

In Search of the Good City

By Kris Hirschmann

An excerpt from an event summary written for The Aspen Institute, an international non-profit organization based in Aspen, Colorado

Session One: The Dispersed and Segregated Metropolis

Presentation by Robert Fishman

The symposium opened with a presentation by Robert Fishman, professor at the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning of the University of Michigan and author of *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier*. Currently working on a book on urban decentralization tentatively titled *Metropolis Unbound: Cities After the End of Cities*, Fishman is a leading authority on the issues of urban and regional planning.

“Starting our search for the Good City with a discussion of dispersal and segregation is a little like starting a hike through the Grand Canyon with a discussion of rattlesnakes and dehydration. It’s a bit daunting,” said Fishman in his opening statements. However, he said, “I think it’s the necessary place to begin. For if we are to attain the Good City, we must face and perhaps overcome the two great underlying principles of post-war American urbanism, which are precisely sprawl and segregation.”

How did these principles come to define the American urban landscape? To answer this question, Fishman first explained the urban scenario in the early 1900s. “As late as the 1920s, the American city was still based on the classic urbanistic principle of concentration around a core. The industrial metropolis was a series of concentric circles—first the center city, then the factory zone, and finally the commuter zone, or suburbia.” These suburbs, Fishman pointed out, were very different from the sprawling suburbs of today. “They were actually narrow borderlands between the dense city and the agricultural hinterland, sharing advantages of both. Their growth was restricted because residents had to be within walking distance of one of the streetcar or rail lines coming out from the city.”

In the 1930s, however, the federal government began to throw the weight of its policies behind the decentralization of cities. In addition, sprawl-friendly technologies (particularly the automobile) were becoming practical and popular. Driven by these two forces, cities began to organize themselves along roadway grids instead of the traditional hub-and-spoke system. This shift seemed innocuous—but it wasn’t, said Fishman. The characteristics of the grid system were fundamentally different from those of the hub-and-spoke system. How? “Grids don’t need a center. They extend in every direction. You get the same advantages wherever you plug into the grid, which means that it is no longer necessary or advantageous to be close to the city’s core or to concentrate society’s resources at a single point. Urbanization can take place at any point in the region.”

And it did. The suburbs that surround American cities today are the result of the untrammled urbanization that exploded as a result of the new grid organization. Not only are

these suburbs larger and more spread out than their predecessors, they also have a different function, said Fishman—to the point that the very term “suburb” has become meaningless. “Today’s suburbs are not dependent on any kind of center. They even have their own economy. In fact, it’s the suburban economy that is at the heart of a region’s economy today,” explained Fishman. “The suburbs are no longer satellites; they are in fact a new kind of low-density city. For the first time in urban history we are seeing urban complexity without urban concentration.”

The “dispersed city,” as Fishman calls this new suburban form, has its advantages. But it also has some major disadvantages, one of which is congestion. “The new city depends on the thousands of automobile trips that people make to knit together the different fragments. We therefore create low-density congestion that is caused by the necessity of turning every urban interaction into a separate automobile journey.”

The primary problem of the dispersed city, however, is the concentration of poverty. Fishman pointed to the example of Camden, Pennsylvania, to illustrate this point. “Dispersal devalued Camden’s location. The city wasn’t close enough to the Philadelphia core to benefit from the special economics of today’s downtown. It didn’t have the advantages of the emerging areas at the periphery. And so what you see today is center city Philadelphia surrounded by a solid ring of poverty in areas like Camden.” This concentration of poverty and its attendant segregating effects, said Fishman, stands out as the most important negative consequence of the dispersed city.

Presentation by Donald L. Miller

The second presentation of the day was given by Donald L. Miller, professor of history at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania. Dr. Miller is also the author of five books, including the recent critically acclaimed *City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and The Making of America*, which received a Great Lakes Book Award. *City of the Century* was also nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and for the Urban History Award as best book in North American Urban History for 1996.

Miller’s presentation sought to answer one key question: Why are American cities different from European cities in terms of dispersal and segregation? The answer, said Miller, seems deceptively simple: “American cities are different because we’re Americans and they aren’t. Our national character and the pattern of our lives have been shaped by our history. Long-range historical processes have created the kinds of cities we have—and there are great difficulties in changing the pattern of American cities given that they are so uniquely, quintessentially American in character and appearance.”

The roots of the modern American city, said Miller, can be found in the nature of early America. Driven by the country’s colonial and frontier character, cities grew in a different way than they had through most of humankind’s history. “American cities were created by an explosion process—that is, the city appeared first and then the small towns came later.” Miller offered the city of Chicago as an example of this process: “If you were moving west, you had to go through the city to get out into the frontier. You picked up your supplies and you went out and you cut down the prairie grass and you built farms, and when you set seed in the ground and grew your grain, you built canals back to Chicago. Chicago became a place to send your goods and services. And then Chicago itself exploded out into that prairie.” This story was played out all over the country, said Miller, with the result that cities across America grew at spectacular rates.

At the same time that the cities were beginning to explode, technological innovations were helping to shape the growth of the burgeoning urban centers. Like Robert Fishman, Miller pointed to transportation technology as a key factor in this transformation. “The technological changes were especially important in terms of the way transportation shapes cities and spreads them out. The first suburb is created by the railroad and the omnibus and other technologies. You can follow the transportation revolutions all the way into the age of the car and the truck and see that each of those technologies has had an irrevocable effect on the shape of the modern city.”

But transportation technology was not the only driving force at this time. Other technologies and other opportunities abounded. America in general and American cities in particular became hotbeds of capitalism—and as Miller explained, “The type of capitalism that grew up was somewhat unique. It was the most untrammelled, uncontrolled, unlicensed, reckless capitalism that had ever been invented. And because it was not partial to restraint, and especially restraints on growth, this capitalism drove American cities to become growth machines.”

It also molded the American urban character. For as Miller pointed out, the real founders of American cities were businessmen. “Cities were capitalist enterprises run and built by risk takers. Businessmen were often the first mayors of a city, and they felt that if they invested in the city, they would get rich.” Because they had a personal stake in the success of “their” city, civic leaders were reluctant to put any controls in place that might compromise the money-making frenzy that accompanied growth. According to Miller, these feelings persist to this day: “It’s all a debate between controls or no controls. How much control is America going to tolerate? It runs against the grain of American society.”

Miller concluded his presentation with an observation of the geographic differences between Europe and America and the effects of such differences on sprawl. “We have a whole continent with no natural boundaries and a common language. We’re always moving, moving, moving, and that has immense consequences in terms of sprawl. Now try to imagine 11 million people in the United Kingdom moving in two years from the London region to Portugal. It couldn’t happen. Geography is just one more reason why American cities may fly out of control.”