

Imagining Buffalo: The Spirit of the City

One

Let us start right off with praise and celebration. This is a marvelous event—that we can have a purposeless day’s talk about City. No single issue is to be debated, no partisan political action committee no attempt to raise funds for a cause—just coming together to talk and listen, to feel, think and imagine about the spirit of our home on earth, the City. What could be more important? I wonder why we aren’t doing this all the time. Perhaps, in fact, we are doing this sort of thing, unconsciously, when we gossip, complain, argue an issue, judge our officials, and comment on their projects, or rally around Buffalo’s teams.

Today, however, we will be intensifying this feeling, thinking and imagining so as becoming more conscious of the invisible spirit of place, what antiquity called the *genius loci*. We want to see the shape and hear the voice of the particular genius that makes its home in Buffalo.

What we are doing affirms the oldest notion of city, *civitas*, and community as a psychological activity that holds a place together in a common sense about the common interests. We could even imagine that this building where we are meeting is the old village common.

Of course there are meetings similar to these: seminars with technical experts, retreats with spiritual leaders, encounter sessions with psychological counselors. Those

meetings have fixed goals. You are meant to learn something, to come away at the end programmed toward more efficiency whether in technical knowledge, in spiritual inspiration or human relationship. Our goal today is different: we want only to let imagination loose, to loosen our minds and hearts without fixed notions of where we shall be ending up. The end, in fact, has already been achieved: that we are all here participating, bringing dedication to the City.

As you know, I come from Dallas. Buffalo and Dallas: they seem poles apart. Dallas so often looking toward the year 2000 and the next century, Buffalo so often looking back at its glorious last century. Of course they do have in common the assassination of Presidents—that is, both are marked by mythical events of national proportions. But what I believe they hold in common is this concern with their cities, the attempt by a few enterprising citizens to work on the spirit of the place. It is as if the City itself, in Dallas and Buffalo, tries to become conscious of itself, puts itself through a psychoanalysis of its symptoms, of its parents and its childhood (early days), its case history, its fantasies and typical behaviors, its dreams and nightmares. It wants to know itself.

Now we are speaking of City as if it were a living being, a body with a soul, a dreamer. This organic, vital aspect of City shows in how we fall into physiological language when we speak of it: traffic as circulation, the parks as lungs, the heart as downtown, the congestion of its arteries, the feeder lines, dying neighborhoods, the foot

of a street or the bottom of a street—and of course, a distasteful body part for the City’s “pits” that my discretion keeps me from mentioning out loud.

But one word especially shows this organic thinking, this feeling that a City is alive: *buildings*. Why not, as Robert Sardello has said, call them *builts* or *buildeds*? The word that is used for the most characteristic structures of a city, so solid, so walled, so fixed indicates that the imagination of City goes on as an organic. A City is more than a spirit in a place; City is a spirit in process.

Two

To get at this spirit of your city, to define it by feeling its specific quality, we first have to get out of the way some absolutely basic perceptions of City itself. That word City already has meanings in our minds. It produces images and ideas, so that the imagination of City affects our feelings and views about any actual place, such as Buffalo.

If we walk around with unconscious ruinous thoughts about the archetypal City, then the city out there becomes what we expect of it. Psychology calls this self-fulfilling prophecies. Psychology says that cities, like bosses, like children, like spouses, like quarterbacks enact our deeper notions of them. They perform according to our conscious expectations. Cities partake in and are even ruled by the images they unconsciously carry.

A very simple example, disguised as usual as an economic issue: the whole Dallas area is over-built with millions of square feet of empty office space, condos, and hotel rooms. Yet, Dallas is still building more. In Buffalo, on the prime street under which the subway runs, a street already partly revived, it is hard to find offers for what Dallas developers would consider must surely become a prime certified business district area. Manic excitement and momentum without limits rules Dallas, depressive anxiety and inhibition rules Buffalo. For Dallas too has its bankruptcies. Interest rates are just as high there, and many Texas banks are in bad shape. There are all sorts of grave problems in Dallas: education, transportation, neighborhood preservation, water, ethnic oppression, and crime, to mention only six of the worst. Yet Dallas' self-perception, via its ideas and images, sees only golden sunshine. To effect change in any city we need to become more psychologically aware of the ruling ideas and images affecting our perceptions, especially of City itself, and even more especially if these ideas and images are ruinous.

There are three major ruinous thoughts about City that we inherit in our culture, ideas that we pick up with the air we breathe, the words we think with. They are like a psychological inheritance passed on unconsciously for generations, subtly poisoning our city life.

The first of these is *City versus Nature*, urban versus rural. On the one hand, nature is imagined to be good, godly, and ordered. Peace resides in nature (so we each want to have a bit of suburb with hedge and grass and tree). On the other hand City, ever since the Bible, is the place of Babylon and Ninevah, Sodom and Gomorrah: vice,

disease, unnaturalness, corruption, danger, perversion, fanciness, usury, luxury—and it's bad for children. 'Children'—our way of speaking of the growing and creative—would be better off in 'nature'. These ideas are sometimes called Romantic, sometimes attributed to Rousseau, but they are deeper and older than that and they still affect us profoundly.

They make us lose sight of the fact that the City is as natural as human society, as the exchange of goods, as perimeters and boundaries (walls and ditches), as conversation and news, as organization and construction. All these are natural human activities, which go on in cities. Lewis Mumford said, "The city is a fact in nature." So we must watch out of the ruinous divisions between City and Nature, which sentimentalizes Nature and denigrates City.

The second of these ruinous thought-models is one expressed by St. Augustine: The City of God versus the City of Man. This does not originate with Augustine, for already in the New Testament there is an opposition implied between the world of Christ and the world of Caesar. Christ's Kingdom is "not of this earth." Hence, from the earthly city there is to be expected only power (Caesar) and the corruption that goes with power: hierarchy, bureaucracy, paternalism (Caesarism), oppression, and poverty. The economic view of life itself is part of this division, since money, as the same New Testament passage says, belongs to Caesar. What is here and now, the human City is merely human and built by sinners. The good City and the real City is the heavenly one.

So, again a caution: watch out for oppositions between heavenly, ideal, otherworldly hopes for your city opposed to the mean and sordid everyday world. For the two Cities co-exist and continually affect each other.

Practically, this means that the desire for perfection will affect every city project. Nothing built or made, nothing thought or said about Buffalo, goes on without some heavenly counter part in mind. And practically this also means, never leaving behind the real city streets with their messy insoluble problems in order to achieve grandiose schemes that would tear down and throw away (urban renewal) the Sodom and Gomorrah of actuality. Heaven is not on earth, for that is what Heaven means.

Now the third ruinous thought does make that mistake. It attempts to realize literally the ideal heavenly city right here on earth. Plato tries this with his Republic and the city of Syracuse in Sicily. It became tyrannical. Marx tries it too by removing Heaven altogether to have the ideal City on earth. Here begin theocracies and utopias, *1984's* and the thousand-year Reich. A city without shadow becomes all shadow.

This should caution us to watch out for idealizations of Buffalo. There is no ideal community, no ideal plan, that adman's dream or planner's playhouse of glassy towers, consumers strolling under exactly spaced trees, sprinkled like parsley along the waterfronts and river walks, inoffensive sculptures and pretty awnings—and no trash, no kids, no winos, no cars with busted mufflers, and nowhere a snowstorm.

My point so far has been—not what is the right or the wrong way to imagine this city, Buffalo—but that an imagination of City already exists full bloom in our historical-cultural mind. We already inhabit a psychological City before we enter any actual city at all. The City of the Psyche builds the actual cities we live in, so it is of first importance to attend to our notions and fantasies, our dreams and words before we unconsciously actualize them in our streets, subways and schools.

Three

I want now to expand this third ruinous thought—the idealization of the City, the attempt like Plato or Marx, to build the Heavenly Jerusalem right here on earth. And I want to expand on this in terms of Art, the arts, and artists.

I beg your patience here: you may think there are more urgent matters than arts. Politics. Economics. Schools. Crime. Justice. Jobs. Interest rates. Race relations. In a city everything is urgent. That is what is wonderful about Cities: everything is immediate, pressing, desperate. But I want to suggest that nothing is more immediate than Art.

The way a city handles art reveals a great deal of its imagination of itself. When the City is imagined to be unnatural and therefore sinful and ugly, art is brought in to beautify and uplift. In the Marxist and Platonic states, the arts serve the state's purposes—or they will be suppressed. Even in our nation today, art objects are conceived to decorate and refine the city plazas and banks, the walls of its hospitals and

schools, to embellish the only functional with the purely aesthetic, as a cultural overlay, a cover-up of Caesarism.

So developers plan in their budgets, as the last step in construction, for some wall art and some landscape art and maybe even a monumental sculpture to be added on at the end when the whole project is in place. As the budget estimate usually doesn't cover actual costs (over-runs), the add-on of art is then topped off.

The issue here is neither bigger budgets for art nor tighter budget controls. The trouble begins with the notion of art as an add-on. It begins with the relation in our imagination between City and Art.

I do not know if this view of art as add-on has been or will be the Buffalo way. It is often the Dallas way. In Buffalo there is the Albright-Knox, the cemeteries and good old houses, the avenues and solid industrial remnants, the jazz and poets and critics, the preservation of ethnic sensitivities, so that probably this add-on, decorative view of art, art to beautify the ugly city, does not hold. I hope not, because this view actually degrades the city by imagining City from the beginning as merely functional and ugly and in need of decoration and it degrades the arts by perceiving them as decoration.

We all know that art—writing, painting, composing, and sculpting—is not decorative but disruptive. We all know that art hasn't anything to do with decorum. It disorders, upsets your fixed perceptions and fixed notions. It doesn't present the ideal but

rather exposes what is not ideal, thereby reminding indirectly of the ideal. Often, art is at war with both the earthly City and the heavenly City: things as they are and things as they should be. Yet, art abounds in cities, derives life from cities and exist for cities. Art is the response of the City to its own psychological condition; Art expresses how each city senses itself. In fact, art is its common sense.

I am not saying that artists must be disordered or disorderly persons. But rather, the way they do things disorders our habitual laziness and what they see and say discomforts our anesthetized daily life. The ideal City would be comfortable, smooth, anesthetized. No breakdowns in Heaven. But the artist discomforts, always breaking down our usual sense of things because of his or her aesthetic sense—aesthetic, which means sensitized perception. No wonder Plato’s rational Republic would either ban them or keep them under severe control. No wonder artists in dictatorial Eastern Europe are so often dissidents. No wonder in our Capitalist nation they are so often broke.

If artists are like the City’s watchdogs, the barking guardians of immediate un-anesthetized noticing, then a first priority of any city is to increase the participation of its artists and to make life for them more possible—not ‘easy’, or recognized or successful, merely *possible*.

By ‘artists’ please don’t hear me to mean professional entertainers in orchestras and ballet companies, or those who hold down professional aesthetic jobs in museums and universities. I am not referring to those with professional artistic skills. They may

not be the watchdogs at all. (In fact, sometimes they are more like pussycats or pet parrots.) No. The artist that the city needs to favor is anyone whose perception and action embodies subversive, discomfoting, aesthetic noticing—preacher, journalist, photographer, humorist, thinker, investor. Any citizen at all is an artist when he or she cuts through cant, demands quality, and refuses to be anesthetized.

Artists are not those who have taste, but those who do taste, taste and see the world. They do not have special senses, sensibilities, sensitivities; they simply sense as men and women of sense, sensing what goes on, and responding 100% to the city, to its discomforts and outrages by being equally discomfoting and outrageous.

The artist furthermore—and you are beginning to see that what I am calling artists others might call citizens—is always altogether engaged. Everybody into everything. The artist is the 100% turnout. That person on whom popular democracy depends. Nothing in his life or hers is specialized, nothing divided into fractions: he or she is both labor and management, servant and master, prosecutor and defendant, work time and free time, functional and aesthetic, practical and ideal. What happens in the street, what he or she smells and touches has no less importance than Major Policies and Great Ideas. The artist leaves nothing to George, and nothing to Sam. He is the eternal busybody.

This 100% response, this transformation of the notion of citizen into artist, corresponds with the notion that the City itself, as Louis Mumford has also said, is the greatest work of art of all art of all times. We each live inside this artwork, and to live in

it rightly is to live in it as an artist. Allow me to conclude with a private piece of my own imagining of the Heavenly City. We cannot help idealism coming in. The New Jerusalem infects every Buffalo, every earthly City with its vision of something marvelous.

Until that day when each citizen realizes he and she lives within a work of art and recognizes his or her aesthetic reactions, that is, admits to being an artist, there would have to be what are now called artists on every single decision-making board. Not merely women and blacks and handicapped, not merely in the name of justice, not merely to save artists from their inflated ivory towers and depressed garrets of poverty or the mediocrity of university posts. Not another Federal program. No, the artist would be there as guardian of common sense, to keep the city sensible, in touch with realities of image and ideas as well as realities of the senses. Artists would be brought in from the beginning—planning the subway (not merely decorating its stations), selecting textbooks (not merely for the subject called art appreciation), working on crime prevention (not merely as occupational therapists), studying the traffic flow, supervising hospital management, analyzing interest rates and advising on business loans. Artists in the fire department, waste disposal, emission controls, building codes, utility rates...

The arts would no longer be separated out—Art Councils, Art Endowments, Art Reviews, Arts and Recreation. Instead, artists would be counseling, endowing, reviewing and re-creating everything going on everywhere in the city. You would soon not be able to tell a citizen from an artist. And think of the money we would save on “arts programs”.

Imaging that! Imagine Buffalo like that! Not even Nelson Rockefeller got this far...that's my outrageous story for this afternoon of stories of Buffalo. Call it science fiction, call it political science, and call it the aesthetic revolution. But do let it discomfort and entertain your imagination. For that purpose we are all here today.

This piece written in 1984 while Hillman lived in Dallas and was an associate with the Dallas Institute on Humanities and Culture. The talk was delivered to the "City Fathers" of Buffalo.