

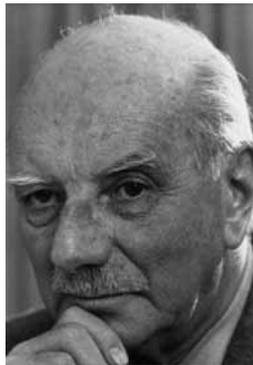
Lewis Mumford: Pioneer of Multidisciplinary Urban Thought

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WHEN URBAN ACTIVIST JANE JACOBS died this past April, obituary writers on both sides of the Atlantic noted that she had crossed swords with critic and historian of ideas Lewis Mumford. In other words, Mumford, who appeared on *Time* magazine's cover in 1938 and who died in 1990 at age 94, was still a newsmaker. In an age of sound bytes and television rivalry for public attention measured by the minute, the power of Mumford's ideas has persisted. Mumford's life span linked the era of Mark Twain with that of the Internet. For decades, Mumford had captured imaginations, stimulating policy makers, scholars, urban planners, architects, and the general public to sit quietly with a book or essay and reflect on major issues. The subject for which he achieved this educational coup was urban philosophy.

In Mumford's graceful, lucid prose, asking large, serious questions about the kinds of cities we want—or should want—became not just a civic responsibility but an enthralling odyssey of the mind, involving excursions into the evolution of technology, the history of civilizations, imaginative literature, the nature of democracy, architecture, fine art, science, environmentalism, and the quality of life of the common man, woman, and child. Born in Flushing, New York, in 1895, Mumford swiftly abandoned teenage thoughts of an engineering career to become a writer. Over his lifetime, he held academic posts at Dartmouth, Stanford, the University of Pennsylvania, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the University of California at Berkeley; wrote *The New Yorker's* "Sky Line" column from

1931 to 1963; advised cities, including Honolulu and Oxford, England; and won numerous awards—America's National Book Award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the National Medal for Literature, the National Medal of Arts, the rank of honorary



Knight Commander of the British Empire, and France's Prix Mondial del Duca for literature. This list scarcely suggests the enormous stature that he brought to urban discussion, which he saw not merely as a patchwork of contributions from different kinds of specialists but as a unified field

demanding as much intellectual resourcefulness and respect as any field of national interest.

The influence of many intellectuals seems to grow in inverse proportion to the ability of succeeding generations to recall exactly what they were famous for. British philosopher Bertrand Russell's life was interwoven with some of the 20th-century's central public debates, but today few people, even among the highly educated, could easily describe his career. Yet the vocabulary of his life and mind continues to permeate and influence our world whether or not we are aware of it. So, too, with Mumford. In the Library of Congress, there is a Mumford auditorium. The State University of New York at Albany houses a Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, whose recent projects include an urban China research network, a study of immigrant children, and an urban sociology teaching guide. The bookshelves of many an urban professional display at least one of Mumford's books. His pervasive presence hangs over our

discussions of the past, present, and future of towns, regions, and cities. But other than knowing that he was an eminent critic of architecture and urban policy, how many people could tell you why he was—and still is—an important figure?

This vagueness is due partly to the fact that Mumford, like Russell, was one of the thinkers whose impact gains from their longevity. They do not simply become retired elder statesmen whose roles grow clearer with the simplifying focus of years. Because they continue to work and develop over unusual spans of time (or because their ideas gain renewed relevance in other ways as decades pass), they eventually become human bridges between vastly different eras. In doing so, they become more, rather than less, complicated to their successors. A generation or so may have to pass before a reassessment is possible. Mumford's time for this has come. However, he will likely remain a difficult figure for contemporary minds, for several reasons. Today, we tend to comprehend public lives in terms of the conflicts they generate. Mumford's strong personality certainly incited confrontations, like his break with Frank Lloyd Wright over the architect's opposition to America's entry into World War II. But overall, Mumford's life was shaped less by enmities than by friendships, such as that with the imaginative Scottish naturalist and social thinker Sir Patrick Geddes, after whom Mumford named his son.

Geddes pioneered the regional approach to urban policy and advocated a holistic philosophy that saw social structures as closely interwoven with the physical structures of the built environment, requiring multidisciplinary approaches in planning and education. Mumford was inspired by Geddes's regionalism (he later cofounded the Regional Planning Association of America),

but it was the multidisciplinary style that became the single most important theme in his work, and the one that gives it most of its meaning for our time. This theme energized and united his prolific body of urban speculation, historical synthesis, technological analysis, architectural and cultural criticism, and comment on the moral direction of America and the world. Articulating these concerns turned Mumford into one of his century's greatest men of letters and one of America's most original philosophers.

To appreciate his multidisciplinary preoccupation, it is necessary to remember that when Mumford was in his early 20s, at the end of World War I, the intelligentsia was deeply under the influence of the great 19th-century system builders like Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Georg Hegel. The wide-ranging visions of these thinkers shared a major characteristic: seeming indifference to the individual. They dealt with colossal structures of argument, image, and metaphor, each system building its tower of ideas on one major concept that formed the foundation and in terms of which all else was explained. In these interconnected labyrinths, the individual appeared to have little place. Social Darwinism, popularized by Herbert Spencer's phrase "survival of the fittest," superficially encouraged individualism, but actually preached an anti-individualistic gospel of a faceless commercial America of assembly lines, accountants, and quietly desperate drones of the sort depicted by Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman*, Sloan Wilson in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and Sinclair Lewis in *Babbitt*. By contrast, Mumford believed that healthy towns, cities, and societies depended on healthy individuals, and on the human recognition of identity—whether that of human beings, communities, or places—as a unique and essential phenomenon. He drew from studies of writers like

Herman Melville, and from friendships with literary scholars like Van Wyck Brooks, a sense of the enriching individuality and eccentricities of people and landscapes. This became a foundation of his urban vision.

Jane Jacobs's criticism of Mumford was based on an irony. She mistook Mumford's misgivings about gargantuan buildings and anonymous, hivelike landscapes—what he called "megalopolis"—as hostility toward cities. Mumford did not hate cities. He was a lifelong loyal New Yorker and his commitment to the study and improvement of city life was obsessive.

Other 20th-century thinkers were wrestling with the tension between large interlocking systems and the vibrant variety of their constituent parts. Out of this ferment emerged the concept of Gaia and the ecological movement. Profoundly sensitive to all of these philosophical currents, Mumford developed an abiding suspicion of enormous, dehumanizing structures. Urban life and planning should, he believed, be aimed at creating cities, buildings, and communities on a human scale, with spaces for individuality and the celebration of both humanity and nature. In a steady stream of eloquent books and articles, he hammered home this message until it became ingrained in the very texture of urban discourse, where it persists to this day.

Unlike many 19th-century philosophers, Mumford was no system builder. His work has unity of vision but does not prescribe to formulaic solutions. Whereas thinkers like Hegel and Spencer sought to impose their special vocabularies on every other field of knowledge, Mumford advocated a spirit of translation, whereby the multidisciplinary urban analyst or policy maker seeks to negotiate productive rapprochements among different professional viewpoints. It is significant that neither Mumford nor Jacobs (who had a deeper kinship with Mumford than she may have realized) was a college graduate.

Both were autodidacts, with renaissance minds aware that modern urban existence is an intellectual hot-house in which not only different ethnicities and social classes but also diverse professional perspectives necessarily collide, interact, and merge. To Mumford, crafting and criticizing urban policy was an act of interprofessional diplomacy alien to an age of increasing specialization.

He sought to analyze the connections between the heritage of the past and the potential of the future to understand the problems of the present. His first book, in 1922, was about our anticipations of things to come: *The Story of Utopias*. In 1926, he published *The Golden Day*, an astute survey of how American culture evolved from the breakdown of medieval society. This book was praised by Harvard scholar George Santayana, one of the 20th-century's most respected philosophers, as the best he had ever read on America. Mumford's intellectual range, multidisciplinary insight, and historical perceptiveness give him a unique niche in urban studies. He brought to urban commentary a sweeping sense of humanity that bore favorable comparison with the greatest metaphysical and existential thinkers of Europe, yet was essentially American in its respect for the here and now of contemporary civilization.

Nowhere was this clearer than in Mumford's remarkable recognition of the human need to think philosophically about the urban implications of technology. In a leap of imagination that was astonishingly in tune with the development tendencies of the 21st century, Mumford understood as far back as 1924 (when he published *Sticks and Stones*, his first book on architecture), that anyone wishing to study the modern city must come to terms with changing technology—not as a novelty of the new era, but as a profoundly human experience that is not new at all but has been with us since our earliest history, shaping our towns, conditioning our

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societies, contouring both physical structures and social institutions in war, peace, and the twilight periods in between. In 1934, Mumford published *Technics and Civilization*, a monumental review of the history of technology intertwined with themes of urban thought and planning. In 1938 came *The Culture of Cities*; in 1952, *Art and Technics*; in 1961, *The City in History*; in 1967, *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development*; in 1970, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power*. These works display a startling awareness of the centrality of technology in urban policy, relating powerfully to our need today to incorporate information technology and telecommunications opportunities and challenges into our urban design philosophies.

Just as today we are only beginning to come to terms with the breadth of information technology's implications for work patterns, transportation systems, lifestyle impacts, and other features of increasingly computerized urban infrastructures, so too for Mumford, technology meant not just hardware but a set of constantly evolving tools of ancient origin and incalculable power to liberate or imprison us, according to the wisdom with which we choose to apply them. To use technology wisely, he believed, we must treat its study and criticism as a humane discipline allied to history, education, philosophy, morals, the arts, psychology, and social thought. This multidisciplinary approach reflected Mumford's time, yet, in its application to urban policy, was far in

advance of it, as was his realization that, contrary to wide assumption, technology does not develop spontaneously but needs special conditions and active nurturing for its innovation as well as for its wise use. He pointed out that whereas Karl Marx appeared to base his social critiques on a study of emerging technology, Marx, in fact, poorly understood how technology developed and the kind of society that its growth required. Similarly, Mumford argued, healthy cities would not evolve by themselves but needed to be coaxed into existence by teams of people from a variety of disciplines prepared to acknowledge the contributions of colleagues in other fields, working across conventional professional boundaries to create inclusive urban environments that reflect the varied scope of human needs, rather than catering to limited interest groups.

As often happens with pioneers, Mumford ended his life without a clear vision of the doors to the future that his work had helped to open. The America that inherited his legacy showed, and continues to show, disturbing signs of indifference toward its potential for decay into the urban wasteland, devoid of respect for place, identity, history, and human proportion, that Mumford dreaded and spent his career trying to avert. Particularly poignant is that he did not live long enough to witness the transformative potential of the technology that he had tried so hard to fathom and bring to the center of urban debate. It is difficult to imagine that Mumford would not have changed some of his central views on technology if he had been able to observe the vast power of the Internet to multiply our choices about where we live, how we work, how we nurture communities, and how we develop transportation systems and other infrastructures. His very success as a surveyor of the past may have made it hard for him to envisage the technological possibili-

ties of the future. For example, the New York City that Mumford knew in the first half of the 20th century was the home of a dynamic new literature called science fiction, which was fueled by those technological impacts and possibilities—both dangerous and wonderful—that had absorbed Mumford for so many years. Yet, his thought was largely untouched by this artistic, intellectual, and social development.

Although he lived into the Internet age, Mumford thought of technology as industrial, derived from a Newtonian concept of the machine as essentially an artifact of clockwork that extends human power without reflecting the ideas and symbolic constructs that define humanity. A more united world, Mumford believed, would come from setting technology to one side; international cooperation, for example, would come from declaring a technological moratorium and exchanging more students, ambassadors, and scholars. He did not dream that a new technology was evolving that would result in a new kind of infrastructure that would deal with information and span the world more swiftly and fully than an army of envoys.

Despite these limitations, Mumford holds a secure position in the history of urban progress. His vision of the worth and dignity of the urban professions, and of the central position that they deserve at the top of major civic priorities, is today more relevant than ever. If every architect, urban policy maker, planner, infrastructural economist, technologist, environmentalist, and urban commentator were more familiar with Mumford's legacy, there would be a higher level of urban debate, greater public recognition of the importance of the urban professions, and a fuller, more sensitive ability to place society on the path toward a sound urban future. **U**

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