

THE CULTURE OF CITIES

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*As far back as 1915, under the stimulus of Patrick Geddes, I began to collect the materials that have gone into this book. Like my hitherto published papers and books on architecture, community planning, housing, and regional development, the present study rests primarily on first-hand surveys, conducted in many different regions: beginning with a close study of my own city and region—New York and its immediate hinterland. It both attempts to explore in a more unified way a field hitherto worked on divergent lines by specialists, and to establish, for the purpose of communal action, the basic principles upon which our human environment—buildings, neighborhoods, cities, regions—may be renovated. Certain aspects of life, those ordinarily treated under the head of ethics, religion, and education, remain to be dealt with at another time. Even at the risk of an occasional repetition of thought, I have had to parallel in this volume parts of *Technics and Civilization*; but it should be plain that the two works, while independent, are complementary: each seeks to explore what the modern world may hold for mankind once men of good will have learned to subdue the barbarous mechanisms and the mechanized barbarisms that now threaten the very existence of civilization.*

L. M.

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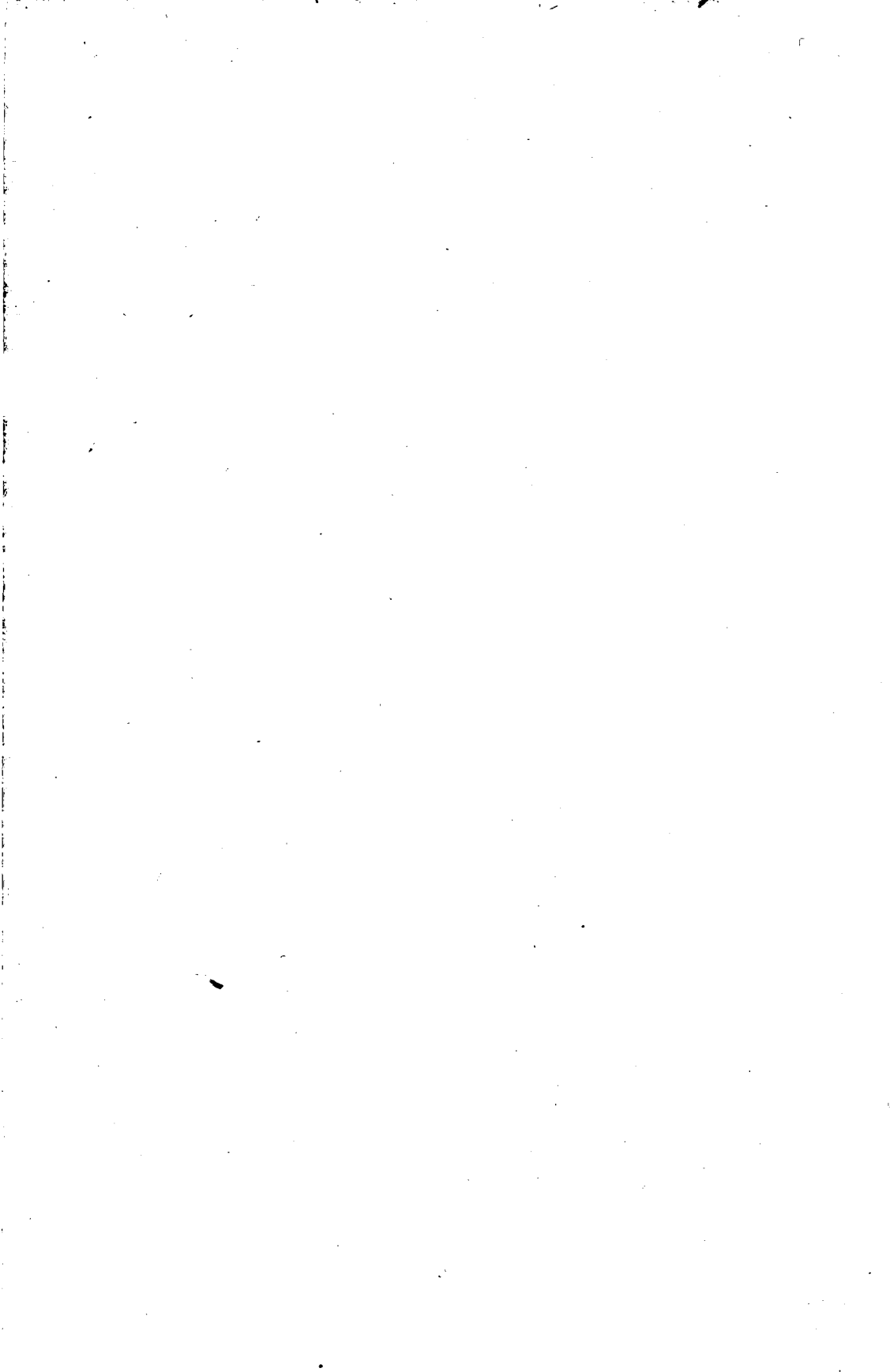
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INTRODUCTION

The city, as one finds it in history, is the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community. It is the place where the diffused rays of many separate beams of life fall into focus, with gains in both social effectiveness and significance. The city is the form and symbol of an integrated social relationship: it is the seat of the temple, the market, the hall of justice, the academy of learning. Here in the city the goods of civilization are multiplied and manifolded; here is where human experience is transformed into viable signs, symbols, patterns of conduct, systems of order. Here is where the issues of civilization are focused: here, too, ritual passes on occasion into the active drama of a fully differentiated and self-conscious society.

Cities are a product of the earth. They reflect the peasant's cunning in dominating the earth; technically they but carry further his skill in turning the soil to productive uses, in enfolding his cattle for safety, in regulating the waters that moisten his fields, in providing storage bins and barns for his crops. Cities are emblems of that settled life which began with permanent agriculture: a life conducted with the aid of permanent shelters, permanent utilities like orchards, vineyards, and irrigation works, and permanent buildings for protection and storage.

Every phase of life in the countryside contributes to the existence of cities. What the shepherd, the woodman, and the miner know, becomes transformed and "etherealized" through the city into durable elements in the human heritage: the textiles and butter of one, the moats and dams and wooden pipes and lathes of another, the metals and jewels of the third, are finally converted into instruments of urban living: underpinning the city's economic existence, contribut-

ing art and wisdom to its daily routine. Within the city the essence of each type of soil and labor and economic goal is concentrated: thus arise greater possibilities for interchange and for new combinations not given in the isolation of their original habitats.

Cities are a product of time. They are the molds in which men's lifetimes have cooled and congealed, giving lasting shape, by way of art, to moments that would otherwise vanish with the living and leave no means of renewal or wider participation behind them. In the city, time becomes visible: buildings and monuments and public ways, more open than the written record, more subject to the gaze of many men than the scattered artifacts of the countryside, leave an imprint upon the minds even of the ignorant or the indifferent. Through the material fact of preservation, time challenges time, time clashes with time: habits and values carry over beyond the living group, streaking with different strata of time the character of any single generation. Layer upon layer, past times preserve themselves in the city until life itself is finally threatened with suffocation: then, in sheer defense, modern man invents the museum.

By the diversity of its time-structures, the city in part escapes the tyranny of a single present, and the monotony of a future that consists in repeating only a single beat heard in the past. Through its complex orchestration of time and space, no less than through the social division of labor, life in the city takes on the character of a symphony: specialized human aptitudes, specialized instruments, give rise to sonorous results which, neither in volume nor in quality, could be achieved by any single piece.

Cities arise out of man's social needs and multiply both their modes and their methods of expression. In the city remote forces and influences intermingle with the local: their conflicts are no less significant than their harmonies. And here, through the concentration of the means of intercourse in the market and the meeting place, alternative modes of living present themselves: the deeply rutted ways of the village cease to be coercive and the ancestral goals cease to be all-sufficient: strange men and women, strange interests, and stranger gods loosen the traditional ties of blood and neighborhood. A sailing ship, a caravan, stopping at the city, may bring a new dye for wool, a new glaze for the potter's dish, a new system of signs for

long distance communication, or a new thought about human destiny.

In the urban milieu, mechanical shocks produce social results; and social needs may take shape in contrivances and inventions which will lead industries and governments into new channels of experiment. Now the need for a common fortified spot for shelter against predatory attack draws the inhabitants of the indigenous village into a hillside fortification: through the compulsive mingling for defense, the possibilities for more regular intercourse and wider co-operation arise. That fact helps transform the nest of villages into a unified city, with its higher ceiling of achievement and its wider horizons. Now the collective sharing of experience, and the stimulus of rational criticism, turn the rites of the village festival into the more powerful imaginative forms of the tragic drama: experience is deepened, as well as more widely circulated, through this process. Or again, on another plane, the goldsmith's passive repository for valuables becomes, through the pressure of urban needs and the opportunities of the market, the dynamic agent of capitalism, the bank, lending money as well as keeping it, putting capital into circulation, finally dominating the processes of trade and production.

The city is a fact in nature, like a cave, a run of mackerel or an ant-heap. But it is also a conscious work of art, and it holds within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art. Mind *takes form* in the city; and in turn, urban forms condition mind. For space, no less than time, is artfully reorganized in cities: in boundary lines and silhouettes, in the fixing of horizontal planes and vertical peaks, in utilizing or denying the natural site, the city records the attitude of a culture and an epoch to the fundamental facts of its existence. The dome and the spire, the open avenue and the closed court, tell the story, not merely of different physical accommodations, but of essentially different conceptions of man's destiny. The city is both a physical utility for collective living and a symbol of those collective purposes and unanimities that arise under such favoring circumstance. With language itself, it remains man's greatest work of art.

Through its concrete, visible command over space the city lends itself, not only to the practical offices of production, but to the daily communion of its citizens: this constant effect of the city, as a col-

lective work of art, was expressed in a classic manner by Thomas Mann in his address to his fellow-townsmen of Lübeck on the celebration of the anniversary of Lübeck's foundation. When the city ceases to be a symbol of art and order, it acts in a negative fashion: it expresses and helps to make more universal the fact of disintegration. In the close quarters of the city, perversities and evils spread more quickly; and in the stones of the city, these anti-social facts become embedded: it is not the triumphs of urban living that awaken the prophetic wrath of a Jeremiah, a Savonarola, a Rousseau, or a Ruskin.

What transforms the passive agricultural regime of the village into the active institutions of the city? The difference is not merely one of magnitude, density of population, or economic resources. For the active agent is any factor that extends the area of local intercourse, that engenders the need for combination and co-operation, communication and communion; and that so creates a common underlying pattern of conduct, and a common set of physical structures, for the different family and occupational groups that constitute a city. These opportunities and activities superimpose upon primary groups, based upon traditional acceptances and daily face-to-face contact, the more active associations, the more specialized functions, and the more purposive interests of secondary groups: in the latter the purpose is not given, but chosen: the membership and the activities are selective: the group itself becomes specialized and differentiated.

Historically, the increase of population, through the change from hunting to agriculture, may have abetted this change; the widening of trade routes and the diversification of occupations likewise helped. But the nature of the city is not to be found simply in its economic base: the city is primarily a social emergent. The mark of the city is its purposive social complexity. It represents the maximum possibility of humanizing the natural environment and of naturalizing the human heritage: it gives a cultural shape to the first, and it externalizes, in permanent collective forms, the second.

"The central and significant fact about the city," as Geddes and Branford pointed out, "is that the city . . . functions as the specialized organ of social transmission. It accumulates and embodies

the heritage of a region, and combines in some measure and kind with the cultural heritage of larger units, national, racial, religious, human. On one side is the individuality of the city—the sign manual of its regional life and record. On the other are the marks of the civilization, in which each particular city is a constituent element.”

Today a great many things stand in the way of grasping the rôle of the city and of transforming this basic means of communal existence. During the last few centuries the strenuous mechanical organization of industry, and the setting up of tyrannous political states, have blinded most men to the importance of facts that do not easily fit into the general pattern of mechanical conquest, capitalistic forms of exploitation, and power politics. Habitually, people treat the realities of personality and association and city as abstractions, while they treat confused pragmatic abstractions such as money, credit, political sovereignty, as if they were concrete realities that had an existence independent of human conventions.

Looking back over the course of Western Civilization since the fifteenth century, it is fairly plain that mechanical integration and social disruption have gone on side by side. Our capacity for effective physical organization has enormously increased; but our ability to create a harmonious counterpoise to these external linkages by means of co-operative and civic associations on both a regional and a world-wide basis, like the Christian Church in the Middle Ages, has not kept pace with these mechanical triumphs. By one of those mischievous turns, from which history is rarely free, it was precisely during this period of flowing physical energies, social disintegration, and bewildered political experiment that the populations of the world as a whole began mightily to increase, and the cities of the Western World began to grow at an inordinate rate. Forms of social life that the wisest no longer understood, the more ignorant were prepared to build. Or rather: the ignorant were completely unprepared, but that did not prevent the building.

The result was not a temporary confusion and an occasional lapse in efficiency. What followed was a crystallization of chaos: disorder hardened uncouthly in metropolitan slum and industrial factory districts; and the exodus into the dormitory suburbs and factory spores that surrounded the growing cities merely widened the area of social

derangement. The mechanized physical shell took precedence in every growing town over the civic nucleus: men became dissociated as citizens in the very process of coming together in imposing economic organizations. Even industry, which was supposedly served by this planless building and random physical organization, lost seriously in efficiency: it failed to produce a new urban form that served directly its complicated processes. As for the growing urban populations, they lacked the most elementary facilities for urban living, even sunlight and fresh air, to say nothing of the means to a more vivid social life. The new cities grew up without the benefit of coherent social knowledge or orderly social effort: they lacked the useful urban folkways of the Middle Ages or the confident esthetic command of the Baroque period: indeed, a seventeenth century Dutch peasant, in his little village, knew more about the art of living in communities than a nineteenth century municipal councilor in London or Berlin. Statesmen who did not hesitate to weld together a diversity of regional interests into national states, or who wove together an empire that girdled the planet, failed to produce even a rough draft of a decent neighborhood.

In every department, form disintegrated: except in its heritage from the past, the city vanished as an embodiment of collective art and technics. And where, as in North America, the loss was not alleviated by the continued presence of great monuments from the past and persistent habits of social living, the result was a raw, dissolute environment, and a narrow, constricted, and baffled social life. Even in Germany and the Low Countries, where the traditions of urban life had lingered on from the Middle Ages, the most colossal blunders were committed in the most ordinary tasks of urban planning and building. As the pace of urbanization increased, the circle of devastation widened.

Today we face not only the original social disruption. We likewise face the accumulated physical and social results of that disruption: ravaged landscapes, disorderly urban districts, pockets of disease, patches of blight, mile upon mile of standardized slums, worming into the outlying areas of big cities, and fusing with their ineffectual suburbs. In short: a general miscarriage and defeat of civilized effort. So far have our achievements fallen short of our needs

that even a hundred years of persistent reform in England, the first country to suffer heavily from disurbanization, have only in the last decade begun to leave an imprint. True: here and there patches of good building and coherent social form exist: new nodes of integration can be detected, and since 1920 these patches have been spreading. But the main results of more than a century of misbuilding and malformation, dissociation and disorganization still hold. Whether the observer focuses his gaze on the physical structure of communal living or upon the social processes that must be embodied and expressed, the report remains the same.

Today we begin to see that the improvement of cities is no matter for small one-sided reforms: the task of city design involves the vaster task of rebuilding our civilization. We must alter the parasitic and predatory modes of life that now play so large a part, and we must create region by region, continent by continent, an effective symbiosis, or co-operative living together. The problem is to co-ordinate, on the basis of more essential human values than the will-to-power and the will-to-profits, a host of social functions and processes that we have hitherto misused in the building of cities and politics, or of which we have never rationally taken advantage.

Unfortunately, the fashionable political philosophies of the past century are of but small help in defining this new task: they dealt with legal abstractions, like Individual and State, with cultural abstractions, like Humanity, the Nation, the Folk, or with bare economic abstractions like the Capitalist Class or the Proletariat—while life as it was lived in the concrete, in regions and cities and villages, in wheatland and cornland and vineland, in the mine, the quarry, the fishery, was conceived as but a shadow of the prevailing myths and arrogant fantasies of the ruling classes—or the often no less shadowy fantasies of those who challenged them.

Here and there one notes, of course, valiant exceptions both in theory and in action. Le Play and Reclus in France, W. H. Riehl in Germany, Kropotkin in Russia, Howard in England, Grundtvig in Denmark, Geddes in Scotland, began half a century ago to lay the ideological basis for a new order. The insights of these men may prove as important for the new biotechnic regime, based on the deliberate culture of life, as the formulations of Leonardo, Galileo,