

Preface

This is a book about cities. We shall introduce you to the basic ideas about cities, different ways of looking at cities, as well as how cities vary from one epoch to another, and from one society to another. We will rely on many specific examples of cities in this book, for instance, London and New York, Chicago and Shanghai, and we will generally assume that all these cities are very much alike.

But, of course, they are not. Cities differ in terms of the size of their populations, the size of their territory, as well as of their economic functions and cultural features. Some are what we would call a large metropolis, while others are simply small cities or towns. Some have a history that stretches back many hundreds of years – like London and Paris, while others have been around for only a few decades, like Naperville, Illinois. The miraculous growth of the Chinese city of Shenzhen bordering Hong Kong over the past two decades has earned it the title of “the city built overnight.” We hope that you will appreciate our somewhat eclectic use of these different examples to convey the nature of city life, but we choose to do so to provide you a rich and broad sense of what cities are all about.

Once we get beyond our examples and illustrations, the waters become a bit murkier. There are different ideas about how cities work and about how they develop over time. There are also different ways for focusing on the residents of cities and the manner of their lives. Because we believe it important, in an advanced textbook such as this, to give you as catholic a view of theory as of the city, itself, we discuss, albeit briefly, different ways for thinking about cities and how they work. This broad and systematic treatment of urban theories distinguishes our book from introductory level texts on urban studies. Some of these ideas are grounded in the writings of great social theorists, as,

for instance, those of Karl Marx. But some are of more recent vintage, such as the analyses and provocative ideas of the sociologist, Saskia Sassen, who argues about the deep and transforming nature of the forces of the global economy today.

While we have tried to give you a fair and concise picture of these different theories, we have refrained from giving a single endorsement to any perspective. We, ourselves, tend to differ in our perspectives. Orum tends to an historical view of the development of cities, and tries to emphasize economic and political forces in his own work. Chen, by contrast, tends to work on more recent cities, especially those in the Pacific Rim, such as in China, and he tends to emphasize mainly the global economic and cultural forces. Together we bring different but comparative and complementary perspectives and evidence to bear on cities. While we emphasize the ways that the growth of the economy or the forces of government shape the development of cities, we try also to give a fair overview of the historical development of cities in the United States, more or less free of a single theoretical perspective. Such an historical discussion is intended to introduce you to the major ways that American cities have developed, but does not especially adhere to only a single theoretical lens through which to tell that story. In our writing about China, we not only emphasize the interaction between the global economy and local government autonomy, but also demonstrate the importance of local cultural traditions and elements in the making of the modern city.

To date, the dominant story about the development of cities, especially over the past two centuries or so, has been a story of the deep and pervasive influence of economic and political institutions – of capitalism, in particular, and of the role of powerful officials within cities. Nevertheless, as we learn more about cities, we have come to recognize the important national and cultural differences among them. The cultural frame of reference, in fact, today has become increasingly popular as a way to understand the modern city, and is visibly evident in the writings of sociologists like Sharon Zukin. In addition, in our new age, of information and high technology, whole sets of new forces have begun to shape city life, among them, the computer and the Internet. These relatively new inventions, of just the past several decades, now make it far more possible for people to communicate with one another at great speeds and over major distances. The effects are quite noticeable, from reshaping the nature of the economies of large, global cities, like London or Tokyo, to the apparent liberation of people from working in specific sites and locations.

But while these changes have taken place, and many of their consequences are only now unfolding, we want to emphasize that there remains something very enduring and powerful about cities, which always experience both changes and continuities simultaneously (see chapters 3 and 4). They are the places where people are located in large numbers, and where they are

often densely packed together. People gravitate to cities because they provide the nodes where new economies flourish and enterprises develop.

Beyond this, however, cities take on a meaning, a life all their own. They become, as we shall argue forcefully in chapter 1, ***places – specific sites in space where the lives and work of people are regularly conducted.*** Moreover, within these large places, there are smaller ones, places like neighborhoods and homes to which we ourselves become tied. And therein, in the midst of these various layers of places, we find our own identities and personalities shaped, the foundations for communities of people among whom we live, a central dynamic to who we are as human beings. Cities, as places, in other words, are more than simply material facts of existence; they represent the social forms that serve to make us who we are.

An Overview of the Book

In the following five chapters of this book, then, we shall try to convey to you some of the richness and interest we have found in studying cities over the past couple of decades. Chapter 1 will introduce you to the concept of “place,” suggesting how and why it is important to understanding the nature of cities. We also will distinguish this concept from other similar concepts, such as that of “space.” Chapter 2 then turns to consider a number of different theoretical perspectives on the nature of cities. The ideas of Karl Marx figure large in many of these perspectives, even though he, himself, did not develop ideas specifically tailored to the nature and meaning of cities. We offer a number of different viewpoints, ranging from the work of Henri Lefebvre, a French Marxist, who developed ideas about the importance of space and social life, to those of Saskia Sassen, who takes a new global point of view about cities, suggesting how and why new social forces have emerged in them. While other introductory texts may avoid giving an overview of these many diverse theoretical perspectives, we offer it to prompt you to assess these perspectives further in light of our examples and other evidence. In chapter 3, we trace the history of metropolitan growth and development in the United States, from the late eighteenth century to the present. We show how the metropolis grew over time, and how the growth of suburbs mushroomed in the years following World War II. We also show how inequalities became deeply ingrained into the fabric of the American metropolis, resulting in the growth of a large urban underclass in the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, we suggest ways that gender differences make a difference to urban life, drawing on the writings of some prominent feminist scholars.

Chapter 4 then introduces you to a broad global, comparative view of cities today, especially those in China, with continued reference to such US cities as Chicago. We begin with a comparative discussion on how the global

economy has begun to transform cities, making many of them, especially those in previously closed economic systems like China, highly vulnerable to external forces. Then we examine why and how local governments have become more autonomous under decentralization, which tends to make cities more entrepreneurial and competitively oriented, with both positive growth outcomes and potential undesirable consequences. We also discuss how the penetration of global commerce and consumerism and local traditions have created a new and hybrid cultural landscape, especially in such Chinese cities as Shanghai. We end chapter 4 by focusing on the direct and indirect spatial consequences of the global–local interaction in both the Chinese and American metropolitan contexts. And we conclude the book, in chapter 5, by showing ways in which cities might be improved. We extend our ideas of place as a means of talking about how cities, as places, could be reconstructed so as to improve the lives of their residents. We also discuss some of the newer ideas about how to refashion cities, including those of a group of people known as the New Urbanists. They work hard, among other things, to limit the influence of the automobile on the nature of community life within cities; and yet, for all their imagination, much of their work has been devoted to improving the lives of relatively wealthy residents in upscale villages and towns.

Please join us, then, as we take you on a journey, across time and space, over the urban landscape.

To help readers, especially students, with our text, we have employed several conventions. First, we have included a Glossary that contains all the important terms and concepts used throughout the book. These same Glossary terms then are highlighted in bold in the text. We also have set in bold italic certain terms and phrases that are essential to our arguments at particular places in the text. And, finally, we have set in roman italic certain words that are, by convention, set in that format.