

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

The New Urbanism: Celebrating the City

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/25v2x5qt>

Journal

Places, 8(4)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Bray, Paul M

Publication Date

1993-07-01

Peer reviewed

The New Urbanism: Celebrating the City

Paul M. Bray

Healthy cities have an ego, a sense and pride of place, and an awareness of where they came from and where they are going. Unfortunately, it is increasingly hard to find these attributes in cities today, and the failures of urban planning to foster them are both many and well documented.

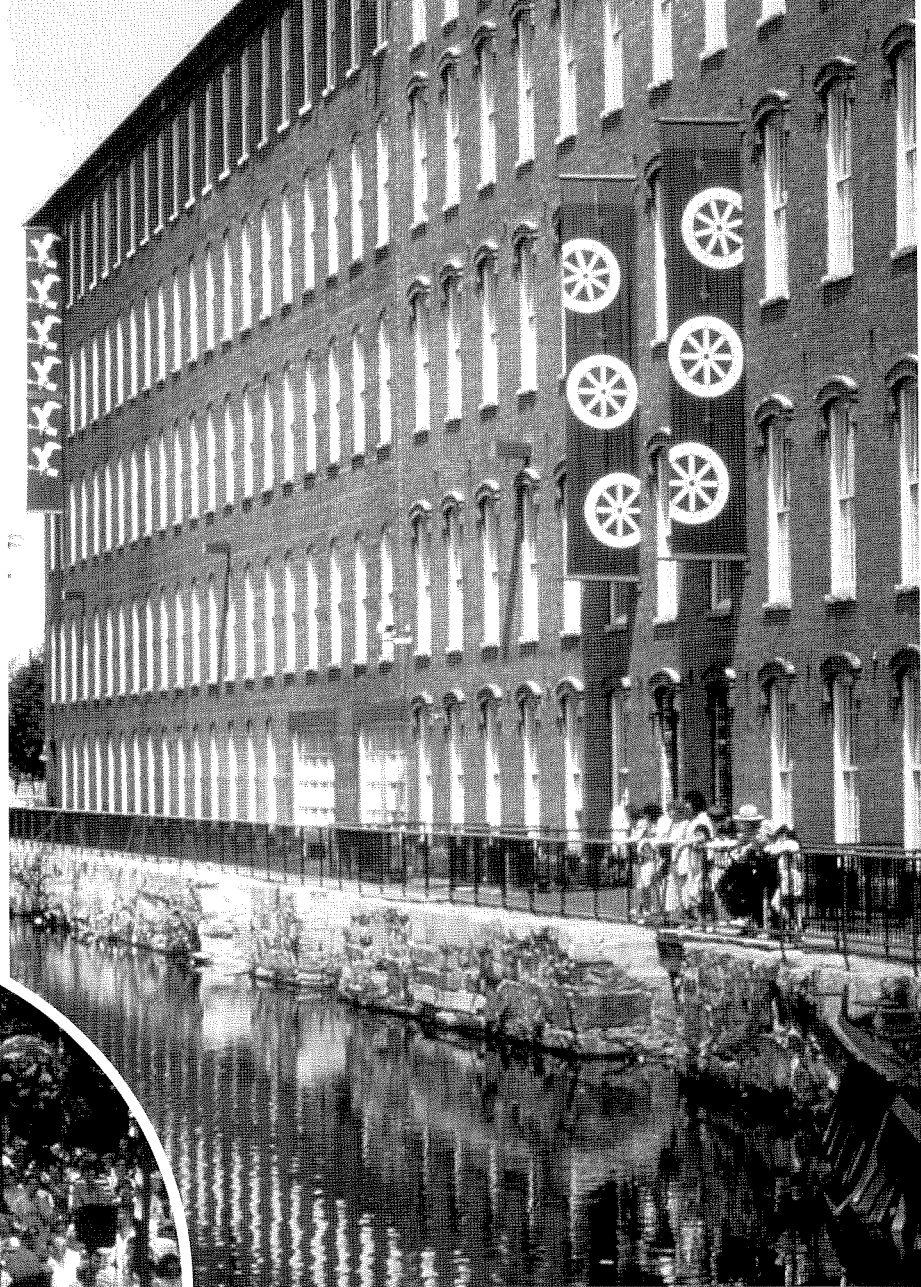
As M. Christine Boyer declares in *Dreaming the Rational City*, “Our modern cityscapes show little awareness of their historical past. New architectural structures, spaghetti highway interchanges, and historic preservation projects are seldom integrated with the existing texture. Instead the historical centers of the city are dangerous to city life; they had to be completely removed or reduced to museum pieces.”¹

Our physically and socially fragmented cities suffer from what sociologist Richard Sennett called “a surfeit of sameness,”² which has deterred individuals and groups from engaging their cities as unique communities and precipitated the decline of shared institutions like parks, libraries, and schools.

But Lowell, Mass., and places like it are the vanguard of a new urbanism that offers meaningful answers for reweaving the fabric of social life in cities and making urban life a more enjoyable and civilizing

In Lowell, MA, planners found that century-old mill buildings and canals, powerful artifacts of the industrial era, could be educative and economic resources.

Top: Ranger leading tour of the Suffolk Mill, Lowell National Historical Park. Center: Crowd at Lowell Folk Festival. Bottom: The Market Mills Courtyard.



There is no "park" at Lowell National Historical Park; the entire city is the park.

New York Times

The Croton Aqueduct, in Ossining, N.Y., helped make New York City's nineteenth century growth possible. Courtesy New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, Urban Cultural Park program.



experience. The new urbanism is an emerging planning philosophy that melds a recognition of urban culture and history with an emphasis on making human and physical connections, encouraging public engagement in civic affairs, and improving the public realm. It represents a convergence of evolving ideas in historic preservation, environmental planning, park design and management, and economic development.

Historic preservation, for example, is broadening its interests to address the conservation of neighborhoods, the adaptive reuse of vernacular buildings, the economic issues besetting small town main streets, and the representation of the many cultures that have contributed to our nation's history; these efforts have not only preserved older buildings but also made our heritage a more visible and integrative element of our urban environments.

The environmental movement has not only won protections for air, water, and land, but also created a fuller awareness of the value of nature in everyday urban settings; today urban forestry, community gardens, creek restorations, and waterfront revivals are popular initiatives for improving the quality of life in cities. Changing economic conditions have increasingly forced city governments to be active and creative boosters of quality of life in order to retain and attract both businesses and residents. Similarly, park designers and managers are challenging the notion that parks should be separate and apart from the city and its daily life. They are discovering that urban park planning truly is the essence of city planning when the entire city is viewed through the lens of a park.

Although the new urbanism is still in an inchoate stage, one can see examples of it in most cities. It is evident nowhere more, perhaps, than in the urban cultural parks inspired by Lowell. There, planners found that the powerful architectural and urban artifacts of the industrial era could be used to transform a city where everything was perceived to be dull into a city where everything is interesting. New life was given to century-old mill buildings and canals through adaptive uses.³

Urban cultural parks represent a major leap from the nineteenth-century concept of the park as a retreat or escape from the city. They apply traditional park ideas of resource protection, beneficial enjoyment, and public use to built landscapes that possess a coherent heritage, civic capacity, and community will. Sociologist Galen Cranz writes that these parks, "intended to protect an important part of the nation's industrial and economic history for educational and recreational purposes, were opened on the assumption that all parts of the city — its workplaces, living quarters, and connecting streets — had equal aesthetic and recreational potential, that the city was in fact a work of art worthy of appreciation and objectification."⁴

In an urban cultural park, the entire urban landscape, with its amalgam of cultural and natural resources, becomes the “park.” The park makes for a more legible and livable city, and it uses the city as an educational resource that offers insights into the distinctive human, natural and economic forces that shaped the city. In turn, the park serves as a unifying force, helping the city develop a shared image or ego and serving as the basis of an integrated, resource-based planning effort that addresses the goals of preservation, education, recreation, and economic development.

Urban Culture

The binding element of the new urbanism is urban culture, which encompasses the story of human achievements that occurred in urban settings. A city’s discovery and celebration of its urban culture supports the human need for rootedness and identity, provides the ballast of an historic context that can help cities navigate the course of change, and can serve as a source of confidence in our own creativity.⁵

Unlike other urbanized nations, which celebrate their urban culture, America has let its urban culture suffer the fate of indifference and become nearly invisible, except for ethnic enclaves and museums. Yet American cities have been the engine of much of our nation’s economic prosperity and culture. Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger declared, “The city, no less than the frontier, has been a major factor in American civilization, without an appreciation of the role of both the story is only half told.”⁶

A city’s urban culture comprises stories about its development, growth, traditions, and rituals. These stories — found in recorded history, memories, and the form of physical artifacts like streets and buildings — tell why the city started and what its successes and failures have been. They are about inventors and capitalists who started industries that triggered the process of urbanization, workers who organized cooperatives and unions, immigrants who started new lives, reformers who campaigned for child labor laws or women’s rights, and civic leaders who organized to build an opera house or theater.

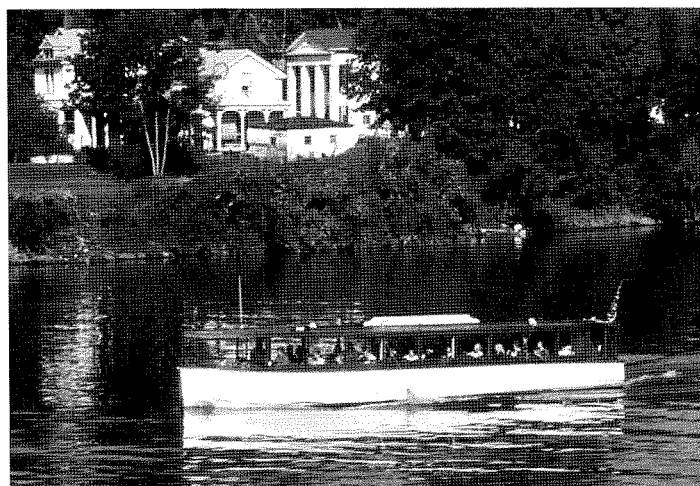
New York State’s urban cultural parks highlight much of the state’s history by emphasizing themes like labor, industry, reform movements, and transportation. For example, Kingston, N.Y., prospered throughout the nineteenth century as a Hudson River port and terminus of the Delaware and Hudson Canal. The Kingston Urban Cultural Park uses its history and natural environment to make its transportation history more legible to the public at large through exhibits, tours and special public events.



Tour of a nineteenth century neighborhood in Troy, NY, part of Riverspark.



Tour of an industrial archaeological site in Troy.



Riverspark visitors also can take boat tours along the Hudson River. Photos courtesy Riverspark.

HUDSON-MOHAWK

TRAIL/CULTURAL PARK PROGRAM

THEME: Labor and Industry

PARK CONCEPT

Hudson-Mohawk Park was designated by the NY Legislature in 1977. The park will illustrate the development of early industries and how transportation facilities and natural features influenced the development of these industries. This regional park at the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers encompasses Troy, Cohoes, Watervliet, Green Island, and the Town and Village of Waterford. The 49-mile long Heritage Trail provides a framework for connecting the significant cultural, historic, and recreational resources. These resources represent the region's industrial, ethnic, and transportation heritage and include the Burden Iron Works, Harmony and Ogden Mills, Watervliet Arsenal, the U & A Car Shops and remnants of the Erie and Champlain Canals.

PROJECT PROPOSALS

Preservation

- Identification of properties to National Register
- Parks and buildings restoration program
- Restoration of National Register structures

Education

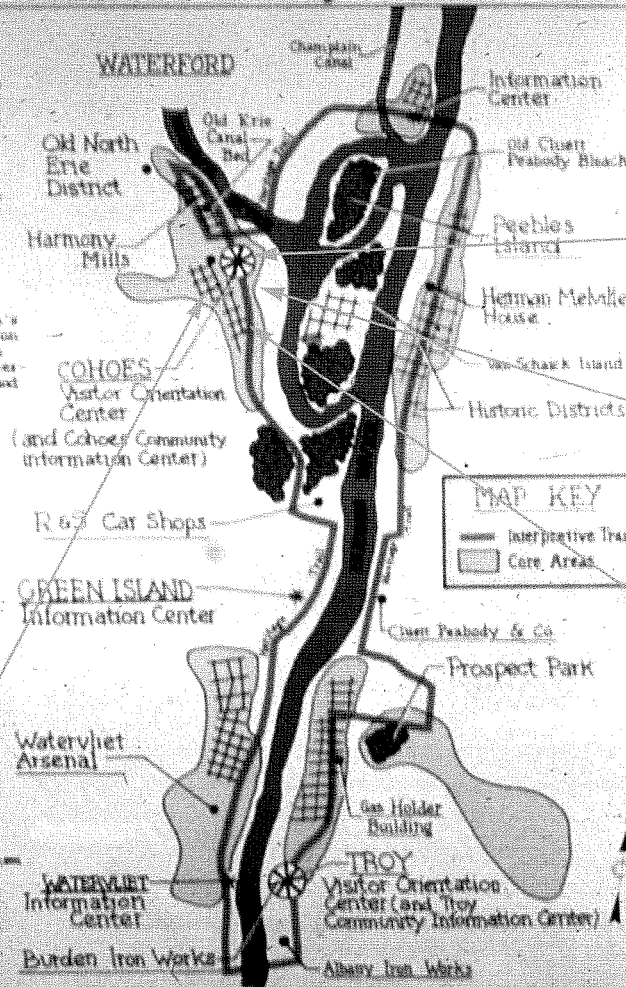
- Visitor Orientation Centers at former Burden Iron Works building and former Stillman Memorial Church
- Heritage Trail signs and publications
- Leisure learning weekend
- Gateway tours and lectures
- Harmony Mill Machine Room restoration

Recreation

- Bus tours along Heritage Trail
- Walking tours, bicycle trails, and boat rides
- Separation of existing park system
- Canal lock park improvements

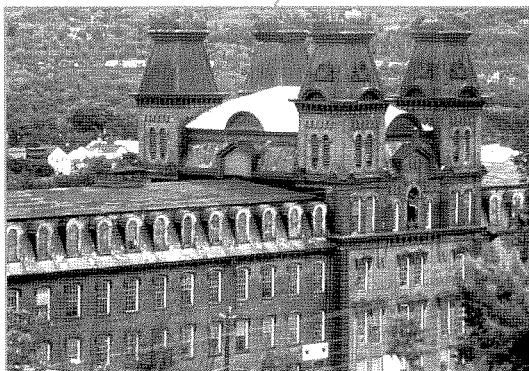
Economic Development

- Revolving development fund
- Parks passport program
- Grant and technical assistance program
- Adaptive grants for housing and commercial development



NEW YORK STATE OFFICE OF PARKS, RECREATION AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Riverspark includes a 26-mile guided trail that connects sites in the communities of Waterford, Cohoes, Green Island, Colonie, Watervliet, and Troy. Photos courtesy Riverspark.



Left: Harmony Mills, Cohoes. The mill complex and worker housing are intact. Opposite page, top: Cohoes Music Hall. The theater is still in use and also will serve as a visitor center. Opposite page, center: Harmony Mills and Cohoes Falls, Cohoes. Opposite page, bottom: Ogden Mills, Cohoes. The building has been rehabilitated for senior citizens housing.

Urban culture is also about the present — cities are complex mechanisms and there is untapped interest in seeing first hand how they work. An urban cultural park can offer residents and visitors contact with a city's economy, industry, neighborhoods, law, and, history and help them explore the balance between humans and nature. The Gateway, the tour arm of Riverspark (which includes Cohoes, Colonie, Green Island, Troy, Waterford, and Watervliet) has offered tours of nineteenth century industries that are still in business — such as Teledyne Gurley, whose instruments have accompanied explorers all over the world since 1845, and the Marvin Neitel Corporation, which has made uniforms since 1845. Gateway tours also take the interested citizen to the working parts of today's city — such as the warehouse of a local supermarket chain and behind the scenes at the daily newspaper.

The use of urban culture as a planning tool fosters a sense of self worth and pride in citizens, who come to realize more fully the continuum of which they are part. The Riverspark visitor center in Troy, N.Y., for example, features photos of the city's famed Burden Iron Works, which made horseshoes for the Union troops, locomotives, stoves, and other products. One only has to see the awestruck look on the faces of city of Troy teenagers after they have seen the powerful images of the sweating, straining ironworkers to appreciate the inspirational power of urban heritage.

Linkage

Linkage, or making human and physical connections, is the second pillar of the new urbanism. Traditional urban parks were designed to be separate and apart from the meanness of the city. But urban cultural park planning holds that all parts of the city are of interest and there is nothing to be concealed; the premium is on systems and linkage of natural and cultural resources as well as new arrangements between government and private entities. Restored or expanded urban park systems, heritage trails, and urban greenways and corridors have become emblematic of urban cultural parks and the new urbanism.

One of the first actions in establishing Riverspark was the planning and creation of a heritage trail that links more than 60 historic and natural sites in six neighboring communities that have a shared urban culture. This 28-mile trail, routed along existing public streets, highlighted the urban culture of these communities, became a force for rehabilitating existing public areas and establishing new public areas, and was a tool for promoting visitation (through guided bus tours and self-guided auto tours) and recreational activities (such as a Heritage Marathon).





Annual Riverspark Canalfest, at Lock #2 of the Erie Canal in Waterford, marks the seasonal opening of the canal.

The urban culture of Saratoga Springs is associated with the city's mineral springs, which led to the city's development as an elegant nineteenth century resort. The planning for the Saratoga Springs Urban Cultural Park highlighted the existence of mineral water fountains in many of the city's existing parks. This led to an effort to restore both the fountains and the parks themselves and to establish a greater linkage among them.

As natural and cultural urban resources are linked, new arrangements and alliances between causes ranging from the arts to the environment to neighborhood revitalization to economic development are formed. Urban cultural parks create the conditions for disparate groups to work together. The Albany Urban Cultural Park was a catalyst for bringing together the city's museums and other cultural institutions to expand public education about the city's heritage.

After opening the High Falls Visitor Center for the Rochester Urban Cultural Park, more than 20 property owners or stakeholders, including Eastman Kodak and the Genessee Brewery in the Urban Cultural Park, have formed a citizen's planning group to work with the city and state on setting development goals in the park for the next decade. Such new arrangements expand the means a community has for carrying out activities and projects that enhance its quality of life.

Civic Engagement

The process of establishing an urban cultural park is a powerful force in engaging individuals and organizations in a dialogue about their city; successful urban cultural parks have drawn together a diversity of civic leaders, businessmen, local public officials, educators, and interested citizens to survey the positive assets and resources of their city.

Unlike urban renewal, which began with the premise of cities being diseased and offered surgical solutions, the urban cultural park planning process begins with a common interest in employing the city's shared urban culture to enrich the existing urban environment. A shared image or vision develops around the strengths of a city, the dreams people have for it, and a consensus on urban planning values and goals.

This coalescing is not for the purpose of creating a new and separate initiative with its own organization and constituency, but rather to find the soul of the city and chart a course that offers a common purpose to the otherwise disparate elements of the city. Chris Lindley, Deputy Mayor of the City of Rochester, says that the many-faceted celebration of Rochester's heritage at the Rochester Urban Cultural Park visitor center has been widely accepted as "an act of civic affirmation."⁷

The Public Realm

The fourth pillar of the new urbanism is the public realm — making lively streets, parks, plazas, boulevards, and esplanades that distinguish a city and make life there a civilizing experience.

In recent years our nation's commitment to its public realm has been wavering, as Robert J. Reich points out: "In many cities and towns, the wealthy have in effect withdrawn their dollars from the support of public spaces and institutions shared by all and dedicated the savings to their own public."⁸

Yet a number of forces are at work to counteract the succession from the public realm. For example, urban leaders are recognizing that cities can actively compete with suburbs for residents and business by enriching their urban environments with arts districts, festival market places, parks, and activities that animate these places.

Urban planning in support of public amenities and good design offers other advantages. Such efforts are more likely to develop a consensus because the focus is upon maintaining and enhancing proven qualities of the city rather than quick fixes, quantum leaps, and architectural acrobatics. When the city is

a regarded as a park that visibly celebrates urban culture, citizens can better see how the features of the city relate to each other (like the traditional parks in Saratoga Springs) and how people and places fit in the continuum of time.

Even in the best planned urban cultural park, improvements in the public realm often are driven by the unpredictable availability of public funding. But the new urbanism can help generate better opportunities than might exist otherwise. An urban cultural park's resource-based management plan, and the linkages and civic engagement it cultivates, can pay unexpected dividends. Also, urban cultural park planning often connects economic development with improving the public realm.

The Seneca Falls Urban Cultural Park has become a partner in restoring an important but burned out main street building. It also helped attract \$250,000 from the New York State Urban Development Corporation to restore facades on the village historic main street, part of the park. The siting of the Kingston Urban Cultural Park visitor center in a previously stalled mixed-use development resulted in a fully rented project in a historic and revitalizing area of the park.

The "World in the Square" celebration in the Syracuse Urban Cultural Park. Courtesy City of Syracuse.



Putting Cities Back Together Again

The new urbanism is demonstrating that cities today offer more promise the pathology. One cannot ignore the dire consequences of “the city of the permanent underclass” portrayed by Peter Hall in *Cities of Tomorrow* or the forces described by Reich in “Succession of the Most Successful.” Cities have been shamelessly left to care for society’s ills without an adequate tax base or community structure.

But the future of the city need not be bleak if cities build on their inherent strengths. As part of the global economy, the U.S. has to compete with nations that possess strong, healthy cities that offer advantages with regard to education, the arts, energy conservation, entrepreneurial activity, and what William H. Whyte calls the “intelligence networks” of clubs, restaurants, and street corners.⁹ For better or worse, the U.S. must come to terms with its cities. The question is whether we build on the promise of our cities or simply react to urban pathologies while denying the usable past.

The new urbanism is enabling people and places to revel in the rich cultural diversity of our cities by fostering the discovery, and reasserting the importance, of our urban culture. This is leading to the unlocking of the unique and diverse resources of the city — and the civic will to tap these resources for the enjoyment of the public and improvement of the community.

The concept of integrating a city’s urban culture with the practical approaches of linkage, civic engagement, and improvement of the public realm does not offer a quick fix; it suggests incremental approaches to improving what should represent the highest achievement of a society, its cities. Sustained over time, the new urbanism may provide a significant approach to addressing the challenges presented in today’s cities.

Upper left: Map of the Rochester Urban Cultural Park, which includes the Genesee River and urban uses along it in the center of the city.

Left: Model of Brown’s Race Market in the Rochester UCP. Local industries and government invested \$25 million to renovate these industrial buildings. Photos courtesy New York State Urban Cultural Park program.

Opposite page: Theatrical lighting on Rochester’s High Falls. Photo courtesy City of Rochester.



Notes

1. M. Christine Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 286.

2. Richard Sennett, "Whatever Became of the Public Square," *Harpers* (July, 1990): 51.

3. A decade ago, this expanded idea of the city as a park was adopted by New York State. Its statewide system of urban cultural parks (UCPs) now include 14 UCPs made up of all or portions of 22 cities, towns, and villages across the state. These UCPs range in size from the Village of Sacketts Harbor, with 1,000 residents, to New York City's Harbor Park, and encompasses business districts, residential neighborhoods, and traditional parks.

Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania also have heritage area park programs, both to preserve their urban heritage and to capitalize upon it for the purposes of urban revitalization. Congress has endorsed heritage efforts across a broad spectrum, such as America's Industrial Heritage Project, which encompasses 8,000 square miles and 999 municipalities in southwestern Pennsylvania, the Illinois and Michigan Canal region and the Blackstone River Valley Heritage Corridor in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Legislation has been introduced by Congressman Maurice Hinchey (D-N.Y.) to create a national system of

heritage areas and a national heritage areas coalition has been organized to support this type of legislation.

4. Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design A History of Urban Parks in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 141.

5. The five sociologist authors of *Habits of the Heart* write about our need for a real "community of memory" involved in retelling its story (urban culture). Richard Sennett, in *The Conscience of the Eye* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), writes that the "city ought to be a school for learning how to lead a centered life." These books make an almost passionate argument that the diversity, complexity, and connection to the past associated with cities is an essential need for individuals in a society.

6. Quoted in Francesco Dal Co, "From Parks to the Region," in Francesco Dal Co et. al., *The American City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979), 184.

7. Conversation with the author.

8. Robert B. Reich, "Succession of the Most Successful," *New York Times Magazine* (20 January 1991): 42.

9. William H. Whyte, *City: Rediscovering the Center* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 293.

