



Rediscovering the City

In grave disrepute a few years ago, city life is making a come-back. For tourists as well as residents, the city has again become the place to be. For both, there is rare satisfaction in being an urban explorer. It also serves to keep the city alive and well . . .

□ A recent article in *Saturday Review* told of a native of New York City who had moved to a country home some years ago. He had repeatedly invited his father in New York to come and stay with him, always to be met with the same reply: "Me? Come to the country? Are you crazy? Where is there to walk?"

Taking nothing away from the joys of rural life, one can see this urban denizen's point of view. Except to the knowledgeable nature lover, the countryside appears to be static and dull, restful though it may be. By contrast, the city is restlessly alive — that is, the city proper as opposed to the suburbs. There are city-lovers as well as nature-lovers, sharing the same keen eye for detail; to the former, the "streetscape" of the city holds a fascination that never palls.

It is the fascination of the kaleidoscope — of endlessly changing patterns and colours. A person may walk down the same street a hundred times and notice things that have never registered on him before. They may be as inconspicuous as a gargoye at the top of a building, a sign peeping out of a shop window, a menu on display at the front of a restaurant. No bird-watcher ever saw such variegation. The faces, shapes, and raiment of the crowd change constantly as it surges by.

As the summer vacation season approaches this year, hundreds of thousands of Canadians are making plans to savour the manifold pleasures of

the city. Some will go abroad, some to the United States. More of them than ever will visit the cities of Canada, even though they may normally live in other Canadian cities or their suburbs. They will join resident city-lovers in their agreeable rounds of things to see and do.

In their travels, these urban tourists will be taking part in a kind of renaissance that has affected not only tourism, but trends in lifestyles, the arts and business. For, after a long spell of neglecting and even scorning the big city, people are now rediscovering its worth. Whether as individuals, in groups or through their elected representatives, they are breathing new life into the downtown stone and steel and concrete. They have recognized anew that the city is the fulcrum of civilization, and that it is indispensable in this role.

The image of the city in the public mind has come almost full circle in a single generation. Back in the 1940s, in the golden age of radio, the air-waves were rife with popular songs literally singing the praises of city life. If it wasn't April in Paris, it was New York in June, a foggy day in London, or New Orleans at any time. To people in those days, the big city represented warmth, good living, glamour and romance.

Twenty years later it had become as fashionable to deplore cities — especially, though not exclusively, in the United States — as it once had been to glorify them. American intellectuals *en masse*

declared their cities to be tottering on the brink of doom. And indeed, evidence was all around of the urban collapse they predicted. Whole huge sections of U.S. cities were ravaged by rioting, arson and looting.

The situation was never so grim in Canada, where a tradition of orderliness at least made our cities relatively safe places to live in and visit. Still, a rising incidence of crime and the chaos caused by demonstrations and public service strikes considerably dimmed the attraction of our home-grown bright lights.

The cause of it all was concisely explained by author James Michener in an essay written in 1967. "Ours is the first generation in which people have had the option of rejecting the city if they wished," he pointed out. "The automobile, new systems of marketing and communication, plus the superior attraction of the suburbs, enabled us to live quite satisfactory lives while ignoring the city . . ." The consequences of this rejection in the U.S. included urban decay, civil unrest, and a massive increase in crime among the dispossessed persons left behind in the city core.

In Canada, the consequences were somewhat different: deterioration and sterility. This accorded with the global over-view of the urban malaise, as expressed by such experts as Lewis Mumford — that city life "dehumanized" people, turning them into either neo-barbarians or automatons. Mumford blamed it on human slavery to the machines that tend to dominate modern living. He said, in effect, that only through a "re-humanization" could the city be saved.

Fortunately, it looks as if that is exactly what is now happening. Even in the American cities worst afflicted by the urban blight of the 1960s, former suburbanites are moving back into the core areas, braving obvious dangers for the sake of being back in the swing of city life. Canadians too are showing a fresh appreciation of their inner cities in a reversal of the mood that impelled them to withdraw to the suburbs a few years ago. Toronto,

for example, has taken on added vitality since families have begun renovating and taking up residence in run-down houses and other buildings close to the centre of town.

Getting people out of their cars and back on their feet

All over North America the city core is regaining its traditional status as a market-place. After many years of focussing their attention and investments on suburban shopping centres, retailers have taken a rewarding second look at business prospects downtown. Malls containing all the shopping and entertainment amenities of main street under one roof have been connected to the traditional department stores. When seen in the light of the need for re-humanization, it is noteworthy that these malls depend on people walking rather than driving. They have taken them out of their cars and put them back on their feet, thus bringing them once again into contact with their fellows on a basic human scale.

The resuscitation of the city after it had almost been given up for dead seems to be due to a fact that escaped the notice of the urban soothsayers of yester-year. This is that people *like* being in the city, despite its noise, dirt, danger and all the rest. They like the glitter, the bustle, the rubbing of shoulders, the electric sensation of high-powered activity. In wanting to be in a city, people are obeying an impulse that is nearly as old as mankind.

Before history was ever written, human beings began to band together in market-places formed for the purpose of trading. The inhabitants of the outlying areas travelled to them with their produce, and presumably lingered for a primitive night on the town. As time went on, more and more people decided to put down roots in these commercial centres.

Some became craftsmen, building and mending things for people who came in from the surrounding countryside. Rulers, priests and scholars emerged. Defences, schools, and places of worship and entertainment were constructed. The fundamental culture of the populace was enhanced and enshrined in palaces, temples and statuary. In

places that were ports or on main trading routes, a cross-fertilization developed with the cultures of other lands.

And so were born the world's cities. But not all agglomerations of population became true cities, as Lewis Mumford has pointed out. According to him, the difference between a city and a town is "the unique function of the city as a container and transmitter of culture". It has also been an active generator of culture from the bronze age to this day.

From the bronze age on, a generator of culture

In their cultural dimension, cities have always attracted men of ability in search of learning and inspiration. "The City, the City!" wrote Cicero of his beloved Rome. "Devote yourself to her and live in her incomparable light." The sheer size of the population offered scope for artists and artisans to give free rein to their abilities. The city was where Michelangelo could paint a mural, where Molière could get a play produced, where Beethoven could introduce a symphony, where Christopher Wren could build a church.

In any North American city today you still see things that could only exist in an urban setting. No small town or suburb can afford a great library, art gallery, or museum. Symphony orchestras, opera and theatre companies may tour the outlying regions, but the city is their natural habitat. The same applies, with rare exceptions, to professional sports teams and the stadia and arenas they play in. They need the broad base of population on which urban culture lives.

The scale of the city is one of its chief sources of enjoyment and edification. "When a man is tired of London he is tired of life," said Dr. Samuel Johnson in 1777, "for there is in London all that life can afford." A big city is a small world unto itself, packing all aspects of life into small, accessible compartments. It is at once a microcosm and a microscope, containing and magnifying the best

and worst of humanity. The city's contrast between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, has always been fuel for the creative fires of artists of all kinds.

Variety lives both within and among Canadian cities

In some cities the world is quite literally represented. Canadians are particularly favoured in this respect. Thanks to immigration and the Canadian tradition of encouraging ethnic diversity, few cities in the world are as cosmopolitan as our three largest ones. Smaller places such as Winnipeg and Hamilton are not far behind.

Within three blocks of a single street in Montreal, for instance, you will find Russian, Creole, Japanese, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, French, Arab, and West Indian restaurants, plus American-style bars and a British-style pub or two. Nor is this street unique for its variety in the cosmopolitan heart of Montreal. Whole districts of our cities have assumed the character of the country of origin of most of their residents. Hence there are parts of Toronto where you would swear you were in Lisbon or Athens, and streets in Vancouver that might be in Hong Kong.

Ethnic diversity is only one of the reasons why Canadians should explore their own cities before looking farther afield. If there is variety within Canadian cities, there is also great variety among them. A person from, say, Calgary will find a world of difference from what he is used to at home in the salty old seaport and garrison atmosphere of Halifax. And vice versa: for someone from Halifax to visit Calgary is to sample an entirely unfamiliar air of cowboys and Indians, oil and cattle — the air of both the old and new West.

Canada's newer cities show that history need not be old

Canada's cities range from the very old to the very new. Founded by Champlain in 1608, Quebec City is among the most ancient cities on the continent; it remains steeped in history and splendid charm. On the other hand, Vancouver was still a swamp and a stretch of thickly-wooded mountainside when it was chosen as recently as 1885 as the western terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

It was chosen well, in one of the most beautiful natural settings ever to grace man's handiwork. Its very newness, added to its location on the Pacific, gives it a special casual verve.

A trip to one of our newer cities will hold some surprises to anyone who equates history with antiquity. The excellent Provincial Museum of Alberta in Edmonton, for example, provides proof that history is no less intriguing for being relatively new. There, an exhibit of farm machinery dating back to before the turn of the century can prove at least as interesting as a display of suits of armour in one of the old cities of Europe. Edmonton, incidentally, boasts eight other museums, including the huge restored Fort Edmonton. This is just one indication of how Western Canadians cherish and preserve their collective past.

"A man should know something of his own country, too, before he goes abroad," wrote Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*. Unfortunately, Canadians in the past have proved all too ready to make their way elsewhere on their vacations, ignoring exhortations to "see Canada first". When they *have* travelled in their own land, they have tended to give the cities short shrift in favour of Canada's natural beauties. With our newer cities coming of age and our older ones being restored, now is the time to consider exploring the wealth of interest and entertainment they hold.

Poking around the side streets simply to see what is there . . .

But if we should know something of our own country and its other cities, then surely we should also know something of the cities we ourselves live in, or are close to. It is remarkable how many people there are who can live in a city or one of its suburbs and not take the slightest interest in what there is, or what is happening, in the heart of town. There are people who have never been inside their city's museums, except perhaps as children

on school tours. Others might go to a hockey or football game, but never to a concert or a play downtown.

These things are, of course, matters of taste; it is perhaps a greater shame that some have never even walked the streets of their cities. They have never strolled around its various districts, with their different occupational and ethnic characteristics, to get the feel of how their fellow city-dwellers work and live. They have never sampled the noisy and odoriferous splendours of a city market on a hot summer day, nor cooled off in the hushed sanctuary of one of the churches. They have never taken an hour or two out of their lives to do nothing more than poke around the side streets simply to see what is there.

Instead many people keep to their cars, which carry them unseeingly home when their day's work is finished. The hasty tension of the expressway at rush hour is surely one of the least attractive aspects of urban life. In the evening they may watch an episode of a television series about an American city. And, during the commercials, they may ponder how boring their lives have become.

They are missing out on a great deal of stimulating experience which is more or less there for the taking. The exploration of cities is one of the cheapest forms of entertainment there is. You can, of course, spend a fortune in the city; but there is much to be done and seen that costs practically nothing or very little. One good way of reacquainting yourself with your own city is to take an inexpensive bus tour designed for out-of-town visitors. You may be surprised at how many things the guide points out that have never caught your attention before.

Whether it is your own or somebody else's, the city always offers things to catch your attention, because in small, subtle ways, it is constantly changing. The benefits of city-viewing are mutual, for the city needs people to take an interest in it to keep it alive and well. It needs people who are willing to participate in it. It needs life and love in its heart if it is to continue to provide its immense benefits to mankind.