

Where's the City?

As an object of study, the city is back. During the past decade or so, scholars concerned with such matters as the global environment, social equity, and sustainable development have turned their attention to the city. Yet most of our thinking about the subject—particularly our reflections on the city as place—has failed to keep pace with the changes in urban form that are taking place all around us.

Those changes are huge and ever accelerating. All over the world, more and more people inhabit cities or their sprawling interconnected communities. The number of “one million population cities” increased from 11 in 1900 to 105 in 1990, and is expected to reach 248 by 2115. If current projections hold, a billion souls will be added to Asia’s cities within a generation, and Latin America long ago joined the ranks of the world’s regions with majority urban populations. Given such realities, there is no way to address the world’s ills, or its challenges, without considering their urban dimensions.

The extent to which social scientists have focused on the city in recent years is impressive. Analysts have examined urban family structures, the role of women in urban communities, the informal urban economy, and interethnic relations in urban settings, as well as more purely technical issues of public transportation, urban infrastructure, and municipal governance and finance. It is difficult to imagine an aspect of urban life that has not come under minute inspection, except—oddly—the city itself.

This was not always so. A large and impressive body of scholarship once took the city as a subject in its own right. The grand debates of a century ago focused on specific cities such as London, New York, and Chicago, and were carried on by the likes of Ebenezer Howard, Robert Park,

Jane Addams, and Patrick Geddes. All of these observers of urban life wrote of cities as distinct and distinctive organisms, examining them both as seats of civilization and culture and as sites of human degradation. Until recently, however, the attempt to come to terms with the city in all of its dimensions seemed quaintly outmoded.

As scholars begin to recognize the need for more synthetic approaches to urban problems, they are also starting to see the necessity of making a place for “place” in urban analysis. Those efforts need not deny the importance of other approaches centering on families, economic development, or environmental disasters. Both kinds of approaches are required if scholars are to grasp what is peculiar about the urban experience, and if politicians and planners are to come up with strategies for improving the lives of city dwellers.

Place, of course, is inescapable. Few would question the need to take the physical aspects of place into account when planning infrastructure. It would be folly to build the same road system for a city in the mountains and one on the plains, or to excavate for subterranean services in a permafrost region, an earthquake zone, or a swamp.

Yet place has another significance, namely cultural, and it is at least as important. It is the point at which universal macrotheory—be it economic or engineering—meets local reality. The economic realities of Tokyo, Manhattan, and São Paulo may be converging, but someone trying to accomplish a specific task—buy a house or apartment, bury a relative, find a job, plan a wedding—still needs to know how these great cities differ from one another. Such distinctions are not merely national, for Tokyoites, Manhattanites, and Paulistas may be more similar to one another than to their countrymen and countrywomen from rural communities. It is difficult to specify precisely how the urban

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cultures of these communities vary; yet they do. And those differences matter, even in negotiations so trivial as hiring a cab.

During the past 20 years, enlightened bureaucrats and planners in national ministries and development agencies have begun to recognize the futility of top-down, national urban and housing planning. An emerging consensus among such people favors difference and accepts the inadequacy of universal solutions, particularly for something so constantly changing as a city. While there can be no definitive solution to a specific city's problems, this consensus holds, there can be different approaches to minimizing difficulties and maximizing opportunities. The challenge is to spotlight strategies for urban success without reducing them to simplistic "how-to" recipes.

Unfortunately, too many national governments and international organizations, including the World Bank and the United Nations Centre on Human Settlements, ignore this wisdom and continue to champion "best practice" solutions for all urban challenges. Sadder yet, this official reliance on "best practices," and the concomitant disregard for the particulars of time and place, comports all too well with the dominant academic approaches to urban issues. There still appears to be too little room for imaginative scholarship in a world that demands immediate "solutions," however specious they may be. So, within the academy, the city too often remains an object of battle about gender, poverty, or people with disabilities, rather than a subject in and of itself. Where, one might ask, is the city anyway? Where is its "I"?

Cities and places have distinct identities, their "Is". The Czech novelist Ivan Klima expressed this point more eloquently than scores of social scientists when he wrote, "A city is like a person: if we don't establish a genuine relationship with it, it remains a name, an external form that soon fades from our minds. To create this relationship, we must be able to observe the city and understand its peculiar personality, its "I", its spirit, its identity, the circumstances of its life as

they evolved through space and time." But mere ego is not enough to describe what makes a special place special. Cities also have their own unique souls.

A city's soul may be rooted in a compulsive impatience with rules, as in Osaka; or in the trust placed in the nonlinear, as in Istanbul. It may consist of concupiscence, as in Rio de Janeiro; or of the accomplishments of high art, as in Florence and Prague. St. Petersburg is a special place not only because of its great architecture, bathed in muted northern light, but because of the sad dignity of its residents. "This is the city where it's somehow easier to endure loneliness than anywhere else," said one of St. Petersburg's native sons, Joseph Brodsky, "because the city itself is lonely." Loneliness may define a place even as it defies social-scientific analysis. There are also cities in which history asserts itself—such as Cairo, Jerusalem, and Rome. Yet character and soul are not merely products of age. Late-19th-century Chicago proclaimed a distinctive soul of commercial cupidity well before it was 50 years old.

How does one quantify soul, heart, spirit, or even place? How are they "objectified," "gendered," or "unpacked"? We have a far easier time talking about the city in the abstract than in confronting the actual city in all its glory and shame. The result is that we barely know the city at all. This yawning breach in our thinking about urban life must be filled even as we seek to establish pragmatic solutions to existing urban problems. Sunil Khilnani, in his examination of India's various and distinctive cities as engines of modernization and political change (p. 16), steps boldly into that breach. So, elsewhere, do Theodore Bestor in his writings on Tokyo, Mike Davis in his work on Los Angeles, and Brian Ladd in his recent book on Berlin. Yet we need many more such imaginative approaches to the cities of the world. We need to think more about what makes a place a place—and to do so by considering both material and nonmaterial factors. Only by heading in this direction will we finally bring the soul into our discussion of the city.

—Blair A. Ruble