gans was also studying it for his master's thesis at the University of Chicago, and he went on to write a classic work on the new planned suburb, *The Levittowners*.) Whyte moved on from Park Forest to ask the key question: Was this the best way for our cities to expand? He asked it in a pragmatic spirit, rather than in a despairing one.

It was easy enough to denounce the suburbs, the eating up of fields and farmland for individual plots to serve single-family houses, the homogeneity of the new communities, the absence of many urban amenities and of

urban diversity. Such attacks were all too common, as were the parallel denunciations of the crowded city, with its noise, dirt, packed subways, and helter-skelter mix of housing. Whyte could appreciate both critiques. But he was skeptical of the received answers of the time, whether they issued from another major city and landscape observer, Lewis Mumford, or emerged in the work of the era's great visionary architect, Le Corbusier.

To Mumford, who was an admirer of the compact feudal city and a leader of the "garden city" movement, and to other critics, what was happening to the city and countryside was

simply capitalism run wild, development without the restraint that sound community living required. Whyte was no enemy of capitalism and the free market. In studying what had gone wrong, he was as critical of the planners and the "new town" vogue, which Mumford believed could save us, as he was of shortsighted developers. Together, he believed, they made a terrible team. In *The Last Landscape* (1968), the book Whyte published the year before he began helping the New York City Planning Commission draft a comprehensive plan for the city, he criticized the diagnoses and the utopian desires that he felt were leading America astray:

New town proposals are generally prefaced with a sweeping indictment of the city as pretty much of a lost cause. We tried, the charge goes, but the city is a hopeless tangle. Medical analogies abound. The city is diseased, cancerous, and beyond palliatives. The future is not to be sought in it, but out beyond,

where we can start afresh.

The possibility of working with a clean slate is what most excites planners and architects about new towns. Freed from the constraints of previous plans and buildings and people, the planners and architects can apply the whole range of new tools. With systems analysis, electronic data processing, game theory, and the like, it is hoped, a science of environmental design will be evolved and this will produce a far better kind of community than ever was possible before. . . .

To offer all this, a new town would really have to be a city. . . . But these are not to be like cities as we have known them. There is not to be any dirty work in them. There are not to be any slums. There are not to be any ethnic concentrations. . . . Housing densities will be quite low. There will be no crowded streets. . . . It will have everything the city has, in short, except its faults.

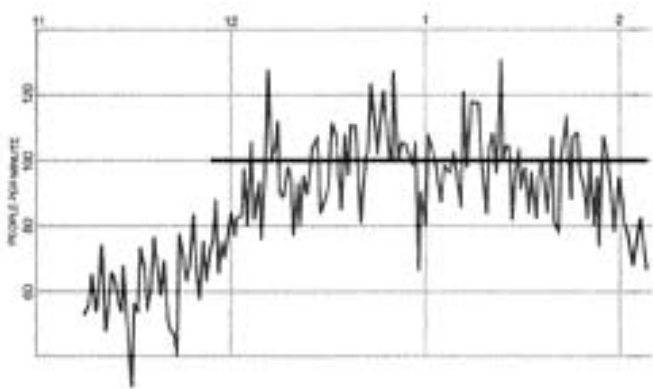
[But] you cannot isolate the successful elements of the city and package them in tidy communities somewhere else. . . . The goal is so silly it seems profound.

But denunciation was not Whyte's style. Rather, the question was what could be done, and he believed that much could. His 1964 book *Cluster Development* was a handbook on how developers could plot their new suburban tracts to save land, reduce the need for expensive roads, bring houses somewhat closer together, with no loss to what new suburb dwellers were looking for. His most substantial work, *The Last Landscape*, lays out in detail the many mechanisms, public and semipublic and private, by

which urban sprawl could be contained and the pleasures of the countryside saved.

As that book showed, Whyte's specialty was realism, not utopianism or alarmism. He did not simply wring his hands in despair or cry in outrage, though there was much to be outraged by. Instead, he aimed at what was practically possible, and he showed that a great deal was. For example, he observed that the trouble wasn't so much that America lacked countryside as that it was "becoming a hidden countryside." And unsightly billboards did not deserve all the blame. Greenery itself, as cleared land became second-growth forest, sealed off open vistas from the eye. "Landscape is not beautiful if you do not see it" was Whyte's point. He was just as practical about open spaces in the city. They were not the salvation so many planners believed, but they were well worth salvaging—and patchwork reclaiming was what it would take, Whyte insisted. "The most pressing need now," he wrote, "is to weave together a host of seemingly disparate elements—an experimental farm, a private golf course, a local park, the spaces of a cluster subdivision, the edge of a new freeway right-of-way." *The Last Landscape* remains a remarkably useful book.

Whyte's forte in his study of the city was close observation, indeed very close obser-



A connoisseur of sidewalks, Whyte bolstered his case for wider ones with this graph of heavy pedestrian traffic on Lexington Avenue near Grand Central Station.

vation. He used time-lapse photography to capture the daily reality of urban places—parks, storefronts, sidewalks. He minutely analyzed what drew people, what repelled them, and how they were affected by small changes in the urban environment. It was the “eye-level view, the way people see it,” not the bird’s-eye view favored by grand planners, that interested Whyte. Thanks to him, we now understand that people are

was to revise our thinking about urban density. He took issue with the prevailing wisdom: planners and critics, he felt, had gone too far in attacking urban crowding and disorder. According to the reigning view, the key to improved planning was to thin out the city and insist on more open space. But Whyte argued that density worked—it made the city attractive. His midday pedestrian counts downtown were

his gauge of a city’s prospects: if fewer than 1,000 people passed in an hour, “the city could pave the streets with gold for all the difference it would make. The city is one that is losing its center or has already done so.”

In the 1930s, Mumford had written that New York was saved by the Depression, because the city would have ground to a halt had it continued to build skyscrapers and increase the number of jobs downtown. Nonsense, said Whyte. See how energetically people behave in crowds. They manage and, more than that, they love the easy access to so many facilities and specialized providers that their numbers make possible. Indeed New York later added tens of millions of square feet of office space, with almost no increase in public transit facilities, in a succession of postwar building booms. Far from grinding to a halt, as Mumford expected, the city thrived. It became clear that the planning theorists had missed



*William Whyte at work*

not repelled by crowding—up to a point—but excited by it, eager and able to adapt to it. Much of his work was pure scientific ethnography, but much of it gave hints and guidance on how we should build and rebuild in cities.

Possibly Whyte’s greatest achievement

some important things. In his *Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980), and in many lectures and consultations with city officials, developers, and planners in which he tried to put his insights to good use, Whyte pointed out how much had been overlooked.

It was Whyte who helped to identify and

remedy a fundamental misunderstanding of the life of city and streets that planners of the 1960s embedded in the zoning codes of New York and other cities. The codes rewarded office tower developers who pulled their buildings back from the street, creating spaces rather grandiloquently called plazas. The idea was to open up crowded city streets, admitting light and air. But the new plazas often became little more than dead zones between streets and building lobbies, spaces that derelicts and other undesirable people were only too happy to occupy. Other plazas became all but inaccessible, to protect them from just such users. Whyte pointed out that the plazas broke up the continuous street front that is an identifying characteristic of the good city, providing entertainment and a sense of security for the strolling pedestrian.

**T**he key to reclaiming these plazas, Whyte explained, was to attract more people to them. Then the derelicts and unappealing users would be crowded out or stay away. His research uncovered small but key details that draw people: movable seats are important, for example, and the availability of food and drink, even from a pushcart, is helpful. Any fixed seating—a designer’s or architect’s arrangement of space, whatever it was and whatever its formal virtues—imposed itself on those who tried to use the space. People wanted to feel in control, and one way they could feel in control was to be able move their chairs, whether to get closer to someone to whom they were talking, or further away from someone to whom they didn’t want to talk, or to catch a ray of sun, or simply to shift around for no reason at all. And so the lightweight, unattached chair became a fixture in the New York City plazas and similar city spaces elsewhere.

For an example of Whyte’s ideas at work, it is hard to do better than New York City’s Bryant Park, recently restored after years of neglect. Lying along 42nd Street and behind the city’s grand public library, the park was originally cut off from the street, physically and visually isolated from

passing pedestrians and motorists by shrubs. The design worked in New York’s earlier, more placid days, creating a sense of shelter and privacy for harried New Yorkers. But in a high-crime city it was a disaster, providing a well-concealed haven for miscreants. Now the park has been opened up and transformed into one of the best-used open spaces in New York City. If you can find an empty chair, you can move it wherever you want, and there are almost as many food vendors as pigeons.

**T**he *Exploding Metropolis* was recently reprinted—40 years after its original appearance!—by the University of California Press. Whyte is restored to the title page as editor (the original volume was “by the editors of *Fortune*”). It says something about Whyte’s enduring contribution that in 1999 *The Organization Man* is out of print, but his books on the city and on open spaces are still available. In his last book, *City: Rediscovering the Center* (1988), Whyte wrote with typical realism that “I am eschewing prophecy in this book. It is hard enough to figure out what is happening now, let alone what might or might not 20 years hence.” But he was optimistic that “the center is going to hold.”

Indeed, the signs since then are that, thanks not least to advice he had offered 20 years before in *The Last Landscape*, downtown revitalization is alive and well—and often it is much the sort of motley enterprise he favored. As Whyte urged then, invoking San Francisco’s waterfront as a model, even touristy rehabilitation can work. “Almost every city with a waterfront has a pier or shoreside structure that could be refashioned for restaurants and shops,” he pragmatically observed. “They are slightly fraudulent—the seafood is apt to be flown in from somewhere else and not very well prepared—but the view is good, and people do love the honky tonk.” *The Exploding Metropolis* and the works that followed are urban history, but they are more than that. Whyte’s work remains a living and usable handbook for improving our cities, our countryside, and our lives.