Samuel H. Gottscho, view of New York from the roof of the St. George Hotel, Brooklyn, September 10, 1932; panoramic view looking over the East River to the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges; Manhattan in background, featuring the Empire State Building. Museum of the City of New York

LEWIS MUMFORD

"The Intolerable City: Must It Keep On Growing?"

Harper's ☐ February 1926 ☐ SECTIONS I-IV

New York native Lewis Mumford was a thirty-year-old literary editor and architecture critic when he wrote this piece for *Harper's*, a seminal work in his long career as *the* critic-philosopher of the modern American city. "The mouths of our great cities," he declaimed, "are gigantic hoppers" that devour the human spirit, a process he dramatized in the first half of this article (presented here) through three New York City residents—office worker "Mr. Brown," millionaire "Mr. Smith-Robinson," and suburbanite "Mr. Jones." The suburbs could provide only a temporary respite, Mumford insisted, and despite the bold futuristic visions of architects in "Cloudcuckooland," nothing could make the sprawling urban centers "fit for permanent human habitation." For the rest of his life, Mumford promoted the creation of brand-new moderate-sized communities, surrounded by agricultural green space, designed to nurture the best that life had to offer *homo sapiens*.

THE mouths of our great cities are gigantic hoppers. Into them pour the foods we coax from the earth, the energy we snare from the sun, the metals we disembowel, the men and women we draw from the sampler communities. What comes out of these hoppers? Ordinarily, people think that wealth is increased and life is far more attractive and thrilling; for if this were not so, who would be drawn into New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, Philadelphia, and why should any other city boast about its increases in population and attempt to put itself in the same census tables? Surely, this *is* the best that modern

civilization can offer, this New York with its dazzle of pointed towers, this Chicago with its sweep of avenues, this Detroit with its thick pageant of motors?

In short, Mr. Brown travels through the pulping mill of the subway, endures the tawdry monotony of his flat, divorces himself from the natural environments he can never quite recover on Sunday—for what? For an occasional visit to the museum or the opera? He could have as much if he lived a hundred miles away.

But let us look at the hopper more closely and see what is actually coming out of it. Census reports, mortality statistics, and income tax returns do not tell the whole story: there is something beneath all that, the life of the ordinary man and woman. In the long run the things that tip the balance are those that cannot be weighed: they must be seen, felt, handled, endured. Recently, the New York State Housing and Regional Planning Commission confessed that only one third the population of New York City had an income sufficient to enable the family to live in decent modern quarters. Let us single out Mr. Brown, who is one of this fortunate minority, and follow him through the routine of his day.

As an inhabitant of a vigilant city, Mr. Brown is proud of the low death rate his health department boasts; unfortunately, the statistician keeps no account of the living rate, so we must make a firsthand appraisal. Mr. Brown usually comes home at the end of a day with that tired feeling, and all the quack medicines in the drugstore do not quite relieve him of it. He is proud of the fact that he keeps books or sells insurance on the eighteenth story of a skyscraper; but so much of the ground was used to build those splendid offices that Mr. Brown works most of the day under artificial light; and in spite of the slick system of ventilation, the middle of the afternoon finds him dull.

The journey home undoubtedly calls forth physical effort; unhappily it is not invigorating. The Swedish massage he receives at the hand of the subway guard does not improve his appetite; nor is it helped by the thick fumes of gasoline when he walks out upon the street. Eventually Mr. Brown sits down at his dinner table and looks out on an airshaft or a court where a dozen other kitchens have been busily preparing a dozen other meals; it never varies. No change in color, no hint of sunset or moonlight, no variation from season to season as the vegetation flourishes or shrivels: only the smells that creep through the windows tell the difference between Thursday and Friday.

Once upon a time Mr. Brown used to stretch his legs and play with the children; the six-room flat [apartment] was common in Boston and New York; the seven-room house flourished in Philadelphia and Chicago and St. Louis. Now the walls of the rooms have contracted: Mr. Brown pays so much for his four cubicles he is perhaps forced to harbor an ancient aunt or his wife's parents in the same narrow quarters; and, as likely as not, there are no children. When the Browns have put by a little they will have either a baby or a cheap car: it is hard to decide which, for the upkeep is high in both cases; but the car has this advantage—it would enable the whole family to get out into God's own country on Sundays.

This pursuit of God's own country would make the angels themselves weep: it means a ride through endless dusty streets, and along an equally straight and endless concrete road, breathing the dust and exhaust of the car ahead, and furnishing an equal quantum of exhaust and dust to the car behind; a ride with intervals spent at hot-dog stands, and long hours wasted at ferry houses and bridges and main junctions and similar bottlenecks, where the honking of impatient horns reminds Mr. Brown in the spring of the frog ponds he was not quite able to reach. As the main city grows, the country around becomes more suburban and the fields and hills and lakes are more difficult to reach. A generation ago Mr. Brown's father used to catch shad in the Hudson, or he might have spent the Sunday rambling with his youngsters along the bays and inlets of Long Island Sound. Today a vast load of sewage has driven away the fish; and the expansion of great country estates for the lords of the metropolis has blocked and fenced off the rambler. Nor does New York alone suffer. Buffalo was forced to jump sixteen miles from the city line the other day to recover a paltry thousand feet of lake front for its citizens. By the time open spaces are set aside, however, the population has multiplied so furiously that, on a summer Sunday, the great parks are as congested as the city's streets—so much for solitude and natural beauty!

When dinner is over neither Mr. Brown nor his wife is in condition to listen to great music or to attend the theater. First of all, they are not in financial condition to do this because ground rents are high in the amusement district,[1] and the price of seats has risen steadily to meet the increase in rents. Unless the occasion is important or Mr. Brown is willing to scrimp on the week's lunches, he cannot afford to go. Again, he is in no mental condition to participate in play that demands mental activity or emotional response above the spinal cord; and if this were not enough, the prospect of another hour in the subway kills most of the impinging [close together; touching] joys. The seventy theaters that exist in sophisticated New York are, really, only one to a hundred thousand people; there are a score of little towns in continental Europe that are far better provided with drama and music. The fact is that, with all New York's wealth, its cultural facilities are relatively limited: they would be insufficient were it not for the fact that only a minority can afford to enjoy them regularly.

But Mr. and Mrs. Brown have their amusements? Oh yes, they have the movies, that is to say, the same entertainment, served in almost the same form, as it comes in Peoria or Tuscaloosa or Danbury—no more and no less. If they are too tired to "drop around the corner" they have another consolation, the radio: this, too, works no better than it does in the despised, backward villages of the hinterland, and if the Browns happen to be situated in one of the mysterious "dead areas" it does not work nearly so well! In short, Mr. Brown travels through the pulping mill of the subway, endures the tawdry monotony of his flat, divorces himself from the natural environments he can never quite recover on Sunday—for what? For an occasional visit to the museum or the opera? He could have as much if he lived a hundred miles away. His sacrifices are in reality made for a much more mystical purpose: his presence increases the "greatness" of his city. By adding to its population, he raises the capitalizable value of its real estate; and so he increases rents; and so he makes parks and playgrounds and decent homes more difficult to obtain; and so he increases his own difficulties and burdens; and his flat gets smaller, his streets bleaker, and his annual tribute to the deities who build roads and subways and bridges and tunnels becomes more immense.

Mr. Brown grumbles; sometimes he complains; but he is only just beginning to doubt. His newspaper tells him that he is fortunate; and he believes it. He fancies that when another subway is built he will find room for his feet—if he leaves the office promptly. I shall deal briefly with this fond hope a little later.

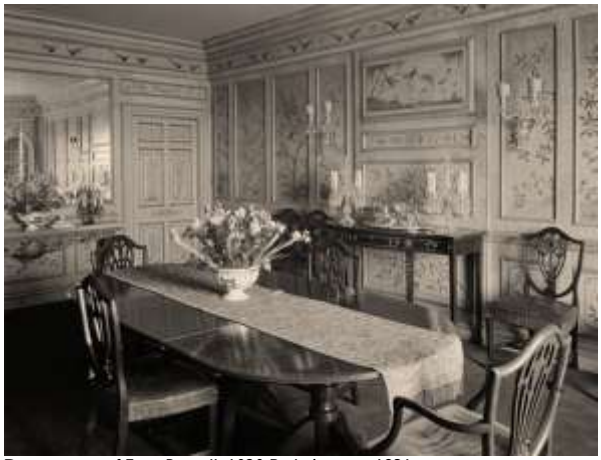
II

What is true of Mr. Brown is true also of the people who live on the East Side, the South Side, the Hump, the Stockyards District, or "the other side of the railroad track." Since, however, they lack Mr. Brown's snobbishness, they have a touch of neighborliness for consolation, and may occasionally manufacture a little special amusement for themselves in wild dances and hearty weddings and funerals full of pomp and dignity and excellent wine. If these groups, through advances in wages, could be raised to the level of Mr. Brown's station, they would not exactly be in Paradise; but suppose Mr. Brown stood at the apex of the pyramid—perhaps that would be Paradise? Perhaps that would justify Mosshunk's trying to become Boomtown, Boomtown's trying to become Zenith, Zenith's trying to become Chicago, Chicago's trying to become New York, and New York trying to become like Mr. Hugh Ferriss's picture, The Future?

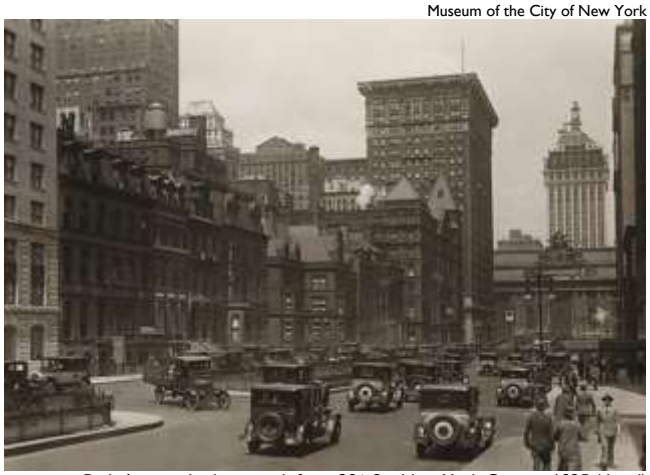
Hugh Ferriss, "Art Center," *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, 1929. In 1925 Ferriss had exhibited a selection of his visionary architectural renderings entitled "The Image of the Future City."

[1] I.e., rents of ground-floor apartments are high in the theater district of Manhattan.

Museum of the City of New York



Dining room of Faris Russell, 1020 Park Avenue, 1931
Photograph: Samuel H. Gottscho



Park Avenue, looking north from 38th St., New York City, ca. 1925 (detail)
Photograph: Frederic Lewis

Well, let us consider what Mr. Smith-Robinson, the millionaire widget manufacturer, gets out of the great city, with its increasing population, its multiplying turnover, its skyscrapers, its subways—in short, all the symbols of its dominant religion of material expansion.

Mr. Smith-Robinson lives in a twenty-story apartment house on Park Avenue. It is like Mr. Brown's plain apartment, but it ascended the ladder of evolution: the blastula has become a gastrula,[2] or to speak more plainly, the four-celled unit has multiplied to sixteen units, six of them being sacred chambers devoted to illustration and baptism. To overcome the base efficiencies of the building, we shall call in the services of a fashionable architect; he will arrange the scenery to persuade his client that he is a Spanish ambassador, an Italian prince, or a medieval English baron—but woe to the poor client if he take it into his head to draw back the hangings and look out the window. The chances are that he will find himself facing directly a blank honeycomb of windows, exactly like Mr. Brown's exhilarating view—only there are more of them. After all, the company that built the apartment was not in business for its health: they covered every square foot that the building laws and zoning ordinances would permit. Though they may call the few tubs of trees and shrubs at the bottom of the court a Persian garden, it is a feeble attempt to confuse the mind: the virtues of a Park Avenue apartment are those of an honest barracks.

So numerous are the lofty palaces and cloud-capped pinnacles where the "emergent minority" live, that the streets are vastly overtaxed by the traffic of their automobiles. When Mr. Smith-Robinson comes down from the country estate he sooner or later acquires, he finds that it pays to leave the car at the outskirts and take the rapid transit into town. The theaters, the clubs, the teas, the dances, the dinners, the concerts, the opera, and all the other devices for "performing leisure" which Mr. Thorstein Veblen[3] has catalogued have, perhaps, a strong appeal to Mr. Smith-Robinson; but more and more, for all that, he is tempted to adopt the Friday-to-Tuesday weekend in the country. He finds, curiously, that as his income increases, the devices for reducing it become more and more effective. He bequeaths a young fortune to his fellow citizens to buy them a park; his executors are able to get hold of only a small wedge of land. Or he adds a wing to a hospital, and finds that it is overcrowded before the first year is over. As the avenues become clogged, as crimes increase, as he becomes conscious of the danger of merely walking abroad on the streets, our fortunate citizen perhaps grows a little thoughtful; at the least, he reads with great interest the weekly bulletin of plans for doing away with traffic congestion by sinking endless millions into ingenious feats of engineering. These plans are to Mr. Smith-Robinson what new subways are to Mr. Brown; and with the fond hopes that they too embalm I shall deal shortly.

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[2] Blastula, gastrula: early stages of embryonic development.
[3] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899.

III

In the meanwhile, neither Mrs. Brown nor Mrs. Smith-Robinson is an altogether happy woman: the city they live in was at best designed for adults, and there is no place in it for the coming generation. So much money is spent in the detection of criminals, in the treatment of preventable disease, in the building of refuges for the mentally unstable and above all, in the more fruitful processes of living and learning. The schools are driven, by mere weight of numbers, to offer an education which caricatures our democratic technique of living; and no pabulum that may be added to the curriculum quite makes up for the impoverishment of educational opportunity in the city itself.

So note the paradox. As a city increases in "population and wealth" it becomes less able to afford the things that make life gracious, interesting, and amusing.

As for play, it is almost out of the question; even generous Chicago cannot keep up with its necessities. The acreage of parks and playgrounds in our metropolitan hives bears no relation at all to the density of population; for although by crowding people and piling story on story we may almost indefinitely multiply the normal density, Nature does not permit us to pile one lawn upon another, or one tree upon another; and even if the rooftops were used for playgrounds, too, there would not be an adequate amount of open spaces. Indeed, as our cities continue to grow, and become more deeply in need of parks, the difficulties of holding open the land they do possess become greater: art galleries, museums, universities, art centers, and similar institutions run without commercial profit naturally covet land that need not be bought—and as ground rents rise their demands become more importunate.

So note the paradox. As a city increases in "population and wealth" it becomes less able to afford the things that make life gracious, interesting, and amusing. The difficulties of carrying on mere physical existence are so terrific that a major part of a city's money and energy, which should be spent on making life itself better, is devoted to the disheartening task of keeping "things" from getting worse. For a fortunate and able minority the city provides power and riches—much power and much riches. But the chief benefit of a big income is that it enables the possessor to escape from the big city. Hence the estates that are being planted from Chestnut Hill to Santa Barbara; hence the great drift of the middle classes into suburbia. If metropolitan life were the best civilization can now offer, it would be impossible to explain the fact that the suburbs are increasing in size, number, and population. The smaller cities that copy the defects of New York and Chicago, towns that ache for skyscrapers and apartment houses and pray to heaven for a little traffic congestion—even these cities are in the same boat; for many of them are being engulfed by suburbs which take advantage of the city's business facilities and escape the increasing burden of taxes.

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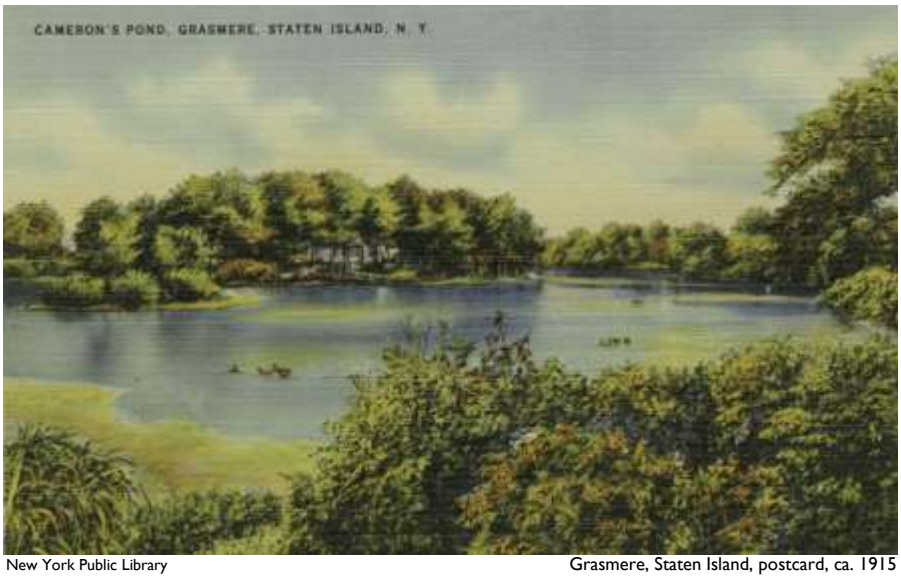
Herald Square, New York City, 1921

IV



New York Public Library

Grasmere, Staten Island, postcard, ca. 1915

Manifestly, the suburb is a public acknowledgment of the fact that congestion and bad housing and blank vistas and lack of recreational opportunity and endless subway rides are not humanly endurable. The suburbanite is merely an intelligent heretic who has discovered that the mass of New York or Chicago or Zenith is a mean environment. Is the suburb, then, a "solution"? Will the metropolis of the future cover a radius of at least fifty miles from the central district; will Boston, New York, Philadelphia be merely high points of congestion in a vast belt of suburbs and industrial districts stretching along the coast? That is the assumption upon which many of our city surveys and regional plans, to say nothing of real estate speculations, are being tacitly made. Let us examine this beautiful prospect.

The suburb is an attempt to recapture the environment which the big city, in its blind and heedless growth, has wiped out within its own borders. With the aid of the suburb, business and living are divided into two compartments, intermittently connected by a strip of railroad. For the sake of clearness, let us isolate the case of Mr. Jones, the typical suburbanite, the perennial theme of the cockney cartoonist.[4] Twenty years ago Mr. Jones built a house in Grassmere.[5] It contained some of the closets, rooms, niches, fixtures, furniture which had been oddly missing in his city apartment, and it was surrounded by a garden which, until the garage began to demand space, and the car itself most of the family's time, was well-cultivated. The streets were embowered with trees, the school was small and surrounded by a playing field; within ten minutes walk was Chestnut Woods, a great place for picnicking.

When Mr. Jones moved to Grassmere it was Eden; almost it was. All the suburbs along the [railway] line were small, the railroad company was obsequious[6] and kept the fares low; and if the journey to the office was a little tiresome, the newspaper presently increased in size and reduced the mental distance. The sacrifice of the climax of the third act was a small price to pay, in fact, nothing at all to set over against the children's gain. As long as Mr. Jones had "business in the city" this was perhaps the best possible arrangement for the life of his family.

In establishing himself in Grassmere Mr. Jones forgot only one thing: he forgot that he had not really escaped the city. The very forces that created the suburb moved out, inexorably, with icy relentlessness, and began to smear away this idyllic environment, which had the neighborliness of a small community and the beauty of gardens and parks and easy access to nature. Inevitably, the suburb grew and, growing, it became more like the city it had only apparently broken away from: the market street lengthened into a garish main street, ungainly offices and lunchrooms sprang up, an apartment house was built near the railroad tracks. Land values boomed; but taxes, alas! rose too. Potentially, Mr. Jones was more prosperous; but if he wanted to keep his house as a permanent home every increase in land values and taxes had the effect of making him poorer. If he had a little extra land he was forced to sell it as building lots; that brought neighbors uncomfortably near. The simple dirt road, which had cost little, was replaced

[4] Reg Smythe, creator of the British comic strip *Andy Capp*.
[5] Grassmere: Grasmere, Staten Island, the least urbanized borough of New York City.
[6] I.e., overattentive and accommodating to the commuting public.

by asphalt; traffic increased and it was necessary to widen Main Street: both improvements cost money. The old method of sewage disposal and the old water mains were no longer adequate for the doubled population; Grassmere enlarged them—and that cost money. New streets were opened at the behest of the leading real estate man, who happened to be Mayor during the boom period; while these streets waited for new owners and housebuilders, they "ate their head off."

All the costs of sewers, paving, unnecessarily wide residential streets, street lighting, gas, electricity, and police went up so rapidly that presently the newcomers could no longer afford a roomy, comfortable house like that which the Joneses had built: they put up monotonous semi-detached rows or plumped into apartments. Mr. Henry Wright[7] has pointed out that the cost of these little accessories has been steadily mounting during the last century, and now comes to about forty-five percent of the total cost of a house. When all the land is covered with asphalt, when all the streets are designed indiscriminately for through loads of traffic, when the land itself is sold by the front foot, the single family house becomes a forbidding luxury, and there is no choice at all for the greater part of the population but to build multi-family houses. The "Own-your-own-home movement" does not recognize that the real difficulty under these conditions consists in keeping your own home.

The suburb is not a solution. It is merely a halting place. So long as the big city continues to grow, the suburb cannot remain suburban. Its gardens are doomed, its quiet streets are doomed, the countryside around it is doomed, a doom hangs over every aspect of its life—sooner or later it will be swallowed up and lost in the maw of the great city.

When his suburb became choked with new buildings, Mr. Jones began to wonder if he might not endure an extra hour's travel each day for the sake of quiet, lower tax rates, a tennis court, and a more congenial community.

Unhappy Mr. Jones! If he moves farther into the country the improvement is only temporary. So long as the office buildings and the lofts crowd higher into the sky, so long as the factories are planted more thickly along the railroad sidings that line the entrance to the great city, so long will the blessings of suburbia be little more than a momentary illusion. The sort of life the suburb aims at is of course only partial: inevitably the suburbanite loses many of the cultural advantages and contacts of a complete city; but even its limited effort to obtain two essential things—a decent home for children and a comely setting for life—is thin and ephemeral in its results. The suburb is not a solution. It is merely a halting place. So long as the big city continues to grow, the suburb cannot remain suburban. Its gardens are doomed, its quiet streets are doomed, the country-side around it is doomed, a doom hangs over every aspect of its life—sooner or later it will be swallowed up and lost in the maw of the great city. Spring Gardens was anciently a suburb of Philadelphia; Cambridgeport[8], of Boston; Flushing, of New York—and where are the snows of yesteryear?

Having rejected two reworks for the "intolerable city—re-engineering existing cities and building more suburbs, Mumford proposes the creation of new human-sized, human-oriented "garden cities" as a viable, sustainable, and life-affirming option. From his conclusion:

> "The alternative to super-congestion is not 'back to the farm' or 'let things go.' The real alternative to unlimited metropolitan growth is limited growth and, along with it, the deliberate planning and building of new communities."

"Once the desire for better living conditions is effectively expressed, there is nothing in modern industry itself to hinder its being worked out; for the building of new garden cities calls for no violent departure from normal American practices."

> "With a tithe [tenth] of the constructive power we now spend on palliatives,[9] we might found a hundred fresh centers in which life would really be enjoyable, in which the full benefit of modern civilization and culture might be had."

[7] Henry Wright: American landscape architect and proponent of the "garden city" concept of urban planning.
[8] I.e., kept raising taxes to pay for the suburban improvements.
[9] Remedies that do not address the underlying causes of a problem; short-term solutions.