

## Architecture and the City

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As long as civilization has existed, so have cities, and as long as cities have existed, so has utopian thinking about urban planning. In their aspiration to perfection, ideal city plans are particularly revealing about a culture's most core desires. In most urbanized cultures worldwide, the form of the city serves as a tangible manifestation of social ideas, though examinations of various cities reveal the different political, economic, and religious forces that drive their urban design. However, the history of architecture demonstrates a wide range of attitudes on what constitutes an urban ideal. In the Italian Renaissance, for example, the image of the ideal city became a favorite theme of many artists and architects. A *cassone* panel attributed to Giuliano da Sangallo, for example (Figure 10.1-19), shows a central-plan church flanked by precise, cubical palaces. The impression, shared by many contemporary treatments of the same subject, is of the disorder of urban life brought under control by the logic of geometry.



Figure 10.1-19

It is perhaps no accident that the panel is free of human figures; as with many conceptions of the ideal city, a lacuna opens up between idea and lived experience. In contrast, some plans, especially from the late twentieth century, privilege social interaction itself over traditional city forms. Constant's New Babylon (Figure 20.1-7), for example, proposed a vast megastructure that would destroy the dulling effects of bourgeois life, thus returning humans to what the artist believed was their essential, playful state.



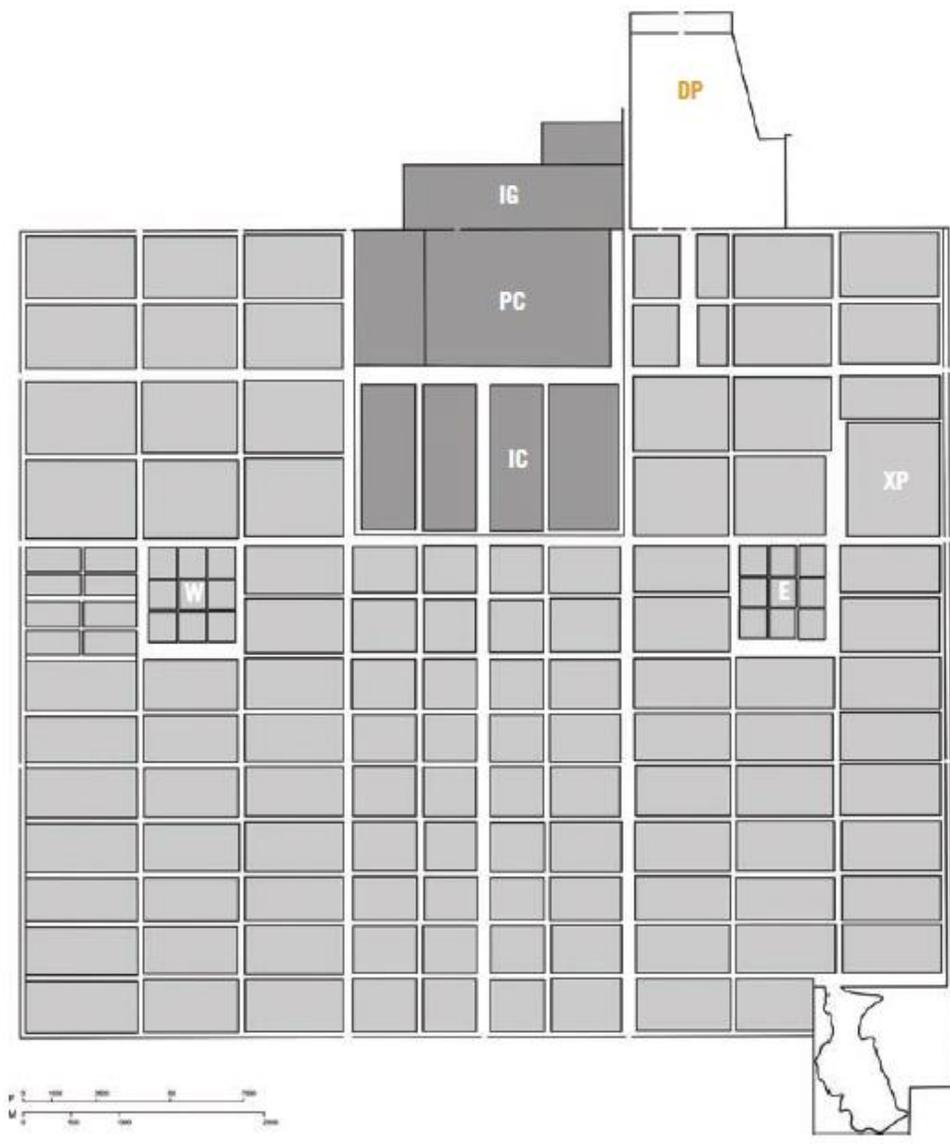
Figure 20.1-7

One of the most consistent binaries in urban design—and one that remains a subject of debate today—is that between beautifying the city on the one hand and developing its infrastructure on the other. Both Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, the two major cities of the Bronze Age Indus Valley Civilization, seem to have been highly organized urban formations that were surprisingly free of anything resembling purely symbolic projects. In fact, the Harappans seem to have been the first urban society to forgo the erection of monuments. Archaeologists speculate that their reasons were twofold; first, the environmental pressures of the Indus Valley required that they focus on infrastructure in order to survive; and second, they seemed to have shaped a cultural identity around an ascetic moral ideology. Though the Harappans were in contact with other civilizations, they did not seek to increase their territory by violent conquest, suggesting that social attention was trained on the protection of citizens and resources. Though there is evidence of a social hierarchy in the cities based on wealth, resources were fairly equitably divided, and even average city dwellers likely enjoyed a standard of living that would have been unimaginable in contemporaneous civilizations. Because of the region's desert climate, hydrological projects made up the bulk of construction efforts. In Mohenjo-Daro, for example (Figure 2.3-2), the orthogonally planned city was organized according to function, with separate zones for working and living. The platform on which the city was constructed contained an elaborate network of sewers and drains, thus allowing for a central drainage system. This system would collect and then distribute water to individual households, which contained private wells, while public wells were provided for visitors or traders. Even the most monumental building in the town—the Great Bath—served both ritual and practical purposes. The Harappans thus focused their human and economic resources on pragmatic rather than ornamental projects, idealizing city life by attending to the everyday needs of its citizens rather than enhancing the city's symbolic content.



Figure 2.3-2

An early example of how philosophy can influence urban design, and an early attempt at idealizing the city, can be found in ancient Chinese planning traditions, which aimed at the union of human and natural forms through the principles of Feng Shui and I Ching. These geomantic philosophies meant that the cardinal directions were invested with deep symbolic meaning. Therefore, orthogonal urban schemes gained popularity at least as early as the Zhou Dynasty and continued into the medieval period. The city of Chang'an (Figure 7.2-2) was one of the most cosmopolitan centers of its time, determined by its position as a nexus of trade at one end of the Silk Road.



**Figure 7.2-2** Chang'an. Rebuilt during Sui dynasty, ca. 580, and developed by the Tang dynasty during the seventh century. (W) West market; (E) east market; (IC) Imperial City for administrators; (PC) Palace City for court; (IG) imperial gardens; (XP) Xingqing Palace; (DP) Daminggong Palace.

Figure 7.2-2

Taking the form of a sprawling grid city—covering three times the territory of ancient Rome—medieval Chang’an followed the principles laid out by Confucianism, in which the numbers three, nine, and twelve bore particular significance. Therefore, spatial units in multiples of these numbers govern the plan, and Confucian social orders determine which citizens are permitted to occupy different zones of the city. As in the ancient Hellenic world, the imposition of a grid on the form of the city bore a significant socioeconomic message; in this case, it analogized the fairly equal distribution of agricultural land to the area’s farmers, obliging them reciprocally to pay taxes and register with the centralized government. Under the Sui Dynasty, the city was substantially rebuilt according to plans by the architect Yuwen Kai. The resulting grid was unusually monumental, with vast boulevards intended both to awe foreign visitors and to segregate the different zones of the city. In this case, the ideal city represented a realization of social order and the powerful political control of a centralized government.

Despite its historical popularity, the concept of the Ideal City gained new energy during the Enlightenment, with its insistence that reason and logic could solve even the most intractable social ills. After the Industrial Revolution, the need for a livable city—a plan that took both living and working conditions into account—seemed more pressing than ever, as cities became crowded, dangerous, and unhygienic. To address the widening feeling of oppression in cities, planners began to treat the problem of industry as city-wide and endemic to urban conditions themselves. Rather than imagining residential and industrial buildings as existing in separate urban zones, architectural reformers attempted to conceive of workers’ communities, in which the public and private spheres were harmoniously united. The effort was to envision places in which people could live and work comfortably, usually in clumps appearing at the edge of cities. For example, the French social reformer Jean-Baptiste Godin’s concept of the “Familistere” contained residential blocks, each four stories high, to house the workers and their families. Families would be allotted apartments of two or three rooms to prevent the health hazards, both physical and psychological, of overcrowding. Each apartment block had a large central court covered with a glass roof under which children could play, even in bad weather conditions, and each family had its own garden plot in which it could grow fruits, vegetables, or even pleasing flowers. Therefore, even under industrial conditions, inhabitants could enjoy access to green space and contact with the land. Across from the residential blocks, a vast building would house facilities for schools and a theater for the community’s use. Other “municipal” functions—a dining hall, post office, and chapel—were contained in structures surrounding a large public square, which Godin said was inspired by the *piazze* of Rome. Across a bridge are the factories, signaling a transition from a residential “zone” into the work zone. Godin referred to the Familistere as a “social palace,” and indeed, there are undeniable references to the planning of Versailles. Here, however, the social content is exactly opposed to that of Versailles, providing an ennobled life for the industrial working class. Interest in such “mixed-use” communities, in which many different urban functions are contained in a relatively small area, would reappear in the later part of the twentieth century as the New Urbanist movement.

Likewise, Robert Owen’s plan for an ideal village was, in reality, a social idea taking urban form. Owen’s background was not in architecture, but rather in industry; as the owner of several large textile mills, he witnessed firsthand the degradation of his

workers under the pall of factory life. Arguing that the machine was a fundamentally inhuman creation that must, nevertheless, be made to act humanely, he became a supporter of trade unions and a champion of the working class. For Owen, social reform meant architectural and urban reform, and he began to consider how to transform industrial towns from chaos to order. In 1817, he attached a drawing to a report on workers' living conditions that he submitted to the Committee for the Relief of the Manufacturing Poor. The drawing was the first of many small villages that he proposed in his lifetime, each intended for a population of about a thousand people. Each village would take the form of a square, as Owen argued that this urban module was infinitely repeatable anywhere it needed to travel, and would be surrounded by ample open land. The village would contain a number of communal buildings—a public kitchen and dining hall, a school, and a garden for exercise and recreation—and residents would be grouped by age and marital status into houses and dormitories. Surrounding these living quarters would be all the facilities needed to create a fully self-supporting community—the slaughterhouse, buildings for washing and bleaching clothes, and farming establishments. Owen's vision, which he attempted to actualize in his experimental community at New Harmony, Indiana, was a utopian community so perfect in its conception that inhabitants would have no desire to leave.

In some ways, in their very effort to idealize industrial life, these ideal plans turned their backs on its everyday realities. Specifically, many ideal plans for the industrial age (including those produced during the influential Garden City and City Beautiful movements) primarily oriented themselves inward, rejecting the increasingly dense patterns of connectivity between urban nodes in a rapidly globalizing economy. Yet other urban planners made an effort to embrace these linkages, such as the Catalan engineer Ildefonso Cerdà in his 1859 plan for the expansion of Barcelona (Figure 16.1-9).



Figure 16.1-9

After the municipal government approved plans to demolish the historic town walls, Cerdà grew concerned about the lack of theories and laws regulating its growth. He thus

began a course of meticulous social research and analysis to determine patterns of use and density in the growing city, emphasizing actual statistics over ideal or theoretical abstractions. In his plan, he focused on what he determined to be the vital necessities of city dwelling, shaped by his study of utopian social thinkers and by his involvement with the sanitarian movement. He proposed that a grid plan would ensure the equal distribution of urban amenities, including naturally lit and well-ventilated homes surrounded by green spaces, well-functioning sewers and other means of waste disposal, and networks for the transportation of people, goods, energy, and information. This democratic distribution of services across a grid of equal units would offer a corrective to the overcrowded, toxic conditions of factory cities. The only hierarchical element was the street design, in which two large, intersecting diagonal avenues provided for efficient transit of manufactured goods both into and out of the city. For Cerdà, the fundamental feature of the industrial city was movement itself—and only through systematizing this movement could urban life be made hygienic, affordable, and pleasant. Cerdà's belief in the utility of urban research, focusing on the way the city was already used rather than idealizing how it should be used, ushered in an era of urban sociology that included figures as disparate as Georg Simmel, Robert Park, and Jane Jacobs.

### **For Further Reading**

Eaton, Ruth. *Ideal Cities: Utopianism and the Unbuilt Environment*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002.

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Maisels, Charles Keith. *Early Civilizations of the Old World: The Formative Histories of Egypt, The Levant, Mesopotamia, India and China*. London: Routledge, 1999.

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