TOWNS & CITIES

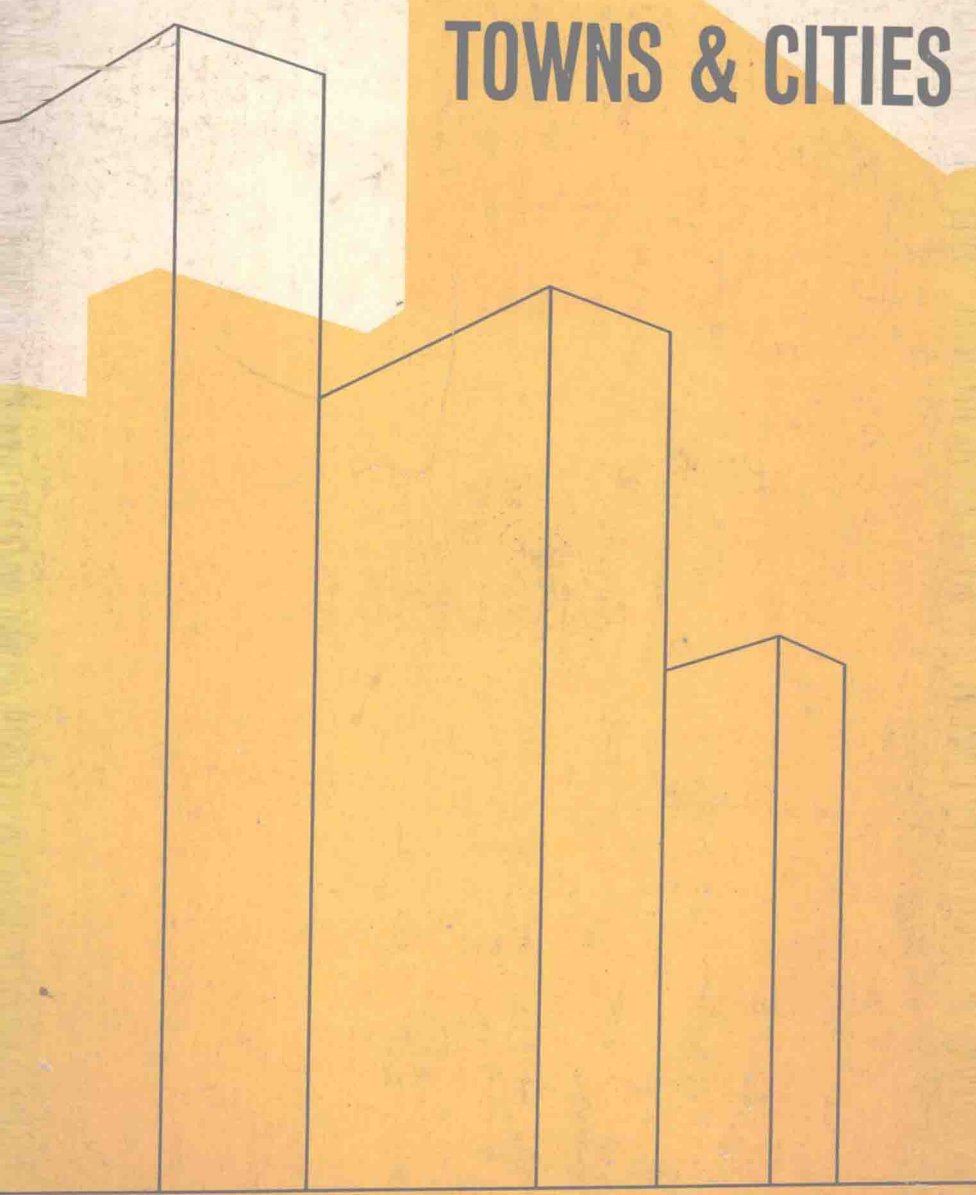

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Fig. 10 is taken from J. Carrière, *Le Fait urbain en France*, Paris, 1964, p. 74.
Figs. 2a, b, and c, 5a and b, and 17 are taken from E. Jones, *Human Geography*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1964.
Figs. 12, 14, 15, and 16 are taken from E. Jones, *A Social Geography of Belfast*, Oxford University Press, London, 1961.

1
What is a Town?

(i)

THERE CAN BE few human institutions which have evoked such depth of feeling and contradictory attitudes as the city. On the one hand it has been equated with the height of man's achievement. The Latin root is shared with the word 'civilization', suggesting that outside the orbit of the city is the uncivilized, the uncouth, the barbaric; inside flowered the great cultures of human history. Here technical skill achieved its utmost, schools of thought flourished, and the arts prospered and the human spirit was raised to its highest pinnacles. On the other hand the growth of the city—and in particular of the industrial city of the nineteenth century—brought its own retribution. The city was a consumer of mankind, for until recently no city grew by its own natural increase; it fed on those who lived beyond it but could not resist its lure; it offered disease and misery, poverty and want to millions; at its worst it made human life cheap and human values worthless. There is a City of God and there is a Babylon, and these are both the same city. But many are blind to one or the other. To Rousseau, 'Cities are the final pit of the human spirit.' Shelley would have agreed: 'Hell is a city just like London.' Yet, in Johnson's view, 'When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.'

It is not strange, therefore, that the city, which has excited such extreme reactions, has attracted the student; that there are so many books, so many theories and viewpoints, which seek to describe, explain, analyse, praise, and denigrate. In the last few decades, when it seems as if we may indeed be overwhelmed by the city, increasing efforts have been made to understand its origins and growth, the reasons for its birth, how it functions, what are its effects, to what extent it controls or is controlled by society. The increasing urgency

is due not only to the degree to which so-called Western societies have become urbanized, by the growth in north-west Europe and North America of the super-city, the megalopolis, a many-headed giant which dwarfs all pre-existing ideas of the city. But even greater urgency is called for to meet the newer, no less startling, and possibly even more rapid urbanization which is now characterizing Latin America and, to a lesser extent, Asia. Here peasants become city-dwellers overnight. In the last decade the number of 'million' cities in the tropics has risen from four to fourteen; and whereas major European cities are not increasing as phenomenally as they did during the last century, major tropical cities are growing by leaps and bounds. Saigon has increased by nearly sixteen times in twenty years. Yet we still know very little about the city, even about our own cities which have so long a tradition.

The English are a nation of town- and city-dwellers. However much an Englishman may delight in his rural heritage, boast of the village pump, dream of a green and pleasant land, his everyday world is the city street, his meeting-place the market square, and his reality is Jerusalem, however sadly fallen from the ideal. There is, of course, an extreme reluctance to recognize the fact. No one has done more than the Englishman to bring the country into the town. *Rus in urbe*—perhaps his most distinctive contribution to town planning—has given us delightful green squares, contrasting greatly with their paved continental counterparts. It has given us garden suburbs, and probably contributed most to the uniqueness of which Rasmussen wrote so eloquently in his book on London. Unfortunately it has also meant suburbs which have compromised the countryside with a travesty of the town. This unwillingness to accept the town derives from the ambivalent attitude already referred to. If one distinguishes as clearly as the English between country and town, then the latter is a very poor second. God, after all, made the first, and man the second. We are still extremely jealous of our countryside—probably because four out of five Englishmen live in towns—but our problems are urban ones. They are the nearly intolerable problems of city growth and decay, of congestion and commuting, of traffic and communications. Within a matter of weeks in early 1963 three important reports appeared, the first on traffic in towns, the second on the growth of London and the south-east, the third on the possibilities of relocating offices outside London. They did little more than underline the size of the problems. More than ever the need for trying to understand the city and how it works has become urgent. Strange though it may seem, we may

have overcome the evils which we associate with the industrial squalor of the last century only to make way for other evils. Our cities are healthier than ever, problems of waste disposal, sanitation, and water supply are easily overcome, and pollution is being controlled, but as a result town populations are generating themselves: concentrations of humanity are reaching unprecedented degrees; new diseases appear—results of the frustration of long journeys to work, of fatigue. The perfecting of the institution may be bringing about its own destruction. The attraction is balanced by a retreat from the city. The centre becomes empty and meaningless at night, but not perhaps as meaningless as the retreats themselves—the million tiny villas which make up our suburbs.

How can one best approach the study of so complex a phenomenon, at once so familiar and yet so difficult to understand? In the very first place, how best can we define it? Strange though it may seem, the city defies a universal definition which would be acceptable to everyone. Is it a physical conglomeration of streets and houses, or is it a centre of exchange and commerce? Or is it a kind of society, or even a frame of mind? Has it a certain size, a specific density? The difficulties involved in definition are countless, and there is very little unanimity: it seems to be all things to all men.

Every country has to have a definition of towns and cities for census purposes, and a glance at some of these will illustrate the variety of definitions. Some countries adopt a simple numerical value. A town or city is bigger than a village community, and if we are dealing with very large settlements there is often little doubt. But at the lower end of the scale, if size is the criterion, who is to say what the size of a town is? In Denmark a settlement of 200 people constitutes a town, as it does in Sweden and Finland. In Greece a settlement must have over 10,000 inhabitants before it can be called a town. Between these is a great variety of figures. A thousand inhabitants makes a town in Canada, but 2,500 in the United States. A thousand is enough in Venezuela, but there must be 5,000 people to make a town in Ghana. Clearly numbers alone mean very little. There are circumstances in which a numerically small settlement may have urban characteristics—like density, markets, administrative functions—and others in which a numerically large settlement may be a specialized research station, like Harwell, or is still obviously a village in which the vast majority of men are farmers. The latter is certainly the case in agricultural states and in the developing countries. In India, for example, it is specified that to be a town a settlement must not only have more than 5,000 inhabitants, but its

density must be over 1,000 to a square mile, and over 75% of its adult male population must be engaged in work other than agriculture.

This last definition suggests other criteria, namely density and function. We certainly think of most cities as being densely populated, though this need not be universally true. But with the exception of India, density is rarely used as a criterion. More critical than density is function, for it is generally accepted that one of the distinguishing characteristics of a town or city is the fact that its work is divorced from the soil: its people are not primarily food-producers. Yet very few states include function in the definition, partly because it is implied in most as an urban characteristic. India, as we have seen, defines this function accurately. Israel refuses the status of a town to settlements of over 2,000 if more than a third of the heads of households are engaged in agriculture; and the Congo accepts the figure of 2,000 with the proviso that they must be predominantly non-agricultural.

The administrative function of a town is most clearly brought out by those states who use this as a sole criterion. This is so in Turkey, Czechoslovakia, the Dominican Republic, and the United Arab Republic. Many more define their towns by giving them a certain kind of government, as in Algeria, Japan, Tunisia, and, most familiar, the United Kingdom. This really means that the city or town is so by definition—a town is what the state is prepared to call a town. This does not help us very much. It is even more frustrating when a solecism is introduced as in Rumania, where a town is a settlement having urban characteristics. The wheel has come full circle. As one writer put it despairingly, 'A city is a city is a city.'

Reference is continually made to towns and cities. What is the difference? Taking the line of least resistance we could say that a city is a town which has been designated a city. This would be true in many states, including the United Kingdom, but it would confuse as much as it enlightens. In Britain we commonly associate a city with a cathedral, and historically there may be justification for this. But one could never think of St. Asaph, for example, as a city; and the distinction is one which is normally granted under specific circumstances. Yet there are historians of the city who recognize the distinction as being real and significant. Pirenne, in his study of the medieval city, did not deny many urban attributes to towns, but he reserved the full accolade of city to those whose economic functions were of a high level. Certainly if one recognizes degrees of urban-ness, those who qualify at the lower end—functionally

towns because they are non-agricultural and have a considerable population at high density—may be very different from those at the upper end, where the non-material aspects of civilization, together with their manifestation in institutions and monumental architecture, seem to imply a different level of existence. Where this becomes relevant attention will be drawn to it, but otherwise the emphasis will be on characteristics common to both, and the words 'town' or 'city' may be used interchangeably to avoid resort to the clumsy phrase 'urban settlement'.

One last point on legal definitions. They vary so much that the common denominator—which is one of the things we must look for—may seem non-existent, in which case comparative studies of urbanization appear impossible. In fact the simple numerical index can be used on a world scale if enough allowance is made to clear possible contradictions among small settlements. Above 5,000 people there is less doubt that we are dealing with something urban, above 10,000 hardly any doubt at all. The recommendation of the U.N. on grading agglomerations by size is acceptable where the population is above 5,000. The difficulties arise at the point where a village is almost a town, or a town nearly indistinguishable from a village. At that point it is better to accept the local definition. A town is what is implied by the local people when they call a locality a town. If this differs from the criterion we use for statistical analysis it is no less real. It may be much more meaningful than all the scholarly efforts at defining something too rich and varied to be caught by statistics. The latter have their uses, but it would be a pity if the humanity of cities were destroyed by academic niceties. Defining a town, whether in economic or legal terms or merely by size, does not take us very much further towards understanding the nature of urbanism. It merely suggests some of the concomitants of urbanism without telling us which are universal or which are important. Is there a common factor, and if so, does it lie in the form of a city, or in its function, or in its society? There are almost as many answers to these questions as there are students interested in cities.

(ii)

In the first place it should be understood that we are looking for universals, for common elements, shared manifestations. There is a sense, of course, in which every city is unique, a discrete entity occupying a unique position and having a unique history. Many historical studies of individual towns have used this approach,

sometimes isolating a particular one from the very context which explains it. The concern with individual cities is put very strongly in Asa Briggs's recent book on Victorian cities, in which he states that the historian 'will find that his most interesting task is to show in what respect cities differ from each other'. This is a legitimate point of view, but it would tell us little about cities in general. There was only one Athens, there is only one London, but in a study of cities and of urbanization the accent must be on the Greek city state and on the modern industrial metropolis. The unique must be subservient to the general.

The historical approach has by no means been confined to or even mainly concerned with studies of individual cities. But those studies concerned with the nature and origin of cities in general have tended to see the entire explanation in terms of one exclusive set of factors. To Pirenne all the facets of city life in medieval times, when the European city was established, could be explained in economic terms. To him the city was a community of merchants. The force of his classic work lay in the skilful development of this simple central thesis. He traced the growth of commerce in early medieval Europe and the way in which certain settlements responded—largely because of their favoured location. Contact between Venice and the eastern world centring on Constantinople gave rise to the great entrepreneur cities of Lombardy; contact between northern Europe and Scandinavia and Russia centred on the Netherlands. Elsewhere in Europe great fairs were established where peripatetic merchants met to exchange goods. These were usually at already existing settlements. Pirenne distinguished sharply between the existing towns and the cities into which some of these towns grew. The towns had their own markets, but these were strictly local and therefore in a different category from the few centres which served as economic foci for the whole of Europe. The latter became cities. Sometimes economic locational advantages were enough, and cities arose where there had been no privileged market previously. 'Geographical advantage plus the presence of a town or a fortified burgh seems the essential and necessary condition for a colony of merchants.' What Pirenne envisaged was a Europe of small market towns—none with more than a strictly local significance—which witnessed a commercial renaissance in the 10th century. This transformed some of them into cities which were consequently distinguished by merchant and manufacturing classes, and eventually by a middle class, all organized within a set of new communal institutions. The town was a stepping-stone to the city.

Few writers have given such primacy to the commercial function. Some classic contributions have stressed other facets. The importance of legal institutions came first for H. S. Maine and F. W. Maitland. Again, put in its simplest terms, this meant that the distinction between a borough and a village lay mainly in its organization: the former was a corporate body and the latter was not. Other institutional theories have given religion a central place in explaining the origin of towns.

The weakness of most of these theories is that they are too exclusive. It is true that Pirenne, for example, recognized factors other than the economic—such as the need for defence and the rise of crafts and manufacturing—but he relegated these to a very secondary order. In doing so he probably weakened his thesis. None of the single explanations is a sufficient condition of a city, though it may be a necessary condition.

An interesting development and expansion of the idea of the city as crossroads has been made by Robert S. Lopez.[1] He takes as a symbol of the city the earliest known ideogram, an Egyptian hieroglyph. This is a cross within a circle, and to Lopez this symbolizes the city's origin and function. The cross stands for convergence, the meeting, not only of merchandise, but of men and ideas. The circle stands for the moat or wall, but although this is historically so often the case it may further symbolize the compactness of a community, or even the moral barriers it can erect to protect its society. This ideogram is the oldest 'definition' of a city, says Lopez, and the most fitting. He summarizes it in the words 'communication plus togetherness'. The interest of this theory lies in its suggestions and explanations not only of origins and growth, but also of possible decline. With growing speed of transport the convergence could become—as indeed it has in the modern city—a handicap: the centre may lose the main thing it once offered—accessibility. In the same way the function of a wall can change from protection to confinement: it can be a hindrance to growth; it can symbolize the cutting off of a city from the outside world, and this could lead to decline. Lopez suggests that Pirenne was satisfied with the crossroads symbol, and that this was not enough. In adding the circle he has introduced a wider concept. One could still criticize the symbolism. It has been said that the cross is too exclusive a symbol, and that it could well have been a mason's hammer—i.e., the symbol of industrialization rather than convergence.

[1] R. S. Lopez, 'The Crossroads within the Wall' in O. Handlin and J. Burchard (eds.), *The Historian and the City*, Cambridge, Mass., 1963.

Even though the symbol of circle and cross may stand for the non-material aspects of urban life, Lopez's interpretation is still basically concerned with the city in a physical sense, and its function. But one can approach the city from an entirely different aspect, as many sociologists and psychologists have done. It is quite a jump from the idea of crossroads and wall to the statement that 'the city is a state of mind, a body of customs and tradition'. The concern here is with the mode of life which is thought to be characteristic of groups in a city and different from that outside the city. This is exemplified in an article by Louis Wirth called 'Urbanism as a Way of Life'.[1] His acceptance of the criteria of size and density is a necessary part of this thesis. His sociological definition of a city is 'a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals'. If we want to simplify this to the single underlying concept, this is social heterogeneity. Size contributes to the loss of personal contact and the substitution of communication by means other than face-to-face contacts, to diversity and specialization, to anonymity. Density has the effect of throwing together this diversity and encouraging and stimulating new departures in technology and ideas. Basically, under a city structure the old social framework breaks down and a new one takes its place. With the loss of primary contacts go the decline of kinship and the weakening of family ties. The allegiance which replaces them is to diverse groups which, by their very multiplicity, encourage movement. Instability becomes a norm and mobility is given a new significance. An old American song says that 'Any old place I hang my hat is home sweet home to me'. In many ways this symbolizes urban society. It is this new social framework, this new set of group relationships which typify the city, according to Wirth.

A great amount of research has been done on the sociological differences between town and country. The differences are impressive, even in vital statistics. But whether they are as clear-cut and overwhelming today in an urbanized country like our own is becoming more debatable. On the one hand perhaps kinship ties are more difficult to eradicate than was once thought, and can still be found in great cities.[2] On the other hand many of the characteristics which used to belong only to cities no longer do so exclusively. Mobility, complex occupational and class structure, intricate group allegiance—all these things are now shared by rural communities

[1] *American Journal of Sociology*, XLIV, 1938.

[2] See P. Willmott and M. D. Young, *Family and Kinship in East London*, London, 1959.

in Western society. This is the direct outcome of increasing communication. As far as ideas and ways of life are concerned, the cross roads symbol—which implies limited routeways as well as convergence—has broken down completely. Telephone, radio, and television are making spatial differentiation less and less relevant, and there is a sense in which a small country like Britain can be thought of as being wholly urban. Even in the more literal sense of communication the city may be disintegrating and, in so doing, blurring our concepts of what is urban and what is rural.

An immediate criticism of the too exclusively sociological approach is its disregard of the more obvious features of the city—its houses and streets and public buildings and shops. Perhaps the ideas which best married bricks and mortar on the one hand and way of life on the other came from the ecological school of Chicago in the 1920s, and were first set out in the book called *The City* by R. E. Park, E. W. Burgess, and R. D. McKenzie. The term 'ecology' implies—as it does in the natural sciences—the very close relationship between population and environment. In this case the environment is man-made, and the relationship between it and society is very intricate. As a result, distinctive culture areas are found in the city. Moreover it is suggested that the city has laws of its own which direct its growth and development. A city, then, is thought to conform to a strict pattern. Part of this pattern is social, but the emphasis is on the fact that these arise inside a network of neighbourhoods and localities. 'A city represents an externally organised unit in space produced by laws of its own.' Space is given a new meaning. Not only does one now recognize distinctive parts of the city such as the slum, the industrial district, the middle-class residential district, and so on; but these are so related one to another that they set up a recognizable pattern. According to Burgess, Western towns are zoned concentrically. The ecologist sees his task as one of discovering these relationships and patterns and constructing the laws which govern them. Some of their concepts have necessarily been a little crude, but they have certainly led to research which has given new insight into the city and how it works. The main criticism which social scientists make is that the purely sociological concepts are too weak, and that the city environment is stressed at the expense of the society which gave rise to it. Others welcome the reintroduction into the picture of the fabric of the city, and the new emphasis on place and the way in which this reflects social, economic, and historical forces.

To a geographer in particular this coming down to earth is most

acceptable, particularly in the awakened interest which geographers are showing in the city. Perhaps his own approach has always been the most matter of fact, because in the past it has emphasized the part played by the physical environment, particularly in the siting of cities. Sociologists like Cooley noted the significance of breaks in transportation in city origin. Vidal de la Blache[1] pointed out that this break was usually at the border of some great impediment to communication. For example a large number of cities have arisen at the foot of mountain ranges, on the fringes of great deserts like the Sahara, and of course at sea-coasts where, in particular, methods of transportation have to be changed.

The most conspicuous contributions of geographers to the study of cities do not lie in explaining sites and growth, however, but in putting the city into its regional setting. Stressing the contrast between town and country, and isolating the city as a discrete concept, in many ways falsifies the total picture beyond what is reasonable for analysis. To return to the Egyptian ideogram, the circle may lead us into the greatest error by suggesting that it also limits the roads which form the cross inside it. Commercial theories of the rise of cities, like Pirenne's, have implicit in them the extension of these roads: they are the confluence of routeways. But the focusing of attention on the 'togetherness' of the city has ignored the wider regional significance of those roads. City life is dependent on a rural area—normally the immediate countryside—for its food. It provides services for an area greatly beyond its boundaries. It is in fact a centre of exchange for a smaller or larger region around itself. Sometimes a very large city, like Constantinople at its height, depends upon—and serves—a vast area: Constantinople's wheat came from Egypt and the Black Sea, and the city dominated an Empire. Normally the relationships are more local. The Greek city state recognized this fact in deliberately ignoring the urban-rural differences as far as politics were concerned, and thus acknowledging, not the schism between two ways of life, but their interdependence.

The title of a book by R. E. Dickinson, *City and Region*, suggests the degree to which some geographers have returned to this concept. To a large extent, and particularly in an economic sense, the city reflects its region: in a complementary way the region is dependent on the city for all those specialized functions which hinge on exchange and manufacture and service. Geographers have been

[1] P. Vidal de la Blache, *Principles of Human Geography*, 1926 (1st English edition).

concerned not only with analysing this relationship, but with measuring it. Later chapters will deal with some of these techniques. Here it is sufficient to point out that marketing activities can easily be measured by, for example, plotting farms taking their produce to a specific market; whereas the distribution of a local newspaper will be a fair index of the spread of cultural influences from any town. What complicates the issue is that towns offer a great variety of services, from the bare minimum to the plethora offered by a city like London. This means that the index for marketing may give you one series of regions, but those for highly specialized services will give another within which are the many smaller marketing regions. There are regions within regions. This raises the point of whether there is a constant relationship between grades of regions which results in a geometric pattern. It certainly demonstrates that towns of different sizes may be arranged in a series offering different services and having different structures. A. E. Smailes has arranged the towns of Britain into a hierarchical classification, suggesting an increasing range of functions from the smallest market town to the largest metropolitan city. The emphasis in his work is on the increasing complexity of the market and service function of towns. Other geographers have also been concerned with the specialized functions of most towns and the way in which these suggest possible classifications. It is probably true to say that in all these studies of town regions, of hierarchical functions, and of classification, economic indices have been most frequently used, mainly because of the functional approach, but partly because economic data are more easily available and measurable than social. But there is a growing concern that greater expression should be given to the social structure and dynamics of towns and their regions.

The city itself, its land use, functional zones, and 'townscape', has also been studied by geographers, dealing with it as a complete environment in itself. From the point of view of the theory of the city such studies tend to be sterile unless they contribute to an ecological understanding of the problem. To recognize the city as a product of social forces is not enough without also studying its society. It is social analysis which gives ultimate meaning to the different parts of the city. It is also essential to examine the dynamic aspects of population, the ebb and flow of day and night populations, commuters' journeys, migration. Here the geographer is pursuing an ecological approach, although his ultimate interest will be in place rather than process.

A final concept which is very often associated with the city is that