

# Urban Form vs. Human Function in the 1920s: Lewis Mumford and John Dos Passos

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“Cities are like men except that they live longer.”

(Dos Passos, “A City that Died of Heart Failure,” 1928)

“[A] city, like a language, is the product of a whole people.”

(Mumford, “City Planning,” 1924)

This essay has two purposes: Its broader goal is to contribute to a conversation about the role of the aesthetic in public policy, along the lines of the philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s argument for the importance of narrative literature to ethical reasoning. Not only narrative, I will suggest, but also ingrained aesthetic predispositions and culturally accepted organizing metaphors, have considerable power to structure goals and choices in discourses that are often hostile or oblivious to the aesthetic. More narrowly, it will offer a case study of modes of discourse concerning the urban in the 1920s. The body of the essay will focus on the urban commentary and architectural criticism of one of the leading proponents of regionalism in the 1920s, Lewis Mumford, and on the treatment accorded the human life and physical form of New York City by John Dos Passos’s 1925 novel, *Manhattan Transfer*. The historical moment of the 1920s is a crucial one in the history of urban planning. At this point the New

York Zoning Law of 1916 converged with the steel-frame construction that enabled the skyscraper to create the distinctive skyline of Manhattan. At this point the newly rationalized work processes developed by Taylor and Ford dominated the thinking of businessmen and the experts that advised them. And at this point the discipline of urban sociology was just emerging, taking over the field from the social workers of the Progressive era. The powerfully articulate work of Mumford and Dos Passos challenged these dominant trends, motivated by a deeply humane concern for the quality of ordinary lives. They provide models of engagement and cautionary tales. They remind us that both intellectual and aesthetic production can contribute to a just and compassionate conversation concerning the public good without sacrificing creativity or sophistication.

John Dos Passos's characters wander, rush, and crowd through the streets of New York, building throughout *Manhattan Transfer* a city thick with highly individuated persons constrained but not determined by the impersonal space they move through. His narrative depends on how its characters inhabit their physical and psychological worlds, moving through resistant spaces filled with the needs, desires, thoughts, feelings, and bodies of others. A city, however, like a language, can be neither owned nor controlled by any individual. Like the *langue* and *parole* of Saussurean linguistics, these two aspects of the city are both inseparable and qualitatively distinct. Louis Mumford oriented his work toward the urban *langue*. He struggled to create a model and vision of the city that would replace the congested, dangerous morass of Manhattan depicted by Dos Passos with human-scaled communities. While Dos Passos sought to create powerful and accurate representations of ordinary urban life, Mumford articulated a vision of urban form intended to influence those with the power to shape cities.

These two orientations, towards aesthetic representation and its impact on the one hand, and towards creating a blueprint for urban policy and development on the other, reflect a tension between urban planning and urban life that reached a new intensity in early twentieth-century New York (see Ward and Zunz). While the emerging professions of urban planning and urban sociology responded to chaotic urban growth by bringing the tools of rationalized industry and empirical science to bear on the city, John Dos Passos, along with such writers as Mike Gold, Anzia Yeziarska and Nella Larson, created characters whose lives and personalities depended on the chaos, anonymity, and congestion of the city streets. The novels of these writers remind us that the real-world application of any professional discourse, including that of architects and urban planners, is constantly challenged by the complex aspirations and desires of individuals in search of passion, power, respect, or simply survival.

The power of art notwithstanding, the greater credibility of abstract analysis in real-world problem solving is deeply engrained in the culture of professionalism that dominates the academic enterprise in the United States. As was true in the 1920s, according to Ward and Zunz, the pluralism of urban life and its aesthetic representation are often trumped by the rationalism of urban

planning and related professions. Within research universities, financial pressures, a tendency toward a narrow view of the rational, and the sciences' search for broadly generalizable claims have combined to marginalize the arts and humanities. Recognizing the need to defend these endeavors, Nussbaum argues that literature, and more specifically the social-realist novel, is a powerful tool in teaching us the importance of "empathy and compassion" (*Poetic* 10), and the crucial role of "an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own" (*Poetic* xvi). In making her case, she challenges cultural criticism to move beyond detailing strategies of resistance to the inhumane and rather to claim a central role in the conversations that create unjust policies and practices in the first place.<sup>1</sup> Nussbaum eloquently challenges the bifurcation of abstract reason and objective investigation from those values and forms of expression that address what should form the basis of any ethical use of reason—empathy, compassion, and acknowledgment of the worth and complexity of the individual. Such a challenge requires the recovery of moments and structures (of feeling and of discourse) that contain, as Dickens's *Hard Times* does for Nussbaum, powerful correctives to a narrow and abstract reason's brutal force.

Although Nussbaum emphasizes the unique contribution to justice and community offered by imaginative literature, the strategies Mumford and Dos Passos adopted to address urban forms that both writers saw as dehumanizing are not mutually exclusive. Rather, where they do not overlap they complement each other in ways crucial to understanding the problems their texts engage. In doing so, they point to the short-comings as well as the strengths of their respective strategies. Rational argument and theory-making are not opposed to aesthetic representation and narrative, but do different work and achieve different, not less important, forms of knowledge. As Nussbaum herself argues regarding conventional scientific and philosophical writing, a single genre or style cannot encompass those aspects of "human life that may have a different geography and demand a different norm of rationality" (*Love's Knowledge* 20). What narrative literature has to offer is sustained attention to the particular experiences of ordinary people that could not be accommodated in a more abstract and universalizing genre or style of writing. This literature is valuable for

Its commitment to the separateness of persons and to the irreducibility of quality to quantity; its sense that what happens to individuals in the world has enormous importance; its commitment to describe the events of life not from an external perspective of detachment . . . but from within, as invested with the complex significances with which human beings invest their own lives [*Poetic* 32].

While Mumford also clearly valued these qualities, in his often visionary writing on urban planning and policy they are qualities more asserted than embodied.

On the other hand, he was taken seriously as a contributor to professional conversations concerning urban form and policy, as Dos Passos was not (and did not attempt to be). As we seek to correct an over-emphasis on rationalized or abstract approaches to human problems, then, it is equally important to remember the limitations of literary representation in addressing those problems.

Mumford fought against an emerging field of technocratic urban planners and an architectural establishment concerned more with aesthetic form than urban community. Working in a different genre and with a different set of tools, the novelist Dos Passos depicted a city filled with unsuspected choices, contradiction, self-deception, heroism, and disorder that only the realm of the individual utterance, the *parole*, could encompass. Dos Passos's city is predominantly—though not entirely—a city of pedestrians. The space they move through creates what Michel de Certeau called the “practiced” city, as opposed to the concept-city of the planners and developers. While literary narrative may embody and nurture the practiced city, it does not reduce the power of the concept-city to shape the physical and social possibilities and paths allowed by any specific urban environment. This, in the language and concepts available to him, Mumford understood. His task, then, became to create a concept-city in the image of a practiced city—a rationalized urban space that expressed in its form the deepest needs of the individual—insofar as a white, educated, male journalist of the 1920s might understand these. While Dos Passos used language to represent the struggles of individuals to survive with dignity in an environment not arranged with their goals in mind, Mumford took on the task of creating an Esperanto of the urban—a new universal language of urban form and purpose that might substitute for the *langue* that created the dehumanized metropolis he saw emerging.

The sections that follow will examine how strategies and techniques of representation generally thought of as literary or aesthetic emerge in both Dos Passos's novel and in the controversies surrounding urban development in the 1920s. They do so by examining, respectively, zoning as an expression of the aesthetic and social values of the professional-managerial class, the multifaceted symbolic weight of the skyscraper, and the use of narrative to defend the human function of urban environments. Mumford's attempts to critique forms of urban planning and design he felt detrimental to human community and quality of life, for example, make clear how important his—and his interlocutors'—aesthetic predispositions are to how he engaged these discourses. Likewise, Dos Passos's vivid juxtaposition of the rich visual detail of the physical city with a fragmented and despairing human community provides a concrete rendition of what happens to people when cities get their priorities wrong. That Mumford and Dos Passos share a core of values and concerns regarding urban life, but the former is read primarily in the context of urban history, planning, and architecture, while the latter's importance is seen to rest predominately in literary studies, underlines the deficits of a disciplinary, rather than problem-based, organization of knowledge. A sustained conversation about urban policy and practice that

includes both Mumford and Dos Passos, both urbanists and humanists, is overdue. This essay aspires to demonstrate the possibilities and potential of such a conversation.

## Part I: Forms of Order: The Aesthetics of Zoning

Mumford's urban criticism in the 1920s grappled with changes in urban planning and design profoundly influenced by the creation of zoning as a way of legally enforcing use restrictions in city districts. The zoning ordinance passed by New York City in 1916 effectively separated manufacturing from retail and residential land uses and altered the Manhattan skyline through its requirement that tall buildings incorporate setbacks from their property lines to ensure adequate air and light to their surroundings. While a variety of social as well as economic concerns motivated the invention of zoning, by the end of the 1920s it had become clear that economic interests outweighed all others. Nevertheless, the imposition of zoning restrictions expressed desires for social order and had an impact on the physical form of Manhattan that reflected a dominant version of the professional-managerial class's ideals of urban life. These ideals were rooted in aesthetic predispositions.

The goals the 1916 ordinance sought to achieve included stabilizing land values, ameliorating congestion, and increasing the order and efficiency of urban development. Occurring in concert with the increased emphasis on the values of efficiency and standardization celebrated by Taylor and Ford, zoning from the outset reinforced a technical and mechanistic approach to the city. In fact, zoning professionals tended to see the city as a huge machine or factory (Boyer 169; Fairfield 193). Just as an efficient shop floor organized tasks in terms of temporal and spatial efficiency, so city planning, they thought, ought to separate functions that were seen as independent of each other—residential districts were separated from manufacturing, which was in turn distanced from retail outlets. A 1922 contributor to *Architectural Record* denigrates pre-zoning conceptions of the city by comparing that city to “a kind of a fungus” while praising the “new ideal created by the Zoning Resolution” because it “conceives [the city] to be a mechanism of related parts” (Boyd, “New York” 193). The authors of the *Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs*, a ten-year planning effort initiated by the Russell Sage Foundation in 1921 and overseen by Thomas Adams, expressed a deeply felt distress at the existing mixture of slum dwellers and high-end retailers, of financial institutions and slaughterhouses:

In the very heart of this ‘commercial’ city on Manhattan Island south of 59<sup>th</sup> Street, the inspectors in 1922 found nearly 420,000 workers employed in factories. Such a situation outrages one’s sense of order. Everything seems misplaced. One yearns to re-arrange the hodgepodge and to put things where they belong [Quoted in Fairfield 192].

The language of almost visceral distaste for the messy heterogeneity of this urban district, like the image of the unplanned city as fungus, underscore the importance of motives driving professional planners that were neither political nor economic. Rather, these men were engaged in the aesthetic instantiation of class and cultural predispositions, those ingrained ideas of the proper that Pierre Bourdieu has named the “habitus.” The desire to see the space of one’s world arranged in a manner fitting and attractive to one’s taste is neither unexpected nor unseemly. The disproportionate impact of one group’s aesthetic predispositions on the arrangements governing a city to be shared with the rest of humanity is less benign. Even though professional commentators of the 1920s recognized the cultural and economic advantages of intense concentration of businessmen, artists, and professionals of all kinds—supported by available and inexpensive labor—their discomfort with the chaotic and unpredictable character of urban development led them to believe that they could do away with urban disorder without destroying urban vitality. This quixotic endeavor was perfectly articulated by Charles Beard in the *National Municipal Review*: “The city has been the fountainhead, and not the enemy of modern civilization; but the modern city, the product of the machine age, must be studied, controlled, and Taylorized” (726).

While the personal satisfaction attendant on an efficient separation and location of urban functions may have helped drive the professionals involved in writing zoning laws and city plans, the political and business interests influencing their products had a variety of other motives. The high-end retail spaces of Fifth Avenue, for example, were being threatened by the influx of lower class garment workers who invaded the area daily to work in the manufacturing lofts situated above the stores. Likewise, real estate speculators sought to stabilize the value of their investments by ensuring that land uses that might reduce those values were excluded from the area. There is no question, as architectural historian Carol Willis has demonstrated, that the dreams and desires of powerful financial interests had a great deal to say about the shape of the built environment in their cities (Willis 1955). The aesthetic predispositions of the experts harmonized with the profit motives of bankers and developers.

The consequences of the successful imposition of zoning in New York City were, then, not equally positive for all affected. While land values steadily increased in the wake of zoning, so did social, racial, and economic segregation. And, while zoning provided a useful tool for shaping urban development, it also, as it was applied in the 1920s, was incapable of addressing the aesthetic and social qualities of the emerging urban form (Boyer 169). The metaphor of the city as machine, or as factory floor, seemed inadequate to helping planners ameliorate the effects of sprawl and congestion on the quality of urban life.

Louis Mumford believed that the zoning laws effectively reinforced current trends towards increasing centralization and congestion (“City Planning” 80).<sup>2</sup> However, he shared with proponents of zoning and other city planning efforts, particularly the emerging regional planning movement, a desire to impose order

on the uses and development of urban space. Both Mumford's Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA), and Thomas Adams's *Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs*, "projected a rationally planned and zoned city which segregated residential, commercial, and industrial uses, as well as social classes" (Meyers 292). Mumford's view of the basis for ordering the city, however, differed from that of Adams. Whereas Adams is often described as a business-oriented pragmatist who defined the region in terms of existing uses and trends (Hall 165), the members of the RPAA tended toward idealism and defined the region in terms of its natural geography. Further, Mumford and the other members of the RPAA developed a fully articulated conception of the function of the city that gave precedence to human community over technical efficiency. The operative metaphors employed by this group were not mechanistic, but organic.

A relatively small and informal group that included architects, businessmen, and conservationists, among others, the RPAA believed that planning should seek to conserve the natural resources and balance of uses that would best serve the long-term quality of life of both rural and urban sections of a region.<sup>3</sup> Cities, then, were only one part of a larger whole defined by their regions, encompassing geographical and environmental qualities, economic and transportation infrastructures, and a variety of residential types and cultural institutions. They understood that urban physical and social conditions were affected by geography, transit, settlement, and production attributes that did not stop at the political boundaries of the city.

The metaphor of an organic whole that underpinned the RPAA's conception of the region was complemented in Mumford's thought by an historical narrative of community development in the United States that stood in tension with this ideal. In *Sticks and Stones* (1924) he outlines this narrative in terms of the development of community form and architectural aesthetics. The New England Village is here, and will in many ways remain, Mumford's ideal form for human community, a position that has led later commentators to define his point of view as "anti-metropolitan" (Meyers 293). Meanwhile, the villains of the book are the pioneers. In their pattern of exploiting the environment and then moving on once its destruction is complete, pioneers represent for Mumford the most predatory tendencies of American capitalism. The relatively unplanned and unregulated growth of large American cities looks to him not like a triumph of human industry but like the most recent example of the pioneer mentality's selfish and short-sighted pursuit of its own needs and desires. The short-term efficiency and productivity to be gained by this mode of behavior, however, served to legitimize the narrative of the pioneer in the society at large.<sup>4</sup> For those with the power to direct development, the increase in wealth enabled by exploitation rather than stewardship made the benefits of this approach self-evident.

Machine technology, meanwhile, can become a tool for increasing economic optimization and its legitimizing product, thus creating a circular rationale for continued exploitation of an environment. Technology, Mumford felt, was too often subordinated to the non-human ends represented by the dominance of the

engineer.<sup>5</sup> In cities, the deadly combination of engineering expertise with business's voracity for profit had led to urban environments in which "these mechanical improvements, these labyrinths of subways, these audacious towers, these endless miles of asphalted streets, do not represent a triumph of human effort: they stand for its comprehensive misapplication" (*Sticks* 73). Mumford was not opposed to technology, engineering, or the value of efficiency. In fact, he argued for the importance of the automobile as a tool for alleviating the congestion of large urban centers by making their density no longer necessary ("Fourth Migration" 62). The subways, streets and skyscrapers enabled by advances in engineering, however, had not led to the creation of more humane environments or an improved quality of life for either city dwellers or the swelling ranks of suburban commuters. Instead, they simply enabled cities to accommodate the increasing congestion that they themselves encouraged. Mumford attempted to address this failing by subordinating the pioneer's narrative of economically driven expansion aided by technology-based efficiency to an organic narrative rooted in an analogy between the human community and the cell. An integrated yet heterogeneous structure, the cell is inherently limited in the size and nature of its growth. When a population exceeds a certain norm for size and density, its region should "form a new central nucleus and create a new cell" rather than continuing to increase central city density and dormitory suburbs ("Botched Cities" 150).

Throughout the 1920s, Mumford repeatedly rejects approaches to the urban that do not start from a conception of organic wholeness, objecting that most cities are "not organic centers but inefficient mechanical agglomerations" ("Art" 103) and reminding readers that the human functions of community, not the abstract satisfactions of uniformity or technical prowess, ought to be driving urban design. Only, he felt, by subordinating the machine and its products to individuals and communities powerful enough to shape it toward human ends might this technology be safely used for the good of society (*Technics* 433-34). In making his case the metaphor of the organic whole, expressed in narrative terms through the analogy to cell division, consistently defined the terms of his argument, while the narrative of progress, reinforced by a metaphor of mechanical efficiency, underwrote the perspective of those he attacked.<sup>6</sup>

## **Part II: Skylines and Skyscrapers: Art and Urban Design**

Mumford's organicist metaphors and narrative would not win the battle against the narrative of economic progress and the metaphor of the machine in urban development. Only with the failure of urban renewal and the emergence of the environmental movement in the latter half of the century would the momentum shift in any other direction. In the 1920s, however, Mumford attacked not only the Taylorist model of the city as machine, but the position that the city and its buildings should be considered primarily works of art and shaped, therefore, by a master artist. The most influential American representative of



this stance was Hugh Ferriss, the artist whose visual renderings of skyscrapers and skylines taught architects how to design within the constraints of the 1916 zoning ordinance and in the process helped create the skyline for which Manhattan became famous.

Ferriss took the aesthetic principles becoming dominant in skyscraper design, which gave priority to sculpted form over façade (Hollerman 569), and transformed them into the underlying motives for urban design as a whole. He further insisted that skyscrapers as individual works of art would themselves have a powerful and positive impact on city life. This stance aligned him with conceptions of both the rational ordering of space and the role of the master artist in human life that Mumford rejected. In contrast, Mumford consistently refused to treat buildings as self-sufficient aesthetic entities. Ferriss asserted that the architect, as the artist of the city, ought to have absolute control over his creative product. Instead of being at the mercy of bankers and politicians, architects should become self-conscious creators of powerful and benign urban environments. Ferriss, like Mumford, was convinced that the built environment of a city expresses the values of the society that creates it and that changing this environment could improve the lives of its inhabitants. In de Certeau's terms, however, he would be a champion of the rationalized concept-city, both in the abstraction of his vision from the street-level life of the city, and in his desire to impose on citizens a built environment answerable only to that vision.

The distance between Mumford's and Hugh Ferriss's approaches to urban development is evident in how they understand the role of buildings in city. Ferriss sees the buildings of a city as the stage set within which people live out the drama of their lives. Since, however, the stage set influences the actors, the quality of the set provided by architects necessarily will have enormous impact on the "nature of their thought, their emotions and their actions" (16). Moreover, the skyscraper could be a positive force in creating this set, precisely through the proper use of its height. Ferriss envisioned a vertical city emerging in the future, one dominated by huge towers, but surrounded by masses of low-lying buildings (109-10; Willis, "Drawing" 163). This use of a theatre metaphor that removes the artist from direct participation in the life of the city further aligns Ferriss with de Certeau's master of the concept-city.<sup>7</sup> His vision is static. It is characterized by a bird's-eye perspective on the urban landscape and dominated by a thinly disguised fantasy of control and manipulation.

To Mumford the purpose of urban design is to "orchestrate the human functions of a community" ("Art" 103), not to provide empty theatres for the convenience of large egos. Therefore, he had little sympathy for Ferriss's vision. He countered that monumental vision with one scaled to ordinary human life. In an uncharacteristically sarcastic review of Ferriss's work, Mumford links the aesthetic power of Ferriss's drawings to the necessity of ignoring the human costs of embracing them. He argues instead for a city that values pedestrian activities over monuments:

In contrast to Mr. Ferriss' titanic dream-city mine would, I fear, be merely human. Modern technology and science would be used to fullest advantage in my city; but they would not rob it of its human base: the things that would still matter would be birth and death and falling in love and marrying and giving in marriage and fine living and high thinking and decent manners and all the arts of using the body, the voice and the hand for the enrichment of life ["Sacred City" 270-71].

The vitality of the drama of human interaction, not aesthetic power, was for Mumford the mark of a successful urban form.

Dos Passos likewise questioned an aesthetic divorced from the concerns and experiences of ordinary lives, but he had a different idea of the function of art and his own role as an artist. Unlike Ferriss's belief in the social benefits of a totalizing aesthetic vision, or Mumford's advocacy of human-scaled communities, Dos Passos would insist that his role was to be a recorder rather than a shaper of history. This stance does not, however, make Dos Passos's novel irrelevant to urban policy. In focusing attention on the particular lives of individuals and the impact of urban environments on their daily lives and actions, he locates the problems of cities in a concrete, messy reality that Mumford seldom fully engages and that Ferriss ignored.

The characters in *Manhattan Transfer* experience the skyline of Manhattan from boats, windows, and, in truncated glimpses, from the street. Arriving by ferry or ocean-liner, they watch from a distance as the light shapes the tall buildings into the jagged masses created by the setback provisions of the zoning law. With few exceptions, these characters become pedestrians, walking through the city streets, looking up through their canyons at the offices and apartments belonging to lives far different from their own. Dos Passos privileges the participatory shaping of experience enacted by walkers in the city over the sense of mastery and distance emphasized by the concept-city's birds-eye view. Even though, as Mike Gold commented in his review of the novel, Dos Passos's method might be compared to "the zoom of the areoplane flight over a city" (73), Dos Passos himself, writing in the same periodical, would decry the disconnection from other lives implied by such a perspective. He attributes this disconnection, however, not to the distance of higher status, but to social isolation: "Writers are insulated like everyone else by the enforced pigeonholing of specialized industry" ("New Masses" 81). Dos Passos saw the over-rationalized specialization attendant on city life under industrial capitalism creating a caste of writers whose debilitating distance from their subjects was a threat to their integrity as artists. *Manhattan Transfer* names this situation (in the Burkean sense) in part through its constant interplay of people in motion with the static and unyielding physicality of buildings and streets.<sup>8</sup>

In this tension between person and place, architecture, and especially the skyscraper, plays a significant role. The architect Phil Sandbourne, a minor

character whose passing attraction to a girl on the street lands him in the hospital, provides several commentaries on the state of current architecture, championing a Ferriss (or Le Corbusier) inspired vision of massive, multi-function buildings dominating the city's future landscape.<sup>9</sup> Another character, Stan Emery, an aspiring architect and actual alcoholic, articulates the powerful attraction held by the stability, control, and inhuman strength skyscrapers embody. Just before lighting himself on fire in a drunken stupor, Emery plaintively exclaims "Krerist I wish I was a skyscraper" (252). The skyscraper, in fact, becomes both an internal and external presence with which individual characters must contend. While ubiquitous signs and anonymous crowds characterize the commercialized, congested public space of the Manhattan streets, the skyscraper represents the equally ubiquitous, yet restricted, domain of the powerful. The Manhattan skyline and the tall buildings that create it signify a mastery over urban space that characters in the novel repeatedly fail to overcome. Dos Passos expresses their failure in part through a metaphorical relationship between this icon of the modern city and the denial of characters' aspirations by those with the ability to fulfill them.<sup>10</sup>

The skyscraper operates as an image of personal longing for the characters Phil Sandbourne and Jimmy Herf. Herf, one of the novel's two most developed characters (Ellen Thatcher being the other), describes a waking nightmare of a skyscraper that has "obsessed him." He searches endlessly for a way into the building, walking "around blocks and blocks looking for the door of the humming, tinselwindowed skyscraper" but cannot get in (365). The inaccessible skyscraper becomes itself the life he cannot have, symbolized most acutely by the presence of his estranged wife (Ellen), with whom he is still in love, "beckoning from every window" (365). Phil Sandbourne provides a more literal representation of the fantasy that the skyscraper itself might become the vehicle for the good life. Attempting to persuade a wealthy lawyer, George Baldwin, to finance an idea for a new kind of building material, he describes its imagined results for the city:

Imagine bands of scarlet round the entablatures of skyscrapers. Colored tile would revolutionize the whole life of the city. . . . Instead of fallin [sic] back on the orders or on gothic or Romanesque decorations we could evolve new designs, new colors, new forms. If there was a little color in the town all this hardshell inhibited life'd break down. . . . There'd be more love an [sic] less divorce. . . [257; ellipses in original].

Herf's and Sandborne's images of the skyscraper also articulate the two extremes in the argument between Mumford and Ferriss over how urban life and design are related: the recognition of the inhumanity of the monumental skyscraper, in the form of its inaccessibility to Jimmy Herf, and the simplistic environmental determinism of Sandbourne's assumption that prettier buildings will make for

better lives. The skyscraper had become a symbolic battleground in the conflict between those, like Dos Passos and Mumford, who attended to the demands of ordinary lives, and the ambitions of architects and businessmen determined to make their mark on the city.

Louis Mumford engaged this battle on two grounds. First, he, as well as many other writers on urban life in the 1920s, believed that skyscrapers increased street, housing, and mass transit congestion by piling large numbers of people on top of each other in tall office and apartment buildings.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, as seen in his critique of Ferriss, he felt that they tend to express the greed and egotism, or at best the technical prowess, of their builders rather than contributing to a holistic development of urban space in the service of human community.

Skyscrapers had become what Mumford called “symbolic” architecture, that is, buildings whose purpose is not to facilitate and support the daily life of ordinary people, but to stand for the dominant values and manifest the dominant power structure of a society. As a result, most skyscrapers are treated as individual works of art and engineering, and as competitors for star status on the urban skyline rather than productive members of an ensemble cast. Mumford advocated instead the “steady pursuit of a vernacular” architecture (“Symbolic”186), reserving symbolic architecture for public buildings. In his view, high profile individual feats of architectural splendor merely distract from a society’s failure to provide a better life for those masses “deprived of bread and sunlight and all that keeps man from becoming vile” (*Sticks* 67).

Implicitly struggling with this same tension between the “symbolic” and the “vernacular,” Dos Passos names the tall buildings that have become, like celebrities, objects of desire and aspiration—Flatiron, Woolworth, Pulitzer—while he simultaneously sets the life activities of his characters in rented flats, restaurants, and parks. Neither those who work in tall buildings (like the importers Dench and Blackhead) nor those who reject them (notably Jimmy Herf) master them. Like the crowds in the streets deprived of sunlight by the long shadows of these buildings, the characters Dos Passos shows farther up the ladder of success must learn to live in spaces made by others. He would write in his “Introduction” to the 1932 edition of *Three Soldiers* (1921) that “We’re not men enough to run the machines we’ve made” (147). *Manhattan Transfer* demonstrates that we are also neither man nor woman enough to live in the cities we’ve built.

This may easily be, however, because we’ve built the wrong cities. The dominance of the skyscraper expresses an urban culture deeply committed to individual achievement at the expense of the collective, insofar as its design and construction are driven by motives other than a holistic appraisal of the human needs of life in cities. Because skyscrapers embodied an affirmation of personal ambition and local identity that was attractive to the elites of the 1920s, commentators on architecture and urban design tended to treat monumental and visually dramatic buildings and skylines as powerful symbols of success.<sup>12</sup> The response to Ferriss’s work is indicative of this attitude—according to Carol Willis, “Contemporaries . . . responded to his predictions with surprising credulity

and often passionate enthusiasm” (“Drawing” 174). Mumford and his regionalist colleagues were a minority voice for small-scale cities and modest buildings designed for use rather than display.

If Mumford was fighting a losing battle against the forces championing monumental architecture as a path to personal glory and control of the masses, Dos Passos was fighting a war in which he was equally doomed, one against the de-humanized spaces and systems of modern commerce and bureaucracy. This is a battle that he would continue to fight in his trilogy, *U.S.A.* While the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927 was a decisive, radicalizing, moment for Dos Passos, his distrust of the ability of the political and economic systems of the United States to act with justice and humanity was clear much earlier. *Manhattan Transfer* grapples with his suspicions in the context of urban space, deploying the built environment in ways that suggest both the seductive power of its forms and the inability of individuals to master what they collectively have created.

#### **Part IV: Urban Form and Human Function**

The relationship between physical form and human experience shaped both Dos Passos’s figurative use of the skyscraper and Mumford’s more literal attacks on tall buildings. Mumford was straightforward in his disdain for a conception of the artist that he considered arrogant and indifferent to the lives of ordinary people, and he feared the impact such artists might have on an urban environment we all must share. Dos Passos approached similar concerns through quite different strategies. *Manhattan Transfer* is saturated with the juxtaposition of narrative frustration—breaking off storylines, dropping characters midstream—with a powerful depiction of the visual richness of the city. His highly fragmented narratives, reinforced by representations of jostling anonymous bodies in constricted and overbearing spaces, embody an aesthetic strategy that seems bent on squelching sustained identity development in his characters. Finally, the spatial and physical experience of the Manhattan Dos Passos depicts is one that militates against the integration of a human life into a coherent unity.

Dos Passos was not consistently pessimistic. At one point he thought that theatre might contribute to an urban culture that integrated human lives. From 1927-1929 he was active in the New Playwrights Theatre, an experimental company involving John Howard Lawson, Mike Gold, and others, that argued for a strong connection between theatre art and the city. In his introduction to Lawson’s play, *Roger Bloomer*, Dos Passos writes that a vital theatre depends on an organically integrated and vital urban culture and will emerge from “the welding of our cities into living organisms out of the junk heaps of boxed and predatory individuals that they are at present” (“Foreword” 71). If this doesn’t happen, both cities and the theatre are at risk. Cities must “either come alive or be filled with robots instead of men” (“Foreword” 71). Two years later, Dos Passos restates this position with the difference that now theatre takes an active role in forging the organic unity that in the earlier essay was a prior condition

for its progress: “the theatre more than anything else welds into a sentient whole the rigid honeycomb of our pigeonholed lives” (“‘Realistic’ Theatre” 75).

In contrast to Mumford, who never gave up on the power of regional planning to create and maintain the kind of urban communities that could overcome the unhealthy fragmentation of city life, Dos Passos’s belief in the power of theatre to accomplish a similar end did not last. By the early 1930s he had become deeply pessimistic, as evident in the famous “Camera Eye (50)” of *The Big Money*: “America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have bought the laws and fenced off the meadows and cut down the woods for pulp and turned our pleasant cities into slums . . . we stand defeated America” (469). In an essay published in 1934, he falls back on his conviction that the writer’s job is to shape history, not the future, by placing characters “in the snarl of the human currents of his time, so that there results an accurate, permanent record of a phase of history” (“Business” 160).<sup>13</sup> This retreat is anticipated in *Manhattan Transfer*’s final inability to imagine an integrated urban life for either of its central characters. Instead both Jimmy Herf and Ellen Thatcher succumb to New York City’s demand that they either become “boxed and predatory” or fail to survive the brutality of its “granite canyons.” Ellen Thatcher becomes the robot Dos Passos warned against. Jimmy Herf leaves town a failure.

The aesthetic strategies Dos Passos deployed, including his handling of narrative, embody the problematic nature of life in New York City and the urgency of ameliorating its deteriorating and socially toxic environment. Early reviewers of *Manhattan Transfer* characterized its depiction of city life as one of overwhelming confusion and disorder. To D. H. Lawrence it was “a rush of disconnected scenes and scraps, a breathless confusion of isolated moments in a group of lives, pouring on through the years, from almost every part of New York” (75). It is called a “panorama,” a “kaleidoscope” of New York, or, most dramatically, “an explosion in a cesspool” and determined to have “no vestige of plot.”<sup>14</sup> One reviewer describes at length an urban world in which individuals are swamped by the physical scale of their built environment, one where chance encounters rather than sustained relationships and reason govern their futures (Stuart 64). This “monstrous city” was frightening and exciting in Dos Passos’s rendering in part because his technique of juxtaposing short vignettes and fragmentary narratives of incomplete events foregrounded an urban experience that threatened to rip apart sustained stories of life and community. In contrast to smaller, more homogeneous forms of communal life that kept intact family-based narratives of continuity and tradition, the urban life depicted in *Manhattan Transfer* dismantles kinship ties and undermines even the dyadic narrative of romantic love.<sup>15</sup>

Even those narratives that depend on the opportunities provided by large cities were threatened by their uncontrollable scale and complexity. The life narrative provided by the modern career, for example, has been a dominant structure for middle-class male self-understanding throughout the twentieth century. Of the characters in *Manhattan Transfer*, however, only the lawyer

George Baldwin and the banker-to-be, James Merivale, are depicted in lives shaped according to the steady upward rise typical of this narrative. Merivale is a shallow, two-dimensional figure, clearly disliked by the novel's implied author, while Baldwin's success rests on calculated opportunism and the exploitation of women. A more fully drawn character than Merivale, Baldwin ends the novel with everything he wants—appointed District Attorney as a step towards the Mayor's office and anticipating marriage to the woman of his dreams, Ellen Thatcher.

Most other characters end the novel dead, maimed, impoverished, or cynical and despairing of happiness. Jimmy Herf leaves the city for a penniless and uncertain future elsewhere. Ellen Thatcher pays the price of the trophy wife, becoming a mechanical doll, "hard and enameled" as she relinquishes her self to become the image of George Baldwin's power and success (375). In a city where the possibilities for massive wealth, extraordinary power, and unending sensual pleasure seem limitless, *Manhattan Transfer* gives its readers disappointment, bad luck, chance without justice, violent desperation, and an almost monotonous repetition of human pain and suffering in its many forms. But these narratives of truncated lives and stunted spirits take place in a setting of unrelenting visual richness. Eyes meet and slide away, hips sway, strange bodies rub against each other in crowded subways, cars and buses battle pedestrians for city streets, while advertising signs compete for attention with the light reflecting off skyscrapers' windows (see Brevda). The novel moves the reader constantly between building and street, between the internal consciousness of complex individuals and the anonymous masses of buildings and people that control the streets.

Without any context or model for their integration, the human need for connection and relationships bounces off the hard surfaces of the city. In place of an organic whole, the novel leaves readers with two extremes, the totalizing aesthetic power of the built environment and the fragmentary ugliness of the human lives it holds. Dos Passos's *Manhattan* gains this aesthetic power at the expense of people, who, as in Ferriss's monumental cityscapes, are absent from the spaces they inhabit except as implied, indirect and impersonal manifestations:

*Dark presses light the steaming asphalt city, crushes the fretwork of windows and lettered signs and chimneys and watertanks and ventilators and fire-escapes and moldings and patterns and corrugations and eyes and hands and neckties into blue chunks, into black enormous blocks. Under the rolling heavier heavier pressure windows blurt light. Night crushes bright milk out of arlights, squeezes the sullen blocks until they drip red, yellow, green into streets resounding with feet [112; italics in original].*

Unlike Ferriss's drawings, however, Dos Passos's novel seems to grieve the absence of the complete human being in its cityscapes. In throwing its human cargo repeatedly against an overpowering built environment, *Manhattan Transfer* reminds us of what Ferriss had forgotten—the consequences to individuals when the aesthetic loses its grounding in the values of human community and compassion.

If the novel lacks the image of an ideal city that like Mumford's would nurture the human spirit and provide the physical conditions for intellectual and creative growth, it does provide powerful reasons for dissatisfaction with the status quo. By compelling readers to experience the destroyed lives of individual city-dwellers embedded in a disturbingly potent imagery of urban streets and buildings, it leaves readers with a strong sense of the waste—wasted lives, love, money, and beauty—that this city has engendered. This novel shares with Mumford's writings on the city a conviction that the dangers of a city whose physical form overwhelms its human function far outweigh any aesthetic power it might offer as compensation. By naming that situation and giving it form, Dos Passos accomplished a task not only crucial for and proper to the aesthetic, but also for compassionate public policy.

In *Manhattan Transfer*, even more so than in the relatively continuous narrative sections of *U. S. A.*, Dos Passos protects the small narratives of lives fractured by a city that overwhelmed all but the most privileged and least scrupulous. In doing so, he challenges the universalizing tendencies of literary modernism, apparently ignoring Ernest Hemingway's warning that he threatened his longevity as a writer by tying his novels too securely to a specific time and place (Casey 2). Edmund Wilson noted that, unlike most writers and intellectuals, Dos Passos was able to establish a genuine relationship between the aesthetic and intellectual, on the one hand, and the ordinary concerns of people, on the other: "The task of the intellectual is not merely to study the common life but to make his thoughts and symbols *seem* relevant to it—that is, to express them in terms of the actual American world . . ." (449-50; emphasis in original). This quality is one narrative literature is, or should be, particularly adept at accomplishing. As Nussbaum argued in the case of law, distance from human experience in the exercise of reason creates a form of injustice—one could substitute "art" for "reason" and the point would hold. As Dos Passos's novel demonstrates, bridging that distance does not require a retreat from aesthetic innovation or intellectual complexity. At the same time, achieving this connection is not the same as achieving social or political change.

The failure of Lewis Mumford and John Dos Passos, in their respective spheres, to exert significant influence on the physical form of New York City or the individual lives of its inhabitants in the 1920s does not affect their success in defending the inherent value and interest of ordinary lives lived in the streets built for them by politics and finance. Their dismay at the inability of the elites to concern themselves with ordinary lives lived in ordinary spaces proved, in



fact, to be prescient. The path followed by professional planners, real estate developers, and politicians through most of the twentieth century did considerable damage to our cities. The debacle of “urban renewal” in the 1960s destroyed functioning working-class neighborhoods, created high-rise slums more dangerous than the tenements they replaced, and did nothing to halt white flight or the accompanying deterioration of the urban tax base. Only well after Jane Jacobs successfully took on the planning establishment in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) did urban planning and design begin to reinvent itself as a democratic process. Finally rejecting the top-down imposition of grand visions manifested in the concept city, many urban planners now seek to work closely with communities and remain sensitive to geographical and other kinds of diversity, rejecting command and control decision-making in favor of processes that respect the needs and concerns of local constituencies.<sup>16</sup>

Given the value both Dos Passos and Mumford placed on the lives of ordinary people, on the need to overcome fragmentation in urban communities, on the power of the physical environment to shape lives, and on the frightening abuses of the powerless attributable to unrestrained ego and bureaucracy, it is extraordinary that they are so seldom understood to participate in the same discourse. Despite their very different strategies for expressing those values, and their very different contributions to our understanding of the twentieth-century city, they should be recognized, although they failed to recognize each other, as part of the same community of thinkers. That they understood their functions in public conversation very differently, while still contributing to a common goal for urban experience, makes them an ideal model for the kinds of conversations scholars in the humanities, architects, social scientists, and others might pursue. Our failure to do so, except in marginal and fragmentary ways, weakens the influence of the arts and humanities in the public sphere. At the same time, it has the unintended consequence of further strengthening the bureaucratic and disciplinary divisions of knowledge that structure work in universities, making such conversations more difficult.

Humanists have failed to play the role they might in conversations about urban life. The continuing resistance to mixed-use and mixed-income environments and the flight of the affluent into gated communities suggest that the habitus that governs the decision-making of middle and upper-class professionals, like the zoning advocates of the 1920s, still finds deep satisfaction in the separation and isolation of peoples and functions. In a democracy, as Richard Sennett argued more than twenty years ago, ghettos of any description are signs of trouble (“Community”). In the context of the work attempted by this essay to open a dialogue between urban policy and literary studies, Nussbaum’s insight that more than one genre or style of expression is necessary to a full and just assessment of human experience and decision-making is fundamental. Arguably, however, she stops short of the full significance of her insight in addressing only the power of narrative to affect ethical thought. We have seen, for example, that metaphor can play a constitutive role in delimiting

goals and options—if the ideal city is a machine, anything else will look like a fungus. If the skyscraper represents the height of human aspiration, the lowly brownstone will become an admission of failure. Further, it is not only in the elaboration via narrative of the particularized experience of individuals that writers evoke empathy, compassion and outrage in readers—it is also in the truncation and frustration of those narratives, their fragmentation and gaps, that we experience the waste of unjustly cheapened lives. When billboards and lights become more riveting to our attention than a fellow human being in despair, we have reason to fear for our future.

## Notes

1. Taking a different approach to the question of the role of imagination in urban life, and therefore to the role of the humanities or cultural studies to understanding urban problems and policies, James Donald focuses on the power of the imagination to conceive of things being other than they are, and therefore “not limited to the mimesis of images sanctioned by the Law” (19). While Donald would emphasize the power of art to explore alternative possibilities of the urban, Nussbaum asserts that the emotional and psychological work that the aesthetic imagination performs must be inextricably integrated into the task of reason. That is, she challenges the legitimacy of “the Law” at its core, while Donald offers strategies of personal resistance and evasion.

2. Rem Koolhaas, the architect and theorist of urban form, goes further. In his 1994 manifesto, *Delirious New York*, he notes that the “Zoning Law is not only a legal document; it is also a design project” (107). By allowing a specific envelope of space to be filled in every block of the city, the law thereby projects its future physical form: “Even if it is still a *ghost town of the future*, the outlines of the ultimate Manhattan have been drawn once and for all” (108; emphasis in original).

3. For a survey of the history of regional planning that traces its influences and impact, see Hall, chapter 5, “The City in the Region.” See also Lubove’s history of the RPAA and Donald L. Miller’s biography of Mumford. Sussman reprints major position statements of this group first published in a 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic*. The RPAA included Benton MacKaye, an early environmentalist who is remembered primarily for his creation of the Appalachian Trail; Stuart Chase, an economist and follower of Thorstein Veblen; the architects Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, and others. The RPAA’s approach to urban development was deeply influenced by the idea of the Garden City, a mixed use, heterogeneous community limited in size by a surrounding green belt, developed in England by Ebenezer Howard; and by the work of the Scottish intellectual Patrick Geddes, who argued that planning should be based on the natural geography of a region.

4. Neil Smith’s analysis of the gentrification process that turned New York’s Lower East Side from a blighted ghetto into a trendy neighborhood makes it clear that the pioneer narrative is still alive and well in America.

5. The optimization narrative critiqued by Mumford may be thought of as a precursor to that analyzed by Lyotard in *The Post Modern Condition*. Lyotard notes that the goal of “performativity—that is the best input/output equation” required that “idealist and humanist narratives of legitimation” be abandoned in order to justify investment in knowledge (46). The consequence has been that “research sectors that are unable to argue that they contribute even indirectly to the optimization of the system’s performance are abandoned by the flow of capital and doomed to senescence” (47). Mumford’s attempt to redirect the terms under which decisions about urban development acquired legitimacy should be understood in the context of a trajectory in which optimization tends to win.

6. For a critique of Mumford’s organicism see Marx. Along similar lines, Blake sees Mumford’s “holistic approach to culture” as the source of his blindness to the conflicts and power struggles among social groups that are unavoidable aspects of social change (297). To this extent, Mumford’s approach to the urban environment is more like that of the technocrats he opposes than that of a novelist like Dos Passos. Crucially, however, he was attempting to change the structuring metaphor driving the policy discourse, something a novelist’s strategies could not accomplish.

7. As opposed to Ferriss, in the final chapter of *The Culture of Cities* Mumford explicitly rejects the idea of the city as a stage set, replacing it with an image of the city as “a theatre of social action” (480), one that shifts the emphasis of urban design “from the stage-set to the drama” (484).

8. In "Literature as Equipment for Living" Burke writes that "A work like *Madame Bovary* (or its homely American translation, *Babbitt*) is the strategic naming of situation. It singles out a pattern of experience that is sufficiently representative of our social structure . . . for people to 'need a word for it' and to adopt an attitude towards it" (300). *Manhattan Transfer* performs exactly this function in regard to the relationship of the individual to the overbearing and fragmenting physicality of the industrial capitalist city.

9. Gibson has argued that Dos Passos was influenced by the emerging European movement in architecture that would become known as the International Style. While he (and Mumford surely) may have had some knowledge of Le Corbusier's theories, Le Corbusier was not the only source for a top-down, overly rationalized, and giganticist vision of the city during this period. According to Peter Hall, implementation of Le Corbusier's version of this vision did not occur until the 1950s and 1960s (219).

10. The importance of the built environment to the novel has long been evident to its readers. Brevda has analyzed Dos Passos's symbolic use of the cityscape to denote the psychic successes and failures of his characters. Michael Cowan notes that skyscrapers function as metaphors for characters' inner states (298).

11. Others who either feared, or denied, the impact of skyscrapers on urban congestion include Clark and Kingston, who wrote a book-length defense of skyscrapers for the American Institute of Steel; Duffus and Stein attack them as cause of increased congestion; Frederic Delano, the Chairman of Thomas Adams's project, stays on the fence, presenting arguments both for and against. See also Goldberger's discussion of this controversy (87-91)

12. See Hollerman: "Skylines took on more than aesthetic significance as they became icons of their respective cities, and indeed symbols of the American city and America itself" (568). Newcomb surveys the power of this image in modernist poetry from 1910-1925. Periodical literature on the skyscraper in the 1920s comments frequently on its symbolic power as an icon of modernity, of America and of New York City. See, for example, Boyd ("A New Emphasis"), Croly, Walker.

13. See also Dos Passos' 1928 "Statement of Belief": "I think that any novelist that is worth his salt is a sort of truffle dog digging up raw material which a scientist, and anthropologist or a historian can later use to permanent advantage" (115).

14. These comments come, respectively, from reviews by Sinclair Lewis (69), Upton Sinclair (87), Paul Elmer More (78), and Henry Longan Stuart (65).

15. In this respect, the novel implicitly endorses an understanding of the urban that links its characteristics to specific psychological attitudes and modes of behavior. This position was most famously articulated by the German sociologist Georg Simmel, and was influential in the Chicago School's approach to urban sociology, an academic field emerging in the 1920s. Robert Park, an important member of this group, followed Simmel in arguing that cities attract individuals with certain innate personality traits (41).

16. See Fishman for a concise survey of the "near death experience" of American planning in the 1960s and its subsequent evolution. For a detailed description of the kinds of collective, community-based processes becoming more common among planners see Landry. The recent reemergence of regional approaches to urban design and development can be seen in the work of Peter Calthorpe, Myron Orfield, and a volume of essays edited by Bruce Katz for the Brookings Institution.

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