Throughout history, cities have been places where people gather to exchange goods, ideas and culture. Americans, however, have always been ambivalent about cities, fretting over the noise, congestion, lack of privacy and social ills that often attend urban growth. The roots of this ambivalence lie deep within the agrarian foundation of the United States and anchor the thinking of such major intellectuals as Thomas Jefferson, Henry David Thoreau and Frank Lloyd Wright. So perhaps it is not surprising that an alternative — suburban living — would become so wildly popular in the years following World War II. Yet many critics see the vitality of the nation's sprawling suburbs as having come at the expense of its cities. Nearly 75 years ago, critic Lewis Mumford aptly described the space-gobbling aspect of the American character as the "romanticism of the pioneer." In his view, such overly romantic notions would eventually lead to disequilibrium or even disaster.

Outside of architecture and urban planning circles, few people today know Lewis Mumford’s name. Yet, in the early-to-mid 20th century, he was a towering American intellectual with an international reputation. By turns journalist, critic and academician, Mumford was the author of more than 20 books and 1,000 articles and reviews, on subjects ranging from art and literature to the histories of technology and urbanism. His book, The City in History, won the 1962 National Book Award for nonfiction. Before his death in 1990 at age 94, Mumford received numerous accolades, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom (1964) and the National Medal of the Arts (1986).
And Vision Of Lewis Mumford
Ten years after his passing, Mumford is still regarded as the leading 20th century authority on cities — their history, design and communal purpose. Mumford believed in looking beyond a mere cityscape of buildings and streets to the vibrant network of human relationships that are cities’ very raison d’etre. In the early part of his career, Mumford watched American cities boom during the prosperity of the 1920s and then decline during the Great Depression. In his view, dense urban development patterns at that time were tied too closely to free market development and not to sound social policy.

Subsequently, the sprawling American suburbs of the post-World War II era seemed to Mumford to lack any sense of communal focus with their separate residential, commercial and cultural centers and their emphasis on automobile transportation. Although Mumford advocated the establishment of moderately dense regional cities to siphon off some of the pressure on American metropolitan areas, except for isolated experiments such as Radburn, New Jersey and Reston, Virginia, no fully developed examples were constructed in his lifetime.

Engaging The Imagination

Part of the difficulty in evaluating Mumford lies in his own refusal to be pigeonholed intellectually. In a used bookstore, for example, one might as easily find his books shelved in the social sciences as in the arts or humanities. Mumford thought of himself not as a specialist but as a generalist, one who sought to make connections among various academic disciplines in order to discern a larger purpose in human endeavors. This, combined with his belief that society could be improved through rational and ecologically sound planning, marks him as a committed modernist. Postmodernism, the dominant intellectual mode of the present that emphasizes, among other things, the fragmenta-
tion of meaning and the failure of planning, has largely ignored him. This is unfortunate, for Mumford remains a remarkably prescient and relevant writer whose work stands ready to engage the imagination of a new generation of readers.

Mumford was born in 1895 in Flushing, Long Island, three years before the consolidation of New York City. An only and illegitimate child, he was raised by his mother on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Books were his most beloved companions; Ralph Waldo Emerson, H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw were among his favorite authors.

Mumford graduated from Stuyvesant High School in 1912. Although he studied for several years at the City College of New York, he left before receiving his baccalaureate degree.

His education was largely self-directed after that, using as his role model the Scots intellectual Patrick Geddes, a biologist turned educator and town planner, who was at the center of Edinburgh’s turn-of-the-20th-century cultural renascence. Following Geddes’ example, Mumford began a series of “regional surveys,” essentially extended walks around the New York metropolitan area, during which he would sketch and take notes. So committed was he to the study of his environment that Mumford continued these surveys even during his stateside tour of duty with the U.S. Navy in 1918-1919.

Following his discharge from the Navy, Mumford quickly established himself as a journalist, writing critical reviews and commentary for such publications as The Dial, The Freeman, The American Mercury, The New Republic and The Journal of the American Institute of Architects. In 1921, he married his Dial colleague, Sophia Wittenberg. The couple eventually had two children, and through freelancing and lecturing, Mumford was successful enough to sustain his small family. In 1931, Mumford began a long tenure at The New Yorker, writing art and architecture criticism, the latter under the heading of “The Sky Line.” This was perhaps the most influential column of its kind in the United States, with an audience composed of professionals and nonprofessionals alike. Mumford’s witty prose ideally meshed with the magazine’s urbane image.

Changing The World

Although Mumford was not himself an architect or planner, he became the spokesman for the Regional Planning Association of America, an informal group of architects, planners, economists and writers who came to prominence during the 1920s and 1930s. This group lobbied business and government for the establishment of regional cities as an antidote to the metropolitan congestion then increasing at an alarming rate. Essentially a reworking of the British “garden city,” the regional city would be planned on a sustainable scale with requisite residential, cultural, commercial and industrial components. Furthermore, the regional city would be surrounded by an agricultural greenbelt that would supply its food as well as delineate its borders from neighboring communities.

Among the association’s best-known achievements are the planning of the Appalachian Trail along the eastern mountain ridge of the United States, the residential neigh-
borhood of Sunnyside Gardens in Queens, New York, and
the New Jersey town of Radburn, the forerunner of today’s
neo-traditional suburbs. The “townless highway,” one of the
association’s most ambitious proposals, would have linked
America’s cities via limited-access parkways. Unlike today’s
interstate highways, townless highways were intended to har-
monize with the rural landscape while skirting downtown
districts altogether.

During the late 1930s, Mumford took a bold political
stance in his writings, urging his countrymen to
enter World War II on the Allies’ side. Consequently, he alienated many of his friends,
including the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, but to
Mumford, intervention was the only morally
acceptable choice in the fight against Nazism and
fascism. Sadly, Mumford’s son Geddes was among
the thousands of U.S. servicemen killed in battle.
After the war, Mumford redirected his attention to
the threat of global nuclear annihilation, and in
later books and articles, he warned his readers that
technology, left unchecked by human reason,
would lead to mass destruction. He was vocal in his opposition
to the Vietnam War and also to the environmental
degradation brought about by industry, the automobile
and ineffective planning.

His most important contribution to the study of tech-
nology was his construct of the “megamachine,” which in
antiquity he identified as the vast human organization that
had built the pyramids and, in the 20th century, as the vast,
nearly automated organization that had built the atomic
bomb. Had the Internet been more pervasive at the time of
Mumford’s death, one wonders what he would have extrapo-
lated, both positive and negative, from it. Yet, Mumford ulti-
mately believed in humanity’s ability to renew itself, and it is
not surprising that his ideas of the 1960s found favor with a
younger generation of readers looking to change the world
for the better.

The recent spate of neo-traditional suburbs
— including Seaside, Florida and Kentlands,
Maryland — would have ultimately dissatisfied
Mumford. Though they imitate the pedestrian
scale and Romantic architecture of older
American towns, they do not provide the unique
civic focal points, let alone the civic institutions,
that have defined all great cities from ancient
Athens to Renaissance Florence. Of some suburbs’
plans to create town centers from scratch where
none presently exist, Mumford would, I think,
have only shaken his head in disbelief. “Go slow!”
he might have said, in the same way that he once advised a
U.S. Senate committee on housing and urban renewal to
“experiment with small measures and small units” until such
time that government or society could better plan and
organize for an uncertain future. In Mumford’s view, without
patience or prudence, neither the good of the community nor
of humanity would be well served.

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