



Chicago, looking south, December 2011 (Elvin Wyly)

the

new chicago school

G448 Option

A century ago, a group of sociologists at the University of Chicago began a research project that eventually became one of the most influential ways of approaching cities. The “Chicago School of Sociology” became influential not just in sociology, but also in urban planning, urban geography, journalism, and amongst novelists and other writers. But dominance invites questions and challenges. Many began to see the dominant paradigm as a barrier to new insights, and so a period of backlash set in sometime around the 1970s. By that time, the phrase “Chicago School” was being used to describe an influential band of thinkers in another field -- economics -- led by the free-market advocate Milton Friedman.

Now, forty years later, many of us have forgotten the details in that vast literature produced in and about Chicago in the first half of the twenty-first century. Is it worth taking a closer look at what was forgotten? Several features of our present world suggest it’s worth the effort. We’re living in a world that is, for the first time in history, majority urban. We’re living in a world of dramatic ecological pressures. Many experts are convinced that human society must find new ways of building cities and living in cities if we are to avoid ecological catastrophe. This involves adapting one of the key Chicago School ideas -- something called “human ecology” -- for the social and technological conditions of the twenty-first century.

Interested? Read these quotes, track down and read a bit of the original sources, then come talk to me and we’ll come up with a more extensive reading list...

“There are forces at work within the limits of the urban community -- within the limits of any natural area of human habitation, in fact -- which tend to bring about an orderly and typical grouping of its population and institutions. The science which seeks to isolate these factors and to describe the typical constellations of persons and institutions which the co-operation of these forces produce, is what we call human, as distinguished from plant and animal, ecology.”

Robert E. Park (1925). “The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment.” Chapter 1 in Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie, *The City*, 1-46, pp. 1-2.

“A living building is really an entity with its own metabolism, which needs a brain of some sort to nourish it. That could be a human being, or better yet a robotic Jeeves (or maybe Leevies) who tends its herbal roof, meadow walls and human family with equal pride, and is a good listener. ‘Smart houses’ already

have plenty of bells and whistles run by savvy computer brains. Artificial intelligence is growing up fast, as are robots whose facial expressions can elicit empathy and make your mirror neurons quiver.”

Diane Ackerman (2012). “Living, Thinking Houses.” *New York Times*, August 5, p. SR 11.