



Anselm L. Strauss

Images

of the American City

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*To the late R. Richard Wohl,
friend and colleague*



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Preface

BOOKS about cities are always partisan. They always betray, when they are not frankly portraying, their authors' feelings about particular cities, or indeed about cities in general. How difficult it is not to feel in *some* way about cities, for cities are such a tremendous phenomenon as to call forth an enormous range of human sentiment and emotion. Even on the relatively colorless pages of those technical books written by city planners and urban sociologists, there is not entirely missing some evaluative slant, some jaundiced view of what cities were, are, and could be. As for that rich flood of popular literature which extolls and damns New York and Chicago, San Francisco and Boston, Kansas City, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and even Cedar Rapids, Iowa—that literature makes no pretense to unbiased view: it is gloriously and unashamedly evaluative.

No one to my knowledge has written a book about this partisan literature of urbanism. Men of action and men of sentiment are hardly in the mood to step back and examine what others have said about cities. When they do, it is only to react; to agree or disagree; to quote with approval or disdain. One's city—or urban life in general—is there waiting to be talked about, praised, criti-

cized, celebrated; and in real life, to be used, or lived in, or if need be, fled.

It takes a special stance to step back and to examine these men of sentiment and action—for in some sense every man who lives in a city is necessarily a creature of urban sentiment and urban action too. It takes a certain historical and sociological eye, and a great deal of leisure, to step back and ask questions about other men's assumptions. But this is what this book is all about. I have attempted to write a book about what Americans think and have thought of their cities, rather than to write a book about the cities themselves. Our people have regarded their towns and American urbanization from a great many perspectives: some of those perspectives are now obscure but all of them are interesting. What Americans see and have seen in their towns, and what they say and have said about them, can tell us a great deal about how they have lived in them, how they have felt about them, how they have managed to cope with the problems raised by the conditions of life there. Most of what has been written about American cities and American urbanization—even the most technical writing—simply does not make much sense when taken in isolation from what other men have written from other viewpoints and at other times about those same topics.

It would be an incredibly difficult task to document every such viewpoint—even those about American urbanism in broad canvas, not to speak of those about each and every American city. I have had to pick and choose among the many cities, the many topics, and the many decades of city development in this country and to sample the monumental popular literature that has poured off the nation's presses. Of the different kinds of men who have migrated to, lived in, or escaped from American cities, I have written of only a few, with intent always to highlight certain themes woven inescapably into the course of American urbanization.

The main themes of the narrative that is thus spun out by my consideration of our urban imagery, past and present, are these (in brief): America began as an agricultural vision, a set of farming colonies strung along the Atlantic sea coast. America was supposed to remain—or so it was thought by most citizens until

well into the nineteenth century—an agricultural nation. Cities were, at first, subordinate to the countryside in conception if not always in fact. To that countryside was later added, by Jefferson's purchase of the West, what was envisioned to be a fabulous agricultural paradise, the richest farmland, in fact as well as in fancy, that the world had yet known. But step by step, as the population of our farmlands increased, our urban population also grew. Our cities grew in size and in number until by mid-nineteenth century it became apparent to many Americans that cities were not only here to stay, but to dominate. No one in the twentieth century needs to be told the startling outcomes of America's urbanization.

But this conversion of an agricultural land into an overwhelmingly urbanized continent was accompanied all along its course by Americans' attempts to make sense of what was happening. Just as no one, or at least very few people, could correctly prevision the urban destiny of the nation, no one was entirely correct about the meaning and significance of particular urban manifestations and particular urban problems. Some observers were entirely wrong in their predictions, and others were not much more accurate in their perceptions of what was currently happening. Phrased in more concrete and dramatic terms: how could it have been possible for a Virginian plantation owner like Jefferson to foresee the peaceful and profitable joining of Iowa farms with farm-cities, even when he foresaw the slums of America's largest cities? How could the self-satisfied burghers of seaboard cities during the 1820's foresee the waves of immigration that would soon transform their birthplaces so incredibly? And how many Americans foresaw during the 1880's that the antagonism of country and city would eventually be transmuted into today's fusion of farm, town, and city culture? Nor has the last chapter been written: American urbanization is not finished, and neither is its symbolization. Americans are still generating new images and new concepts of their cities and of the nation's urbanization. One has only to look at the area between New York City and Boston to see this illustrated. As the saying goes, it is hard to see where New York leaves off and Connecticut begins, and New Haven does not know which way, quite, to face.

Across the continent, during all those decades, a number of different kinds of urban centers have evolved. We have cities of every size, and cities of innumerable kinds. There are seaports, manufacturing centers, railroad towns, farm-belt service cities, resort towns, towns that are all of these in one (like New York or Chicago). Some of these kinds of cities are traditional, and no one was surprised when they developed here in America. But some of these towns were different from those of Europe. No European city grew quite like, or quite as fast as, Chicago during the nineteenth century. No European country saw the rapid conversion of numerous commercial towns and villages into prosperous manufacturing centers—for none had a midwest farmland to populate in such a hurry. Nowhere had so many cities sprung up along railroad tracks and so far from watercourses as they had in America. This has all left its heritage in the ways that Americans now see and think about—and live in—their cities.

My book is, in some sense, an attempt to put all of this within two covers, however foreshortened the picture, however abbreviated the account. I have hoped to convey something of the shock of this rapid urbanization and the unforeseen forms it took. It has been my intent to point to, to illustrate, and to document some of the changes in American symbolization that were forced by that urbanization; changes that are still underway. There is, I am saying, no single way to see American urbanization. But perhaps one vivid and approximate way to see it is to review carefully how our predecessors and our contemporaries saw and see it.

In order to develop perspective upon the motley, vast array of American urban images, and to give that array more than mere historical ordering, I had first to develop a framework for thinking about those images. This framework is presented in Part I of the book. It is the framework of a social psychologist—which in this instance means a joining of sociological, psychological, and historical perspectives. This theoretical scheme I have presented not at all in the abstract, but as a working tool for directly examining American urban imagery, especially the spatial and temporal aspects of that imagery. Later in the book, in the much longer sections that comprise Part II, I give greater play to

the efficacy of this framework for discussing urban imagery in historical terms; and it is there that the bulk of historical data will be found.

I am especially indebted for verbal exchange of ideas and for reading part or all of the manuscript to Howard S. Becker of Community Studies, Incorporated, of Kansas City; to Kai Erikson of the University of Pittsburgh; to Blanche Geer also of Community Studies, Incorporated; to Nathan Glazer of Bennington College; to Donald Horton of the Banks Street School of Education, New York City; to Orrin Klapp of the State College of San Diego; to David Riesman of Harvard University; to Leonard Schatzman of Michael Reese Hospital, Chicago; to Gregory Stone of Washington University; and to my wife, Fran Strauss.

R. Richard Wohl was to have been co-author of this book, and two of its chapters (Chapter 1 of Part I and Chapter 2 in Part II) were written jointly by us. We did a great amount of talking together about urbanization and urban imagery, although he became fatally ill before we were able to rough out plans for this volume. His early and unexpected death was a great loss to American scholarship and an immense blow to his friends.



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PART ONE

The Symbolization of Cities



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Introduction to Part I

IN Part I, a framework for thinking about urban symbolism will be presented. Its major themes are the symbolism of space and time.

The opening chapter is an introductory statement of the ways in which people spatially represent entire cities, as well as the ways in which they talk about cities. The next chapter concerns how people represent cities in symbolic time. The third chapter will consist essentially of a case study of the development of the characteristic imagery for one particular city, Chicago. This expanded discussion serves to show how the images of a metropolis arise, and how they come to form a symbolic system rather than remaining separate images. In the fourth chapter, we shall see how populations with different styles of life are so affected by the city as to endow urban space differentially. Such symbolic endowment of space requires special concepts for its sociological analysis; thus, a set of such concepts is tentatively offered.

Part I concludes with a fifth chapter, in which we shall look at the appreciative visitor's view of cities; for his view highlights

how persons more familiar, through long residence, with these cities probably manage to enjoy them. Here again, special emphasis will be placed upon urban imagery, particularly upon its subtle transmission—across space and time—through “travel talk” and travel literature.

1

The City as a Whole

ORDINARILY,* the identifying characterization of any particular city, and the symbolic implications of that characterization for the quality of life it represents, are picked up, more or less incidentally, by each resident as he works out his personal "lifestyle" in that city. The city is primarily problematical for him in limited, rather private terms. He must make a living in it, make friends, find a home for himself and his family, and work out a suitable daily round. In dealing with these tasks, he senses some of the special qualities which seem to mark the city as a whole. Riding or walking about the city, reading its local newspapers, talking with people about it, he is exposed to a persuasive propaganda about its distinctive attributes. He builds up a set of as-

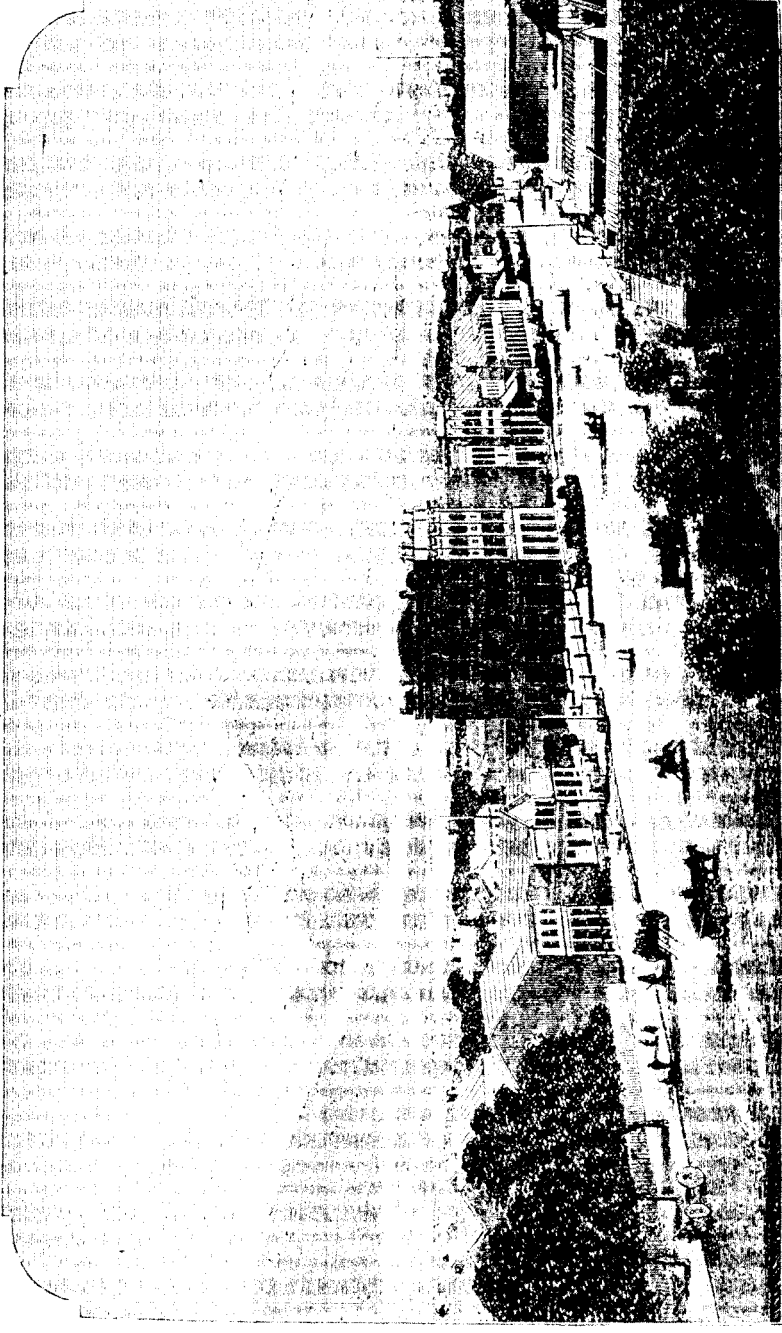
* This chapter reprinted from R. Richard Wohl and Anselm L. Strauss, "Symbolic Representation and the Urban Milieu," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXIII (Mar., 1958), 523-32. All numbered notes appear at the end of this book.

sociations which prepare him to accept and appreciate a shorthand symbolic characterization of the place.

Not only does the city-dweller develop a sentiment of place gradually, but it is extremely difficult for him even to visualize the physical organization of his city, and, even more, to make sense of its cross-currents of activity. Apparently an invariable characteristic of city life is that certain stylized and symbolic means must be resorted to in order to "see" the city. The most common recourse in getting a spatial image of the city is to look at an aerial photograph in which the whole city—or a considerable portion of it—is seen from a great height. Such a view seems to encompass the city, psychologically as well as physically. Actually, an aerial photograph is, for the layman, not only a rather vague but an extremely distorted image of the city: it cannot be read directly, since an exact interpretation calls for great specialized skill. Such a picture really serves to reduce the image of the city to a suggestive expression of density and mass. Furthermore, it simplifies the city by blurring great masses of detail and fixing the observer's attention on selected landmarks that emerge out of the relatively undifferentiated background.

Attempts to encompass the city at a glance preceded the airplane of course. "Bird's-eye" drawings, for instance, those pictures taken from the tops of tall buildings or from nearby hills and mountains also attempted a view from a great height. The same purpose has been served as well by a different manipulation of distance, by capturing a city from below. Some of the older delineations of Kansas City, for instance, are drawn from the Missouri River and mark out the profile of the city as it perches on the bluffs. Sometimes a horizontal vantage point may be used—as in drawings and photographs of a city across a river or a bay.

An alternative option for achieving the same kind of psychological distance is to manipulate the city rather than the point of observation. Traditionally, this has been accomplished through the use of models. Thus, in 1849, when New York was growing at an enormous rate, a group of craftsmen created an exact miniature replica of the city. The observer towered above the model, achieving much of the same effect that we now get from aerial photographs. Of course, a man who inspected such a model could



Main Street, Salt Lake City in 1867.

W. H. Dixon, New America, 1867

probably see as little detail as we now see in a picture taken from an airplane. Hence the promoters of this particular miniature significantly emphasized that every detail of the city's houses and streets had been precisely reproduced, although no one could get close enough to the model actually to perceive this meticulous fidelity to the originals.¹ The *New York Sun*, March 18, 1846, comments, apropos the manipulation of the city rather than the observer: "The whole expanse of streets, lanes and houses, will lie stretched out before the visitor, as it would appear to a person visiting it from a balloon—with this advantage—that he will be spared the nervous feeling incidental to an aeronautic expedition."

These methods of portraying the city space are expressive declarations of its literal incomprehensibility. The city, as a whole, is inaccessible to the imagination unless it can be reduced and simplified. Even the oldest resident and the best-informed citizen can scarcely hope to know even a fair-sized city in all its rich and subtle detail. We can, here, take a cue from Robert Redfield's discussion of small communities.² He points out that small communities can be regarded from various points of view—their ecological and physical dimensions, their social structure, or their biographies. If we consider large communities in these same ways, it is apparent that the complexity of physical layout and structure is immense; that social structure is so complicated that even research teams of sociologists can do little more than grasp the outlines of significant groups and their interrelationships. And who, ordinarily, can hope to know or appreciate the whole social history of a city?

Is it surprising, therefore, that people will literally step back and away from the city to gain perspective on it? "New York is a skyline, the most stupendous, unbelievable, man-made spectacle since the hanging gardens of Babylon. Significantly, you have to be outside the city—on a bridge or on the Jersey Turnpike—to enjoy it."³ Distance clears the field of vision, even if it means losing some of the rich detail. In New York, for example, the observatory on the top of the Empire State Building serves as a classic vantage point for those who want to seize quickly an image of New York City. Approxi-

mately 850,000 people visit the observatory each year, and on most days slightly more than 2,000 come to look at the city. And even on those days when the city is invisible from a height because overcast with rain, fog, or snow, some still make the journey upwards to feed their imaginations with a view that they cannot actually see. From the top of the building the city is laid out like a diagram, pinpointed here and there by landmarks. The panorama is divided off for viewers by visibility markers which bound imaginary concentric circles of vision at three, five, seven, ten, and up to twenty-five miles distant. From this height, the guides point out, anything within a mile radius constitutes "limited" visibility. What visitors grasp when they look out over the city is suggested by the artless eloquence of one of them: "The sun and the stars," she remarked "are the suburbs of New York."⁴ The principal psychological satisfaction, of course, is to perceive, somehow, the unity and the order that underlies the apparent hurtling disarray of the city—to grasp it as a whole.

But even an aerial view is for some purposes too large and too various to symbolize the city. Briefer, more condensed symbols are available, which are often even more evocative, for all their conciseness. Thus the delicate and majestic sweep of the Golden Gate Bridge stands for San Francisco, a brief close-up of the French Quarter identifies New Orleans, and, most commonly of all, a view of the New York skyline from the Battery is the standing equivalent for that city. (So well understood is this symbol that a movie can establish its locale by doing no more than flashing a picture of these skyscrapers on the screen for a moment and then directing the camera into the opening episodes of the film. This coded, shorthand expression is at once understood by the audience.) This familiar expression of the city's "essential" nature is as much accepted by native New Yorkers as it is by outsiders. Yet it is exceptionally difficult—and even unusual—for a New Yorker ever to see this part of the city. This sight is ordinarily available only for those who come into New York harbor from the sea. It is occasionally visible from an airplane, but if native New Yorkers wish to see this part of their city, they must take a ferry into the bay—perhaps to Bedloe's Island—in order to inspect the skyline.



Bird's-eye view of New York, 1880.

J. D. McCabe, New York by Sunlight and Gaslight, 1881

For the purposes served by the symbol, however, it is not really necessary for anyone literally to see the view itself—the important thing is to be able to understand what it represents. The massed buildings, the solidity and density of the agglomeration, the gleaming roofs, the specious neatness and order that a far view lends the scene, seem to reflect all the energy, the crowdedness, the opulence and magnificence of the city. The skyline represents, in effect, the essence of New York, the great metropolis; New York, as the “greatest” and “richest” city in the world. Indeed, the imaginative impact of that skyline is sometimes so conclusive, so overwhelming, that to see the city in normal perspective, and in detail, may be anticlimactic. Thus, Rom Landau describes his disappointment at actually seeing New York after he had visualized it from its skyline. “New York’s sea-front,” he recalls,

shooting heavenwards like torches, is possibly the most exciting in the world. But the city itself might be described as a mere chessboard of straight canyons imprisoned within gigantic walls, throbbing with a restless life, dynamic, stirring, yes—but beautiful . . . ?⁵

These symbols provide another type of reductionism which makes it possible to encompass a city’s wide expanse. Unlike the views from a distance, which distort, blur, and flatten a city’s image, these panoramic views serve as masks. They achieve the simplifications and impose the limitations which come from looking at a facade. They blot out what lies behind, or invite the viewer to disregard it, in favor of the interpretation presented by the facade itself. Each large city contains a number of such facades—not all favorable. In Chicago the downtown skyline symbolizes one set of images, the Loop offers others, and Michigan Avenue or a South Side slum tenders still other partial vantage points. None of them manages to perform as well as it promises. A large city is infinitely greater than its parts and certainly greater than its partial views, which mitigate but do not remove the pressures felt by an individual trying to understand imaginatively his urban milieu.

To a more limited degree than either device discussed so far, the spatial complexity and social diversity of a city, as a unit,

is sometimes integrated by the use of sentimental history in selecting landmarks. Such history hardly ever follows the orthodox chronology of the city's actual development. Particular landmarks commemorate a symbolic past phrased around particular dramatic episodes of urban history. The Water Tower in Chicago, for example, is such a site; so is Telegraph Hill in San Francisco.

Looking at the city, even if it be with an imaginative stare, is only the beginning of the search for the meaning and quality of urban life. What is seen, literally or in the mind's eye, must be expressed and interpreted. The crisis of awareness perhaps comes when one realizes that the welter of impressions will need conscious reflection. Such a moment has been caught for us by Charles Dudley Warner, who probably recorded it—as most of us would not—because he was a journalist making his way across the country to write a series of articles on western cities. "It is everything in getting a point of view," he decided:

Last summer a lady of New Orleans who had never been out of her native French city . . . visited Chicago and New York. "Which city did you like best?" I asked, without taking myself seriously in the question. To my surprise she hesitated. This hesitation was fatal to all my preconceived notions. It mattered not thereafter which she preferred: she had hesitated. . . . "Well," she said, not seeing the humor of my remark, "Chicago seems to me to have finer buildings and residences, to be the more beautiful city; but of course there is more in New York; it is a greater city; and I should prefer to live there for what I want." This naive observation set me to thinking, and I wondered if there was a point of view, say that of divine omniscience and fairness, in which Chicago would appear as one of the great cities of the world, in fact a metropolis, by-and-by to rival in population and wealth any city of the world.⁶

The city, then, sets problems of meaning. The streets, the people, the buildings, and the changing scenes do not come already labeled. They require explanation and interpretation. When it is argued in sociological literature or in the literature of city planning that cities are basically anomic and disorganizing or that cities represent optimal conditions for creative living, it is apparent that such remarks are simultaneously characterizations, judgments, and interpretations. The city can be variously conceived, by its citizens as well as its students: as a place in which

to get ahead; a place where anonymity cloaks opportunities for fun, excitement, and freedom; perhaps as a place which undermines health and happiness but whose resources are usable from a safe suburban distance.

It is impossible, however, for the citizens of any city to comprehend it in its totality. But any individual citizen, by virtue of his particular choices of alternatives for action and experience, will need a vocabulary to express what he imagines the entire city to be.

Speaking about cities, in consequence, involves the speaker in a continual quest for the essence of his urban experience and for ways to express it. The language used, however, is a formal one. A fairly limited range of linguistic conventions has come into use whose formality is shaped by the fact that the form of the rhetorical devices employed does not depend on their content; their set phrasing is hospitable to any and all substantive statements about a city's qualities.

The urban environment is so obviously many-sided that one of the simplest and most obvious ways of giving it an underlying unity is simply to assume it and thus to speak of the city adjectivally.⁷ The speaker pretends that the noun modified—the place name—is fully expressed and completely explained by the sum of its modifiers. It is therefore possible to say of a city that it is brawny, lusty, cosmopolitan, smug, serene, bustling, progressive, brutal, sentimental:

Call Chicago mighty, monstrous, multifarious, vital, lusty, stupendous, indomitable, intense, unnatural, aspiring, puissant, preposterous, transcendent—call it what you like—throw the dictionary at it!⁸

For some, this is a permanently adequate method; they are content to feel that the quality of their own experience and the mood inspired by their own dimly sensed implications provide the cement that binds these attributes together.

The list of attributes may, however, grow so long and so quickly that confidence in the initial supposition that these qualities summarize themselves is undermined. Most obviously this occurs when contradictory attributes are assigned to a city, and these apparently conflicting interpretations seem to call for

further explanation. Even so, it is still possible to shrug off the difficulty by claiming that the synthetic principle which reconciles these opposites is that the city in question is essentially paradoxical. Thus, one writer comfortably concludes about Fort Worth that it "is paradoxically a metropolitan town." And another veteran reporter upon the American urban scene confesses about Baltimore:

A large part of the fun of making the acquaintance of Baltimore lies in trying to unravel its endless contradictions. Almost any sweeping statement you make about its character will be wrong. Most of its 101 consistencies are not simple, direct paradoxes, but oblique, chain-stitched contradictions which in the end lead one not merely around but over and under Robin Hood's barn.⁹

Both the attribution of unity and the assignment of particular qualities can be organized around another, almost equally obvious, principle. The entire complex of urban life can be thought of as a person rather than as a distinctive place, and the city may be endowed with a personality—or, to use common parlance—a character of its own. Like a person, the city then acquires a biography and a reputation. Personified cities can be described with personal pronouns and, through the use of appropriate verbs, conceived of as having capacities for action and possession. And, following this fashion of speaking, we make the same allowances for and judgments of cities that we are ordinarily inclined to make for people.

Urban complexity, which forces us to think in terms of unity or many-sidedness and personification, also leads us to conceive of cities as "really" or "essentially" like something else, something we already know and understand. In a word, complexity forces us to analogize. The analogy may be relatively implicit, for example, "Chicago is a city which must be dominated, as if it were a magnificent and severe animal that plunges and rears,"¹⁰ or, one may use an explicit metaphor (e.g., "New York, city with a heart of nylon").¹¹ The city may be termed or compared with a factory, a madhouse, a frontier, a woman:

Consider dear Old Lady Thrift. That is, the plump and smiling city of Milwaukee, which sits in complacent shabbiness on the west shore of Lake Michigan like a wealthy old lady in black alpaca taking her ease on the beach.¹²

In all such phrasing, the speaker draws upon the emotional and non-specific resources of language to make clear—in terms of something else with which we are already familiar—what seems to him to be the underlying meaning of an apparently confused and confusing urban world. Sandburg's Chicago as "hog butcher to the world" captures in poetic capsule for many people—to judge from frequent quotation—a salient quality of that city's life and air. Not a few descriptions of our cities have a poetic quality and a significant ambiguity which compose themselves into hymns of revulsion as well as into paeanes of praise or devotion. A striking example is Waldo Frank's conception of Chicago, "Hog Butcher for the World," published not long after Sandburg's adulatory poem:

On the one side, trains pour in the cattle and the hogs. On the other, trains pour in the men and the women. Cattle and hogs from the West. Women and men from the East. Between, stockaded off by the dripping walls, the slaughter houses stand mysterious, and throb to their ceaseless profit. . . . The spirit of the place—perhaps its soul: an indescribable stench. It is composed of mangled meat, crushed bones, blood soaking the floors, corroding the steel, and sweat. A stench that is warm and thick, and that is stubborn. A stench somehow sorrowful and pregnant, as if the seat of men joined with the guts of beasts and brought forth a new drear life.¹³

Analogies of cities, personifications of them, or mere lists of their attributes in a succession of adjectives—all these represent conscious efforts to establish those distinctive qualities which help explain or rationalize the swarming impressions that crowd in on the observer. These unique qualities, once established, can be elaborated in detail by an apparatus of illustration and pointed anecdote aimed at showing how these qualities lie behind and shine through typical events and institutions. This is not a language of mere illustration alone but of exemplification as well. For many years visitors to Chicago wrote about and saw the city expressed by its hotels, its crowds, its huge department stores, and its stockyards.¹⁴ Kipling's famous assessment of that city contains a particularly brutal and effective description of the stockyards, as the archetypal symbol of the city, which concludes with:

And then the same merciful Providence that has showered good things in my path throughout sent me an embodiment of the City of Chicago, so that I might remember it for ever. Women come sometimes to see the slaughter, as they would come to see the slaughter of men. And there entered that vermilion hall a young woman of large mold, with brilliantly scarlet lips, and heavy eyebrows, and dark hair that came in a "widow's peak" on the forehead. She was well and healthy and alive, and she was dressed in flaming red and black, and her feet . . . were cased in red leather shoes. She stood in a patch of sunlight, the red blood under her shoes, the vivid carcasses tacked around her, a bullock bleeding its life not six feet away from her, and the death factory roaring all around her. She looked curiously, with hard, cold eyes, and was not ashamed.

Then said I: "This is a special Sending. I've seen the City of Chicago!" And I went away to get peace and rest.¹⁵

It is possible to extend the notion of distinctiveness until the city's qualities—at least in combination—are thought to be unique. It is not only the booster who claims that there is no other city like his own; the ordinary citizen may feel this too, regardless of whether he approves of his city or not. The city's exceptional character can be declared openly as when it is asserted that "only in San Francisco" or by some such query as "where else can you find?" some particular institution, experience, or kind of person. The same distinction can be claimed by stating categorically that everyone in a particular city acts in certain typical ways: All Baltimore is proud; all Boston is proper; all San Francisco is fun-loving.¹⁶ Almost any popular urban history is likely to use this kind of phraeseology.

Essence and uniqueness can be asserted most subtly, perhaps, by claiming that essence is masked by appearance or that appearance can be mistaken for essence. A visitor to St. Louis some years ago warned:

St. Louis is the only large Western city in which a man from our Eastern cities would feel at once at home. . . . And yet today St. Louis is new-born, and her appearance of age and of similarity to the Eastern cities belies her. She is not in the least what she looks.¹⁷

Common speech expresses the essence-appearance inversion more directly than this oblique statement. We often say to visitors

or newcomers that they must live a while in our city before they can see it as it really is.

And so, from all the foregoing, it seems safe to say that without the resources of rhetoric the city-dweller could have no verbal representations of his own or any other city. Characterization of the city, and of the life lived in it, is indispensable for organizing the inevitably ambiguous mass of impressions and experiences to which every inhabitant is exposed, and which he must collate and assess, not only for peace of mind but to carry on daily affairs. When the city has been symbolized in some way, personal action in the urban milieu becomes organized and relatively routinized. To be comfortable in the city—in the widest sense of these words—requires the formulation of one's relations with it, however unsystematically and crudely. Uncertainty about the character of the environment can only engender deep psychological stress.

All such symbolic representations of an urban milieu, however, are inherently unstable. Cities change, forcing those who live in them to face the inadequacies of what once were tried and true conceptions. A city after an economic boom, or swamped by an influx of immigrants, is obviously not the same city it was before. But whether change is dramatic and massive, or mundane and subtle, urban social perspectives—and their symbols—ultimately fail even their most ardent backers. The most insensitive city-dweller, moreover, cannot fail to discover new facets of the city from time to time. One of the fixed conditions of an urban existence is that it provides an inexhaustible store of surprises. And it does not matter whether the surprise is pleasant, challenging, or deeply discomfiting; it must, like all such impressions, be managed; it must be brought into consonance with other impressions of city life.

As new conceptualizations of urban surroundings are required, rhetorical devices once more come into play; only their content changes. To assess the novel and manage the discordant, analogy or some other rhetorical resource must be brought to bear. At that moment new symbolic representations—embodied in anecdote, slogan, poem, or some more prosaic form—crystallize and become public property.

2

The Symbolic Time of Cities

WHEN anyone attempts to represent what a city is, he almost inevitably begins to interpret also what the city has been in the past and will be in the future. Thought and speech about cities are replete with temporal imagery. Cities and their citizens can be, and often are, represented as oriented toward the past, the present, or the future. They can be represented, too, as of some symbolic age, being characterized as young or old, or settled or conservative, or by some other set of significant adjectives. All such placements of a city upon a temporal symbolic gradient are of considerable significance for some of the reasons suggested in the first chapter. In this second chapter, the main aim will be to present an exploration of significant aspects of urban temporal imagery.