

Our Towns

Why American cities are the way they are, and why we don't have Paris.

CITY LIFE

Urban Expectations in a New World.
By Witold Rybczynski.
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By George F. Will

IN the 12th century, when Paris, with a population of 100,000, was Europe's largest city, the city of Cahokia was about as populous as Florence (40,000). But Cahokia, sprawling over almost six square miles, was much less densely populated than compact Florence. And much less durable. It seems to have had no walls or other fortifications, its domestic architecture was made of logs and bark, and it vanished before Hernando de Soto arrived in the region in 1539. Cahokia was in what is now southwestern Illinois, near St. Louis.

Cahokia, as archeologists describe it, shows just how early there was a distinctively New World style of urban living. Puzzlement about the differences between American and European cities is as persistent as the differences. "Why aren't our cities like that?" was the question a friend put to Witold Rybczynski when she returned from Paris. Ask a professor (Mr. Rybczynski is professor of urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania) a straightforward question and you are apt to get a long answer. Mr. Rybczynski's answer to his friend's question is a book — not a long one, but one packed with common sense, subtlety and observations that illuminate our always evolving urban landscape. Readers who allow Mr. Rybczynski to take them on a brisk stroll through "City Life: Urban Expectations in a New World" are apt to understand, and like, their cities more than they do when they begin the stroll.

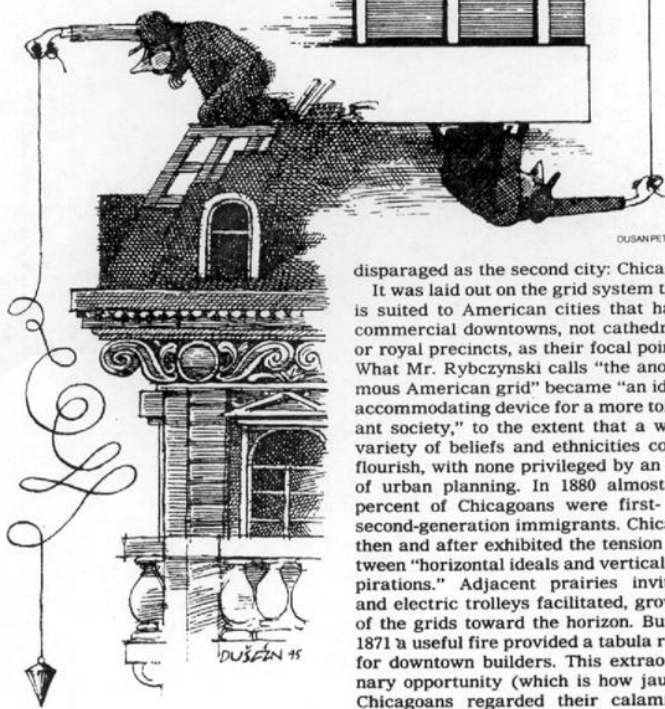
The trouble is, Americans do not think they are supposed to like cities. They like living in the sort of nation Hamilton wanted — urban, industrial, dynamic — but they want to talk like Jefferson, who said, "The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government as sores do to the strength of the human body" and "I view great cities as pestilential to the morals, the health, the liberties of man." Jefferson exemplified the American ambivalence about cities. As Mr. Rybczynski dryly notes, Jefferson may have lived on an isolated mountaintop but he lived there in a house he radically redesigned to resemble a fashionable Parisian residence, the *Hôtel de Salm*, and he furnished it with a lot of French furniture that was not exactly rustic. Sherwood Anderson chose to live in Chicago while writing "Winesburg, Ohio." And for several generations Americans have been fleeing to suburbs (named, as Peter De Vries said, after what the developers destroyed to build them — Rolling Acres, Forest Glen and

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so forth) situated near highways and railroads that expedite flight back from crabgrass to city concrete five days a week.

Americans, Mr. Rybczynski says, have bestowed the title "city" exuberantly and promiscuously. In 1872 the grandly named Dodge City had a few adobe houses, about a dozen frame houses and about two dozen tents. Miami had 343 voters when it declared itself a city in 1896. By 1920 it had 30,000 residents; 70 years later it was the core of the 11th largest metropolitan area in the United States. Such swift transformations are the key to Mr. Rybczynski's understanding of American urban experience: no large European city was founded after the 16th century, and no American city was founded before that. Which is to say, American cities came along in a context of new ideas, like democracy and toleration, and new technologies, like automobiles.

Paris, he writes, reflects the esthetic visions of various planning elites over four centuries. The only American city



that makes similar grand gestures, Washington, was designed by a Frenchman. (Never mind that when another Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, visited Washington in 1831 the third largest building, after the Capitol and the White House, was a tavern.) Above all, the American city, Mr. Rybczynski says, has been "a stage for the ideas of ordinary people." And arguably the most American city, the first example of 20th-century urbanism, is the one famously

disparaged as the second city: Chicago.

It was laid out on the grid system that is suited to American cities that have commercial downtowns, not cathedrals or royal precincts, as their focal points. What Mr. Rybczynski calls "the anonymous American grid" became "an ideal accommodating device for a more tolerant society," to the extent that a wide variety of beliefs and ethnicities could flourish, with none privileged by an act of urban planning. In 1880 almost 90 percent of Chicagoans were first- or second-generation immigrants. Chicago then and after exhibited the tension between "horizontal ideals and vertical aspirations." Adjacent prairies invited, and electric trolleys facilitated, growth of the grids toward the horizon. But in 1871 a useful fire provided a tabula rasa for downtown builders. This extraordinary opportunity (which is how jauntily Chicagoans regarded their calamity) occurred just as structural steel, elevators and telephones were emancipating urban architecture from limits imposed by the weight-bearing capacity of stone walls and the stair-climbing endurance of people.

Manhattan, particularly the Manhattan encouraged by geology (bedrock, the most economical base for skyscrapers, is near the surface at the tip of the island, around Wall Street, and in Midtown south of Central Park), exemplifies one striking contrast between New World and Old World cities. In the New World, the most impressive urban build-

ings are not public works like Saint Paul's Cathedral or the Eiffel Tower, but private enterprises like the Chrysler Building with its eagle gargoyles evoking the hood ornaments on the company's cars.

However, a humble occurrence in Memphis in 1916 — just as Henry Ford's Model T was making personal mobility a universal aspiration and (hence) an inalienable right — did more than skyscrapers to presage the future of urban living. What happened was the founding of Piggly Wiggly, the first self-service grocery store chain and model for future supermarkets.

Mr. Rybczynski, who has a gimlet eye for the mighty consequences of mundane connections, says refrigerators made it possible to store food in quantity, and automobiles made it possible to carry food purchased in weekly rather than daily shopping trips. Soon such trips were being made to supermarkets unsuited to downtowns: "Unlike department stores, supermarkets are spread out on one floor and, especially when parking is taken into account, require large building lots, which are more affordable on the edge of town." Today long-distance trucks, traveling on federally subsidized highways, deliver their goods at the edge of town, not downtown near the old railroad depots. They arrive at large shopping centers. In 1946 there were eight such novelties. But between 1970 and 1990 Americans opened 25,000 new shopping centers — one every seven hours. Today some malls have playgrounds and skating rinks.

MR. RYBCZYNSKI, who hasn't gotten the word that everything modern must be disparaged, says: "I think that what attracts people to malls is that they are perceived as public spaces where rules of personal conduct are enforced. In other words, they are more like public streets used to be before police indifference and overzealous protectors of individual rights effectively insured that any behavior, no matter how antisocial, is tolerated."

There is nothing quite like a dose of unvarnished history for inoculating people against the tendency to indict the present for failing to measure up to a sentimental notion of the past. Although Mr. Rybczynski has robust complaints about our urban living, he is wonderfully dry-eyed about the passing of cities of the sort that existed before there were "the urban technologies we take for granted. . . . The mud in the street was mixed with horse manure, and domestic waste was scattered everywhere, for there was no trash collection. Garbage simply accumulated outside and was trampled into the street, which explains why the oldest Manhattan streets are anywhere from 6 to 15 feet higher than their original levels."

Mr. Rybczynski has written a wonderfully informative, entertaining and nuanced answer to the question why our cities aren't like Paris. In the process he has shown readers how to receive the answer — we have the cities we have because we have the attributes we have — with minimal regrets. □