

Vance, J. E. *This Scene of Man: The Role and Structure of the City in the Geography of Western Civilization*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977. Pp. 420. Illustrations. \$16.95

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Vance, J. E. This Scene of Man: The Role and Structure of the City in the Geography of Western Civilization. New York: Harper & Row, 1977. Pp. 420. Illustrations. \$16.95.

During this decade urban geography has emerged from the "dark ages" of the 1960s, when students (like the present writer) were usually taught that spatial patterns in cities could be studied without explicit reference to the structures that contained them. The physical fabric of a city, with its intricate diversity evolved through time, does not lend itself to ready quantification which, we were told, was the salvation of our discipline. By the seventies such people as Kevin Lynch and Jane Jacobs had taught us that physical structure is vital to our perception of and well-being in the city, and concern was growing for the quality of environment and life within it; no more could urban morphology be dismissed as a geographic non-issue. By 1977 a major treatise in the field was timely, and it has appeared in James Vance's This Scene of Man. The book exudes pioneering fervour, while acknowledging the glimmer of light borne through the barren years by Conzen at Newcastle. Vance's stature as an urban geographer will project his message through the discipline, which may well draw our urbanists closer to their cultural and historical colleagues and also to urban historians.

This Scene of Man is an academic heavy-weight, and a brief review can only sample its scope. It consists of 420 double-column pages, profusely illustrated as befits the visual nature of its subject matter. It is concerned with the role and physical structure of the Western city, two closely interrelated themes. The thread of Western urban evolution is traced from classical Greece through to contemporary North America, compiling on route an impressive body of material on the Western European city. The principal thesis is that urban morphology is a valid part of the study of man, and that the interaction of form with function and human characteristics, and of form with form, is fundamental to the nature of cities. There is strong emphasis on the durable quality of city fabric, its gradual adaptation to changing human patterns, and the powerful influence it exerts upon these in turn. Throughout the focus is upon the city of the common man rather than of unrepresentative elites. Apart from diverse bibliographic sources the book depends upon interpretation of a mass of fragmentary evidence from the fabric of cities; from bits and pieces, it builds a score of powerful concepts designed to comprehend the general principles of Western urban evolution. Such a mammoth project pioneering a neglected field might well contain the strengths of new insight and the weaknesses of arbitrary inclusion and subjective interpretation. It does - and probably as much through the nature of the author as the nature of the work.

The introduction is followed by eight chapters. The first deals with urban "morphogenesis," emphasizing processes involved in the shaping of cities: land assignment, connection, initiation and adaptation,

capital accumulation and transfer, speculation, planning, segregation/congregation/junction. Emphasis is placed upon periods of adaptation: there have been few periods of initiation in Western history (archaic Greece, the Middle Ages, New World settlement), but long stretches of time between when the form and functional patterning of towns was constrained by durable structures or at least a plan inherited from the past. This historical perspective on adaptation puts the "novel" contemporary practice of adaptively rehabilitating our inner cities into a tradition as venerable as Western civilisation.

Chapter 2 deals with the Classical City. We learn how the gods were invoked to justify its configuration, and provide a rationalisation for its location after the fact. Regular grid plans in Greek colonial cities are linked to a responsible democratic citizenry, one of many recurring themes which reveals both insight and subjective interpretation. Town-country relations are considered, and we can see in ancient Rome an elite exurbanisation which clearly anticipated that in our own day; this dispersion of an urban focus into the countryside is (unnecessarily?) labelled "dioecism" and is contrasted with the Greek city state. It is hard to swallow the notion, however, that our terms contemptuous of the countryside are of Latin derivation, and those complimentary of Greek. Another of the great themes of the book is introduced here: the mercantile theory of urban support, developed elsewhere by Vance. It is pointed out that the economically successful cities of the ancient world typically became so, not through central place activities but through the aggressive pursuit of long-distance trade prospects by a mercantile class. This theme constantly recurs in later chapters - deservedly, for it is one of the most fertile concepts to appear in the field in recent years.

Chapters 3 and 4 look respectively at the disintegration of the Dark Ages and the subsequent medieval urban revival. We are soon confronted with the above theme again, for it is asserted that central place theory is an outgrowth of feudalism and helps us to understand only the minor urban patterns in the feudal heartland area. It is inspiringly shown that the successful rebirth of large scale urbanism came through mercantile entrepreneurs, such as those of Venice when the Crusades reopened long-distance trade prospects with the Orient. However, few urban geographers would altogether accept the merciless flaying of Christaller's central-place theory; in making the vital point that mercantile/industrial centres are the prime consideration rather than the exception, it is not necessary to deny central place theory a wide-spread secondary role. The significance of this mercantile dominance is shown for urban form and there is detailed relation of the trading components to the other elements of the city's structure. Much interesting detail is given on the nature of house construction and its adaptation through time; the Southern European city is distinguished from the Northern in having a morphological tradition much more continuous, in style and building material, with the Classical past. The theme of growing urban freedom is strongly pressed, especially in northern Europe where the largely new towns lacked inherited power, and where allegedly their struggles with surrounding feudalism stimulated economic vigour. An

interesting point linked to the evolution of the ghetto is territorial assignment of alien groups, especially traders, within the city.

Chapter 5, on the late medieval bastide, reasserts the theme of association between gridiron plan, egalitarian land-assignment and relatively free and democratic urbanism. Bastides are linked with the later settlements of North America, persuasively so with reference once again to the mercantile concept. The English in Gascony used bastide foundations as an integral part of a profitable mercantile endeavour - the wine trade - which is seen as a training ground for later mercantile adventures in the New World; a quite plausible case is made for a significant transfer of urban experience across the Atlantic.

Chapter 6 examines the Renaissance period, drawing a sharp and probably oversimplified distinction between the Continental "prince's capital" with its ornate baroque redesign, and the chiefly English "merchants" town with its makeshift adaptive form befitting its work-a-day function and stimulating a suburban movement of its elite. The latter is seen as the true line of urban advance, growing through the medium of long-distance trade and in the process setting up counterparts akin to itself in the New World. The evolution of the democratic gridiron town in the northern American colonies is discussed in detail, and an important contrast is drawn vis-a-vis the autocratic settlements of the South, and more particularly of New Spain which is seen as perpetuating Roman traditions of colonial domination and acquiring an architecture and socioeconomic character akin to the "prince's capital" model. The theme of speculation as an important component of successful urbanisation is brought forward; evident in the bastides, it flowered in the "Philadelphia model" and has dominated American urbanisation ever since.

In Chapter 7 the morphogenetic revolution of industrialisation is examined on both sides of the Atlantic. The mercantile cities are seen as the instigators of industrialisation, in the quest to produce more tradeable goods; the great industrial metropolis emerged in successful mercantile cities such as Manchester, Verviers and Boston, which became "centres of commercial intelligence" for surrounding industrial regions. Much attention is given to the morphological variation on and between both sides of the Atlantic. The physical crowding of the urban working class in Britain into very compact cities is seen as just one facet of exploitation by the rural landowning class; a vivid contrast is drawn with respect to the more humane American experience. The morphological manifestations of class difference in British Victorian cities, in an age of limited physical separation, make fascinating reading; as does the growing impact of railways as separators of classes and housing types. The concept of housing generalisation - the free market in housing which supplanted paternalistic employer provision of preindustrial days - is shown to be fundamental to the morphological and social divisions which appeared in the nineteenth century city.

Chapter 8 identifies important themes in the continuing twentieth century evolution of the industrial city. Massive growth inevitably forms a major concern, and important insight is cast upon cities as the dumping grounds for national problems, with direct implications for their financial viability and physical/social character. The morphological structure of the new decentralised "city of realms" is extensively examined. The relative merits of suburbs versus the central city form a particular topic of concern; Vance, always the maverick, sees their morphological uniformity as the great equalising force in American society, the ultimate democratic aspiration which unfortunately not all have been able to attain. In this context he clearly views British preservation of the countryside and containment of suburbia as an aristocratic plot against the real needs of the common man. Whatever the historical truth of this, the British countryside is now an obvious asset for all its people, as the phenomenal membership growth of the National Trust testifies, and no-one's interests would be served by turning England into another California or Connecticut. However, the questioning of established thought is a salutary process, even if we return the more strongly to it. By the close of the book Vance has demonstrated one major truth, other points aside: our glib usage of the terms "preindustrial" and "postindustrial" is far too simplistic, and urban reality consists of slow structural evolution with innumerable hangovers from the past, and much regional diversity.

To separate the strengths and weaknesses of the book from its specific content is impossible, so human and idiosyncratic is its style throughout. Its strength is clearly abundant insight, whether original or by collation of the work of others, particularly concerning those themes which extend beyond morphology alone. It is also highly provocative, and its unorthodox positions on many issues provide a healthy opportunity for review of prevailing thought. Its prime weakness is the direct corollary of this: subjective interpretation of sometimes arbitrary subject matter. This has various annoying manifestations: favourite hobby-horses tend to be pursued ad nauseum, while objects of dislike (such as modern architecture) are attacked vitriolically; the valuable American perspective becomes chauvinistic with unnecessary claims for the prominence of American inventions and America's role in inducing Canadian independence, and excessive comparative criticism of British industrialisation and European social policy. To this must be added some criticism of the book's rambling, sometimes florid style: there is too much repetition, occasional obscurity, certainly marginal irrelevance, and a sometimes haphazard organisation of subheadings, with, for example, descriptive material on the medieval house occurring under at least three. Such a style breeds its own length, of course, with added need to recapitulate.

This is nonetheless a book to be reckoned with. Its poetic licence in filling gaps in knowledge, and its sometimes rambling course, are partly a symptom of the state of the art in the largely uncharted void it attempts to span. Historians should find it of profound importance, for while they may fault some of its assertions, its strides towards generalisation and theory and its historical-geographical linkage

offer inspiration to a broader perspective. To give a most relevant contemporary example: the mercantile theory of city support and its pattern through the ages set Artibise's recent studies of Winnipeg in a new and vital comparative context.

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Stave, Bruce M. The Making of Urban History: Historiography Through Oral History. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977. Pp. 336. \$6.95 paperback.

The Making of Urban History consists of interviews with nine prominent American urban historians conducted by Bruce Stave for the Journal of Urban History between the spring of 1974 and the summer of 1976. In a good historiographical introduction, Stave states that the book combines urban and oral history, "two of the fastest growing and most significant developments in historical study to emerge since World War II" (p. 13). Many of the comments of Blake McKelvey, Bayrd Still, Constance McLaughlin Green, Oscar Handlin, Richard Wade, Sam Warner, Stephan Thernstrom, Eric Lampard, and Samuel Hays on the former topic are informative, provocative, and stimulating. Unfortunately, mediocre editing occasionally tarnishes the effectiveness of the latter genre.

Although the discussions are open-ended, and no uniform questionnaire is employed, several themes reoccur. The three senior practitioners (McKelvey, Still, and Green) all seem to agree that the lengthy, narrative urban biography, the approach they established in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, is now "dead, old history" (Green, p. 128). Through such pointed questions as, "is local history urban history with the brains left out?" (p. 81) a distinction is made between old "city" and new "urban" history. In Bayrd Still's career "the general reader and local citizen as well as scholar" (p. 78) were important; and Blake McKelvey, long-time city historian of Rochester, recalls with considerable pride the plumber who came to mend a faucet one day and mentioned he had been reading McKelvey's works on the city for fifteen years (p. 58). A more dispassionate Constance Green remembers, however, the total rejection of her book on Holyoke by its citizens--largely because it was accurate (p. 119). While Eric Lampard emphasizes the importance of reaching a general readership, it is apparent that the increasing sophistication of new, "urban" history has made the field more purely academic.

History from the bottom up or "the faucet down" (p. 59), especially that of the quantitative historians, also receives considerable attention in the various interviews. The depersonalization and the lack of "colour" of "barefoot empiricism" are bemoaned by the more traditional historians, though Lampard, Thernstrom, Warner, and Hays predictably offer qualified support. Nevertheless, the use of statistical methods in certain