

## Cities after the End of Cities

by

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A condensed version

I have adapted my title - and to some extent my argument - from Arthur Danto's important essay "Art after the End of Art." Danto asserts that the art world has reached the end of unilinear "narrative of historical development" and has now entered a "post-historical period" of almost unlimited pluralism. Danto defines "the end of art" as the end of a master narrative that has dominated art history for at least 150 years: the attempt to purify each of the arts by limiting it to what is unique to it.

The master narrative thus comes to an end, but art continues after the "end of art." Artists have not ceased to make art, nor have they limited themselves to the most purified forms. Artists have moved, Danto believes, into the "post-historical period" where **abstraction is a possibility rather than a necessity, and is permitted rather than obliged. This kind of argument .....can be carried over to urbanism. ....cities today have also entered a pluralistic post-historical era of "possibilities and permissibility's."**

What is this master narrative of cities that has reached its end? ...it is the story of the **opposition of town and country** that has defined the city since its emergence four thousand years ago. Oswald Spengler has perhaps best captured the essential narrative that flows from this opposition of city and countryside, which is at the heart of historical urbanism. A city comes into being, ....only when it is "a place from which the countryside is henceforth regarded, felt, and experienced as environs, as something different and subordinate. ....that of the inside and that of the outside. To subordinate the countryside becomes the task of the city, and cities like Babylon or Rome become great precisely by dominating the largest hinterlands. But in dominating these vast agrarian regions, they necessarily drain them and exploit them.

The 19th-century industrial metropolis represented both the most extended development of the town/country divide and also the beginning of its end. ....the same technology that permitted this intense concentration was also beginning to transform and "urbanize" the hinterland. ....Meanwhile, Ebenezer Howard proclaimed that "town and country must be married" and envisioned the virtual abandonment of a great metropolis like London as population diffuses throughout the country in "Garden Cities" of 30,000 people set in perpetual greenbelts.

In the 1920's Frank Lloyd Wright developed his utopia, Broadacre City, .....Urban functions that had been concentrated downtown or in an adjoining "factory zone" are spread out in Broadacre City over vast regions. Homes, factories, offices, and schools nestle in the agrarian landscape. ....In "Spengler's terms, there is no longer any inside or outside, the city has become one with its hinterland. (Sudjic's 100 mile city.)

Lewis Mumford described (Broadacre) as a fragmentation which replaces organic form and the city gives way to "the anti-city" "Because the anti-city is by nature fragmentary, any part can be built by anybody at any time. This is the ideal formula for promoting total urban disintegration."

**But, as in the art world, the urban reality at the end of the 20th century seems too complex and contradictory to be encompassed by a single form.**

The architects of the Congress for the New Urbanism who are reviving traditional town forms are similar in this sense to the painter who dare to return to representation when "history" has supposedly decreed that a new stage must be reached. **But who in fact mandated that pedestrian-scaled streets, dense town centers, light rail and other alternative to the automobile belong only to the past and not to the future?**

I would suggest that the regions that will prosper in the future will be those that offer the most possibilities not only the "edge city" world of decentralization, but also a vital downtown core, diverse urban neighborhoods, small town, and a true rural landscape of farms and villages. This "regional pluralism" will be far more difficult to achieve than the pluralism of the art world. It requires active intervention against trends that threaten further fragmentation and disintegration and this intervention must include coordinated transportation policies, land-use planning, urban growth boundaries, and open-space initiative. Danto's concept of a "post-historical period" implies for both the art world and the urban world an intense, pluralism in which forms from all periods coexist and thrive.

**(Ray Watson)**  
**COMMENTS:**

Fishman's primary point is that like art the form and design of cities are a product of the times and conditions under which they were built. His comment that "as in the art world, the urban reality at the end of the 20th century seems too complex and contradictory to be encompassed by a single form" summarizes very well the point he is attempting to make. Public transportation allowed families to live in the "countryside" and work in the city thus creating the "opposition of town and country that has defined the city." The "town" was the superior and central element and the "country" its suburb and thus subservient partner. The automobile allowed the suburbs to grow and expand where-ever commerce and the public wanted without regard to where the rail dominated public and private transportation companies dictated. As Fishman puts it, "the city disappears because the division of city and countryside is overcome.....and.....the city has become one with its hinterland."

The importance of Fishman's essay is that he appropriately moves beyond the endless and unproductive urban versus suburban debate that too often dominates professional dialog on the subject of our changing cities. The fact his piece was part of the special issue of Harvard Design Magazine's recent issue on Changing Cities which had as its central piece a dialog with, among others, Andres Duany titled "Urban or Suburban?" allowed him to characterize his work along with other "New Urbanist" works as one of the alternative urban forms our profession is experimenting with today.

It is unfortunate that Duany's work had to be measured by some in the Harvard piece as to whether it was "urban" or "suburban" and fell victim to the charge that it was merely another clever development that "produces yet more sprawl." Unfortunately, in the Harvard forum in which the "new urbanism" took place those who choose to raise the "suburban" and "sprawl" questions never defined either term.

Perhaps the most important sentence in Fishman's piece was, "...the urban reality at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seems too complex and contradictory to be encompassed by a single form." Fishman follows that by stating that "the regions that will prosper in the future will be those that offer the most possibilities....." Unfortunately, his suggestions of more "possibilities" appear limited by the vocabulary of Duany's neo-traditionalism. Duany offers one of the "possibilities" and not the only one. What is needed is to accept Fishman's view that to continue to characterize all communities as either urban or suburban limits the exploration of alternative forms and possibilities. Seeking those alternative forms should not be restrained by the professional fear that someone will label them "suburban."