# THE CULTURE OF URBANISM



## A. Introduction

1. Urbanism refers to the distinct culture which results from living in the urban environment. Like all cultures it is a complex matrix of social, political, religious, psychological and linguistic factors.

2. There is enough similarity between urbanism as found in widely different settings to validate the assertion that urbanism is an international culture. If there is a shrinking world or so-called 'global village', it consists of urban centres which have a good deal in common despite other differences.

3. Differences in interpretation abound among sociologists and theologians when it comes to the main features of urbanism. They tend to divide along positive/negative views of urban life. This may be because many factors contributing to urbanism are ambiguous. Later in the course we will look at some different theories of urbanism. Such theories are often coloured by ideological commitments.

4. Cox's foundational book, *The Secular City[[1]](#footnote--1)* correctly notes many parallels between urbanism and secularism. They not only occupy a similar segment of history, but flow into each other and at many points reinforce each other.

5. As with the physical characteristics of the city, the features of urbanism are directly related to the phenomenon of large numbers of people living in a defined and densely settled area.

## B. The Features of Urbanism

### 1. Anonymity

When we visit the bank, we do not enter into a discussion with the bank manager about his future plans for his kids. He is not the up and coming businessman who wishes to start his own store selling wines, who the day before was willing to yarn over coffee as our cars were being repaired. Now in the bank we function in formal functional roles. Because we rely on a large net of relationships there is a natural limit to the number of people we can know in personal depth. In the rural village setting, it is possible and common to know at some level every member of the community, and also to know their family history and place within the social fabric. This is plainly impossible in the urban setting. A person in the urban environment interacts with far more people in the course of a day than the rural dweller, but at less depth. A major feature of city life is what sociologists call secondary or fictional relationships.

Primary or organic relationships are those in which another person is related to in some degree of fullness and depth; their name is known, something of their history, an interest is taken in their opinions, and there is a measure of mutual trust. Secondary or functional relationships are those in which we interact with another person simply on the basis of some transaction which needs to be performed. There is every chance that we will never see this person again, and we are not interested in how many children they have or how they vote. The greeting "Have a nice day" is empty and fatuous; we don't really care what happens to that person for the rest of the day. There is no real encounter within such meetings which are transitory and superficial. Thus to a large number of the people we interact with in the course of a day, we remain anonymous - without name or identity. We may be defined in terms of the work which we perform: the bus driver, the chip shop man, the vege. lady.

During my boyhood my parents never referred to 'the milkman'. 'the insurance agent', 'the rent-collector' These people were, respectively, Paul Weaver, Joe Villanova, and Roxy Barazano. All our family's market transactions took place within a web of wider and more inclusive friendship and kinship ties with the same people. They were never anonymous. In fact the occasional salesman or repairman whom we did not know was always viewed with dark suspicion until we could make sure where he came from who his parents were, and whether his family was 'any good' Trips to the grocery store, gasoline station, or post office were inevitably social visits, never merely functional contacts. Now, as an urbanite, my transactions are of a very different sort. If I need to have the transmission on my car repaired, buy a television antenna, or cash a cheque, I find myself in functional relationships with mechanics, salesmen, and bank clerks whom I never see in any other capacity (Cox 1965:56).

Interpretations of this anonymity which is an unmistakable feature of urban life differ widely. It is helpful to divide them into negative and positive views.

i. The Faceless Society

Louis Wirth was one of the first urban sociologists to point out the negative side of functional relationships.' He pointed to the exploitation and manipulation which results from treating people as a means to an end. In a rural society, a common commitment to a set of social norms provides a stable basis to the social order. Transgressions of the social code are greeted by communal sanction, but in urban culture, no such community exists, and the result is anomie. Because people are not "known," they are able to engage in crimes such as rape, which is an extreme example of exploitation through functional relationships. All humanity of people is denied, and this violates all who experience it. In the city old people may die and lie undiscovered in a lonely room. The weak and the fragile are ignored insofar as they don't interfere with the life of anyone else. In such a society, order is maintained through a police force, the members of which have no relationship with those they discipline. The vast numbers of dependent people are cared for in faceless institutions, where their file receives a number and they are categorised according to their 'sickness'.

[Urban man] Is used, consumed, eaten away, possessed in heart and soul, and the city gives him new complexes, requires of him new reflexes, transforms his tastes and his mental make-up. The demons push him on with their enormous power, forcing him to find in the city the realisation of his desire for escape and liberty. In response to the impossibility of living in the midst of his neighbour's yelling and slamming and bickering, man might try to find satisfaction in the anonymity of the city. "I am never more alone than in a crowd," goes the obscene paradox. "I am never freer than when faced with blank stares." But this is a "delirious lie. The liberty of rising up against oppression and perhaps against other men is not the same thing as the anonymity of not knowing oven one's next-door neighbour. To be simply a stranger is not to be a free man. This is the solitude of suicide, of a drowning man.

(Jaques Ellul, **The Meaning of the City** 1970:169)

ii. The Circle of Friends

Other writers such as Harvey Cox have taken a far more positive view of the effect of functional relationships on urban culture. Cox points out that it would be impossible and dysfunctional for an urban dweller to attempt to make all relationships primary (1965: 54). He suggests that a check-out person in the supermarket who attempted to have a personal involvement in the lives of customers would be a menace. City dwellers need to draw some boundaries round their intimate relationships in order to avoid being swamped by the sheer number of human contacts in a day. However, it is possible to relate to people in a functional and yet human way, and the majority of contacts within urban life are of this order.

There is a new factor in developing relationships in the city which in fact enhances the freedom of urban dwellers. This is that they are able to choose their friends. Primary relationships in the urban environment are formed not on the basis of geography but on common interest. Circles of friends will often live in different parts of the city, but may achieve a depth of relationship which would be the envy of any rural dweller. Public and private lives are able to be relatively disconnected in the city, and this gives much greater freedom and variety.

Earlier theories supposed that loneliness is a fact. As the number of people in social contact became larger, it was supposed that relationships would become thinner, distributed more broadly. And the end would be greater "Impersonality". But research is discovering other answers. In fact, it may well be that the urban person has moved to the city to find a cure for loneliness. People in apartments , high-rises, and condominiums may not know their neighbours. And they may move into such buildings to maintain their personal privacy. But this does not mean that they do not have personal relationships. They just find them in other channels [[2]](#footnote-0)

### 2. Mobility

When we speak of mobility being a feature of urbanism, there are two different types of mobility: geographic and social. Each of these is significant in understanding the urban way of life.

i. Types of Mobility

a. Passing Through

Both within cities and between cities there is a constant stream of human involvement. It is common for urban dwellers to change cities several times in the course of a lifetime. Those who remain in the same city will have many changes in their place of residence, both in terms of its location and type of dwelling. This is to be contrasted with the 'family home', sometimes passed down among generations. Within cities people are constantly on the move, and Cox has suggested the symbol of the motorway cloverleaf as a sign of urban mobility. The result is a life which is always hustling along. The face of the city is vibrant as it grows and changes. Whole neighbourhoods can boom and die, and change their nature as generations at different stages of life come and go. Removal firms are kept busy; families become adept at settling down in a new city with different schools and shopping centres.

b. Moving Up

There is also a degree of social mobility within the urban setting. In most rural situations a person's aspirations are distinctly limited by birth and social class. In the city a typist might become a manager; a builder's labourer a property developer. The lines of social class are much more fluid in urban culture, although probably more so in appearance than fact. It is the prospect of upward social mobility which acts as so much of a magnet for migrants to the city. The city stands as a symbol for choice and change to many whose lives are strictly determined by powers outside their control. The exposure to and interaction between different groups in the city means that the social norms of settled communities are challenged, and may be experimented with.

Again, the phenomenon of mobility may be interpreted in different ways, according to different evaluations of the urban experience.

ii. Evaluations of Mobility

a. A Rootless Society

Because urban dwellers have no deep roots in any particular community, they lose their sense of identity. The popular view of urban life is one of alienation, of people who travel everywhere but belong nowhere. The spirit of community is destroyed , and urban dwellers live by their wits in the 'concrete jungle'. Constant shifting means that people must become adept at adapting to a wide variety of environments. A psychologist in the early part of this century, George Simmel, wrote a paper entitled 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in which he argued that the pressures of urban life produce mental stress ('psychic overload'). The rate of movement and adaptation, according to Simmel, leads urbanites to withdraw emotionally from one another, and become calculating, aloof and pragmatic. Louis Wirth, following Simmel, suggests that the loss of community and the absence of established roots produces competition and mutual exploitation rather than co-operation. City cohesion or the 'right thing to do' is lost. Order needs to be maintained by outside agencies and regulations, which Wirth calls 'formal integration'. Rootlessness leads eventually to chaos and social disorder.

b. Opportunity and Liberation

The positive view sees urban life as one of choice and freedom, the breakdown of a uniform social code enables people to escape the rigid categories of a basically hierarchical society. Cox notes that "Mobility is closely linked to social change; so guardians of the status quo have always opposed mobility" (1965:65). He argues that more than any other single factor, mobility has granted liberation to millions of people. In America, many blacks moved from the rural South into the urban centres of the North, and discovered that racism was not inevitable. In addition, social mobility is of the most advantage to those on the bottom of the social pyramid. It provides the hope of change and possible advancement. Conversely, mobility is very threatening to those who hold power, and consequently they are generally 'conservatives'.

c. The Disappearing Male

As the women advance into the workforce and the home is destroyed, what becomes of the man?

d. The Emergence of Permament Unemployment in the Affluent Society[[3]](#footnote-1)

There are six paradoxes in Western Capitalism

(1) Unprececedented wealth combined with unprecedented scarcity

(2) Poverty arising in wealthy societies

(3) Yet opportunity for mutual care is decreasing

(4) Labour shortages combined with unemployment

(5) Both healthcare and dissatisfaction with its delivery are rising

(6) Lives with more wealth and less time

What is happening in the emergence of a permanent poor class of unemployed in New Zealand is part of the global trend. Unemployment stands at 30-40% in the third world cities and 8-11% in the developed world, where we work longer hours, with more temporary, part -time or multiple jobs, combined with less job satisfaction and security.

Goudzwaard and de Lange offer a 12 step recovery process for these issues.

### 3. The Pluralist Society[[4]](#footnote-2)

Two factors contribute to the evident pluralism of city life. The first is that the sheer number of people living in one place increases the potential for human diversity. The second is that people migrate to cities from many countries and cultures, and bring with them something of this heritage. The result of the process is that people of different race, culture, belief system and lifestyle live in close proximity to each other. It is more difficult for a city dweller to ignore the immense variety of human life. Great tolerance is needed in large cities if public order is to be maintained. Rather than inheriting their values, beliefs and lifestyle, urbanites are faced with making a choice from a number of different possibilities.

When a city is looked at as a whole, it is extremely heterogeneous. Within that broad perspective, however, there are many pockets of homogeneity: Chinatown, the Arab Quarter, little Italy. Here people from the same culture will form enclaves to ensure the survival of their heritage. Other areas of the city are informally graded according to social status, and residents will be of a similar socio-economic level. The same dichotomy of interpretation prevails in evaluations of pluralism, as with other aspects of the urban culture.

i. A Faithless Generation

The proximity of widely differing belief systems can lead to urban cynicism, in which all beliefs are devalued. A common image of the city is that of the marketplace, where everything is for sale. Religion and morality are seen as being marketed and promoted along with everything else, by those who have some benefit to gain from it. The great variety of groups which lay claim to clearly contradictory versions of the truth brings a consequent doubt in the existence of any objective truth. Relativism is the order of the day in the city (You can believe what you like as long as it doesn't affect me"), and so traditional religious visions of life struggle.

ii. The Freedom to Believe

Others view this situation as providing just the conditions for gospel to triumph over law. Peter Berger speaks of 'The Heretical Imperative' (Berger 1979).[[5]](#footnote-3) In earlier times there was a clearly defined orthodoxy, and those who chose otherwise were clearly identified as heretics and punished accordingly. In the pluralism of urban life, however, everyone is forced to choose, because there is no fixed orthodoxy. The essentially partial human understandings of reality can be enriched and corrected by other viewpoints. And freedom is the prerequisite of conscious and personal faith. There may be fewer people in churches, but those who are there are there because they choose to be. Pluralism need not be threatening; it can be exciting and colourful.

### 4. Injustice

A characteristic of cities is the heightening of structural injustice. However a city is divided into regions, there will be a marked difference in living conditions between the various sectors. The basic needs of the city dweller are described by Tonna as employment, housing, public utilities and services, and community life. The so-called 'natural areas' of the city show wide disparity in the provision of such facilities. Any indicator such as health, education, employment, will reveal a great deal of difference in the quality of service between Remuera and Otara. While mobility is of great benefit to the upwardly mobile, its consequence is that those on the lowest socio-economic level must make do with those areas of the city in which no one else wants to live. In the development of traditional Western cities, this has meant the exodus of the middle-class to the suburbs, leaving the inner-city to those with neither wealth nor power. Even when gentrification occurs, the urban poor are still left with what is unwanted by others. In the Third World, slums are often formed in areas prone to flooding or near rubbish dumps.

Cities often give physical expression to the injustice inherent within society. The juxtaposition of extremes of wealth and poverty highlight basic inequalities which might be less obtrusive in a rural setting. Urban system and divisions are used by the powerful as a means of exploitation.

Any analysis of the city environment must take into account the distribution of resources within the city, and the flow of power. Because of structural injustice in the urban environment, almost any element of 'need provision' will have a political element. Tonna notes, "It is essential for urban missionaries to understand clearly the functioning of these political, largely depersonalised, processes. Only so can they understand the inner meshing of the urban mechanism" (Tonna 1982:72).[[6]](#footnote-4)

1. Cox, Harvey

   1965 ***The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective***, NY: Macmillan. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Harvie M. Conn

   1987 ***A Clarified Vision for Urban Mission, Dispelling the Urban Stereotypes,*** Grand Rapids: Zondervan, p42. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Goudzwaard, Bob and Harry de Lange  
   ***Beyond Poverty and Affluence***, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. (These summary points developed by Bryan Drake). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Newbiggen, Leslie  
   ***The Gospel in a Pluralist Society,*** Eerdmans, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Berger, Peter

   1979 ***The Heretical Imperative, Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation****,* N.Y: Anchor. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Tonna, Benjamin

   1982 ***A Gospel for the Cities A Socio-Theology of Urban Ministry,*** Maryknoll: Orbis. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)