Chapter 10

Distant Cities: Thoughts on an Aesthetics of Urbanism

Focusing on the issue

The question of urban experience is as complex, intricate, and elusive as its material condition: the city. There is massiveness in the physical presence of the urban mix of skyscrapers, institutional edifices, and commercial monoliths. We not only encounter massiveness; we face spatial extent in a broad array of neighborhoods, districts, and spreading urbanized surrounding countryside. The last of these is a relatively recent phenomenon, as the urban consumption of the landscape spreads across whole geographical regions, such as the megalopolis of the northeastern seaboard of the United States that stretches from Boston to Washington, or the amoeba-like spread of construction across huge distances, sometimes overlapping state lines, as in the urban agglomerates of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and St. Louis.

Moreover, we face social mass, too, in teeming populations with their associations and organizations, both formal and informal, public and subversive. And related to this is the emergent mass culture, replete with the mass marketing and consumption of goods, of entertainment, of anything that can be commodified and sold. Consumption also overwhelms the ambient environmental conditions that offer space and distance more easily traversed visually than bodily. This is more than mass culture; it is a mass world. How can we understand and live in this world?
Several matters need to be clarified before going further. One is the temptation to speak of urban architecture and design and of urban society as separate subjects. To do so would be to commit a common but fundamental error, for the city is constituted of an irreducible complexity of factors, forces, and activities that are inseparable from their physical, geographical, and cultural setting. While it is customary in scientific inquiry to break down complex things into their component parts and focus research on those constituent elements, this often has limited explanatory value when these parts are recombined. This procedure may be illuminating and it may also provide considerable ability to control and direct those particular things, but their recombination never reconstitutes the whole with which we began. Only by recognizing the indissolubility of complex wholes and working with and within them can we attain a larger perspective and a truer understanding of our social, indeed our human world. In place of external measurements we have the apprehension of participants; in place of discrete objects we have complex physico-social entities often with a discernible identity but with no sharp boundaries. Environmental design and urban life are inseparable.

Where is the city?

We seem to harbor a medieval image of a city: a clearly bounded and coherent built environment set off from its surroundings by sharp edges like invisible walls. This image is now obsolete and unreal. The contemporary city has no perceptible boundary but is rather a node in a pervasive and seemingly endless industrialized landscape which most of its inhabitants rarely leave. Not only is the common image of a city misleading as a physical entity; it is also linguistically misleading. 'City' denotes no object, no entity, no discernible thing. Rather the word represents a collection of politically, socially, architecturally, and functionally diffuse regions grouped around an historical center: Or it may denote an identity
that is defined politically but with no corresponding distinct physical correlate. Neighborhood districts, suburban developments, industrial parks, and satellite communities tend to be the most prominent areas, as the city seeps into the surrounding region with gradually decreasing density, so that we seem hardly to leave it as it blends into an industrialized so-called countryside dotted with metal Quonset structures, gravel pits, and discarded machinery.

Such a broad urbanized landscape has no clear identity, and this is emphasized even more by the usual blandness of its architecture. The same block-like skyscrapers, futilely trying to achieve individuality by recourse to a superficial innovation, stand at its commercial center, but mostly anonymous boxes of no clear vintage and lesser distinction fill its industrial and commercial zones. And of course the commercial life of the modern city has become dominated by chain stores, big box stores, and global corporations, whose signs and logos are everywhere. One sees the same brand names decorating every American city, many of them appearing in unlikely places across continents, such as MacDonald's in downtown Moscow, Beijing, and Helsinki, and Coca Cola advertising pavilions on Chilean beaches. Gertrude Stein expressed this loss of regional identity with poetic prescience several generations ago when she said about her hometown of Oakland, California, "There is no there there."¹

The city, in fact, does not exist. It is a fiction, an abstraction rooted in history and mythology. For how can we identify it? The usual way is to contrast the city with the countryside, which suggests some kind of division between physical regions, perhaps even a boundary. But as we have noted, city boundaries are, at best, a historical phenomenon and a

¹ Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), Everybody’s Autobiography (1937), ch. 4.
political distinction. The vestiges of city walls that still remain in some old European cities are archaeological remnants and function only as tourist attractions. And, of course, this presumed contrast of city and countryside identifies the city with its concrete manifestation rather than with its life.

What actually exists now? Farmland once surrounding the city has been transformed into commercial or industrial sprawl composed of shopping malls and industrial parks when it is not faceless, placeless suburbia gradually dribbling off into the suburbs and the abandoned fields and woods of former agricultural lands. The distinctiveness of the city is no longer something that becomes evident by contrast with the countryside, for there is no countryside. The signs of urbanization are virtually everywhere except in remote backwaters far out of reach.

What exists on the ground are urban accretions with little coherence and no clear identity apart from the sentimental histories promulgated by tourist boards and the local attractions touted by chambers of commerce. Encountered from the ground up, the modern city is most often a bundle of experiences of a built environment known only through its limited parts. There are urban neighborhoods, urban zones, urban regions that have grown by accretion and are loosely assembled into an incoherent complex. Small, separate political entities sometimes called boroughs, suburbs, villages, and towns cluster around a core that once was its commercial center but is often now largely abandoned. Actually, the city is a particular kind of environment in its own right, built from materials obtained or derived from the natural world and embodying the same perceptual dimensions as other environments (space, mass, surface, etc.) but almost wholly designed and controlled by human agency. And although the city is a distinctively human environment, it is nevertheless an integral part of the
geography of its region, a larger environment from which it usually has only indistinct borders and with which it has numerous and complex reciprocal relationships.

The city is thus not a coherent whole, a bounded, circumscribed entity, but an urban context, fragmentary, and with multiple nodes and perspectives. The idea of a city is an ideal only, an ideal that comes from its history and from the word that names it. It is not an entity that we experience. From a human vantage point the city is an environment of experience before it is anything else. Urban experience, in fact, is perhaps one of the most important and powerful of the complex dimensions that constitute the city, however we understand it. It may be misleading to speak of cities at all, for 'city' connotes some thing that is discrete and objective, and presumably, therefore, can become the object of study of diverse fields such as architecture, planning, design, sociology, geography, economics, political science, and history. Moreover, in speaking of urban experience, we are not referring to a psychological condition or a purely subjective event. Urban experience must be understood as an indissoluble complex, no part of which can be grasped in isolation. Like any kind of experience, it takes place in a context of physical, social, and cultural circumstances that are as important to that experience as the human participant.

Another aspect of this inquiry needs to be made clear. Like the study of the material city, most inquiry considers urban experience as a complex but distinct and separate object. The experience becomes a psychological or a cognitive object, something assembled through cumulative bodily sensation and action that is physical in its embodiment in architecture and design, and social in the forms and functioning of its political, economic, and cultural organizations. As noted earlier, such fragmentation is deeply misleading. In contrast to these divisive approaches, we shall pursue the experience of the city as a condition of active
engagement that is an integral part of a single cohesive yet complex physical, social, and
cultural environment.

The most direct way to begin an examination of urban experience would seem to be
by proceeding from within, that is, with the experience of its participants, the inhabitants of
urban regions. This would, of course, reveal much, but it is not the only perspective on urban
experience. We shall approach it differently here. This essay is called "Distant Cities" because
it inquires into urban experience as encountered from the outside, from a distance, as it were.
Such experience may be increasingly unfamiliar as an ever-larger proportion of the world's
population resides in cities. Our question here will be how the city is seen and understood,
not by its inhabitants, but by one who encounters it from without and who may only
occasionally enter into the urban sphere for visits of limited duration.

**Urban experience from the outside**

Two aspects to grasping the city as experienced from outside can be represented by
the two theatrical masques of comedy and tragedy. For the city is a stage on which both
comedy and tragedy are not acted out but lived out. On the one hand, the city as encountered
by a visitor may be a place of fascination and excitement, stimulating in the unexpected variety
of its buildings, districts, social scenes, and cultural places and events. This masque of the city
will reflect the distinctive geography of its site, which determines in large part the patterns of
movement that take place. When cities are located in hilly regions, such as San Francisco,
within sight of mountains, like Seattle and Geneva, on a harbor along the coast, like Helsinki

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and Toronto or combining all these features, such as Rio de Janeiro, its geographical conditions exercise a powerful presence and impart a distinctive quality to the experience that may be most striking to the visitor from away.

Other features may characterize an urban environment: the monumental architecture of government and institutional buildings, the cultural ethos conveyed by the city's history as a key location in the region, or the vast quantity of art, artifacts, and literature collected in its museums and libraries. The complex concentration and diversity of its inhabitants also encourages the distinctive social life that emerges in an urban setting: the contributions of its various cultural communities through concerts, exhibitions, festivals, sporting events, and civic ceremonies. These offer rich opportunities for entertainment and leisure time activities, such as the enjoyment of its parks and gardens, panoramic views from bridges and towers, the curiosities that unfold while strolling along a street of shops, a historic district, or a characteristic neighborhood; its clubs and theaters; details such as personal embellishments to an apartment entrance or a private home and garden; and even passing delight in the reflection of lights on the watery surface of a harbor. Cities offer many distinctive occasions for enrichment and pleasure, in addition to economic and professional opportunities. They are also places of hope, opportunity, and romance. This is the optimistic side of the city, a source of its powerful magnetism.

Yet just as the borderline between excitement and fear may be hard to discern, danger lurks around the corner. Threats of violence to one's body from moving vehicles and muggings seem omnipresent yet are unexpected when they appear. There are also the more subtle threats to one's personhood from the uninterested, sometimes even hostile crowds of jostling pedestrians that submerge one into anonymity, and from the breach of personal space
in the petty thievery and household burglaries that are common occurrences. Intrusions come from the oppressive scale of skyscrapers, while unwalkable distances belittle and overpower the body at the same time as invisible clouds of vehicular exhaust and the incessant roar of traffic envelop it in a sensory miasma. To these must be added the unsettling confusion of a strange neighborhood to the visitor who may be unfamiliar with its streets and unskilled in its manners and customs.

All these features, both comic and tragic, are familiar to the city dweller, but they are all the more intense and unsettling to the outsider who suffers what Wordsworth called the ”blank confusion” and frustration of strangers.³ The urban dweller may grow accustomed to

³ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Bk.8, l. 696. Throughout Book 8, Wordsworth reflects the force of both masques when recollecting his first experience of London. He was appalled by “the senseless mass” (l. 670) with its bizarre range of human types (“This Parliament of Monsters,” l. 692), where “the senseless mass…unites.” (l. 580-584). At the same time, on entering the city he saw London as a “…a thing divine.” (l.710 ) and a place of hope and fulfillment:

… that vast Abiding-place…
Profusely sown with individual sights
Of courage and integrity and truth.
And tenderness, which, here set off by foil
Appears more touching….“ l. 838-842)

…[Sometimes} “among the multitudes
Of that great city often times was seen
… the unity of man.
One spirit over ignorance and vice
Predominant….

(Bk. 8, l. 665-670)
the mix of exhilaration and fearfulness that is familiar in city life, but these become still more intrusive and intense to the visitor.

The masques of comedy and tragedy symbolize the normative urban experiences that excite strong feelings of attraction or repulsion, those two poles that natural philosophy has long attributed to matter. While significant, they hardly represent all urban experience, but they are especially vivid to the outsider coming to the city for a brief time, to whom nothing feels normal. The urban dweller inhabits the more extensive neutral ground of daily routine, which may feel natural and comfortable from familiarity. For most inhabitants, the urban condition is simply taken for granted, but for the visitor everything is vividly present.

From the vantage point of the outsider, the city is the quintessential human built environment. It holds the fullest range of human values, negative and positive, aesthetic values as well as ethical ones. The city may have the comfort of familiarity to its inhabitants, but to the visitor the city is never neutral. Unfamiliarity breeds not contempt but excitement, confusion, physical difficulties in navigating its unknown ways, and disquiet from the intensity of perceptual stimuli: new sights, disruptive sounds, incessant activity—the commotion of city life.

**An aesthetics of urbanism**

One of the city's normative domains, central to this discussion, is its aesthetic. Urban experience for the visitor typically focuses at first on its architecture: the public buildings, the commercial streetscapes, and perhaps the residential areas. The products of architecture are

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4 This section is adapted in part from the Introduction to Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson, eds., *The Aesthetics of Human Environments* (Peterborough, Ont., Canada: Broadview, 2007).
not ordinarily thought of as environments, but architecture is increasingly understood more as
the design of built environments rather than simply of independent physical structures.
Architecture shapes both interior and exterior spaces. It creates surfaces and volumes, and
establishes patterns of movement for various purposes--domestic, commercial, industrial,
governmental, celebratory. Moreover, architectural structures occupy sites that are contiguous
with other environmental configurations and may be integral parts of larger urban areas. The
aesthetics of the architectural environment therefore merges with that of landscape
architecture, as its concerns move beyond the physical boundaries of a structure to embrace
its connections with its site. Architectural aesthetics also coalesces with urban design through
the relationships and groupings of multiple structures that it establishes and the patterns of
human activity it creates.5

Urban aesthetics, in contrast with architectural aesthetics, focuses more generally on
the larger built environment as it is shaped by human direction for social purposes:
paradigmatically, the city. However, we do not have to oppose the city aesthetically to the
countryside or to wilderness, even though it is a common tendency to do so. For the city is
rather a distinctive kind of environment made from materials obtained or derived from the
natural world and embodying the same perceptual elements as other environments, but more
fully designed and controlled by human agency. Yet while the city is a distinctively human

5 This theme is developed more fully in Arnold Berleant, “Architecture and the Aesthetics of Continuity,” re-printed in
Arnold Berleant, Living in the Landscape (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997) and in Allen Carlson, "Existence,
Location, and Function: The Appreciation of Architecture," both in Philosophy and Architecture, ed., M. Mitias (Amsterdam:
Rodopi, 1994).
environment, it is nevertheless an integral part of the geography of its region, the larger context within which its boundaries are usually indistinct, as we have seen, and with which it has numerous and complex reciprocal relationships.

Both architectural aesthetics and urban aesthetics deal with the same perceptual factors that are part of all environmental experience. Moreover, in the city, the pre-eminent human environment, sensory dimensions are inseparable from historical and social ones. The aesthetic values of the city include more than urban beauty; they also encompass the perceptual experience of meanings and traditions, of familiarity and difference. Even more than architectural aesthetics, urban aesthetics includes negative aesthetic values: the intrusion on perceptual experience by omnipresent noise, air pollution, strident signage, utility lines, littered streets, and dull, trite, or oppressive buildings.

An aesthetic critique is essential in evaluating a city’s character and success. To incorporate aesthetic considerations into urban design and planning is to put the city in the service of the values and goals integral to fulfilled social life. Urban experience from the perspective of the outside may be perspicuous. It is clearer, less obscured than experience tamed by routine, perhaps by overexposure, when, like a habitual route we follow in going to work, we rarely see the details anymore. The perspective of distance provides the visitor with a wider normative range than the city dweller is likely to possess. The two masques are set in motion and enlivened; they become animated. How, then, can an aesthetic critique of urban experience proceed?

Critical for achieving an aesthetically satisfactory urban environment with human proportions is our ability to establish the conditions that shape the perceptual patterns through which we carry on life in the city. In addition to structural dimensions that respond
to the needs of the human body and human activities, the environment must work as a sensory one. For this reason, urban design and planning cannot be confined to the arrangement of objects but rather should be used to create sequences of experience. This can take many forms, one of which is what Kevin Lynch called “imageability” or “legibility,” those visual traits by which people can maintain an awareness of their position in an urban complex and find their way through it. An “imageable” city is one whose paths, nodes, districts, boundaries, and landmarks are readily apparent and easily recognizable.\(^6\)

Moreover, fashioning an aesthetically satisfactory urban environment goes beyond simply ordering visual experiences. It must include other experiential dimensions to which American culture is often insensitive, such as the auditory stimuli that distinguish neighborhoods. These include not only the drone of traffic and whine of machinery but the shouts and calls that characterize different districts. Other sensory stimuli are of equal importance: tactile perceptions, such as the surface textures of roads, walks, and building façades; and smells, not only as evidence of decay, fuel combustion, or manufacturing, but also as attractive signs of the character of districts, such as waterfront, market, restaurant, and park. In addition, all the senses combine in the temporal progression of perception as we drive along a street, stroll through a park, window shop our way down a commercial plaza, sit observantly in a square, or gaze out over the city from an observation point. In this manner, a

full range of sensory cues serves to direct human activities, enabling us to move securely and with ease, as well as with interest and excitement, through an urban setting shaped to accommodate human needs and activities. It becomes clear that for an urban environment to function not only humanely but also as a source of rewarding aesthetic experience, it must succeed as a condition for experience and facilitate our patterns of movement. This would not only enable the city to work more effectively but would also enhance common symbols, meanings, and memories. Such urban experience can increase emotional security and help make possible a social condition through which we can realize our fullest possibilities.

Aristotle claimed that society is the place where people become fully human.\(^7\) We now understand better than ever what environment is and what it means. That understanding recognizes the human presence as an active participant, inseparable from the other factors that constitute environment. People are a vital factor in environment, "doing and undergoing," as Dewey put it, affecting as well as affected by the conditions of living. Let us conclude this inquiry with an unabashed sketch of what a humanly fulfilling urban environment might be.

**The future of urban experience**

Over its long history the city has evolved through various functional stages.\(^8\) Small urban organizations appeared as far back as 5000 B.C.E. in the Mesopotamian basin. In their earliest form they served a basically sacred purpose. Ancient urban groupings often developed around monumental temple structures where priestly functions and religious rituals took place. These urban centers were ordered and guided by a priestly class, and their temples

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\(^7\) Aristotle, *Politics* (ca. 350 B.C.E.), Book I, Chapter 2.

imparted a sense of security and cosmic order to the palaces of the rulers and the dwellings of the populace. Somewhat later, the city assumed an imperial function. Powerful rulers established conditions for land ownership and provided systems of laws and offered security from invaders. Later as large areas came under the control of such rulers and trade developed, cities grew in size and proliferated. Their commercial role developed over a long period and eventually became their dominant feature.

Conflict persisted among these different functions, with religious, political, and commercial interests vying for control. We see some of the same competition today in different ways in various parts of the world. Still, commercial interests seem to be more fully in control than ever before, as commerce joins with industrial technology to dominate the social and physical landscape and direct political decisions.

From a distant perspective, a fascinating drama is being enacted. Population is increasingly diffused throughout the countryside, since commercial and industrial needs no longer require a large urban concentration. At the same time there is greater insecurity within the city and increasing control over the population. Commercial hegemony itself excites further tension as it comes in conflict with sacred, imperial, social, and personal interests.

At the same time that most of the world's population has gravitated to cities, an exodus has been taking place in developed countries. In addition to the influence of changing forms and patterns of employment, the exodus is motivated by environmental needs that are at the same time physical and social. In the effort to avoid congestion and multiple forms of pollution and in the desire for greater security, people have moved to the ever-expanding periphery of the city. Suburbs have themselves become urban neighborhoods, the surrounding countryside has been refashioned and regulated into new suburbs and into the
semi-rural form of settlement known as ruburbs, and the city's function has shifted to become
the locus for business, education, technological research, and cultural activities. At least in the
highly industrialized parts of the world, factories have moved out of the inner city into
industrial parks on its outskirts and increasingly to underdeveloped regions with cheap labor
and raw materials. The identity of city and countryside has become diffuse and obscure.

At the same time, fundamental changes are taking place in our understanding of key
urban concerns, including architecture and environment. We have noted how buildings can
no longer considered discrete structures but interpenetrate the environmental region of
human movement and use, and how these functions are themselves incorporated into the
architectural design. As we observed earlier, architecture has become not the design of
structures but the design of environment in which everything is considered and shaped in
ecological terms, i.e., in the interconnections of humans and environment as a single complex
totality. An entrance, for example, is understood not as a break in the outside barrier wall of a
structure and thus an intrusion in its uniformity, but as an interconnection of outside and
inside that invites transition.

Thus as aesthetic interests become more insistent and necessary, urban aesthetics
focuses more generally on the larger built environment as it is shaped by human direction for
human purposes. Yet urban experience is undergoing still further transformation, with
unimaginable opportunities and equally unimaginable dangers. This is a transformation that
can be guided by aesthetic as well as by commercial interests. We might even speculate that it
may generate a new vision of urban experience and, perhaps indeed, a new utopianism. What
could this be?
Pictures of a successful urban environment usually include public safety and wellbeing in the lawful conduct of personal and public life, clear and efficient patterns of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, efficient and dependable utilities, a strong economic base and high level of employment, a wide range of artistic and educational opportunities, and a broad array of cultural and recreational choices. But do these constitute the optimum condition of a good city? Is this the urban ideal? I want to suggest that it is not, that this picture describes a healthy city but not urban experience that elevates the life of its inhabitants.

Liken this picture to the human organism and it will become clear why it is not. As good circulation is necessary for a healthy body, the smooth flow of walkers and efficient traffic patterns help a city function smoothly and well. Similarly, the satisfactory distribution of goods and services seems to resemble the body's digestive system. As healthful living and working conditions safeguard human physical wellbeing, so safe streets and a low crime rate help make a city livable. Prudent decisions and conduct help ensure the safety and security of an individual person, both as a physical organism and as a city dweller. Finally, a healthy organism is one that is strong and active, with weight proper to its size and age. So, too, is a vital city busy and prosperous. While no none would dispute the desirability of such conditions in an urban environment, they are necessary but not sufficient for humane and elevating urban experience. Although a healthy body is a precondition for a good life, it hardly fulfills our human potential. What more is needed for humanly fulfilling urban experience?

Here we may look to the aesthetic to serve ethical ends. As all human experience consists in or derives from sensory perception, and insofar as sense perception is at the heart of the aesthetic, the aesthetic domain is indissolubly implicated in the fundamental ethical goal
of fulfilling experience. If we add to this the Aristotelian premise that humans are social, cultural animals, it follows that such an aesthetically infused goal must find its fulfillment in a social condition. It is appropriate, then, to speak of aesthetics at the same time as we consider ethics, and so to speak of an urban aesthetics at the same time as we consider an urban ethics. But what constitutes an urban aesthetic?

Just as Aristotle also recognized that adequate material conditions are necessary for human happiness, the description we have given depicts the conditions a city can offer. Yet we must supplement this material account with the aesthetic conditions, conditions that are perceptual. So we must now ask, what are the perceptual conditions of a positive urban aesthetic? Here let us propose, as a start, that many of the common sensory dimensions of the aesthetic experience of art and environment will prove useful. In the visual realm these include color, texture, line, composition, and proportion. Since the urban environment is three-dimensional, we should also include mass, volume, and scale. This last is of signal importance in achieving humane urban experience, especially as the modern city has enlarged disproportionately to its ability to fulfill human ends. Much as a greatly overweight person has more difficulty carrying out his or her activities and is more prone to illness, an overweight city has similar difficulties in effectively meeting the needs of its inhabitants. Excessive scale carries a psychological burden, as well. It is intimidating, oppressive, and inefficient. It encourages abuse and corruption. And when an urban region extends itself without restraint, this may act as a cancerous growth that ends by destroying its host. Similar considerations

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9 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, Ch. 8, 1099a.
apply to the auditory, olfactory, tactile, and kinesthetic domains of urban experience, whose
importance match the visual and which join with it.

Let us bring this discussion around to conclude on a more harmonious note of the
potential for an aesthetically informed urban future. We have observed that the city's
principal function shifted from being the site of the sacred to securing the seat of power, and
from this to underpinning the forces of commerce and industry. And we have noted that the
city is becoming less necessary for carrying out these functions. But there remains one role it
can play that brings the city, in some sense, back to its origin as a place for community and for
the fulfillment of the basic needs and developed possibilities of perceptual experience. This
can happen when the city fulfills a new function as the center of culture. How can this take
place?

A beginning answer is for the city to become the deliberate host of those associations
and institutions that encompass the creative, preservative, and productive activities and fruits
of a rich and complex culture: art, science, and history museums; research institutions and
universities; libraries and performance centers. As organizations and structures, these are the
tangible evidence of the creative activities of a culture. Behind them lie the informal
exchanges and associations that take many forms and lead to fuller development and enlarged
capacity for enlightenment and creativity: productive discussion, debate, and exchange; and
networking, sharing, and collaboration of ideas, knowledge, and techniques. These require a
concentration of population large enough to generate cultural ferment but not so large that it
becomes oppressive or overwhelming. Such mutual stimulation, of course, complements the
often solitary efforts of artists, scholars, and scientists.
Such a creative culture is an ideal, one that is only possible in community. This is the vision of a distant city, a city whose outlines are easier to discern from the outside, the city of which we continue to dream as we are drawn by the promise of urban life. At the same time, it is the vision of a city that is both plausible and possible. Will it become real?