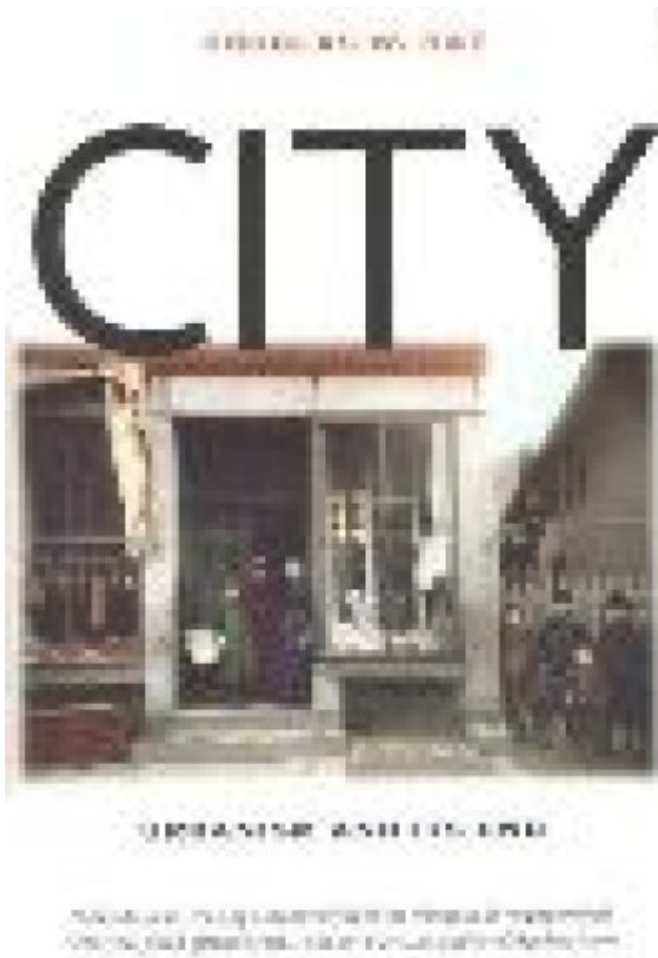


City: Urbanism and Its End

reviewed by [Richard Luecke](#) in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

In Review



City: Urbanism and Its End

Douglas W. Rae
Yale University Press

Some city dwellers still remember porch-sitting and leisurely walks to the corner store for ice cream. That was before TVs and freezers drew people inside behind

locked doors. Children walked to school, and afterwards they worked at local jobs or played in neighborhood streets or vacant lots. They were not yet bused to schools that keep them off the street until six o'clock, nor vanned to Little League and soccer games. Some parishes remember their own roles in the ambience of those neighborhoods.

Douglas Rae, a teacher of management and political science at Yale, who served as chief administrative officer for the first African-American mayor of New Haven, has written a book to stir old memories, but also to jar current assumptions of what it takes to make cities work.

Rae takes us back to the convergence of industry with steam and rails in mid-19th-century New Haven, initiating a period to which he assigns his positive term "urbanism." He places an "end" to such urbanism near the mid-20th century, when steam yielded to electric grids, everyone who could do so got on wheels, and suburbs changed the urban ground on which people walked—or came to walk less and less.

A frontispiece to the book is a passage from Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* about "the trust of a city street . . . formed over time from many, many little public sidewalk contacts." Rae also cites Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who called voluntary associations "the greatest school of self-government" and added: "In mastering the associative way, [people] have mastered the democratic way."

Rae's focus is on "patterns of conduct and decision-making that by and large make the successful governance of cities possible even when City Hall is a fairly weak institution." Lack of such "governance" is never fully supplanted by government, even when City Hall is more aggressive.

A term readers will take from this book is "civic fauna." Exhibits from many files—photos of mixed business and social life, mom and pop stores, bars, restaurants, neighborhood clubs, local sports teams, and piles of tellingly arranged data—are the stuff of these chapters. The city is viewed as a network of communication among citizens.

During the national period of "urban renewal," from the 1950s to the 1970s, America had no more aggressive city mayor than Dick Lee of New Haven, and none who reaped more federal dollars per capita. It was this mayor's lot, however, to preside

over urban decline. As jobs left the city, the sidewalk republic yielded to private malls and parking lots. A “crabgrass curtain” (Richard Wade’s term) rang down between hierarchic suburbs, many without sidewalks at all. Worker families who came late to the urban vineyard were left behind. Amassing the city’s poor on forsaken ground amounted, in Rae’s terms, to “a rapid disaster wrapped in slow catastrophe.” “Urban renewal” accompanied the end of urbanism.

The conventional wisdom of the time was 1) neighborhoods grow old and die and are not self-renewing; 2) racial change causes such decline; and 3) the best communities are those in which sleeping places and working places are far apart. Graduate students went out and proved these self-fulfilling propositions over and over again.

Rae adds a last, too-short chapter on “A City after Urbanism.” He points to a plethora of new crisis organizations that recruit across boundaries of race and class but notes how these are run by hired staff in distant places. He advocates a return of citizens to streets and local specialty shops. Why not pay an extra quarter for milk, bought at a nearby store on a neighborhood walk? He describes moves toward a new treaty between New Haven and Yale, the city’s remaining big industry, whose building plans could include some tax-yielding enterprises for residents.

As massive public housing projects come down in many cities, more powerful questions and proposals seem required. These will all be seen, however, to entail some return to the sidewalks. Left-behind communities still do communicate in face-to-face ways. An “Asset-based Community Development Program,” mentored by John McKnight and John Kretzmann of Northwestern University, finds reports of the death of neighborhood communities greatly exaggerated. An inventory of Grand Boulevard, one of the poorest areas in Chicago, shows 319 named face-to-face associations; 612 have been counted in the West Garfield Park neighborhood—another place where there aren’t supposed to be any.

Any larger politics to follow will begin with sidewalk questions. Was it really necessary or efficient for industries to disperse quite so massively as they did? Closer relations between industry and community, including worker- and neighbor-based warning systems for prospective removals, plus proposals of alternate approaches to ownership, are pressing needs. The location of subsidiaries and the local ownership of franchises are matters of public concern and may warrant certain public incentives and restraints. Should Industrial Revenue Bonds and Small

Business Administration loans be awarded to those who move plants out of the city?

Any genuine social and civic life of the future will entail a sidewalk culture. Is it time for all of us to start talking about density as a virtue? “Density bonuses” (land, permits, waiver of fees and of unit restrictions) are being proposed for new housing developments that will accept set-asides and vouchers for poor residents, thereby easing their entrance into mixed communities. In at least four cities, “location efficient mortgages” (larger loans, fewer points, lower interest rates) are available to households whose shopping, recreation and public transport are within walking distance and which thereby reduce the public costs of maintaining the infrastructure and slow the decline in air quality on the freeways. Local plans include mixed redevelopment at nodes of public transport.

Rae cites religious groups as “a spectacular exception” to the withdrawal from urban community. Congregations live on both sides of former crabgrass curtains, communicate with each other and profess common cause. They seem especially suited to confront regional issues: welfare, the spatial mismatch of jobs and skills, transport, affordable housing, school finance, health measures for children—all of which go limping amid the hundreds of governments and commissions in metropolitan areas.