Facing the Challenge of the American City

David P. Handlin

When I hear the word city used in conversations such as this, I try to imagine the kind of place its usage implies. And I invariably conclude that what is being referred to are places like the Lower East Side, Greenwich Village, parts of San Francisco or Boston, or Harvard Square, where my architecture office is located. In other words, the Jane Jacobs city, remnants of the pre- or mid-modern city, the walking city.

I have great fondness for those places, but there is one fundamental problem in thinking of them as archetypical of what a city should be. In spatial terms, they comprise probably less than one percent of the American city.

Recently I have had the opportunity to spend some time in three newer cities, Memphis, Houston and Tampa. Although each has an older section that dates back to the latter part of the nineteenth century, the bulk of these cities has absolutely nothing to do with Greenwich Village and Harvard Square.

My question, therefore, is if we cannot speak of the “city” in more encompassing terms, are we simply writing off all these other 99 percent and all the people who live there, bearing in mind that they are not simply the rich and privileged but represent the whole economic and ethnic spectrum?

Just as I question this narrow concept of what type of built form constitutes a livable or tolerable city, I see an equally limited idea of what constitutes public space. On the one hand, our idea of public space is exemplified in our ongoing admiration for places like the Rue des Fêtes, and on the other hand, in various landscape traditions extending from the English garden to Frederick Law Olmsted. If these traditions continue to dominate our ideas about public space, we will continue to misunderstand or ignore the varied needs of the bulk of people inhabiting American cities.

I see two possible reactions to the emerging spatial constellation that I am describing. One is to turn one’s back on it, to withdraw into a nostalgia about what life supposedly was like in a city, town or suburb that existed in some form. The other is to begin to think of what a post-Industrial city might look like.

It would be very difficult to prove that people who live in the ‘other’ city are less friendly or more isolated than people who live in cities like New York.

— David P. Handlin
sort of golden age of the past. The other is to ana-
lyze this emerging context with the hope that as de-
signers and theoreticians we might be able to shape it (perhaps, in part, on the
basis of our knowledge of the history of city, town and suburb) in a more
palatable way.

I am not so disdainful about following the first
course of action as I might
see, because I know there are profound prob-
lems in following the sec-
ond. One of the most
important has to do with
language. We simply do
not have the words or
phrases to describe or con-
verse about, in part or in
whole, this emerging city (if that is the right term).
We seem to be trapped by
our language.

Taking photographs in
Tampa, I found myself
trying to frame compo-
sitions according to conven-
tions established by
photographers of the
urban scene. I was remind-
ed of this recently when I
saw some Berenice Abbott
photo-graphs. They are
wonderful images but I
have found that the con-
ventions on which they are
based do not seem to be
useful in describing this
emerging city.

What is needed is the
artistic imagination both to
create and represent this
emerging city. Before that,
there has to be a certain
amount of faith or will. I
can guarantee you that
simply disparaging it is not
gonna to make it go away.
Amazing things, many of
them amazingly bad, are
happening in every part of
the American city — in the
central cores, in the aban-
doned areas where the
nineteenth century industrial infrastructure was
located and on the far
periphery.

Designers and theoretic-
cians, especially in the last
20 years, have had virtually
nothing of consequence to
say about how these
inevitable and measurable
waves of change should
and can take place. By
focusimg on a narrow idex
of what is desirable, we
have rendered ourselves all
but impotent.

Architecture
as a Universal
Language

Marshall Berman

Within a number of differ-
ent occupations, my gener-
ation — the ’60s or New
Left generation — prac-
ticed a form of what plan-
ers came to call advocacy
planning. Planners lent
themselves to the commu-
nity movement, assuming
not only that it was possi-
bile to determine what “the
people” wanted, but also
that one could think in
terms of the interests and
welfare of “the people” as
a whole. Then, during the
’70s and ’80s, what we had
thought of as “the people”
disintegrated into an infi-
nite number of distinct
interest groups.

In a recent New York
Times Magazine article,
“The Secession of the
Successful,” Robert Reich
wrote that today, when
people talk about their
community, they use the
’60s rhetoric of community
control and power to the
people, and that to a great
extent language that origi-
nally expressed a challenge
to traditional political sys-
tems has now been incor-
porated into practical
political review. But today, Reich
notes, “community” almost

Is placelessness
a problem, and
if so, what sort?

Marshall Berman