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An Invitation to Urban Studies

Cities have a mind-altering quality. They speed you up, they lower inhibitions, space has a different energy, images jump. Not all urban spaces are equally like this, but certain large public arenas in the centers of large metropolises full of people—truly urban spaces—are. The anonymity of public spaces teeming with strangers invites people to play identity games, to pass themselves off as something they are not, to try on altered identities. They offer the opportunity for the adventure of dropping your routine guard against interacting with strangers and to experiment instead with chance encounters. Cities allow you—require you—to make your way among a broad range of others, as they provide the context that offers up the richest array of diversity and freedoms available (Loftland 1985, 163–71). But this is no neutral territory; it may present its own unruly encounter to the unwary wanderer, so you have to be ready for the potential “rough adventure of the street” (Charyn 1987), a tense confrontation, an aggressive intrusion on your personal space: This is a prospect that attracts some modern-day adventurers and repels others who want to keep their urban experience under control and at a distance.

For tens of millions of poor people in wealthy nations, the city is a different kind of adventure: a lifelong struggle to get an adequate diet, shelter, education, and medical attention in overcrowded public clinics and to get by in built-for-profit environments featuring the highest costs of living in the world. For hundreds of millions of people in the poorest countries of the world, cities promise hope and deliver on the promise in every shade of good and ill fortune imaginable, from lavish comfort to a daily bitter struggle for the barest existence. For more than five thousand years, the city is the place where the greatest intensity of human experience, the biggest stories of change, and the most significant events of history have been anchored. This is our subject matter.
CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES IN UNDERSTANDING URBAN SPACE

Sociologists study the structural elements of society. Structural elements include the class system that determines the ways that some people are advantaged while others are disadvantaged, the political system that has to do with who holds power and what they do with it, and ongoing institutional arrangements, such as the form the family takes in a given era. In the field of sociology, we are interested in the ways that these structural elements come into being and change. Ultimately, we are interested in the consequences of structural arrangements for the way people think and behave.

Our study in this volume is urban sociology, one of the many subdivisions of the broad field of sociology. In urban sociology, we focus on just one aspect of society, a certain kind of physical environment, how it is produced, and the social consequences that result. The premise of urban sociology is that urban environments have identifiable consequences regarding the ways that people experience themselves and others, the way they interact, and the way their lives are organized.

To identify a subfield of sociology as urban sociology, we are thereby proposing a hypothesis: Something called urban is a sociological variable that affects people in systematic and identifiable ways. Urban sociology is the field of scientific study that seeks to discover those systematic causes and effects.

The study of cities involves many conceptual challenges, but it is an exciting and worthwhile intellectual enterprise. What we are setting out to discover—the city and its influence—is all around and therefore difficult to see. It is part of who we are, just as we are part of it. We subscribe to urban styles and ideas; we are its models and agents, spreading its influences as we act and speak. It may be difficult to see this at first, but that is because, unlike previous generations, we in Western society have little that is nonurban with which to contrast it.

One of the key features of any science is an almost obsessive attention to terms and definitions, and in urban sociology we immediately run into a problem. It may surprise you to learn that urban sociology has some difficulty defining what is meant by urban. In part, the difficulty has to do with the complexity of the structure we are trying to define; in part, it has to do with the emotional response of people to the idea of the city. First, regarding complexity, keep in mind that when we say we are going to study the city, we are referring to a matrix of structures and activities that comprise one of the largest and most complex forms of social organization. Unlike other complex structures, the city has no formally defined central organizational structure. We make a distinction here between two kinds of organization in order to make this point. One kind of organization is enacted; the other kind comes into being through a crescive process (Warren [1963] 1972).

An example of an enacted organization would be a large automobile manufacturing and sales corporation. We say it is enacted because it is planned as a unit from the beginning, and while its organizational structure may expand and become more complex over time, these changes are deliberate and planned out. No matter how large and varied the work of the company becomes, there will be a formal organizational chart and a company handbook that traces the specified relationship between bureaucratic positions from executive board members down through production-line workers. The body of rules and regulations gives overall coherence
to such disparate activities as research and development, marketing and advertising, sales and financing, worldwide manufacturing operations and subcontracting, quality control, and dealing with lawsuits resulting from product failures. Whatever new directions it may take, the company remains a formal organization with clearly defined lines of communication and command.

Now think of how the organization of the city differs from that of the corporation. Is there an organizational chart that identifies the status and set of relationships of every individual involved in some way with a particular city? Such a chart exists for city government with its many agencies and branches, but this is not the unit we are trying to understand. When we say that cities come into being crescively, we are saying that their elements emerge gradually, over time, and that the interrelationships among their many parts are not due to formal deliberation so much as to spontaneous accommodations among the different parts and individuals. That is, if we take the sum total of activities carried out and lives lived in the city, what we have is an arena of action where no one is totally aware and no authorities are totally in charge of how the whole thing operates or even how it holds together. In reaching for a way to express this kind of organization of space and human activity, Long (1958) offered the image of “an ecology of games.” Games are the things that people do—for a living, for recreation, for gaining and maintaining shelter, in generally going about their business. Ecology, an important concept in urban sociology that we will discuss from time to time in this text, is used here similarly to the way biologists use it. It refers to a natural order that has been worked out over time among various organisms, a process that allows a variety of life-forms to use the same environment in mutually beneficial ways.

This is a useful metaphor in thinking about how people use the urban environment and how that environment is ordered, so long as we remember not to over-emphasize harmony and balance to the exclusion of conflict and exploitation. In an ecology, big ones eat little ones, and the powerful grow sleek off the weak (eventually microorganisms gobble up all else, but here we reach the limits of our analogy). Urban environments harbor long-standing conflicts, sudden confrontations, distractions, and discontinuities. The city is an arena, a place in which the balance of elements often involves a standoff among antagonists. Law enforcement and crime, political protest and routine acts of government, fundamentalist religious practices and pornography mills, the industrial production of environmental toxins and community discussions of environmental goals—these are all “games,” very serious games, that take place side by side in an arena that makes room for all of them and holds them in tension with one another.

Related to the challenge of understanding the informal structure of cities is the fact that the urban arena lacks physical or spatial closure. The nature of the city is such that it has no natural boundaries or limits; it is peculiarly open-ended. Standing at the center of a large city, an individual can easily see the physical evidence of the city and perceive the life around as characteristically urban in quality. That is not the challenge in establishing the unit of space that makes up the subject of study here. The challenge comes because the sociological consequences of the city reach far beyond the space that we identify as characteristically urban. Although the heights of buildings and density of structures typically diminish as we move away from central cities, through their suburbs and into the open countryside, we have not reached the limits of urban influence when we can no longer see the city skyline on the horizon. Electronic
media, city newspapers, urban lifestyle, and political and economic domination emanate from built-up population centers. Culturally, politically, and economically, the city has no geographic limits in a rapidly urbanizing world.

A further difficulty in conceptualizing the urban form is the fact that cities and the nature of urban life vary among societies. Also, urban places look and operate differently within the same society at different points in history. As we think about how to define the city and urban life, we need to remember to make the definition broad enough to encompass the ancient cities of prehistory, the walled cities of the Renaissance, the cities of the Industrial Revolution, the cities of less-developed countries, and the sprawling modern metropolitan centers of economic activity. Not surprisingly, it has proven difficult to formulate a single definition of the urban form that applies with equal validity cross-culturally and historically to all those places in the world that we would like to recognize as having urban qualities.

There is one final difficulty in defining what we mean by urban, and this has to do with the kinds of effects the city has on people. The public reacts emotionally to cities, and this colors what they think the social consequence of urban life is. Maybe we think that urban life is faster, colder, cooler, socially richer, morally corrupting, spiritually uplifting, and more exciting and therefore either more attractive or more off-putting than life in nonurban places. What we understand as urban qualities means different things to different people. People tend to feel strongly, emotionally, about cities, about certain areas of cities, and about their own versus other cities or neighborhoods. The way we feel about cities influences what we “know” about cities, and we may believe so strongly in our emotionally stoked vision that we resist learning other things. This is not the ideal condition under which to conduct science, where differing, strongly held opinions vie with evidence, but it makes for interesting arguments. Is life in the city cold and heartless? Yes. Is it warm and richly human? Yes. Is it a place where people become lost, isolated, or are alone? Yes. Is it a great place to build a wonderful social life? Yes. Is it the dominant pulsating engine of the international economy that gathers in enormous wealth? Yes. Is it subject to unanticipated changes in global arrangements that can destroy the core of its local economy? Yes. The contradictions imbedded in these observations are not resolvable by research-based “facts.” The evidence tells us that all of these statements are true. The city is a big place. A unique event occurred on a particular day in 2007 or 2008, when a child was born in one of the world’s cities, or perhaps when someone moved to a city from a rural area. At that moment, for the first time in human existence, there were more people in cities worldwide than in rural areas. If the event occurred in mid-2008 that would mean about 3.4 billion people lived in the city on that day. The city is a big enough place to contain many contradictions.

In the remainder of the chapter, we set out to discover in an informal way some examples of how cities influence human experience and shape our thinking and behavior in subtle and not so subtle ways.

EXPERIENCING URBAN SPACE

In 1998 the American Psychological Association devoted most of the June issue of the journal American Psychologist to the theme urban life. This followed five years of
study by a task force set up by the association to study the effects of living in the
city on people’s mental health. Although it was recognized that urban life might
have some beneficial effects, the impetus for the study was clearly a concern with
the negative consequences of living in cities, including “alienation, demoralization,
helplessness, hostility, substance abuse, distrust, isolation, apathy, marginalization
and powerlessness” (Marsella, Wandersman, and Cantor 1998, 621). An extensive
review of the international literature on the mental health consequences of life in
urban and nonurban settings led to the conclusion that the beneficial effects of
urban living, such as “intellectual and cultural growth and development, tolerance
for diversity, and opportunity for social mobility” needed to be appreciated as well
as the potential negative effects (Marsella 1998, 632). What interests us here is the
operating assumption by professional psychologists that the urban environment
produces a real and important impact on experience and the way people define rea-

Public Spaces and Human Behavior

When we think about the effects of cities on experience and behavior, we are most
likely thinking in terms of the public spaces that characterize urban life. What marks
these territories is the fact that, except for the occasional chance meeting of acquain-
tances, they are peopled by strangers. These are spaces where a certain social ten-
sion is inherent and where the successful negotiation of the environment depends
on employing knowledge about how to conduct yourself and how to strategically
move about in public (Lofland 1998, 28). As a competent participant, you need to
be able to reach back into a half-articulated store of knowledge—of public- or street-
lore—about how to move through crowds, what seat to choose in a bar or on a bus,
how not to draw unwanted attention, the proper way to conduct yourself while
standing in line waiting, how to react to someone who appears to need assistance,
and how to recognize immediately threats to personal safety and what to do about
them. Urban public space affects what we think and do. To the extent thought and
behavior reflect who we are—our self-image, how we see ourselves in relationship
to others—we are talking about an environment that is arguably of considerable
importance for understanding ourselves.

Cities as Culture

If we step back to see what we are saying about cities, it is that cities, in produc-
ing their own cues for behavior and their own rules, are altering the cultural world
in which we live. The effects of urban ways of life on personal styles, tastes, and
attitude are not confined to cities. Given the prominent place of the urban environ-
ment in our imagination and the attention it draws to itself as the center of multiple
fascinations, we see that the high-profile cultural influences present in the city are
quickly communicated to the rest of society. The influences take many shapes and
speak in many voices. Zukin (1995) identified some of these. “The cultures of cities
certainly include ethnicities, lifestyles, and images—if we take into account the con-
centration of all kinds of minority groups in urban populations, the availability and
variety of consumer goods, the diffusion through the mass media of style. Cities are
the sites of culture industries, where artists, designers, and performers produce and sell their creative work” (264). In fact, cities represent a multifaceted environment where different messages about the basic nature of urban culture—the symbolic significance of The City—compete with one another.

What do cities symbolize? According to Zukin, there is the message of danger, in part a product of the popular media image of the city as a dangerous place, but reinforced in everyday urban experience by such symbols as the presence of armed security guards employed to set aside “safe” spaces. How do we interpret places outside the perimeter set up for the safety of shoppers and strollers, the “other” city? Concerns about security permeate the consciousness and conversations of urban residents and visitors alike. The high visibility of minority and immigrant groups within urban populations has given another symbolic element to the meaning of the city. Cities are the place of beginnings, of cultural transitions, where generations of immigrant cultural others struggle to make peace with the host culture. And cities are places where cultural differences often do not melt down, where assimilation is blocked, where disadvantage becomes in some measure permanent, where prejudice and discrimination against some categories of outsider become chronic, and minority groups settle into pockets of social exclusion. Some of the messages broadcast from the city to the wider society reflect elements of inner-city minority cultures, which grow rich as expressive traditions of art and music with themes that grow out of poverty and economic isolation. The city’s mainstream institutes of high culture, such as museums and performance centers, find themselves arguing publicly that they represent the true cultural expression of the city, not the life of the streets and alternative cultures that occasionally gain a strong and audible voice, such as that expressed through the popularity of hip hop. At the same time, the rising number of immigrants from new origins—from Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean—transform the neighborhoods and streets of wealthy European and U.S. cities by setting up new market areas evocative of Third World themes. These exotic images compete with other urban themes for a place in shaping the meaning of the city, influencing the self-portrait that the city presents to the world in general, a world that invariably looks to the city to learn what is on the cutting edge of cultural change. Meanwhile, the wealth of the corporation has come to play a more visible role in what we experience as urban culture, making the corporation’s presence felt through promotions and advertising in what was formerly public space. Public places—parks, squares, and other gathering places—have symbolically gone private, bear the logos and slogans of corporate sponsors, and at times are renamed in honor of their corporate benefactors (Zukin 1995, 265–67). We are reminded that the privatization of public spaces in city and suburb—as represented by shopping malls, gated communities, designated business improvement districts dominated by local commercial property and business owners, and other forms of privatized areas—has implications for the kinds of behaviors and expression that are permitted there. The interests that design and operate these spaces are intent on bringing the characteristic unpredictability of the urban environment under control, at least in those physical segments of the environment they dominate. Such control inevitably limits the freedom to act, to speak, even to be present if you fall into one of the categories of person deemed undesirable or unsightly (Kohn 2004). Cityspace is an arena that incorporates both
the little anarchies that anonymous crowded environments invite and the impulse to impose control over those tendencies.

The combination of all of these elements and many more play a part in informing our image of what the city means, and images of urban life exert an atmospheric influence on contemporary popular culture in general. Think of the streaming images of action and change that play through the channels of entertainment and information media, that play up the themes of style, of edginess, of sensuous experience, lavish lifestyle, the blurred edge of legitimacy and hustle. Can there be any question as to whether these images are urban in origin? In any world region, for at least the past five thousand years, the cultural future of the next generation was always taking shape in the cities. Cities influence our thinking and behavior in profound ways, whether or not we actually live within the city.

Structuring Personal Experience

For those who do live within the city, we can identify a number of ways that the built environment of urban space itself structures experience and behavior. Lynch’s (1960) classic work systematically explained for the first time how cities manage the experience of their residents and visitors. In sum, the significance of Lynch’s work is his identification and description of structural elements in the urban environment that channel both perception and movement. He identified five categories of physical elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. Paths are the channels people travel in moving about: They are important determinants of how individuals experience the city. Long-term residents will know several alternatives in going from place to place, leading through different neighborhoods and districts and opening to different experiences. Newcomers’ experiences of the city will be more narrowly channeled, more restricted. Edges are barriers, usually linear, that hem in movement. Bodies of water, including rivers like the Charles in Boston, which can only be crossed at a limited number of points, tend to corral experience, holding it in on one side. Highways cutting through cities with limited over- or underpasses can work the same way. Districts are relatively large areas that have a somewhat cohesive quality, a theme or a characteristic feel. Boston’s ethnic North End, with its narrow streets or fashionable Beacon Hill, is experienced as having a unified texture. The Chinatowns in lower Manhattan and San Francisco are particularly well-defined districts. Nodes are smaller public places that may best be thought of in terms of junctions or turning points, such as traffic circles, squares, or major mass transit exchange or transfer points. They may also be points at which people congregate. One might find no better example than the piazzas of Italian cities, where people returning home from work or classes in the evening engage in the passeggiata, a slow, stylized amble, ideally accompanied by a well-dressed other or at least an engaged cell phone. The plaza, with streets radiating outward from it, is a place of many crossings, a place to linger, to see and be seen, to savor city life. Nodes are distinguished from Lynch’s last element of physical structure, the landmark. The landmark is an outstanding feature of the visual cityscape, a marker that helps anchor the individual’s mental map of the city. More prominent than the Italian piazza is likely to be the dome of the cathedral or public building that stands at the edge of the broad public space, commanding the local scene. Los Angeles has its Civic
Center, Boston the Old North Church and Faneuil Hall, New York the Empire State Building. What distinguishes landmarks is that most people usually pass them by rather than entering them, experiencing them as external markers.

Lynch’s approach to understanding urban space has interesting implications. One is that each of us carries a somewhat different image (social construction) of the city around inside of us, even though the broad outlines are shared among many. The newcomer lives in a different city from that of the long-time resident, in this sense, because of the fragmentary experience of the city. It follows that even among long-term residents, different perceptions of the city are bound to exist because people who live in different sections will travel different paths framed by different edges through different nodes past different landmarks and will become familiar with different districts. Thus, they carry a different image of the whole of the city in their heads. Also, Lynch made the point that cities have different degrees of imageability, the degree to which they lend themselves to being captured in the mind’s eye. He compared three cities—Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles—and found that people had the easiest time mentally embracing Boston as a whole, due to its multiple identifiable districts, landmarks, and nodes. The residents of Jersey City emphasized the sameness of their different streets and neighborhoods, while Angelenos tried to hang onto the anchoring influence of the old city center as their city sprawled beyond the capacity of their imagination to contain it.

Placemark 1.1—Portland, Oregon: City with a Personality

The people of Portland love their city. The feeling appears to be irreducible to civic pride or boosterism. There’s a kind of pervasive passionate awareness on the part of residents that they live in a special place, a place that has a consciously shared image, a personality that is the project of the people who live it. Portland is a cool place, and this is manifest in the behavior of its citizens, who in greater relative numbers than anywhere else use public transportation, embrace cycling as an effective commuter strategy, walk to shopping, recycle, greet strangers, support the preservation of land and green space, and watch vigilantly lest their special place be altered by less scrupulous agents of change. The city is perennially cited as the most cycling friendly in the United States, with laws designed to protect cyclists from motorists and 266 miles of designated bike routes. Estimates place the number of commuters who use bikes to get to and from work at between 16 percent and 25 percent. Portland may not be the only town to hold an annual naked bike ride on city streets (there are scores of cities worldwide that do) but their naked midnight ride is the largest. And for Portlanders recycling is not restricted to setting out paper, cardboard, plastic, and metal cans for curbside pickup: The first stop for do-it-yourself home improvement projects and contractors alike is the neighborhood construction materials reclamation warehouse, selling everything from recycled lumber to bathtubs. The personality of the city is reflected in the annual recycled materials fashion show where a remarkable array of discarded
The Micro Order

Cities by their nature are large and complex structures. But some sociologists have oriented their study to smaller units of space within the urban environment. William H. Whyte is prominent among them. Whyte (1988) was an observer of incidental public behaviors, and so he became familiar with the kinds of public space that people were comfortable in and the kinds of spaces that thwarted sociable mingling. His careful and systematic observations of behavior yielded surprising results. Although people who work and live in the city might talk about longing for a break from the crowds, about getting away from it all, Whyte observed that people on their lunch hours and other breaks appeared to be drawn to other people, to crowded spaces. His work reveals that for people who are a part of them every day, crowds are stimulating in the sense that they are a desirable and congenial medium in which to pass time. When acquaintances meet on crowded sidewalks, contrary to what we might expect, they stop in their tracks and carry on extended conversations in the streams of highest pedestrian traffic. And, also contrary to expectations, obstructed pedestrians squeezing past knots of conversation are polite and unruffled for the most part (10).
Whyte’s work led him to consider what types of spaces, besides crowded ones, people found most congenial for passing leisure time and for accommodating *schmoozing*, a Yiddish term that translates roughly as “nothing talk,” gossip, small talk (11). The crowded sidewalk is the schmoozer’s natural habitat in the large metropolis, but Whyte found that the engineering of microenvironments was very important in determining whether a particular space was welcoming or off-putting as a site for spending little snatches of leisure. Setting aside space in the city is not enough to ensure people will use it. Whyte observed that many set-aside spaces were nearly empty, while others were jammed. A number of factors appeared to determine which spaces would be most well used. Pedestrians will not go far to relax, and when they get there, they want to sit down. Whyte was surprised and dismayed by the number of instances where low ledges along buildings and walls adjacent to walkways actually seemed to be designed to discourage sitting, being too narrow or fitted with hostile pointed surfaces, apparently intended to keep people moving, to prevent them from becoming knots of obstruction. Food will draw people, the sound of falling water and rustling leaves overhead will soothe them, low ledges and alcoved seating will get them to linger, shade in summer and sunlight in winter will comfort them. Long blank walls, enclosed and elevated walkways, the nearby rush of traffic will keep them moving, reduce chance street-corner meetings, discourage lingering, and all but eliminate the natural tendency of urbanites to schmooze. For our interest, Whyte’s work is a reminder that even the most incidental aspects of the structuring of the urban environment have real consequences for the quality of experience and patterns of behavior. Urban environments shape social life.
Personal Management of the Public Experience

While Whyte was interested in engineering social space to make it more accommodating to human needs, Lyn Lofland (1985) is interested in the ways that private individuals and small groups take matters into their own hands by taking over public spaces and making them their own. She observed that through the regular and routine use of a particular restaurant, plaza, or section of park, individuals and small groups of individuals may gain a sense of priority over the space, a kind of informal ownership or stewardship. Through regular use, the individual passes from the status of regular “customer” (who has the general lay of things clearly in mind) to that of “patron” (who has some familiarity with other regulars and whatever official staff or attendants may be present) to that of “resident,” the culmination of cultivating a sense of place. “The resident, who, by dint of not only using the locale regularly but using it on most occasions for long period of time, acquires . . . an intimate knowledge of all that there is to know and a set of privileges that goes with such mastery” (122). This person, connected to this public space as a matter of choice, having dedicated weeks and months to establishing a familiar presence in that place, having become a recognized fixture in the minds of other users, has effectively colonized the territory. It becomes a home away from home, a semi-privatized realm in the resident’s mind. The resident may be surrounded by strangers, but these simply become part of a moving backdrop, just another familiar element of the local scene. As a part of the moving curtain of strangers yourself, you can identify the residents by their body language and their demeanor: They are relaxed, informal, sprawling, presiding over their domain. They are at home in a world of strangers who are temporarily moving through their space.

By contrast, Lars Frers (2007) draws our attention to the public condition of those who are simply part of that moving curtain of strangers, how those who are navigating territories in which they are truly anonymous attempt to manage their experience of such places. In his view the stranger creates an envelope, a layer (or layers) consisting of attitude, demeanor, and details of performance that allow the public actor to manage the degree of personal involvement (and disinvolvement) with their physical and social surroundings. At the same time, the individual is passing through an environment where other envelopes, created by other public actors in whose midst the individual is operating, or even envelopes created by the physical environment (the intensity of a bakery’s smells, the noise of demolition or construction), tug at and threaten to penetrate one’s calculated intent, that is, threaten to envelope one’s envelope. Seen in these terms, urban public space is rich in situated energies. Confident actors may adjust their envelope to be open to the richness of encounter. More timid souls may tighten their personal envelope, disengaging with their surroundings at the cost of missing much of the potential richness the city has to offer. And it may be the case that at different times the same individual may be more open or more closed to engagement, depending on, for instance, whether they are late for an appointment or taking a leisurely stroll.

All of these writers, from the American Psychological Association through those like Lofland who take a microview, show us many ways to think about how cities shape experience. The urban environment is more than a backdrop; it actively intervenes in the social process. It is created by our collective attitudes and actions, and in turn it impacts who we are by becoming part of our consciousness and influencing
our behavior. You may love what the city is, you may hate it, but whether or not you live in one, the city is here. Its influence is all around you, you are a part of it and it is part of you—and not just because you have been assigned to read this textbook, but that, too.

**OUR LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CITY**

In chapter 3, we will see how important historically attitudes of Western culture toward cities have been in shaping urban theory in sociology. Here we look briefly at how people feel about cities today.

There is a long history of city bashing in the United States; it is somewhat less pronounced in Europe. Moralists and anxious politicians have been concerned with the effects of teeming urban centers on the human soul and on the political future of the state, respectively. Each succeeding era finds something new about the city to be put off by. In the United States, this has meant shifting concern away from Eastern European immigrants and Catholics at the beginning of the twentieth century to Third World immigrants and racial purity at the beginning of the twenty-first, away from infectious epidemics of influenza and tuberculosis to HIV, from gangsters to gangsta. Lofland (1998) said that when she asks her students on the first day of her urban sociology class for impressions that come to mind when she says the word “city,” she gets back “frenetic, crowded, loud, smelly, dangerous, indifferent, anonymous, dirty, filled with hostile strangers, and littered with the unsightly homeless and the unsightly poor” (113). Others who find themselves living in cities by choice or default have made peace with it and find it downright appealing. We are divided in our society between cityphobes and cityphiles—those who hate and those who love the city. Many may respond to this distinction by recognizing a little or a lot of both within themselves.

Cityphiles have learned to use the city to suit their needs and their tastes. They are at home in cities in general or in love with their own city in particular. If they are not living in a city, or a large enough, exciting enough, or varied enough city, they will let everyone around them know of the shortcomings of their compromised life situation. Once one is used to the smorgasbord of elective diversions that prevail in the pace of life, the politics, art, and culinary variety of the world city, it is hard to be happy anywhere else. Placemark 1.2 invades a chat room hosted by the official Austin, Texas, Web site. Within Texas and the Southwest region, Austin generally has a reputation as an appealing and highly livable university town. However, the first speaker is disappointed that Austin falls short of expectations acquired from living in other cities. Note that the argument is about the virtues of particular cities of different sizes and characteristics: These speakers are emotionally tied to their favorite city, not necessarily the city in which they live or the city in general.

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**Placemark 1.2—My City Can Beat Your City**

One of the things we have learned about the Internet is that people tend to speak plainly about what is on their minds, dispensing with normal rules of
There is a lot at stake in the argument in placemark 1.2. People need to feel good about their city: Place of residence represents one of the most important life choices. The ease of electronic data gathering and communication has allowed people to compare the quality of life among different cities using more or less objective criteria. The trick in putting the data to good use is to select the criteria most relevant to you. Then you can shop around for the city that suits you, aided by such reference works as *America's Top Rated Cities* (1999), *The Places Rated Almanac* (2007), the *Gale City and Metro Rankings Reporter* (1997), *Inc. Magazine’s “Boomtowns ’07”* for entrepreneurs, *CNN/Money Magazine’s “Best Big Cities”* list, *Best Life Magazine’s “The Best 100 Places to Raise a Family”* (2008), or *The 100 Best Art Towns in America* (2005). These sources are probably not going to resolve arguments about whether one town is better than another, but they do supply data that

 civil interaction, their true identities buffered by their online alter egos. In this e-mail exchange, the first speaker derides Austin, Texas, in a chat room peopled largely by other Austin residents. “Austin is way overrated . . . following the hype of Austin, I moved from San Jose. . . . The tech industry is not what I thought. Little pay $$ and the Austin base economy is very small. . . . It’s still very much a college town, which is ok if you are going to school. However, the pay sucks and the traffic is worse than S.J. Stay in New York with a real job with real pay. I plan to move to Dallas, where the pay is 5 times better and the industry is highly diverse. . . . It’s no wonder . . . high tech industries always choose a city like Dallas (a real city with real money and a real Airport!, not a college town) over Austin. Move to Dallas!!!”

The response from Austin defenders is equally direct: “Spoken like a true Californian—GO HOME THEN. We don’t really want people here who don’t get what Austin is about anyway. Austin is NOT Dallas and I can only pray to God that IT NEVER WILL BE!!! Dallas is filled with plastic attitudes polluting the quality of life (just like California)—Austinites have always taken great pride in the fact that we ARE NOT Dallas or Houston. . . . You should go—hurry—and take a few of your buddies with you because 150 people move here every day due to the fact that it is such a desirable place to live. . . . BYE BYE—we really don’t need you congesting our roads, polluting our air, depleting our springs, destroying our parks, or infecting our children with such shallow, superficial principles.” Others agree, including this resident of San Francisco: “If you don’t get it . . . leave. Austin is heaven. San Jose has F—’ed their city up by letting the techs do as they want. I live in SF and work in ‘the valley of death’ (AKA silicon valley) and I spend as little time there under that cloud of brown ‘prosperity’ as possible.” And a third defender steps out of the my city–your city box. “As for Dallas, it has its pluses I’m sure, but my impression is it’s a big flat sprawled out city. It matters what you are wanting out of a city and if where you are doesn’t fulfill it, then everyone has the option of moving elsewhere. It doesn’t mean that where you left isn’t the perfect place for someone else, now does it?”

The last speaker really does seem to “get it.”
may help the geographically mobile make informed choices about where to live. Such lists inevitably generate their own heated disagreements in the quality-of-life rivalry when some cities are left out, demoted from year to year, or placed lower on a list than rival cities. Some ranking instruments include do-it-yourself rankings where you can plug in the criteria most important to you: the Best Places Almanac provides users with paper and pencil score sheets, while CNN/Money features a similar online interactive device.

In their ranking of city qualities America’s Top Rated Cities considers information on state and municipal finances, population, employment and earnings, taxes, transportation and commercial real estate prices, as well as cost of living, housing, education, health care, public safety, climate, and water quality. In selecting the one hundred best places to raise a family, the editors of Best Life Magazine considered the safety of children, favorable student-teacher ratios, above-average test scores, numbers of museums, plentiful parks and pediatricians, and good earning to cost of living ratios. Negative measures included multihour commutes, high housing costs, and higher divorce rates. The Places Rated Almanac presents data on crime rates, climate, price of a starter home, traffic congestion, medical services, and a number of other criteria (seventy-four in all), including the availability of classical music radio stations. The 100 Best Art Towns list is addressed to people who are attracted to art museums, galleries, theater performances, music festivals, and art fairs. It is not surprising that their top-rated five places (Santa Fe, Loveland (Colorado), Sarasota, Hot Springs (Arkansas), and Asheville (North Carolina) are not matched by Inc. Magazine’s top five: St. George (Utah), Yuma (Arizona), Prescott (Arizona), Fort Myers (Florida), and McAllen (Texas). The Places Rated Almanac demonstrates best just how volatile a place’s rank can be when criteria are shifted: According to the Almanac, New York ranks number 1 in terms of “ambiance,” but if you’re looking for “normal people” it ranks number 150 on a list of 150 places. Alternatively, when attention shifts to a global scale considering the “livability” of cities, a new set of criteria is called for that includes such factors as political stability, currency exchange regulations, and degree of media censorship, along with more familiar quality of life measures (Mercer 2008). In the resulting ranking of 215 large cities, only two North American cities made the top fifteen: Vancouver (number 4) and Toronto (number 15). The two top cities were Zurich and Vienna. The United States enters the list at number 28 with Honolulu, while New York ranks number 49. The least “livable” of the world’s major cities in 2008 was Baghdad according to the Mercer listing.

How do the opinions of the fans of Austin, Texas, square with these formal rankings? They probably would not be pleased to learn that Mercer did not consider their city at all for its list of 215 significant world places. It made the America’s Top Rated Cities list. It was ranked favorably at number 14 on best family-rearing places to live (2008). Dallas didn’t make that list, nor did San Jose. But those of us who have lived in a number of different cities are bound to feel that there is something suspect in any attempt to sum up any city’s qualities in a set of standardized comparisons. Indeed, we can assume that the compilers of these city comparisons offer them only as the roughest guides to the would-be intercity migrant. Different people are going to be emotionally caught up in their love or hate reactions to the San Francisco Bay area, San Jose, Dallas, and Austin. Even where we employ handy
standardized criteria, we end up allowing the last speaker in placemark 1.2 to have the final word.

The True Cityphile and the Idealization of Urban Space

Some of us are tied emotionally to the city in general, the very idea of the city, a specific kind of city that embodies what we feel to be the fulfillment of the true urban promise of enriched living. Oldenberg (1989) wrote about the array of “great good places” harbored by the great cities—the pubs, cafés, and coffeehouses that are welcoming to the stranger. Oldenberg agreed that much about cities is potentially off-putting and believed that the city has the capacity to divide human beings and isolate them (48). But that is the beauty of the welcoming public place, which provides a haven. The German or transplanted German American beer garden is a place of festivity waiting to happen, the English “pub” combines the contradiction of the public place (from which its name is contracted) with the private familiarity of long and intimate associations among neighbors, and the French café or bistro is a democratizing force where all classes rub shoulders during prolonged and very regular visits. Oldenberg took Lyn Lofland’s observation, that regulars colonize space and make it their own, a step further. He suggested that even strangers are welcomed by certain urban public spaces.

Oldenberg wrote about spaces more characteristic of the old-fashioned convivial urban environments of the city center, and we may wonder whether the changing North American metropolis, with its sprawling suburbs, will continue to provide such convivial public environments. He warned that “where urban growth proceeds with no indigenous version of a public gathering place proliferated along the way and integral in the lives of the people, the promise of the city is denied” (Oldenberg 1989, xv). In this vein, Janusz Mucha (1993, 22), a sociologist visiting the United States from Poland in the 1990s, found that outside of three American cities—New Orleans, New York, and San Francisco—“The idea of the ‘city’ as I conceive it, hardly exists in America.” He means that there is a dearth of public squares where people safely meet, talk, or buy flowers. It is hard to find a decent coffee shop or café. There is no theater culture in the downtown; everyone has gone to the “movies” at the sprawling suburban mall. Mucha is passionate about cities, particularly familiar cities, cities that are the cultural heart and life blood of a society, his cities. Those of us who love the city are apt to be passionate, to have allegiance to a certain form of urban environment, and to feel robbed by its absence. Oldenberg and Mucha wanted cities that gather people in their leisure to the center and gently hold them there through the lure of welcoming public space.

But are these writers talking about a real or a romanticized city? How do the spaces they are speaking of square with the prevailing image of the inner city in the United States? The city is not for everyone, not for the cityphobic. In his book, Urban Nightmares (2006), Steve Macek explains in a chapter titled “Inventing the Savage Urban Other” how conservative forces in government and the popular media have amplified the fears of the middle class by demonizing poor and minority residents of cities. Suburbs are testimony to the way many Americans who find themselves tied by work to the large metropolis feel about the city. Suburbanites are willing to commute long hours from home to work each week so they do not
Chapter 1

have to sleep where they work. As we see in chapter 7, many corporate headquarters, other offices, and even manufacturing complexes have followed the commuter out of the city. And people employed in the suburbs respond by pushing the edge of the metropolis still further into surrounding plains, hillsides, and deserts, creating the *exurbs* from which they commute back to jobs in the suburbs created a decade or so earlier. Former Arizona governor and Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt is acutely aware of the issue of sustainability of expanding urban encroachments on natural areas in his own state and elsewhere in North America. He comments in his book *Cities in the Wilderness* (2005, 18–19) on the environmental impact of exurban sprawl: “As open spaces have disappeared, as development has accelerated and the patterns of sprawl have spread across the nation, it has become clear that in many areas development has already undermined the integrity of the surrounding natural systems . . . It is time to weigh the benefits of marginal developments.” Some urban exiles have pushed beyond the edge of the metropolitan region, opting out of the large cities in favor of small-town life. The Midwest has become home in the past decade to a number of metropolitan refugees fleeing the East and West coastal regions. William E. Pike (2000) tells his story in textbox 1.1.

Textbox 1.1. Choosing Pierre, South Dakota, over Washington, D.C.

William Pike (2000) made a choice. He moved from the nation’s capital to the capital of South Dakota, population 13,800. He wrote, “After four years at Harvard and another year and a half in Washington, urban life was wearing me down. I was not meant to tread along exhaust-choked streets, ride on subways, and stand in lines for everything. Nor was I willing to put up with a cynical culture, continuous late nights at work, a constant striving for material gain, and an empty view of life as a chore, not a privilege. I had seen one too many jaundiced, suit-clad, vacant-eyed paper pushers riding the metro, 30 years older than me and not a day wiser. I knew I must escape before I too fell into this trap called The City and suffered under its slow death sentence.” Pike visited Pierre and found a job with the state legislature and an apartment, loaded the rent-a-truck, and never looked back. He reversed the logic of the old German saying, “City air makes men free,” and enjoys new freedoms in Pierre, like not having to lock the car doors, being able to walk anywhere at any hour of the night, eating lunch at home if he wants to, and leaving the office at five o’clock each evening. These are freedoms that many residents of the coastal metropolises may long for. But his description of the open prairie surrounding Pierre, the lack of neighboring towns, and the peace of the countryside is not going to appeal to the cityophile. Phrases that would leap to their lips might include “boondocks” and “the middle of nowhere.” Pike acknowledged that where he lives is not paradise, but when locals ask him why he moved there, he asks back, “Have you ever lived in D.C?” In response, they smile and nod knowingly. It is interesting to think about vacationers from one of these places, Pierre or D.C, visiting the other, and what they would miss, if anything, when they returned home.

People are leaving the city. Not only Washington, D.C., but also North American cities in general have lost population in the past few decades. Most of those leaving the city aren’t going far, not as far as Pierre. As we will see in chapter 7, there is something of a contradiction in the general pattern of urban population
loss. While Washington’s population appeared to have slipped by about 20,000 people, down to a total population of about 520,000 between 2000 and 2005, the greater Washington metropolitan area, extending into western Maryland and northern Virginia, increased by about 7 percent to a total of just under 6 million in roughly the same period (Washington Post April 17 and December 22, 2005). People leave the city proper, but most remain within the sprawling urban regions, and newcomers arrive daily. Also, while many of the older urban cores are losing population, they are taking on new functions and a new character. Washington, of course, retains its old federal architectural quality and government function as the national capital: Much of the region’s growth is attributed to the creation of new national security jobs in northern Virginia, which received a disproportionate amount of homeland security spending after 2001 (Washington Post April 17, 2005). But another important economic feature of the capital is tourism: Washington, D.C., is host to millions of tourists each year, 20 million in 1997 alone. In city after city, governments and promoters of local economic growth are going after tourism and convention business more competitively. The downtown area of the capital city in the middle to late 1990s acquired a new look, with new retail development, a new convention center, and a $100 million sports arena (America’s Top-Rated Cities 1999, 332–33).

As metropolitan regions sprawl around them, older urban cores are threatened with losing their old importance, even symbolically, as the heart of their region. The most dynamic growth takes place on the region’s periphery, where the affluent middle class resides. If the welcoming public spaces that attract Oldenberg and Mucha are to survive, they must learn to live here in the suburb. Suburbanites and inner-city residents have many issues that divide them, in terms of economics, culture, and politics. Under what circumstances can we still talk about urban regions as representing a meaningful sociocultural unit generating among all the elements of the population a common sense of identity—an identity attached to the broad physical space they share? Of the little we have said about the District of Columbia, the new sports arena may provide the most valuable hint.

We’re Number 1

As we have seen, place of residence generates a sense of allegiance for many people. This is especially so in the case of hometowns, the place of birth. For people who were born in large cities, the “hometown” may be the whole city, or a neighborhood, or named area within it (the South End, the West Side, and so forth). For those born in metropolitan regions, the question of what is “local” is problematic. People in the Boston metro region—a large, but by no means the largest, example we might have chosen—may live in and identify themselves as being from Brookline, Dedham, Quincy, Newton, Chelsea, or a dozen other possibilities. Is Greater Boston a “real” place to its residents? The following observations are not based so much on careful scientific data gathering as they are on a set of truths that become immediately recognizable as facts once they are expressed. Here we enter the dangerous realm of common observation.

To highlight the dimension of the urban experience having to do with the way people identify the spatial unit in which they live, we turn our attention to a particular
aspect of popular culture that has very wide appeal. When this cultural force comes into play, geographic allegiance comes to extend to the city as a whole, to cut across all demographic categories, to unite all social classes, to extend even through the suburban metropolitan region joining all in a single solidarity based on shared space and glory. This powerful force is not warfare or mortal threat, at least not in the literal sense. This force exists, by advancing degrees, where there is a local professional team competing in a major sport, when that team is having a winning season, when that team makes the playoffs, when that team is champion. This is the one force to unite the cityphile and cityphobe in celebration or mutual despair. It is a phenomenon similar to the patriotic experience that attends the playing of the gold medal winner’s national anthem at the Olympics. In the case of professional sports in North America, the rivalry is not as often international as it is intercity.

Red Sox and Yankee fans root not for a team representing the Northeast, but for a team from their metro region, and when the two teams play each other, the rivalry is at its height. The pitch of local identification and rivalry is repeated in city after city. The Cleveland Plain Dealer, during the 1999 National Football League season, sponsored a Web site where Cleveland Browns fans could trade insults with Pittsburgh Steelers fans, soon provoking a similar site sponsored by a Pittsburgh-region newspaper. The sponsors of both sites had some trouble keeping the exchanges limited to “good clean fun” (Williams, 1999).

Anthropologically, team rivalry is thought to represent a new form of tribalism. Psychologists talk about the degree to which fans identify with their teams, experiencing a surging sense of well-being when the home team wins and a deflated sense of self with each loss. On-site studies show that male fans, during important games, undergo a physiological transformation expressed in substantial increases in testosterone levels, which only lasts beyond the duration of the game if their team is victorious. When teams win an important championship, hometown fans are apt to rampage through the streets, as in 2008 in Montreal when the Canadiens bested the Boston Bruins in the first-round payoffs for professional hockey’s Stanley Cup (International Herald Tribune April 22, 2008) repeating the disturbances that had occurred in Boston months earlier when the Red Sox won the World Series in 2007 (Telegraph October 30, 2007).

One disreputable element among the ranks of European soccer fans is notorious for inflicting damage and injury. The phenomenon, known as football hooliganism, is especially associated with international matches, but opposing fans and the city hosting a domestic intercity contest often come in for rough treatment as well. English sportswriter and fan Hunter Davies (1999) once attended an international soccer match between his own country’s badly outmatched Arsenal team and Spain’s Barcelona at Wembley Stadium. At halftime, with their team behind by two goals, disgruntled Arsenal fans roughed him up because they suspected he was a Tottenham (another English team) fan, even though, as far as he could tell, he showed no outward sign of that secret allegiance. There simply were no Barcelona fans available, and a fan of an urban rival was a worthy substitute.

The phenomenon of sport interests us here because of its unifying power. This power is tied to location, and at least while the winning streak, championship game, or playoff series is underway, we have a glimpse of the power of place, of
allegiance to a particular city, to transcend the important sociological differences that otherwise separate local populations on a daily basis. Professional sports is one of the most powerful forces for getting people to use the term “we” inclusively, with reference to all of the people in an urban region, and mean it. Of course, the “we” don’t all have to be living in the city of the home team, but to be sure the most ardent body of fans are there—the highest per capita ratio of fan to inhabitant. In years where the Yankees and the Red Sox are battling each other for the American League title, it is possible to find Yankee fans from Boston and Red Sox fans from New York in the stadium, but there won’t be many, and they may not admit it.

It would be highly desirable to harness the unifying power of sport, to generalize and apply it to the cause of social unity on a routine basis, and to preserve the spirit of fellowship that it generates among metropolitan populations. So far no one has thought of a way to do it (short of actually going to war with neighboring city-states), and any lingering sense of solidarity and common cause probably does not extend beyond the stadium parking lot. Still, it gives us another glimpse of the sociological importance of space.

THE URBAN ARENA: PLAYGROUND AND POLITICS

The ancient city of Athens, in 400 BC, provides insight into one very important feature of all cities: Cities are arenas or stages that naturally lend themselves to spectacle. The daily business of Athens took place in the open, in the central marketplace where goods from all over the known world were sold, all trades plied, and all services provided. This was also the site in the early years for entertainments, athletic games, and equestrian displays (Hall 1998, 38). Although the population of Athens was modest by current urban standards (at its peak, having no more than 300,000 inhabitants), by the standards of the age Athens provided a spectacular pageant even as it went about its daily business. One of the ways that cities are different today is that most businesses and entertainments are somewhat less likely to be carried out in the open. But there is still much activity that spills out into the streets and plazas, and cities remain natural arenas for festival and dramatization because of the sheer numbers of people they contain.

People find cities attractive playgrounds, and local authorities and organizers, aware of this fact, sponsor festivals to remind residents and visitors to have a good time—and spend some money. The International Festival and Events Association estimates that there are 32,000 urban festivals each year in the United States (Ward 2000b). One New York City street festival source listed 291 festivals for the 2007 season, most of them clustered from April through October (May is the big month with fifty-three). These included La Gran Parada Dominicana, Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (two, one in Manhattan and another in the Bronx), the Romania Day Festival, the Old Saint Patrick’s Street Fair, the Bronx Puerto Rican Festival, the Dance Parade Festival in Washington Square Park, the Livable West Side Street Fair, and the Young Republicans Club and PrideFEST celebrations both held on the same day in June. Organizers in smaller cities may make do with just
one street festival a year in an effort to put their city on the map: Gilroy, California’s Garlic Festival each July and Moriarity, New Mexico’s Pinto Bean Fiesta in October.

One of the most popular festival themes combines ethnic celebration and food. Some cities host multiethnic food fairs, like St. Petersburg’s Ethnic Food Festival or, with more emphasis on food than ethnicity, Chicago’s Taste of Chicago. Mexicans, Germans, Greeks, Chinese—many traditions know how to party in the streets, but none seem so dedicated or naturally adept at it as Italians in the United States. There are no fewer than thirty-three major Italian American street festivals in the United States each year, from Sacramento’s Festa Italiano to Saint Anthony’s Feast in Boston. Probably none of them is larger or better known than New York’s San Gennaro Festival held each September in the Little Italy neighborhood. Like many Italian American festivals, it combines a good time with observation and celebration of a saint’s feast day, in this case San Gennaro, patron saint of Naples. The continuation of the festival is important to many of the long-time residents of Manhattan’s Little Italy, which is today roughly a six-block area on the Lower East Side, bounded by Mulberry, Canal, and Prince streets. Formerly, the area known as Little Italy was much larger, but it has shrunk from generation to generation, and the third- and fourth-generation Italian community is being succeeded by Chinese, Vietnamese, Spanish, and other ethnic groups. The languages in which Mass is now said in formerly Italian Catholic churches are those of more recently arrived ethnics. The street festival gives the remaining few thousand people of Italian immigrant descent a few days each September when they symbolically reclaim the streets, although most of the locals who watch the parade and other festivities are of Asian birth or descent (Leyden 1999).

Another symbolically important feature of the festival lies in its organization and sponsorship. An annual event since its beginning in 1927, there is ample evidence that for much of its existence it was run by sponsors with ties to organized crime, and that the proceeds, which were raised for charity, were skimmed by major New York crime figures. In 1996, after a two-year investigation, the City of New York barred the former sponsors from organizing the festival, and neighborhood interests immediately founded a nonprofit organization to take over the festival’s operation (Leyden 1999). The potentially damaging publicity, made-to-order to fit negative stereotypes attached to successful Italian American enterprise, was for a time defused. While rumors of mob influence persist (New York Sun September 17, 2004), and although some neighborhood residents claim that the annual event is a nuisance and should be banned (New York Daily News March 26, 2007), the symbolic importance of the festival for New Yorkers of Italian descent remains strong. In 1999, the president of the organization committee said, “It all started here for our families, the roots are here. Why should we end this? The neighborhood is smaller, but the tradition, the heritage—it’s a big thing. People come back. . . . The point is Little Italy is a very big part of people’s lives” (Leyden 1999, A3). Between 1 million and 3 million people, according to various estimates, are attracted to the food and games every year, lending weight to the Italian American claim that they still own a couple of blocks on Mulberry Street for several days each September.
Cities for Fun and Profit

Urban street festivals are a public expression of the identity and solidarity of a community. A particular festival may express the ethnic identity of an urban subculture, like the San Gennaro festival; it may support a particular neighborhood cause, like New York’s Livable West Side Street Fair; or it may celebrate something about the city as a whole, like Moriarity, New Mexico’s annual Pinto Bean Fiesta. Whatever their theme, festivals reframe public space for a time, maximize its potential to be experienced as warm and welcoming, and invite visitors to join with locals in a time and place that’s “just for fun.”

But a lot of work by neighbors, volunteers, or members of religious organizations is required to bring off a successful public event, and because at least a share of the proceeds is typically marked for charity or for community improvement, an important measure of success is the bottom line—how well the event worked as a money raiser. The increasing popularity of the street fair or citywide festival has created a growth industry for private consulting companies that specialize in engineering financially successful festivals. Behind the expressions of solidarity, tradition, and people having a good time is a set of promoters doing business.

The urban festival’s potential to generate profit has not been lost on the entertainment industry and other promotional entrepreneurs. If a neighborhood can generate substantial profits in a few days of organized nostalgia each year, why not create year-round festival zones in the heart of large urban centers featuring proven crowd-pleasing, money-making attractions—minus the for-charity motive? The festival theming of contemporary urban spaces did not simply occur spontaneously. The historical context was provided by the decline of the industrial economic

The Little Italy street festival in Lower Manhattan is perhaps the best-known of all the ethnic street fests in the United States. © KLPJ Photography, photographersdirect.com
urban base, especially in older northern and eastern cities of the United States, cities that had originally developed as part of the era of industrial expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the face of industrial decline, city leaders opted to promote tourism because tourism paid off. “By the 1990s tourism had become one of the most dynamic sectors in the world economy, growing faster than any other sector; by 1990 it ranked third [behind automobile and petroleum production] in value-added trade-related activities” (Judd 2003, 50). In 2006, international tourism alone (people traveling between countries) was valued at $733 billion, and U.S. urban Chambers of Commerce and other civic leadership groups were eager to increase the 12 percent or $86 billion share of that worldwide tourist market that was spent in the United States (Oskar Garcia, Associated Press July 4, 2008).

In fact, individual cities have “entered into a vigorous international competition for tourists, and the terms of this competition require cities not only to market themselves, but also to provide a constantly improving level of facilities, amenities, and services.” Clever promotional themes, like the well-worn “I Love New York” slogan introduced in 1977, are not enough to keep tourists coming in. Cities are devoting a major share of their budgets to underwrite the costs of sports stadiums, festival-themed malls, convention centers, family-friendly pedestrian malls packed with shops and free of motor traffic, redeveloped waterfronts, themed museums, outdoor concert venues, casinos, and other enhanced public spaces, in order to attract visitors and their dollars to tourist-magnetic entertainment zones (Judd 2003, 3–7).

Hannigan (1998) used the term Fantasy City to describe the “urban entertainment destination” (UED) projects that were being contemplated or constructed by nearly every major entertainment company and several large real estate developers by the end of the twentieth century. The phenomenon being described here combines elements of old-fashioned entertainment districts that have developed crescively, with the enacted form of environment characteristic of the theme park (these terms were introduced at the beginning of this chapter). Some districts may be wholly designed and managed by a single corporation. Others involve many developers, designing their projects independently, but all united in the recognition that a particular urban area is taking shape as a UED; entrepreneurs scramble to position their restaurant, theme bar, multiscreen theater, or retail complex strategically within it. The idea is to create a public space that appeals to the tourist and consumer mass market, a secure environment that has something for everyone, and where the attraction is fun. It is typically a day-and-night operation in the spirit of the Las Vegas casino, and visitors carry away with them prestige logo-embossed souvenirs—maybe the best example is the Hard Rock Cafe T-shirt—bearing the imprint of the UED, one of its many attractions, or the logo of such an area’s corporate sponsor, attesting to the fact that they had been to the site.

Fantasy City . . . is constructed around technologies of simulation, virtual reality, and the thrill of the spectacle. Without a doubt, a major inspiration has been the Disney model, not only because it has been widely imitated but also because a number of the Disney “imagineers” (designers) have migrated to other entertainment and real estate companies and projects where they bring their “Magic Kingdom” sensibility. Increasingly, as motion picture and amusement park technologies merge to produce a new
generation of attractions, the space between authenticity and illusion recedes, creating the condition of "hyperreality." (Hannigan 1998, 4)

Hannigan’s examples include as many actual theme parks as sanitized and revised downtown sites, but some of the prominent illustrations of the concept include the desexualized revision of Times Square, the South Street Seaport (also in Manhattan), Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston, Harbor Place in Baltimore, Madchester and Gay City in the old industrial city of Manchester, England, and several urban or urban-adjacent entertainment complexes in Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong. The text provided by a visitor’s guide to San Francisco’s waterfront attractions profiles the way cities and their agents promote their locations as urban entertainment destinations.

Hop on the ferry to Alcatraz (be sure to reserve ahead as tours often sell out) also known as “The Rock” and take an audio tour. . . . Now every kid has an inner pirate, but how many have sung sea chanteys on a real ship? San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park hosts Chantey Sing at Hyde Park Pier . . . truly a once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing. . . . A stroll along the Marina Green will lead you to Fort Mason Center, a collection of buildings jutting out into the bay, transformed from an Army post into an arts/events/performance/restaurant/non-profit space. . . . Up a slight incline to Upper Fort Mason is a small park [that] offers hands-on exhibits, ranger led tours of historic sailing ships, workshops, and programs designed especially for kids.

Continue southeast for the perfect mid morning (or afternoon or evening) snack: a hot fudge sundae at the Ghirardelli Ice Cream and Chocolate Shop in Ghirardelli Square, which houses shops and restaurants with great views of the water. . . . If you do get caught without a sweatshirt when the fog brings in its damp coolness, there is no shortage of merchants along the wharf waiting to sell you a warm piece of clothing that says, “I Escaped from Alcatraz,” or “I Left My Heart in San Francisco.” . . . pass under the Bay Bridge to reach our final near-the-water destination. AT&T Park is home to the San Francisco Giants. . . . If attention wanes walk over to the Coca-Cola Fan Lot, an interactive play area above the left-field bleachers. Slide inside the 80-foot wooden Coca-Cola bottle, see the world’s largest baseball glove, or run the bases inside “Little Giants Park” . . . AT&T Park tours leave every day from the Giants Dugout Store at 10:30 am and 12:30 pm on non-day-game days. (Where Magazine, San Francisco July 2008. Morris Visitor Publications. Augusta, Georgia)

The San Francisco waterfront provides a familiar urban experience offered by many cities to the contemporary visitor. But we do need to recognize that as a calculated and marketed environment it represents a transformation of the nature of urban space as it has existed and been experienced until recent times. It is more orderly, safe, and deliberate. Cities have always been places where people could find “fun,” but fun has not historically been the city’s reason for being. Critics of urban fun zones make this and other points in considering the transformation of urban space that we are describing here. These fantasy spaces do not simulate authentic urban arenas so much as they do a theme park experience. One may spend several days in the managed entertainment environments and never come to know the city that exists beneath this sanitized facade. Second, critics point out that these themed environments are created solely for the purpose of separating visitors from their cash in arenas of inflated prices. Ehrenhalt (1999) comments on Chicago’s premiere
shopping UED, Michigan Avenue. It does not belong in any particular way to Chicago. The stores drawing the crowds are the same upscale chains that are found in other cities, selling hypermarketed image items in such super outlet operations as Niketown, Disney Quest, and the American Girl Place. Minorities are dramatically underrepresented among the shopping crowds, and the poor have no reason to be there. However, Ehrenhalt concludes that, although these are serious criticisms of the Michigan Avenue district, the slick and segregated environment is succeeding on its own terms and that is worth something in an era when many downtowns continue to struggle economically. His response to critics of the new shoppertainment environment is summed up, “No matter how much you might wish to deny it, most of the people strolling down Michigan Avenue on a Saturday night are enjoying themselves. If they’re suckers, they’re happy suckers. It’s a little presumptuous to second-guess their contentment” (7).

Finally, the quest to reinvent urban space in order to attract visitors comes with a huge price tag. Any public resources devoted to underwriting urban attractions means that those resources will not be available for the provision of other municipal infrastructure and services: education, security, safe bridges, and so forth. Critics argue that subsidies that enhance a city’s attractiveness for visitors and affluent residents are misspent, since they do not return benefits to the city’s poor. Reviewing the impact of just one of these sites, Baltimore’s often celebrated success in turning its dilapidated Inner Harbor into an attractive tourist and convention destination, Norris (2003) concludes that the matter of who receives the net benefits of such projects is difficult to determine. When the project was initiated, Baltimore had long been in a state of decline, as affluent citizens and businesses fled to the suburbs. But, if the city had opted to invest public funds more directly to enhance the lives of the city’s poor rather than trying to make the city center more attractive to entrepreneurs and affluent classes, the question remains as to what the consequences would have been for all citizens if the exodus of capital and retail dollars had continued unabated. This, of course, is part of a familiar perennial public debate about whether policies that focus on economic growth serve all interests or best serve the affluent and economic elite.

Political and economic questions about which classes of citizens benefit most from particular policies abound in urban sociology, and they will absorb our attention in much of this text. For now what interests us about the various elements of urban fun zones is the assumption that the engineering of spaces modifies thought and behavior. Here, we are trying to see how urban space and different kinds of urban space impact the perceptions, the mood, and the behavior of people who occupy them. The developers of urban fun zones—the Fantasy Cities—realize that urban space can be engineered to produce a particular kind of experience. In effect, the agents of development are doing urban sociology, a kind of applied sociology or human engineering—deliberately attempting to modify urban environments to produce particular perceptions and behaviors that are compatible with the profit motive. They are providing cues that are widely recognizable to people who have absorbed and been absorbed by a particular kind of urban stimulus to induce the “here’s where we begin to have fun and spend some money” reaction. We may define this neutrally as facilitating recreational behavior or more critically as shaking down the suckers, but whatever our interpretation, we are operating within the
assumption that urban space alters behavior and that by altering the space itself, a particular behavioral tendency can be created.

One final and especially curious form of the imagineered urban experience is the re-creation of historic, exotic, or even current urban environments somewhere else—in a theme park or a foreign UED. A small but perhaps familiar example is the transplanted-brick-by-brick Irish pub, with its permanently stashed bicycle, thatch, hearth, and Guinness on tap. On a somewhat larger scale, you can experience New York in Las Vegas in the New York–New York casino, which reproduces New York environments for Las Vegas tourists—many of whom are visiting from New York. In the 1990s the casino’s operators lifted a selection of Manhattan’s street performers to put on a ninety-minute “authentic” expression of New York street culture, “MADhattan,” backdropped on stage by a graffitied street scene (Hannigan 1998, 74): By 2008 this production had been replaced by Cirque du Soleil’s more risqué Zumanity stage creation. Universal Studios took the quest for authenticity to a new level in its re-creation of New York City, combining the resources of the two fantasy capitals, Hollywood (the movie capital) and Orlando (the Disney capital). The Universal Orlando theme park featured a New York experience richer than the experience of New York itself, affording visitors a walk through the “real” South Street waterfront of the 1920s, the Little Italy and Fifth Avenue of the Great Depression, and the more upscale contemporary New York. Authenticity of experience was enhanced by attention to detail—from rust stains on pipes to cobwebs to sidewalk bubble gum. Fantasy and reality have been run together as the streets of the theme park New York now provide the big city backdrop for thrills aboard the Revenge of the Mummy and Twister rides and performances by Jake and Elwood, the Blues Brothers (www.uescape.com), not the “real” Jake and Elwood, of course. A Universal Theme Park opened in Osaka, Japan, in 2001. It re-created authentic urban experiences from cities in the United States. These included an Irish pub, not from Dublin but from Brooklyn, a Chinese fast food restaurant from San Francisco, and yes, a re-created authentic Japanese restaurant—from Manhattan’s SoHo district.

The line between what is real and what is fantasy is blurred by the near-miraculous capacity of rapidly advancing technology to create illusion. In Fantasy City, it has been combined with unprecedented levels of modern corporate wealth to build physical environments that mimic Hollywood’s capacity to create two-dimensional illusions on the movie screen. It seems both ironic and natural that it is the movie set that has taken fantasized urban environments to their logical extreme: fantasy in the round. But there is the possibility of a further step here, that the fantasy cityscape will escape from the theme park and reenter the everyday, lived-in urban environment and transform it to conform with the fantasized, re-created, sanitized, and perfected theme park city scenes. Zukin (1995, 65–69) believes that is just what has happened. The Disney formula for simplifying and stylistically coordinating the appearance of spaces that people use, so that their themed message can be easily understood and digested—what has been called the sanitization of experience—is at work in such diverse projects as the wholly planned community of Seaside, Florida, and the cleanup and redesign of New York City’s Times Square. The Disney Company, during the 1980s, was commissioned to redesign Seattle Center by that city, but concerns over whether the center would be turned into a theme park where those needing access would be charged an admission fee, the company’s
reported unwillingness to incorporate input from the city or its citizens, and cost overruns caused the city to look elsewhere for design ideas. In order to apply theme park criteria to actual urban space, “Its charming surface and smooth-running infrastructure would only be achieved through planning practices that are unacceptably authoritarian in the real world” (Warren 1994). To the extent the imagineer’s sense of visual and social order prevails in reshaping the public environments of future cities, making them safe and predictable, the urban features that draw many of us to the study and the experience of the city will have been lost. Toontown may be safe, it may be fun, but it lacks intrigue, chance events, surprises. It lacks many of the features that delight the urban sociologist and the cityphile alike.

Cities and Political Expression

Just as cities provide an arena for festivals, they also offer a natural setting for dramatic political expression. For one thing, they provide large numbers of people that can be mobilized by those in power for political rallies in support of government and its policies and for mass expressions of solidarity on national political holidays. But they also provide the critical mass of like-minded dissenters who can take to the streets to express dissatisfaction, mistrust, and opposition to a government or its unpopular policies. Historically, the city provided a natural arena where political demonstrations were communicated effectively and immediately to the largest audience possible simply by the noise and spectacle of mass gatherings themselves. In recent centuries, communication of urban demonstrations has been insured by the concentration in cities of the news-gathering resources of print and electronic news media. The objective of most political demonstrations is expressive, designed to communicate a message of dissent and a call for change. Major cities provide a showcase, a setting that lends weight to the cause, a setting where large numbers of people in the streets are optimally disruptive, where the consequences of massed opposition have the greatest effect. Cities also draw political demonstrations because the targets of the demonstrators reside there: congresses and parliaments, presidents and prime ministers, corporate headquarters and other influential institutions. Cities have also been the natural setting for demonstrations because they contain the most substantial numbers of the poor and minorities. As people in the United States know from the experience of recent decades, confrontations between agents of law and order and members of minority communities regularly invite the perception of injustice and the use of excessive force. These can quickly generate massive rioting.

Cities appear to continue to be a necessary component in political causes that employ public demonstrations as a means to gain the attention of policymakers. Whether the mode of operation is a candlelight prayer vigil or an act of terrorism, if it takes place in the heart of a world city or capital, it will be a more effective means of communicating the cause. Farmers seeking a change in policies that affect their livelihood bring their tractors to the capital; they don’t demonstrate in rural areas. Revolutionaries, anarchists, and other activists may come together on the Internet to refine their positions and strategize activities, but if they live only in cyberspace, few of us will take note of their activity unless we deliberately take the trouble to look for them. Cities are a different type of communication medium. Here the world is
forced to take note. When the world remembers the terrorist attack on the United States in September 2001, the World Trade Center in Manhattan is the first image that comes to mind, then the Pentagon. The tragedy of the hijacked airliner that crashed in a remote field in Pennsylvania that day does not have the same symbolic impact: it lacks an urban context.

For those who feel pushed aside by economic globalization itself, where better to address the remote and faceless process than the streets of Seattle, London, and Washington, D.C., as the executives of the World Trade Organization (WTO) come together to meet? Symbolizing both the shrunken globe and the continued relevance of local space, 50,000 demonstrators who had gathered from throughout the world blocked the streets in Seattle in 1999 and prevented the United Nations Secretary General from addressing the assembled WTO delegates in person. The tens of thousands of protesters who gathered there to shout their defiance at the remote and faceless engines of global economic change may not be a sufficient force to reverse the process. They may accomplish little more than to inconvenience the executive agents of the organization convened to set the terms of global change. But the people in the streets are a highly visible force that effectively draws the attention of the watching world to what the demonstrators see as the dark side of the most recent economic revolution. The streets and public squares of the city are more than a backdrop to the drama: They provide the setting for the massing of human energies, the infectious excitement of being a part of a huge crowd that shares what they see as a set of noble goals. Each protester’s voice is amplified into a thunder of collected voices and together the protesters enjoy the empowering experience of standing against lines of police, the coverage of hundreds of television cameras and news reporters from around the world, and the validating sense of the crowd that they are up to something worthy of note on the broadest possible scale.

In many ways the political use of the street is the ultimate expression of people taking control of public space, making it their own, and feeling fellowship and at home there, at least while the demonstration lasts. At the same time, they are in the company of thousands of strangers. At this moment, the city, by virtue of providing the conditions that invite collective political expression, is having a profound impact on each of the people gathered there, on their sense of who they are, on the way they perceive others, on the way they perceive the world, and on the way they organize their lives. This is a decidedly urban phenomenon.

We conclude this chapter in textbox 1.2 with an examination of events that are both festivals and episodes of collective political expression: the urban tradition known as the gay rights march.

Textbox 1.2—From Stonewall to Rome

On June 8, 1969, the patrons of a Manhattan bar, the Stonewall Inn, took to the streets in defiance of public homophobia and in direct response to a police raid on the drinking establishment where they had carved out a safe place—an establishment that catered primarily to gays—in a hostile environment. “Stonewall” became a rallying symbol of defiance against the suppressed right to a gay sexual identity, and a powerful
political movement emerged. During the following decades the gay pride march became a familiar fixture in many cities. Chicago, London, San Francisco, Boston, New York, and many other cities regularly host celebrations of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered identities. The marches, which in the beginning were political demonstrations of solidarity akin to those of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, had by the 1990s become parades surrounded by a festival atmosphere. While the marchers are still subject to counterdemonstrations, threats of violence, and hecklers, they are now regularly joined by family members, community leaders, celebrities, and political figures.

The annual New York City Gay Games, a gay Olympics, draws thousands of athletes and estimated hundreds of thousands of spectators. The May 2000 gay pride celebration at the National Mall in Washington, D.C., included a six-block street fair and featured such prominent corporate sponsors as United Airlines, America Online, and the Miller Brewing Company. Comedian Ellen DeGeneres wore a Mickey Mouse T-shirt and publicly thanked the ABC television network, owned by the Disney Company, for airing her weekly sitcom *Ellen* (the show ran from 1994 to 1998). Martina Navratilova, former tennis champion, appeared as spokesperson for both Subaru and the VISA Rainbow Card. The event demonstrated how far the gay rights movement had come from the days of the Stonewall march. Members of the movement had found a broad base of public support, and many enjoyed a level of economic success that made them an important market that could not be ignored (Wildman 2000, 14).

In Rome, Italy, 2000 was also the year of the World Pride celebration. Rights demonstrators had organized parades and rallies in many countries in recent years, from Ireland to Mexico to Australia, and it was time to bring the cause to the world’s attention in a focused and highly publicized event in the Eternal City. The weeklong event in early July drew between 200,000 and 300,000 participants. It occurred during the summer of the Vatican’s Jubilee Year, a year that combined celebration and solemn purpose, and attracted hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from around the world. The juxtaposition of these celebrations generated the expected controversies, which highlighted the political purpose of the World Pride event. Some organizers had favored the more gay-friendly cities of Amsterdam or London for the international celebration, but Rome was chosen due to the Church’s opposition to homosexuality. In the weeks leading up to July, the Vatican openly criticized the movement’s plans, the mayor of Rome withdrew the city’s welcome, Catholics held public vigils in opposition to the World Pride gathering, and neofascist organizations marched through the streets and threatened violence.

In the end, the World Pride celebration took place peacefully, as scheduled, with conferences, fashion shows, a parade, theater events, and concerts. The parade was broadcast live on Italian television. The atmosphere was festive, but the undercurrent of hostility was a reminder that gay rights is still fundamentally a political cause with far to go toward the goal of universal acceptance. As one of the organizers said of Rome, “This is turning into another Stonewall” (*New York Times*, July 9, 2000).

The celebration and the controversy surrounding it highlight the fact that the city is an arena, a showcase for the culture and politics of the times. Social movements must still come to the city to achieve their political and social ends. International social movements select spectacular arenas of expression, and Rome, the ancient and Eternal City, the former seat of empire, is hard to beat as a stage from which to address the world.
From Ancient Cities to an Urban World

In order to appreciate the way cities shape social life it is necessary to begin by tracing the advent and development of the urban form—to study the origins of cities and how they have changed over time. In this chapter, we begin with what we think were the first cities—located in the Middle East—and also look at the earliest cities in other regions of the world—China and Mesoamerica. We then turn to the urbanization of Europe and assess the impact of the Industrial Revolution. In both the ancient period and the period of rapid industrialization, there are three distinguishable categories of social change: the increase in the scale of human settlements and its consequences for social organization, specifically social stratification; the impact of the city on culture and experience; and the process of political and economic centralization. In both the ancient and industrial eras, the magnitude of the change associated with new urban centers was truly revolutionary in terms of the conditions under which people would live their lives and experience the world. These eras laid the groundwork for the urbanization of the world, a process that continues today. The chapter concludes with a discussion of current patterns of urbanization. Today the most rapid urban growth takes place in the largely poorer countries in the Southern Hemisphere, and in the emerging global giants, China and India. At the same time, the significance of cities, as important units of spatial analysis, is challenged by the conceptual framework, globalization. The study of the impact of globalization leads us to ask whether we have reached an era in human history where limited physical space, like the space defined by a city, has become a significantly less important framework for containing or influencing social action.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE URBAN FORM

The city as a type of human organization and settlement, measured against the record of human existence and settlement, is a relatively recent innovation. It is generally agreed that early modern Homo sapiens emerged about 200,000 years ago. The last ice age ended 10,000 years ago. Permanent settlement is commonly thought
to have begun shortly thereafter, as scattered human populations could turn from hunting to agriculture and the domestication of livestock. The earliest of the human settlements that would seem to qualify as a city, Hamoukar in current-day Syria, didn’t come into the archeological picture until sometime a little more than 6,000 years ago (Ur 2002).

Although the city has emerged only relatively recently as an artifact of human existence, its emergence still came some time before there was a written language to record its history. This means that whatever we learn of the origins of urban life must be pieced together by archeologists from the physical remains of these places. As Mumford (1961, 55) wrote in The City in History, “This inquiry into the origin of the city would read more clearly were it not for the fact that perhaps most of the critical changes took place before the historical era opens. By the time the city comes clearly into view it is already old.”

In Search of the First City: The Middle East

The first cities probably were built in an area ranging between what is today northeastern Syria and southern Iraq, and these were followed within a few hundred years by the development of cities in the Indus River Valley in contemporary Pakistan. The emergence of cities in these regions came only after a long pre-urban period of permanent human settlement and technological advancement, the development of a dependable agriculture, and an increase in population. Gradually, the nature of the settlements in question underwent a qualitative change, a transition from a locally focused, isolated, economically and socially self-contained, and basically agricultural community to a form of settlement that demanded recognition as distinctly urban. Even if we had a perfectly clear account of the entire era of transition from preurban to urban society, it would still be impossible to establish at what point the transition took place. We can imagine that the change came about by degrees. The nature of that difference is reflected in the following passage from Childe:

By 3000 BC the archeologist’s picture of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley no longer focuses attention on communities of simple farmers, but on States embracing various professions and classes. The foreground is occupied by priests, princes, scribes, and officials, and an army of specialized craftsmen, professional soldiers, and miscellaneous laborers, all withdrawn from the primary task of food-production. The most striking objects now unearthed are no longer the tools of agriculture and the chase, and other products of domestic industry, but temple furniture, weapons, wheel-made pots, jewelry, and other manufactures turned-out on a large scale by skilled artisans. As monuments we have instead of huts and farmhouses monumental tombs, temples, palaces and workshops. And in these we find all manner of exotic substances, not as rarities, but regularly imported and used in everyday life. (Childe 1951, 115–16)

At the ancient site of Erech, an early Mesopotamian city, excavation revealed a mound of debris (a tell) fifty feet high. It consisted mostly of the ruins of mud and reed huts, layer upon layer, the result of centuries of continuous occupation. Over time the village grew in size and wealth, but it remained a village. Above the older ruins, however, was evidence of a monumental structure, an artificial mountain of
clay, carefully modeled and decorated, 35 feet high and 1,000 yards square at the top. Its religious purpose was revealed by a small shrine built atop the structure, raised closer to heaven by the mound. Larger temples were built at the base of the sloping sides of the earthwork (Childe 1951, 117).

The decorated mound of clay at Erech reveals something about the transition from preurban to urban society. It symbolizes the three dimensions of social change that mark the rise of the urban form: the increase in the scale of social organization, the transformation of culture and experience, and the rise of empire or the state found in the growing political-economic power of city-based leaders to command and control.

Change in the Scale of Social Organization

The earliest cities were not very large, either in terms of population or in the area of land that they covered. Sjoberg (1960, 36–37), upon viewing the evidence, put the population of the larger Mesopotamian centers at between 5,000 and 10,000 late in the fourth millennium. After 3000 BC the estimates for specific sites are somewhat higher, ranging from 12,000 (Khafaje) to 24,000 (Ur), but Sjoberg suspected that these figures were inflated. The relatively small population size of early cities raises the question of how big a population center has to be before it can be recognized as a city or a truly “urban” place.
There are perhaps three ways of handling this question. The first is to avoid the issue as unresolvable. A second is to attempt to establish an acceptable base figure, such as 2,500, 5,000, 10,000, or 20,000—all of which are currently employed by various census bureaus or worldwide data-gathering agencies. The problem is that these figures are arbitrary. The third approach is to admit that we have no numerical answer to the questions, How big is a city? or What is the scale of urban life? and to establish the question of size in a different way. Instead of attempting to posit a critical number of inhabitants, we look for the effects of increasing population size on the number and nature of different roles and relationships that occur among densely concentrated populations. A concentration of population leads to specialization within the workforce (Durkheim [1893] 1993). At some point, the density of sizable populations generates the demand for specialists who are thus freed partially or altogether from agricultural production—assuming that the remaining agriculturalists can be induced to produce sufficient surplus food to support those withdrawn from production.

This is the specialization referred to by Childe in the emergence of “the army of specialized craftsmen, scribes, soldiers and miscellaneous laborers.” But in the same passage, Childe notes that the archeological record discloses something else about the changes in social organization that were taking place. Where specialization created interdependence among the population, it also produced scarcity, in that access to the most highly valued goods and services was restricted to the few. Wealth was required for their acquisition, and some mechanism of distribution was needed to decide who would have access. The emerging urban social differentiation produced a more elaborate system of social stratification than had previously existed. Consequently, that hierarchical division of society into groups having greater and lesser access to wealth and life chances became more complex and the differences more extreme in the new urban society.

Although we can understand the systemic relationship between the size and density of populations, and how these give rise to diversity and stratification, it is more difficult to reconstruct the reasons that these populations were drawn together in the first place. Childe (1951, 88–90) offered the hypothesis that in the case of the very oldest Mesopotamian cities massive drainage and irrigation works were required to turn swampland into productive agricultural lands, which in turn required the coordination of very large workforces. The logic here is that the cooperation and coordination demanded by the environment led to the permanent settlement of relatively large populations of individuals who were mutually dependent on their collective efforts. While Childe’s reasoning is interesting, the reasons that urban settlements came about in other places varied widely. Some cities are thought to have emerged gradually from the growth of early protective agricultural communities. Hamoukar, near today’s Syrian-Iraqi border, seems to have been a specialized obsidian tool manufacturing and trading center from very early in its existence (Ur 2002). In other cases, urban settlement may have resulted from the continuous occupation of permanent military encampments or have been related to the requirements of religious practice—as in the building of monuments requiring large-scale coordination.

To summarize, when we speak of the emergence of an urban form of social organization, we have the following transition in mind: As society became more urbanized,
it became more socially differentiated, more specialized. This specialization, in turn, created an interdependence among the various members of society who were no longer individually capable of providing for all of their own material needs. At the same time, the variety of fine works, luxuries, and comforts magnified and defined what it meant to be rich or poor.

These emerging cities were clearly different from the large agrarian centers that preceded them. It is important, however, not to equate the relative richness and variety that these cities contained with that of cities familiar to today’s urbanite. The level of comfort enjoyed by the very few 5,000 or 6,000 years ago would seem modest by current standards of affluence. Famine and invasion were recurrent threats. Luxury, restricted to the elite, was purchased at the price of the slavery or poverty of the many, whose labor supported the standards of the rich and powerful. For most of the city’s existence, most urbanites lived in huts of mud or clay.

The Urban Form as Culture and the Transformation of Experience

As the dimensions of the social order became enlarged and as the division of labor produced skilled specialists and a more stratified and heterogeneous society, more elaborate and sophisticated cultures evolved that mirrored these social complexities. Early records show that trade routes covering considerable distances brought diverse cultures face to face in orderly exchange. The intermingling of societies was also generated by war and conquest. Although the average urbanite might live in a hut as a laborer or slave, the experience of the soldiers and the stories of traders and other travelers would filter to all quarters of the city. The order of the universe and the relation of heaven and earth were now interpreted by high priests, and the margins of the known world were pushed beyond the horizons that had limited experience in the long stages of prehistory. Life took place on a new scale and with a new variety. As Mumford’s colorful vision states:

In the city, godlike kings, winged bulls, hawk headed men, lionlike women, hugely magnified, erupted in clay, stone, brass, and gold. It is not merely in the theater that the spectator feels that the actors are larger than their actual life size. This is a characteristic illusion produced by the city, because the urban center is in fact a theater. . . . Thus the old active participant in the village ritual became the passive chorus, the spectators and commentators in the new urban drama. Once upon a time in the old village these lookers-on had a full share in what went on, and could perform successfully all the roles, by turn actor and spectator. Now, in the city they were diminished to supernumeraries. Perhaps not the least mission of urban monumental art was the reduction of the common man. (1961, 70)

Although the individual’s influence in shaping the new order may have diminished proportionately to the growth of social scale, Mumford (1961, 66–67) suggested further that a sense of participation and identification with a particular city may have compensated at the same time. “If the inhabitant of the city exulted in his powerful gods, he was no less proudly conscious of the circling and all containing wall: to contemporaries it seemed the great gods had fashioned the city and its temple—‘the house descending from heaven’—and above all its great wall touching the clouds.”
Life meanings were transformed, mystified, and raised up in the emerging urban culture, so that at its highest point heaven and earth seemed to be touching; the city provided the vehicle that brought these two planes together. Ultimately, death carried the worthy citizen across to the other side. In ancient Sumer, the wealth, and position of one’s temporal existence was not left behind. Wenke (1980, 415–16) noted that through 3800 BC, at even the largest settlements, grave sites evidenced little social differentiation. By 3000 BC, however, there was a striking difference in mortuary practice. At Ur, excavators working in the 1920s uncovered a burial pit that eventually revealed tombs of three distinct social strata: simple graves that presumably contained the remains of the common people, the more elaborate graves of the well-to-do, and a total of sixteen royal tombs. In one of these tombs were the remains of a queen, found partially hidden under a mass of gold beads and precious stones. She was surrounded by sacrificial attendants and guards whose duty it apparently was to assist her in her journey, for which the party was equipped with a jeweled chariot and similarly decorated wagons. Lying nearby was a gold- and jewel-encrusted harp, across which were strewn the bones of a gold-crowned harpist.

Even though it may not be possible to pinpoint the dates at which the first urban cultures emerged, we are still able to sense something of the differences embodied in the change. At some stage, people were clearly living in a different, wider, richer world, where specialists could devote more time to contemplating the metaphysical mysteries and debating their answers. The city transformed the human experience for those living within and around its walls. But its influence did not end there.

The Rise of the State and the Growth of Political-Economic Power

Any discussion of the advent and growth of cities would be incomplete if it focused exclusively on events that occurred within and around the walls of the early city. As the urban form took shape and grew in size, the territory that came under its influence grew as well. Whatever the other requirements of urban existence, the one condition that must be met is that of a sufficiently productive agricultural base. To the extent that all early urbanites were not self-sustaining peasants or farmers, and we have observed that many were not food producers, farmers had to be induced to produce a surplus of staple food crops. As Sjoberg (1960, 68) observed, “Peasant farmers . . . rarely produce and relinquish a surplus willingly in feudal societies; thus tribute, taxation and the like must be exacted if cities are going to gain the wherewithal to support their populations.” As the city emerges, therefore, we witness simultaneously the creation of a hinterland, an area containing a population that is not urbanite but subject to urban rule. They are a people whose lives have been transformed by the city, an example of the expanding dimensions of the power associated with the new form of organization. Whether it is through the teachings of the priest or the swords of soldiers, they learn that they owe their allegiance and the first share of their productive efforts to the city.

If the territories under the control of the early population centers of Mesopotamia were limited to a radius of a few miles in 3500 BCE (Hawley (1981, 22), it is not