



# The Urbacultural Opportunity

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THE URBANIZATION OF THIS COUNTRY follows inevitably from the flowering of science and technology. Industrialization is the handmaiden of the global growth of population. Affluence merely underscores the potential of urban life. The economic and cultural maturation of the nations of the world will accelerate the rate of city growth. The American experiment from this century forward will occur in cities. What is done now with and in our cities will help to shape the future planetary pattern of human life.

The quest for the Good Life by men living together has always involved a struggle between men and their environment, which includes fellow men. Two out of three Americans now reside in defined metropolitan areas; the question is whether or not the Good Life is possible among a people whose society is rapidly becoming citified. It is far more realistic to ask this question than to indulge in the nostalgia and myth surrounding the legendary log cabin, the covered wagon, or the rural town. The flight to suburbia, the decay of the central cities, and the disintegration of community life are symptoms of intellectual crises as well as of physical and technological problems. It is doubtful that life in the legendary log cabin, the covered wagon, or the village in which the town hall flourished was more conducive to democracy, equality, cultural attainment, and physical or material ease than is life in the slums of the great cities or in the sprawling suburbs surrounding them. In any event, the agricultural epoch has passed. This country is now an urbacultural nation.

The tremendous complexity of our urban life has created deep frustrations among leaders in all pursuits. The reaction to the frustrations has two basic expressions: deep concern with the technological and

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economic ramifications of the complexity and a dangerously extensive devotion of leadership talent to highly specialized urban pursuits.

It may be assumed that an attack upon the problems of poverty, health, slums, urban design, traffic control, air pollution, and government organization is a condition precedent to the realization of the Good Life among the people. Consequently, chambers of commerce, industrial relocation boards, housing and traffic control authorities, governmental study commissions, tax reform groups, urban planning committees and welfare agencies abound. The administrators of these agencies are influential in the formulation and expression of the urban issues. Onto their boards are channeled the talents of the most powerful leaders of industry, commerce, and the professions. These agencies compete among themselves for the public's attention and money. Each acquires its own mystique as well as its own staff and technique. Each develops its own jargon. Finally, the effectiveness of leadership in each comes to depend upon the skillful manipulation of the special technology and the jargon, and the acquisition of highly specialized skills.

The assumption that improved health, the greater consumption of goods, the expansion of physical comfort, and the promotion of more efficient government are conditions precedent to the enjoyment of the Good Life is not uniquely American. These ends are primary aspirations shared by Russians, Africans, Cubans, and Indians. What is unique here is the almost unqualified scope and influence of the assumption, notwithstanding the other value pretensions of American society. One may ask how a healthier, more comfortable, and more efficiently governed mankind will differ from the societies imagined by Messrs. Huxley and Orwell. Should those urban institutions charged with a special intellectual and cultural responsibility do something different in 1984 from what they do now?

Faith in the application of technology and the manipulation of the economic is doubtful at that point where it begins to preclude a concern with and an attack upon the intellectual and spiritual complexities generated by the urban environment. At that point, the paradoxes of the cultural environment become apparent. At that point, one may observe citizens who do not have enough food to eat and university presidents who do not have enough time to think; one may encounter poverty-ridden citizens who lack the energy and the impulse to read well, and keepers of the storehouses of our knowledge who are not well read. Amidst such paradoxes the American conception of free-

dom may become meaningless, and the city may return to its primitive functions—the physical protection of the tribe and the facilitation of an exchange of products.

Parallel to the growth of urban complexity and related to it is the fantastic accretion of what one professes to know. As the sheer bulk of what is known doubles with each decade, it is increasingly difficult to distill droplets of human wisdom from the swelling sea of human knowledge. In each city, on each campus, for each thoughtful man, the explosion of new facts and printed symbols dwarfs in importance even the spectacular population explosion of university students, museum visitors, and library users. The growth of knowledge threatens to do to the city of man's intellect what the dramatic growth of population is doing to the city of men. In one case the resulting slums and congestion stunt human life; in the other the mind and the spirit are debilitated.

Urbacultural complexity naturally leads one to admire the simplicity of the agricultural past. In the biological world the simplest organisms languish in the slime. The complex organisms display the greatest aptitude for the successful struggle with environment. Man's rank in the hierarchy of living things depends upon his superior complexity. Complexity in environment stimulates and agitates those qualities in a species most critical to its survival. In the case of man, his mind is tried. Increased complexity and growing rationality are two sides to the same coin. The introduction of order into environment is the natural thrust of the intellect. Order cannot be equated with simplicity nor is chaos a natural function of complexity. The new urban order is destined to be complex. The challenge to urban cultural and intellectual institutions is bound to be more complex.

Urban life is the challenge of creating complex order out of simple chaos. Intellectuality is the process of transforming specializations into wise generalizations. The creation of complex social order out of simple urban chaos is an intellectual task. The cultural and academic institutions in the city stand on this free society's intellectual frontier.

The challenge to the university in the city is unique. The difficult problems of urban life do not conform with the way most universities are organized. Most universities are organized the way known knowledge is classified, by disciplines. The difficult problems of urban life disregard these classifications. These urban problems no longer revolve basically around training men to make livelihoods or around up-dating professionals who once were exposed to a higher

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education. The difficult problems arise in the realm of each citizen's public associations with his fellows—in the areas of public philosophy, government policy, cultural quality, and men's views generally regarding their relationships to God, the state, and their nonoccupational connections to each other.

Among the issues arising from these categories are the public responsibilities of the mass media, gerontology, juvenile delinquency, the popularization of culture, the question of religious affiliation in public life, the plight of the Negro in American life, the conduct of our government with regard to the Cuban revolution, and peace. Each of these issues comes to a peculiar focus in the urban arena, for no one of these problems can be approached successfully without the mobilization of the talents and power uniquely present in the cities.

In a very real sense the urgent and most interesting urban issues are controversial, and the really significant issues are those which draw men out of their occupational slots into public arenas where their conduct will be governed by knowledge and experience unrelated to the know-how they possess as wage earners. A city can almost be diagrammed and defined in terms of the sheer number of public controversies among a given population living in proximity, the variety of opportunities for individuals to participate in these controversies, and the general tone of the population which encourages or discourages engagement in the public life and controversy. If one uses this measure it is clear why most suburbs and the rural town could never be classified as cities. Both the bulk and the configuration of power in the true city are different.

The university institution, as it confronts the uniqueness of city complexity, is often inept and ill-equipped. The assumption is frequently made that the university can simultaneously be neutral, catalytic, and intellectual; that fire, oil, and water can mix. A catalyst is by its nature not neutral. It is a force which releases energy in a given direction. The fruits of the intellect are never neutral, particularly when the fruits are eaten by those sitting at the table of public action. The university is seriously weakened by the over-extension of the fiction of its neutrality. Universities in most societies, but particularly in American society, are social institutions and social forces.

The difficulty of the city problems is not only that they demand the application of specialized knowledge, but that they desperately require wise generalization. So long as the universities regard themselves as loose confederations of specialized disciplines, served by

men whose stations depend only upon the refinement of their special knowledge, the universities will provide technical services rather than intellectual leadership in the urban arena.

Moreover, it is a mistake to assume that the universities are always the best reservoirs of our knowledge, know-how, and wisdom. In many cities, public library systems, for example, are more extensive and accessible compendiums of knowledge than universities. Many urban art museums possess both scholars and treasures superior to those possessed by universities. Practicing politicians often display far greater wisdom than practicing political scientists. Throughout American society—particularly in the urban politics—many institutions other than universities provide laboratories and workrooms for some of the nation's keenest minds. The growing position of the intellectual in the working community is one of the more exciting developments in American history. But their rise to leadership in nonacademic institutions does present a special problem to the universities as they advance their pretensions. Beyond the universities one need only look to the Pentagon, Solidarity House, the Rand Corporation, the Committee on Economic Development, or the General Motors Technical Center to grasp the competitive point. However, even the more traditional realms of scholarship, the Institute for Advanced Studies, the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, or the growing influence of the great private foundations accent the stresses upon the universities' claims to fame.

The unique opportunity of the university in the American city is to be found in the way it works to restore the integrity of urban life, of man as he lives and works among and with his fellows in cities. To confront this opportunity the universities must first come to grips with the threats to their own wholeness—the over-specialization of their own parts; the breakdown of connections *within* the humanities, the social sciences, and even the sciences, as well as the obvious gulfs separating these categories from each other. To discover the integrity of life in an urban society, the universities must reconsider the problem of their own integrity. This is essentially an intellectual problem—in many ways, *the* intellectual problem.

The library should be one of the common denominators of the way a university is and of what it aspires to be. From his ground the librarian should enjoy the best view of the whole. Indeed, he, better than most, should be able at least to describe the whole. But like most of the rest, librarians have sought their status in the mastery

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of techniques. Too often they retreat into the perfection of the doing, rather than facing up to the more difficult and troublesome problems of the basic causes of the complexity of what they do.

The rationale and spirit of an institution finally turn upon the reason and spirit of the men who lead it. Men shape the varying character and morale of different cities. Just as the integrity of our cities may be defined through the restoration of the wholeness of the academic institutions in them, so the wholeness of the academic institutions is contingent upon the leadership of whole men.