

Lewis Mumford, “What is a City?”

Lewis Mumford (1895-1990) “has been called the United States’ last great public intellectual” -- a scholar who wrote for a wide audience, and who refused to be boxed in by the categories and departments usually found in universities. His “What is a City?” was a talk delivered to an audience of urban planners at a decisive moment in the history of cities -- when planning came to be understood as an enterprise designed to adjust the rhythms of human life to the emerging scale of the giant, modern, industrial metropolis. Many experts were advising the construction of ever-larger highways and other facilities to serve the massive machinery of the industrial age.

Mumford was deeply concerned about the mechanical thinking that seemed to come with the rise of the large metropolis; the buildings, the factories, the machines that surround us in the modern city, Mumford argued, are distracting us from what really matters in urban society -- the social drama of the city as an achievement of civilization, culture, art, and theater. New York City was his reference point for the ultimate large metropolis, but he traveled widely and read everything he could about every large city -- and thus his writing tries to avoid dealing with specifics. The details change from day to day; Mumford sought to draw our attention to more durable, fundamental principles.

Consider a few key quotes from this reading:

“The city fosters art and is art; the city creates the theater and is the theater. It is in the city, the city as theater, that [humanity’s] more purposive activities are focused, and work out, through conflicting and cooperating personalities, events, groups, into more significant culminations.”

“Without the social drama that comes into existence through the focusing and intensification of group activity there is not a single function performed in the city that could not be performed -- and has not in fact been performed -- in the open country. The physical organization of the city may deflate this drama or make it frustrate; or it may, through the deliberate efforts of art, politics, and education, make the drama more richly significant, as a stage-set, well-designed, intensifies and underlines the gestures of the actors and the action of the play.”

“Whereas in the development of the city during the last century we expanded the physical plant recklessly and treated the essential social nucleus, the organs of government and education and social service, as mere afterthought, today we must treat the social nucleus as the essential element in every valid city plan: the spotting and inter-relationship of schools, libraries, theaters, community centers is the first task in defining the urban neighborhood and laying down the outlines of an integrated city.”

Think of a city or town you know; what experiences in that city have reminded you of a 'city as art,' or the city environment as a 'well-designed stage-set' for a theater performance?

Can you think of examples of cities where the 'physical plant' has been expanded 'recklessly,' while social activities have been treated as mere afterthought?

Consider a city you know and love; if Lewis Mumford were still alive today, what would he say about your city as art, as theater?