

Lewis Mumford's idea of community in an urban world

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It is a daunting task to recover a usable Mumford from his vast body of writing, myriad ideas and public career over a span of seventy years. These four books* make a substantial contribution to that end. Their shared virtues are clarity and thoughtfulness supported by firm scholarship. Useful perspectives are provided on modernization, social ecology, community planning and the human condition. Novak assembles and illuminates a historically important body of letters. Spann narrates an interplay of strong intellects with politics of social change in the 1920s and 1930s. Luccarelli and Wojtowicz cut an impressive swath through the entire scope of Mumford's thought and experience in the contexts of regionalism and architectural criticism. While all the books draw attention to men and women often forgotten but worth knowing about, Mumford is conspicuous for brilliance and charisma in the battle to reconcile urban growth with healthy environments and communities. His arsenal of values, shared by many supporters past and present, supplied articulate standards for change.

With reservations, Mumford believed in the city as a historical force contributing to human development. It is the salient artefact of all civilizations and a barometer of their rise and fall. The creative power of cities mirrors a wider cultural and social reality. When cities decay from neglect, civilization itself is in danger. This conviction was fleshed out in *The Culture of Cities* (1938) and *The City in History* (1961). The city at its best and worst is a *leitmotif* in Mumford's thought, for 'the culture of cities is ultimately the culture of life in its higher manifestations' (Wojtowicz, p. 113). He was also convinced that human-scale living is best suited for balancing the activities of people with their physical

* Mark Luccarelli, *Lewis Mumford and the Ecological Region: The Politics of Planning*. New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1995. 223pp. 12 figures. \$18.95.

Frank G. Novak, Jr (ed. and intro.), *Lewis Mumford and Patrick Geddes: The Correspondence*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. xv + 339pp. Appendices. \$75.00; £50.00.

Edward K. Spann, *Designing Modern America: The Regional Planning Association of America and Its Members*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1996. xvi + 226pp. Bibliography. \$45.00.

Robert Wojtowicz, *Lewis Mumford and American Modernism: Eutopian Themes for Architecture and Urban Planning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xii + 194pp. 16 plates. Bibliography. \$85.00; £55.00.

surroundings. A major problem with cities is the disease of 'metropolitanism', a type of gigantism that spills over to engulf and regiment the countryside. The outcome of such urban imperialism is to vandalize regional distinctiveness and diminish cultural variety. The antidote is community planning to preserve regional autonomy and a healthy mix of civic, economic and cultural activities.

Critics fault Mumford as a utopian moralist oblivious of politics, burdened with socialist tendencies, and committed to elitist programmes managed from the top down. His notion of the 'megamachine' draws the charge of crypto-Luddite. His preoccupation with the whole rather than the part provokes the retort that nothing changes for him unless everything changes, which is not likely. His view that social change depends on a spontaneous transformation of the individual is dismissed as a premise for collective inaction. There is some truth in these reservations, but on close inspection they are misunderstandings the four authors do much to correct. Mumford was never a utopian, saying clearly that imperfect life is always preferable to a 'perfect place'. He was no ingenuous literary man unschooled in political realities. He simply distrusted politics and relied more on cultural, psychological and aesthetic stimulation to change. As Luccarelli puts it, 'he had little to say about the process of creating and sustaining alternative institutions and political practices . . . His emphasis . . . was toward developing a regional perspective grounded in a cultural and intellectual transformation' (p. 23). Technology, or 'technics', is essential, but only if it serves life rather than commanding it. He was a liberal communitarian who sought local autonomy and control through systematic decentralization. By temperament and talent, his medium was books and articles. While he mobilized cultural criticism to understand geographical, biological and social issues, he also acted in public arenas to build liveable communities. His accomplishment was to assemble from available ideas and precedents a credible vision of how human beings are best served by cities, technology and architecture.

The four books under review are largely American in context, but implications and applications are global. Issues of urban design, decent housing, environmental safety, architectural compatibility, resource utilization and technological aptness still thwart public policy everywhere, particularly in countries where huge populations struggle with poverty, urban blight, social tensions and conflicting options for modernization. As Luccarelli puts it: 'Mumford's understanding that democracy meant tolerance for diversity in the context of defining a common or "public" interest became his most important metaphor for mediating the concerns of the social and natural worlds' (p. 223). Regional planning philosophy can still address big questions. What is a healthy organization of human life under modern conditions? How are cities and regions to be configured in a way that reconciles individual freedom, technology, architec-

ture and communal life? Are there shared norms for humanity in the midst of a post-modern irony about meaning, truth and purpose? All four authors show that Mumford's principles were unequivocal and formulated early – values held above technics, roots in the past and connections with the future, wholeness as a corrective to partiality, and respect for the physical, aesthetic, intellectual and social dimensions of individual and community.

In the context of urban life and its possibilities, Mumford asked how human needs, environment, history and public forms like architecture might be orchestrated to provide settings worthy of a 'good life' in a 'good place'. One good place might be the city itself if defects of overcrowding, commercialism and overbuilding could be avoided. Another good place might be the local area distinguished by unique geographic and cultural resources. Thus regional planning and the character of cities were linked in his thought and public commitments. An ecological perspective on history and life is incompatible with *laissez-faire* ideology, referred to by planners as the 'continuation-of-trends scenario'. The probable outcome of allowing bad tendencies to run their course is disruption and adversity. Social and political drift would bequeath unliveable cities, regions enveloped by commercial uniformity, a degraded environment, technocratic *hubris*, and shrivelled lives. The goal of planning is a judicious equilibrium between purposeful things humans do and settings in which they are done. Social reconstruction that serves life must balance the ideal of individualism with order and community. Without a proper support system in nature and culture, however, human potential would languish.

The identifying trait of human nature is a drive ('insurgence') toward self-transformation and self-understanding. Humans share a capacity for creative growth. The opposite state is narrowness, stultification and deformity. Mumford's view of the 'good life' assumes that organic properties and forces are superior to mechanism in any form, and that regional communities are the best way to embody organic principles. He argued for 'technics as a creative response to the forces of nature' (Luccarelli, p. 64). The organic comprises 'qualitative richness, amplitude, spaciousness, free from quantitative pressure and crowding'.¹ A mechanical system embodies 'power, speed, motion, standardization, mass production, quantification, regimentation, precision, uniformity, astronomical regularity, control, above all control'.² Where organic functions, relationships and development are expressed in artefacts and ways of life, conditions are right for healthy, meaningful societies and individual lives. An ascendancy of mechanistic values symptomizes life-denying tendencies.

¹ Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (New York, 1964), 395–6.

² Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (New York, 1966), 294.

Mumford was heavily indebted to Patrick Geddes for these ideas. The Scottish biologist and sociologist pioneered an ecological approach to urban and regional planning, but also to social phenomena in general. He applied biological and evolutionary principles to sociology, psychology and urban planning, and influenced not only Mumford but also other key figures in the New York-based regional planning movement. The message of evolution for Geddes was co-operation rather than conflict, organic interdependence rather than competitive struggle. He argued for comprehensiveness in life and work rooted in experience, refined by thought and duly acted upon. So it was to be with Mumford. He read Geddes' *City Development* (1904) and glimpsed the city as a primary vehicle of human culture. Between 1916 and 1920 he explored neighbourhoods in New York City and tramped over the surrounding countryside with a new sense of personal and public commitment that Geddes had already christened 'the Civic Survey and Regional Development'. The outcome for Mumford's later thought and writing was immense. Personal surveys, sketch pad and notebook at hand became the foundation for his studies of urban life and architecture.

The correspondence between Mumford and Geddes edited by Novak is a definitive body of evidence and commentary on their relationship. Some 160 letters exchanged between 1917 and 1932 are glossed with notes that identify people and places mentioned in each document, amounting to a panorama of Mumford's professional and personal associations. Novak's commentary reviews Mumford's reliance on Geddes, their failed attempts at collaboration and the irreconcilable differences between the two. Mumford viewed Geddes as self-absorbed, disorganized, spasmodic, side-tracked by intellectual gimmicks and incapable of mobilizing himself to write up results of innumerable projects and aspirations, while Geddes found the younger man too literary and unfit for rough and tumble action in the real world. Mumford's positive view of Geddes turns out to be a portrait of himself, a man committed to synthesis of thought and action, breadth of perspective past and present and the insurgent power of human nature to defeat forces hostile to life. In the end, Mumford followed Geddes as a 'professor of things in general'. In all these letters and unlike most of his books, Mumford is relaxed and self-revealing, but the writing remains polished, logical, connected and eloquent. Geddes writes as though on the run in broken sentences, unfinished thoughts and an opaque muddle of *aperçus*, intentions, and proposals. Novak observes with charity that 'Geddes was not a disciplined or gifted writer' (p. 33).

Mumford worked for urban reform while his literary career was flourishing in the 1920s. The connection with the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) runs parallel to his 'usable past' volumes on American literature and architecture. Mumford the moralist looms conspicuously. He wanted the best for humanity in highly specific terms.

In his normative frame of reference, there can be no objective scholarship from which caring has been removed. This rather than mere preaching is the source of his moral tone. Mumford sought to give his values practical force through RPAA in the 1920s and 1930s. Some thirty people constituted the quasi-organization in its heyday of about a decade. Many of them influenced or reinforced Mumford's ideas and priorities. The connection of RPAA with British planners and initiatives was strong. The International Garden Cities and Town Planning Association, a British-based organization, was an affiliate. Members of RPAA went to Britain for a look at garden cities and to meet with Ebenezer Howard and Raymond Unwin, leaders in the garden city movement. At one point in 1925, Patrick Geddes himself met with RPAA during a visit to America. Members of RPAA sought to improve urban and rural living conditions and social environments by promoting small communities and other works of 'improvement'. Some of them were involved briefly with New Deal initiatives, specifically the Tennessee Valley Authority and a national housing programme. Their ideals, writings, projects and political struggles still have much wisdom to offer wherever ailing cities seek a cure.

Spann and Luccarelli resurrect RPAA ideas, relationships and initiatives. They cover similar ground but are mostly complementary in theme and treatment. Spann's lucid, detailed, interpretative history of RPAA from creation to demise connects it with the regional planning ethos of the 1920s and 1930s, a movement characterized by 'radical social idealism'. He sketches vivid portraits of its chief members in a satisfying brew of social and intellectual history. The useful bibliography lists under the names of leading RPAA members reviews and articles they published in journals and magazines of the time. Chapters on all the most influential members discuss and sort out with insight their common ground, disagreements, shifting roles and complex relationships. Luccarelli provides a philosophical, historical and political account of regionalism as a working concept that should be consulted by anyone who cares about responsible land development and urban reform. What regional planning means and how it might work are given a secure exposition and analysis. In Luccarelli's hands, regional planning is depicted convincingly as an explicit ecological science.

The *dramatis personae* of RPAA included Benton MacKaye, whose Appalachian Trail proposal was a foundation stone for RPAA. MacKaye and Mumford initially championed regional planning as an alternative to the limited vision of architect-planners mainly fixed on housing. Other members were Charles Whitaker, Clarence Stein and Robert Kohn, all three prominent in architecture, Alexander Bing, builder and organizer, Frederick Ackerman and Henry Wright, whose practical knowledge of construction and sites fleshed out abstract ideas, and Edith Wood and Catherine Bauer, women in the group who made contributions to

housing policy. Stuart Chase, writer on social and economic topics, was occasionally present for discussions. RPAA's intellectual centrepiece was young Mumford, who served as 'philosopher, publicist, and synthesizer', as well as 'secretary and principal wordsmith' (Spann, p. 44). Despite his imposing role, Spann argues that Mumford's originality as a social thinker diminishes when re-evaluated against a better understanding of intellectual and theoretical debts to RPAA associates.

Mumford described RPAA as 'a community of equals, aiming at the best life possible' (Spann, p. 162). Meetings were mostly informal and dominated by the big six – Whitaker, Stein, Kohn, MacKaye, Ackerman and Mumford. Other members attended intermittently at more formal gatherings. The influence of this group with government as well as intellectual circles was genuine. Their shared ideas had a central strategy – decentralization to promote a world of 'democratically administered communities that combined modern industry and conveniences with manageable social scale and immediate access to nature' (Spann, pp. 72–3). The enterprise was a response to the big city as a metaphor for cruel irrationality. Whitaker specified 'the menacing problems of traffic-congestion, slum-gangrene, terminal disease, arterial sclerosis, alley-fever, tubercular ravages, infanticide, and general decline' (quoted in Spann, p. 33). Priorities for RPAA included affordable housing, control of urban sprawl, organization of bonded communities, preservation of natural settings, containment of the automobile and the creative role of humane planning in an industrial society.

RPAA's rival was the Committee on the Regional Plan of New York (RPNY), led by Thomas Adams. Mumford composed a refutation of the RPNY plan, which Adams dismissed as hopeless idealism, characterizing Mumford as an 'esthete-sociologist' whose ideas were 'unworkable' (quoted in Spann, p. 125). While the RPNY wanted to extend the perimeter of the metropolitan area within perhaps two hours drive to relieve congestion, but without creating a new urban entity, the RPAA proposed decentralization in areas distinctive for culture and geography and set off from metropolitan areas. Among the experiments associated with the RPAA vision were communities like Sunnyside Gardens in Queens and Radburn in New Jersey. Both were conceived as alternatives to jumbled urban growth and were inspired by Ebenezer Howard's garden city movement in England (although both fell short of completely realizing Howard's goals). Luccarelli discusses the genesis and fate of these projects in illuminating detail, with helpful illustrations to visualize results.

The development base for RPAA aspirations was the limited-dividend City Housing Corporation, established in 1924, with the support of Bing, to finance garden city projects. It collapsed in bankruptcy as a victim of the depression in 1934 and illustrated the weakness of private funding for social change in urban America. The brain power of RPAA was

considerable, but its organizational and political effectiveness was insufficient for significant institutionalization. Political resistance to ambitious social change in a raw capitalist environment was determined. Large-scale development plans encountered real estate interests, which enjoyed more political influence than civic-minded regional planning groups. Stein was the political engine of RPAA, a reasonable man eager to assuage the fears of local interests. His planning proposals sought 'low cost state credit and the elimination of profits on land speculation', and aimed to 'prevent the wasteful misuse of land'. He 'came up against laissez-faire ideology – and a little xenophobia for good measure' (Luccarelli, pp. 146–7). The charge of 'socialism' was perhaps inevitable in the climate of the time, but what it really came down to was the unwillingness of land speculators and local builders (Luccarelli calls them the 'provincial bourgeoisie') to embrace changes that would deprive them of maximum profits.

Nevertheless, there were significant achievements with two model communities. Sunnyside was the work of Stein, Wright and Ackerman. It lacked a surrounding greenbelt but was popular with a diverse population of workers and professionals (the Mumfords bought a house there), who lived in well-designed apartments and houses situated in landscaped surroundings that afforded sunlight, fresh air and areas for play. Despite urban encroachment, Sunnyside retained its quality as a place to live and was an affordable oasis in the 1920s. Stein and Wright proceeded with Radburn, which was even more promising with its deliberate effort to moderate the impact of motor cars, but the project remained unfinished. Both men were a force in the New Deal plan to build Greenbelt towns. Three of these were undertaken: Greenbelt, Maryland, is the best example. Thus a garden city ideal was realized. Wojtowicz reminds us that 'after World War II, the Radburn idea was utilised in the design of British new towns' (p. 128).

The experience of RPAA showed that moderate success requires not only political support but a collaboration of multiple talents in architecture, finance, organization, environmental science, cultural analysis and promotion. The real obstacle is politics rather than the sanity and workability of ideas. After May 1933, group meetings of RPAA ceased and by 1936 terminal decline had set in. Non-political reasons included exigencies of personal life, professional distractions, uncertain leadership and internal quarrels – all contributing to eventual breakup. Several key members of RPAA were siphoned off to New Deal government agencies. By the 1930s, Mumford was a prominent American writer planning and writing the *renewal of life* series. He was also entangled romantically with his colleague, Catherine Bauer. In the meantime, world affairs upstaged regional planning. Opposing Europe's totalitarian regimes was his priority by 1939, and soon world war would consume the nation's attention and resources.

With Luccarelli's book, the RPAA experience is available to a fresh generation of planners. Luccarelli has written a virtual handbook of regional planning in theory and practice. He demystifies the organic philosophy of regional planning. Drawing on the thought of Mumford and his associates, he articulates a satisfying vision for reconstruction of urban and rural America by uniting a cultural redefinition of self with civic participation and an ecologically responsible use of technology. As Luccarelli explains it: 'Regionalism concerns the imaginative recovery of place informed by the scientific and imaginative exploration of the environment and an idea of culture as linked to the geographic associations of place' (p. 24). The concept of 'regional city' was a principled ecological fusion of town and countryside – principled because regional planning resided in a coherent philosophy of living manifested in deliberately organized communities. The alternative appeared to be RPNY's 'megalopolitan planning', which Luccarelli concludes was worse than 'the cosmetic efforts promoted by the City Beautiful movement a generation earlier' (p. 122).

Mumford's preoccupation with regional communities shaped his architectural enquiry and commentary (quoted in Luccarelli, p. 47). Wojtowicz confirms this point throughout his fine study, showing how Mumford's architectural criticism influenced modernism and urban planning. 'Following the tenets of his organic humanism, Mumford defined the success of modern architecture primarily by how well it served society, and secondarily by formal and technical criteria' (Wojtowicz, p. 112). From the beginning, he was suspicious of architecture divorced from social and environmental contexts, which led him to qualified praise for Frank Lloyd Wright and high praise for Matthew Nowicki, who 'moved beyond what Mumford viewed as the formal clichés of the International Style toward a truly functional modern architecture that effectively served human needs' (Wojtowicz, p. 108).

Wojtowicz's book merits a wide readership. He describes it modestly as 'a specialised study'. It is far from that. Ten years in the making, it is one of the best introductions to Mumford and his world at a miraculous length of 194 pages. Substantive in every line, there are summaries of his books, mini-portraits of significant people in his life, an array of judiciously chosen quotations from published and unpublished work, generous reference to his critics, a gallery of evocative photographs, chapters that connect in detail his cultural criticism and activism with architectural writing, and superb notes. Four sumptuous chapters proceed from 'The Education of a Critic' to 'The Study of Architectural History' to 'An Organic Architectural Criticism' to 'Building the Regional City'. The effect is like exposure to a capsule liberal education that includes science, literature, psychology, history, philosophy, biography and politics, with architecture as the organizing theme – all emanating from the life work of one man.