

NICHOLAS SCHOON

THE CHOSEN CITY



LONDON AND NEW YORK

**Also available as a printed book
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To Julie, with love and thanks

and

To the memory of
Mary Delaney, 1961–1999

NICHOLAS SCHOON

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LONDON AND NEW YORK

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FOREWORD

WHY WON'T WE choose the city? For years we have been leaving the major conurbations, heading for the suburbs and beyond. Even London is no exception – although that city is constantly restocked by the inward migration of rich and poor from other countries. But we all know that urban flight means loss of countryside, traffic pollution and congestion. It also means loss of morale and self-respect for those who are left behind on stigmatised council estates or in poorly served neighbourhoods.

In exploring the possibilities for the 'urban renaissance' advocated by Lord Rogers' Urban Task Force, and the renewal of marginalised neighbourhoods promoted by the Cabinet Office's Social Exclusion Unit, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has funded over sixty academic studies. We feel well rewarded by the government's National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal and its new housing policies that emphasise the importance of engaging with local residents and creating a mix of incomes. The Foundation has also built 'CASPAR' developments (City-centre Apartments for Single People at Affordable Rents) in downtown Birmingham and Leeds: these are succeeding in attracting and retaining the people with money and talent who are so necessary to the revival of inner cities. But neither our academic programmes nor our demonstration projects can do what Nick Schoon's book sets out to do. This is not an academic treatise or a guide to good practice. It appeals to the emotions as well as the intellect. It seeks to provoke, stimulate and enthuse, as much as to spell out the facts.

Deep-seated divisions in society, the very unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities, the hazards for the environment and problems for the wider economy, can all be predicted to get worse if there is no change in national attitudes toward our cities. Revival of city living will depend on jobs and the resources to change the urban environment must be found. Investment in clearing up derelict sites, removing eyesores, enhancing local services – education and policing in particular – are all costly but necessary. Public perceptions are at least as important as public money. This book's combination of analysis and perceptive journalism should make a very real contribution to focusing the national debate, shifting attitudes and changing minds.

Richard Best, Director
Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York

PREFACE

THIS IS A BOOK about what has gone wrong with our cities and how they might be improved. The proposals are, I guess, just about within the realms of political possibility during the next couple of decades. We can all think of excellent, sensible proposals which are politically impossible, but what's the point? (How about making Liverpool the UK's capital and seat of government? No large city is closer to England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and Merseyside could do with the uplift).

In what follows, I've attempted to divide the complex clockwork of urban decay into manageable chunks such as crime, education, housing and transport. One danger of doing this is that you neglect the need for joined up solutions; something we are going to keep on hearing about now that New Labour has been shoo-ed in for a second term of government. And because Britain has an overwhelmingly urban population, there is another danger – that of seeing every kind of problem as a town and city problem and therefore writing a bloated, formless book which tries to solve everything.

I hope I've succeeded in skirting both of these elephant traps as well as an even bigger one – writing a book about a problem which doesn't even exist. For there is, one could argue, no overall urban problem. There are plenty of bad and poor urban neighbourhoods but there always have been and always will be. There are also a few entire conurbations and several smaller towns, mostly in Northern England and the UK's smaller nations, ex-industrial places, coastal resorts and market towns, which have gone into severe decline. That's tough, you might say, but we can't all be winners. Most of urban Britain is doing fine and the places that thrive more than compensate for the sick and dying. Edinburgh's successes outweigh Glasgow's failures. Just look at London, with its huge and growing wealth and its now briskly increasing population.

But the capital has concentrated poverty and decay running through its inner boroughs and far out to the east which far surpasses that in, say, Greater Manchester or Merseyside. And even in young, prosperous, fast growing towns you find places where deep rot has set in – as in the sink estates of Milton Keynes. There really is an urban problem made up of lots of problems and I've underplayed or altogether missed some of them in an effort to keep my subject under control. By way of apology, I should at least note the ones I'm aware of. They are perhaps predictable

omissions given that the author is (i) white, (ii) in reasonably good health, (iii) lives in South East England and (iv) has spent most of his working life as an employee of unprofitable or non-profit making enterprises.

viii First, there's too little about differences in race and culture. British citizens from ethnic minorities are concentrated in our larger towns and cities where they suffer higher than average rates of bad and overcrowded housing and other kinds of deprivation. I argue that the tendency to segregate neighbourhoods on the basis of income is damaging and should be resisted. This must also apply to segregation on the basis of race and culture.

Second, this book could have included a chapter on health in cities. People living in failing urban areas generally have poorer health than the national average and they have also tended to receive worse health services – certainly at general practitioner level. I didn't include these issues because I did not think them among the prime reasons why people with choices in life tended to shun urban living. However, epidemiologists have interesting ideas on and arguments about these issues. There are those that believe there is some factor, or several factors, in poorer neighbourhoods, beyond the more immediate afflictions of poverty, that puts the health of all of their residents – including those on average and above average incomes – at some extra risk. And perhaps this connects to the observation that the more unequal, income-polarised conurbations, regions and entire nations (such as the USA and the UK) tend to have worse overall health and higher mortality than more egalitarian places which have an equivalent average income but a narrower gap between the rich and the poor.

Third, there's not much in here about regional issues and the great, enduring north south divide, a divide which is complex, murky and certainly more than a myth. The failings of many towns and cities are partly a cause of the wide economic disparities between the UK's regions, partly a consequence. There is an interplay of supply and demand-side factors which tend to widen these differences, to make regions which get ahead get even further ahead, and of countervailing factors which tend to narrow the gulf. The latter rarely seem to win the day, so government – at European and national level – feels compelled to intervene in order to help the straggler regions. These interventions have often failed the great provincial conurbations; that must change. What are the shapes on the map, the assemblages of towns, cities and hinterland, that function as regions and sense a strong regional identity? How can that feeling be harnessed? How should the governance and planning of cities relate to that of their hinterlands? Questions about which many books and papers have been written...but not this one.

Fourth, the fate of towns and cities is tied up with their ability to develop new skills and ideas, to attract investment in buildings, equipment and people, to launch or improve products and services, found new enterprises, grow established ones, raise productivity. Economic performance and entrepreneurship provide a crucial perspective on cities but, for the most part, it is not this book's. I'm interested in

something which is closely related and just as important; how well cities perform in making people want to live in them. My perspective is mainly that of the resident, the consumer of cities. It is a vantage point from which all of us cannot help but keep a look out.

This book may be wasted on those who remain well on the political left or right in these muddled, middling days (although the limited municipalisation of land I advocate might appeal to some old lefties). As I researched, I often found the bracing wind of Marxist thought blowing from the pages of books written in the seventies and eighties. Town planning and urban regeneration were just ways of dealing with another crisis of late capitalism, they argued. It was the rich and powerful, working through corporations and various arms of the state, who were doing for our cities and their poorer residents. There is, of course, some truth in that. But capitalism flourishes. It has spread, it assumes more and more identities, it has found ways of enlisting more and more of us. Whatever the injustices and inequalities it entrains it seems to work tolerably well for the majority in a wealthy western nation – or, at least, better than anything else on offer. But ask yourself this: is our society so uneven and unfair because of the way we segregate our towns and cities by income, or are our towns and cities so segregated because our society is so uneven and unfair? It's both – and in what follows I focus on the former.

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I'm sorry, too, if I seem too pessimistic. I found plenty of encouraging things in Britain's cities and I mention many of them. Some of the ideas in here are already well established. The general election manifestos of the two main parties in 2001 both said cities must be made better places to live in – my main theme. The word 'urban' has become trendy. But I don't think we have turned the corner between decline and renaissance.

I provide no proper treatment of contaminated land (important, but difficult to render interesting), the heritage of older buildings and urban landscapes, the 24 hour city (I'm usually tucked up in bed by midnight) and the role of gay people in urban regeneration. These omissions prevented a long book being longer and I mention them merely to show expert readers that I have at least noticed them. You experts make me nervous. I was a journalist attempting the difficult task of writing a book that could be useful to the learned and the well-informed as well as engaging the interest and enthusiasm of any general reader with some passion for cities. The specialist and the professional will, inevitably, find some passages covering familiar ground, some simplifications, garish colours and vulgar noises. The amateur may find that she or he is occasionally getting rather denser detail and argument than they want. I hope I've provided some surprises and insights for both types of reader.

I wrote this book because the Joseph Rowntree Foundation picked me and my idea for a Journalism Fellowship, giving me the time and money I needed for the task. I have visited all of Britain's largest conurbations and many smaller towns and cities, either in the course of researching this book or during my work as a

x journalist. I travelled around several of them on foot, by bicycle, public transport and car, in an effort to see and feel their neighbourhoods. I also read numerous books, papers and reports, many of them in those most essentially urban of things, libraries – in particular Bromley’s fine central lending and reference facility and the magnificent British Library at St Pancras. Most of my sources are listed in the end-notes but there is no reference to three wonderful books so I recommend them here; Richard Hoggart’s *Uses of Literacy* with its astonishing portrait of bygone working class neighbourhoods (London, Chatto & Windus 1957), Robert Fishman’s *Bourgeois Utopias: the rise and fall of suburbia* (New York, Basic Books, 1987) and *Civilia*, Ivor de Wolfe’s (a.k.a. Hubert de Cronijn Hastings) extraordinary vision of a compact hilltop city for a million people on derelict land halfway between Leicester and Birmingham (London, Architectural Press, 1971). You will need a good library to find them.

Hundreds of people in cities around Britain – regenerators, developers, planners, architects, people from central and local government, academics and residents (including my former neighbours in Hayes) – helped me, mostly with information, opinions and ideas. I want to name a few who were particularly kind in taking the time and trouble to show me around places and in helping and encouraging me at the beginning and near the end; Patrick Clarke, Susan Dunsmore, Cathy Garretty, Andy Gibb, Michael Gwilliam, Peter Hennessey, Roger Levett, Paul Keenan, Duncan Maclellan, John Oldham, Laura Padoan, Lee Shostak, Polly Toynbee and Raymond Young. Especial thanks to the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution whose secretariat I worked for during the closing stages of this project (the views herein are, however, mine and most definitely not theirs), Richard Best of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for his interest and support, Caroline Mallinder of E & FN. Spon, Paul Drew and my friend David Rose. And most thanks of all to my wife Julie who coped with my long absences from family life and with the inexcusable obsession this book became and who helped with ideas and much encouragement.

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Chapter 1

THE ABANDONED CITY

Hayes still remains clean and tidy with good schools, plenty of parks, but gradually the area has become less friendly and the spread from London seems to be drifting our way. Within five years we will have moved further into Kent to give our children a better start in life.

I feel safe, secure and contented here but I don't like to dwell on the fact that we are only a few miles away from troublesome areas. If this was to encroach upon my immediate area, I would move further out.

Residents of Hayes, a suburb on the rim of south-east London

We talked pleasantly enough, until I told him that Moses' road was going to blow every trace of both of our childhoods away. Fine, he said, the sooner the better; didn't I understand that the destruction of the Bronx would fulfil the Bronx's own basic moral imperative? 'What moral imperative?' I asked. He laughed as he bellowed in my face: 'You want to know the morality of the Bronx? Get out, schmuck, get out!' For once in my life I was stunned into silence. It was the brutal truth: I had left the Bronx, just as he had, and just as we were all brought up to, and now the Bronx was collapsing not just because of Robert Moses but also because of all of us. It was true, but did he have to laugh?

Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*¹

- 2 MOST OF BRITAIN'S BIG CITIES now have their emptying quarters, places where despair and decline have gone so deep that large-scale abandonment of homes and business premises is underway. The most spectacular and unsettling example I came across was in Possilpark, one mile out from Glasgow's thriving centre with its crowds of shoppers and office workers.

To reach it, you follow the familiar spoor of urban decay, passing low-rise, post-war blocks of council flats with big, raucous scrawls of graffiti and the easily-burgled ground floor units boarded up, then a battered-looking primary school fortified with CCTV and a high, spiked steel fence. Finally you come to a place of solitude and silence where there is no longer any housing. Here is a grid of tarmac streets, road lamps, street signs and even bus stops covering hundreds of acres, but only grass and weeds slowly engulfing levelled rubble fill the space in between.

Hundreds of council flats once stood in this part of Possilpark and were lived in for a decade or two. Then, as with tens of thousands of other municipal homes in the UK's City of Architecture 1999, they became harder and harder to let, even to poor people with few choices in life who seemed fairly desperate for council housing. This neck of the woods became known as a place of isolation, disrespect and danger. Eventually the council decided, as it had done many times before, that the only way forward was mass demolition.

That happened in 1994; the site has lain abandoned ever since. Glasgow and the rest of Britain have more and more places like this. The government admits there are parts of our towns and cities that are so dejected and rejected that it makes no sense to rebuild there. Most Britons know next to nothing about them, for they have no reason ever to visit them. They offer only smashed up blocks of flats and row after row of mean houses with doors and windows covered by steel or plywood shutters. The local councils no longer bother to keep the streets clean and the few cars you see are often burnt out. You don't see many people about, and those you do often look poor. If mass demolition of the housing in these areas has not begun, then it appears as if it soon will.

And, in most of these areas, a fresh start is unlikely. No new and better homes to last longer this time. There is no prospect of any real redevelopment because there is no confidence in these neighbourhoods being a place where anyone – rich, poor or middling – would choose to live.

Yet the heart of Glasgow, with its blatant prosperity and endless entertainments, its hundreds of thousands of jobs, splendid streets and celebrated architecture, is a 20-minute walk away from Possilpark. The drains and utility mains which lie

below those vanished homes, the network of roads which once connected them to the rest of the city, an urban infrastructure worth millions of pounds, lie idle.

Meanwhile, the national debate about where to build the more than four million new homes Britain is forecast to need over the next quarter century becomes louder and angrier. What chiefly excites the pressure groups, the press, the public and the politicians – in roughly that order of causation – is the threat to the UK's remaining countryside from this frenzy of construction. Two questions being asked are whether government has got its projections right – can the demand for new homes *really* be that large when population growth is so slow – and how much of that development can be squeezed into existing towns and cities instead of obliterating greenfield land?

3

Apart from covering an area of fields and woods as large as Greater London in bricks, mortar and tarmac, what further environmental harm will be done by these millions of new houses built in the countryside? Other types of development – shops, workplaces, leisure facilities – will spread with them. More roads will have to be laid. There will be many more car journeys to work and to play, to schools and shops, accompanied by more noise, air pollution and congestion. The area in which the glare of street lights puts out the stars at night will grow.

These fears are quite justified, but they miss the worst thing about this unending spread of housing. It is not only the damage it does to the countryside that matters. A much more precious environment is being damaged in the process – the urban one. This, after all, is the home of millions of people, whom only the most fanatical environmentalist would say matter less than wildlife and scenery.

Since the industrial revolution began in these islands, the history of most of its cities has essentially been one of desertion by people with choice and money. Most Britons appear to hate them, getting out if they can, escaping to the countryside or small towns or suburbia. If they can't, then they dream of a day when they will be able to. The cities were where almost all our wealth was created, where the middle classes were formed and grew. But even as their populations exploded, as they sucked people from the countryside into their overcrowded, stinking and lethal centres, anyone who succeeded in life was getting out. With them went their standards and money, children and talents, voices and votes. Over a hundred years ago Britain's large towns and cities had settled into smaller versions of the structures you can still find today – a commercial core with offices, shops and a few grand public buildings to demonstrate the city fathers' civic pride, encircled by residential suburbs segregated by class. The dense, low-income housing tended to be nearest the centre with more spacious suburbs for the better off further out.

The rapid suburbanisation of the past 200 years had to happen. Without it people's overall standard of living and life expectancy could not have been raised. Midway through the nineteenth century the population was rising fast and more





than a million urban poor were crammed together in squalid courts, cellars, tenements and back-to-back houses. Reformers fretted about epidemics, sanitation, drunkenness and depravity; improvements were slowly pushed through. But for most people, a move into a less densely populated area further from the city centre was the way to better housing and health, and by the end of the century the innermost areas of the big cities had begun to depopulate.

6 We continue to demand new suburbs because we are still fleeing the city. The population of Britain's eight largest conurbations* fell by two million between 1961 and 1991.² Each day they suffer a net loss of around 300 people to smaller towns and the countryside.³ People perceive that as well as being a place of crime, deviancy and people who don't know how to behave, the big city has failing schools, 'immigrants' (who have often lived here for two or more generations) and unbearable road traffic. The stock of existing suburban and rural and small town homes is nowhere near large enough to satisfy the demands that arise from this shunning of the urban. So new suburbs spread into the countryside and abandonment continues. The cities are left with poorer people, less money, diminishing social capital. The blight spreads out from the inner city, seeping into tree-lined streets where large houses become dilapidated and big gardens turn to scrub. What was once the best of suburbia is degraded and devalued, people with choices in life no longer want to live there, and so still more new suburbs are needed.

Britain's housebuilders and planners, the chief defenders of the status quo, see things differently. They point out that for the past 50 years we have had a complex, democratic system that negotiates and plans the growth of our towns and cities. It is not just the prosperous who have escaped from the cities; the system has decanted hundreds of thousands of working-class families into suburban-style council housing on the urban fringe or into verdant new towns deep in the countryside. Furthermore, they say, it is unfair to accuse a spanking new, three-bedroom house on a greenfield estate on the edge of town of causing urban decline. The real culprit is the changing structure of the economy, or advances in technology, or plain poverty, or something else. An ordinary, hard-working family will buy that new house, cherish it and make it a home.

But we do not really have a planning system, we have organised, formal attempts to control and slow the spread of towns and cities. And while low-income families were moved out from crowded homes near the centres during waves of slum clearance, this only worsened the prospects of many of them – and deprivation remains an abidingly inner city phenomenon. And yes, that new house on the

*These eight are Greater London, the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Merseyside, Tyne and Wear and Greater Glasgow. A third of Britain's population lives in them. London and Glasgow are essentially large, built-up masses; the others are more diffuse structures, each made up of several cities which retain distinct identities and are to some

extent still separated by thin wedges of countryside, river and estuary. I am often going to consider them as units, so let me acknowledge now that the residents of, say, Coventry and Wolverhampton don't think of themselves as West Midlanders. Each conurbation does, however, form its own distinct urban region – big, mainly built-up areas surrounded by countryside. The West Midlands is

edge is contributing to urban decline. If it could have been built in an inner city and sold to a family with a middling income, it would be improving rather than worsening urban prospects.

Isn't suburbanisation rather like slash and burn farming? And don't the quotations at the beginning of this chapter, from residents of the suburb where I lived, sum up the process? The countryside is consumed by development and for a few decades the land is valuable. Then, all too often, it starts to go wrong and the money moves off to cover new countryside, leaving barren ground behind.

7

Surely we should not to treat our urban environments this way. We can no longer justify the urban exodus by saying that people and homes are overcrowded, that they need more room to breathe and that, if they get it, the population as a whole will be better off. The link between density and wretchedness was broken decades ago. Some of Britain's most deprived people live in spacious, grassy council estates on the edge of cities while some of its richest live in high density apartments at their heart. (The most deprived electoral ward in England turns out to be in Wythenshawe, a leafy, medium-density suburb of council semis built on Manchester's southern edge between the wars. It was designed to be England's third garden city.⁴)

People are sometimes pulled to the suburbs or to smaller towns outside the big conurbations because they can purchase more house and garden space; it is a consumer option. But what is pushing them away from the cities is as important and that, primarily, is the presence of poorer people. The greatest shortages in the city are not of space and greenery, clean air and quiet, but of trust and security, of earned incomes and self-esteem. Each decision to leave further concentrates the population who lack money and choices, which makes the inner city an even less desirable place to live.

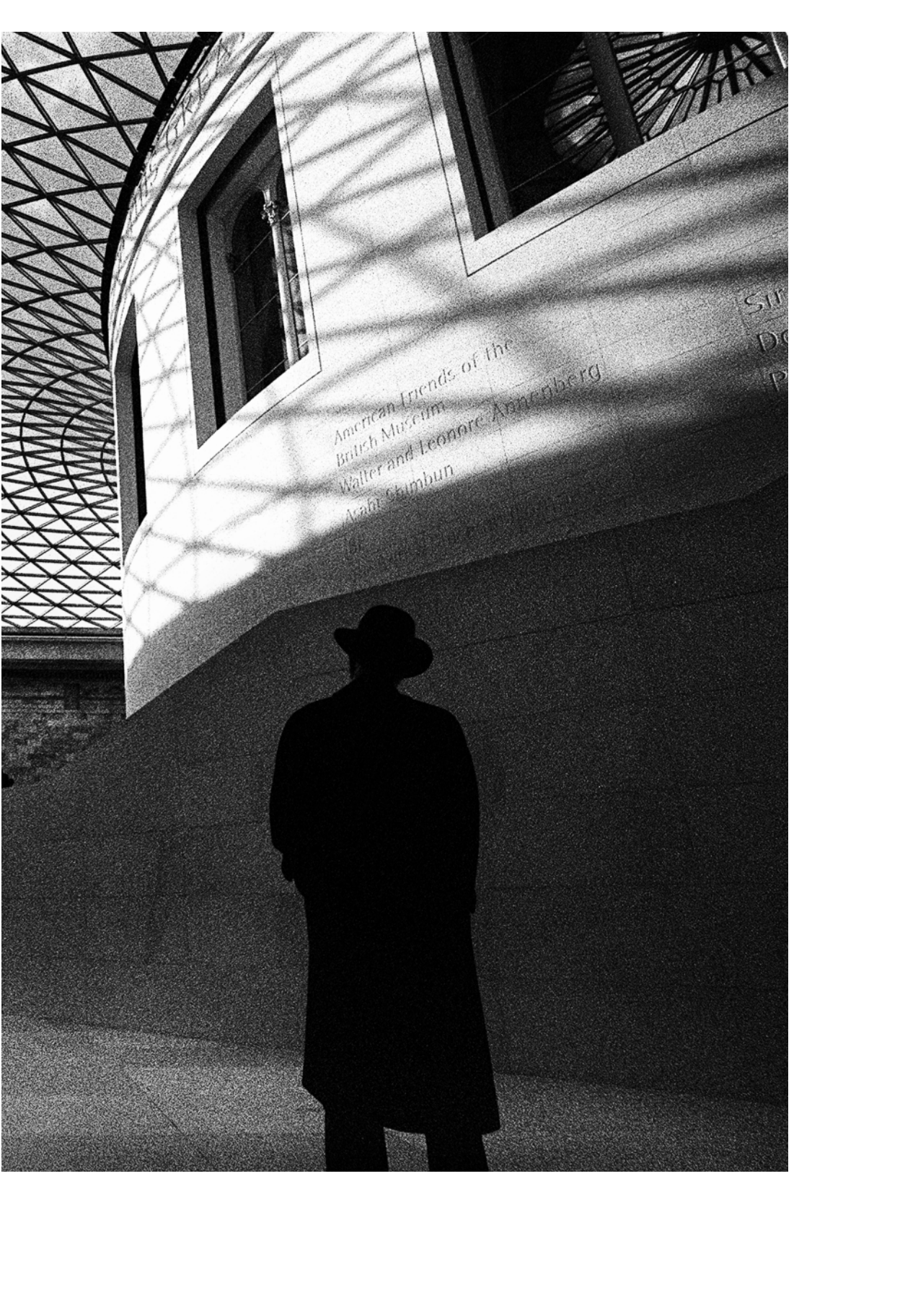
Yet the core of most of Britain's big cities enjoyed a revival through the 1990s, thanks to sustained growth in the service economy. Waves of National Lottery money and public spending have helped things along.** The city centres have survived the booms in out-of-town shopping, leisure and working which have devastated some smaller towns. People with money still want to work, meet, shop and play in city centres, and by and large they have become better places for all of these activities. Their great squares, public buildings and railway stations have been refurbished. That most wonderful of things, the tram, is making a comeback and whisking people in and out of them. They offer more shops and restaurants, bars and cafés, and better ones too. There are spectacular new concert halls, exhibition centres and galleries.

centred on Birmingham, West Yorkshire on Leeds, South Yorkshire on Sheffield, Merseyside on Liverpool and Tyne and Wear on Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

**And, in the case of Manchester, a huge IRA bomb explosion in 1996 which brought about a much praised redevelopment of its main shopping centre.

**National Lottery-driven renewal;
the British Museum's Great Court,**
overleaf





On the back of this has come a surge in city centre living led – as always – by London. Each year thousands of new homes are completed in the core of Britain's cities, by converting redundant offices, warehouses and shops or building new flats and town houses on canal banks, docksides and factory sites. This is highly fashionable and shows no signs of slowing but it is tiny compared to the flow to the suburbs and beyond. When young, prosperous loft dwellers plan babies they almost always get out of town. The city centre housing boom does not spread out into the tatty, sad badlands of the inner city which lie just beyond, into the council estates and the remaining rows of small Victorian and Edwardian terrace houses.

In a sane world the inner belt lying one to two miles out from the centre of Glasgow, Birmingham or Manchester should be where their more prosperous and successful citizens lived in grand houses. These would be the most desirable addresses, with the highest house prices. Work and play in the city centre would be just five or ten minutes away. The rest of us, with less spending power, would have to live in cheaper property further out, wasting more of our less valuable time in commuting to the centre. (Which is what happens, to some extent, in London, a very unusual British city.) But instead the inner belt is a doughnut of deprivation where the poorest citizens predominate. They often have little reason to travel to the city centre. They have no jobs to commute to and their lack of spending power makes them unwanted.

Some people will argue that all urban areas, from small towns to the largest conurbations, are bound to become divided into residential areas defined by income. Nothing can be done about this; it is as inevitable as the differences in incomes and wealth. They are missing the point. The bigger a British city, the more – in general – it has of more than its fair share of poverty, not just in its inner city but across the conurbation. Take Greater Manchester. Its population of 2.6 million is spread among 214 roughly equally populated electoral wards. Of these, 109 – more than half of its wards – belong among the most deprived fifth of all wards in England. But only eight in the whole of Greater Manchester belong to the least deprived fifth of all wards in England. The conurbation has a great excess of the deprived and a great deficit of the prosperous.⁵

The long exodus of people with choices from the larger cities is sabotaging Britain's chances of becoming a fairer, more meritocratic country. The mainstream left may have abandoned the idea of equality but it still stands for equality of opportunity, provided its pursuit does not offend focus groups. If UK plc is to remain a rich, first world country, its supply of bright, talented, hard-working people has to be maximised; we have to be open to talent. You are allowed to be poor, but only if you are lazy and unenterprising as well as stupid. When the electorate finally ejected the Conservatives in 1997 it had, somewhere near the front of its collective mind, the idea that New Labour stood for a fairer Britain. This would be achieved not so much by the old-fashioned method of redistributing income but by altering incentives and by social investment. At the heart of it all was Tony Blair's slogan,

'Education, education, education'. Improved state schools would enable the entirety of each new generation to fulfil its potential.

But the polarisation of our cities, the gradual abandonment of them by people with choices, make this quite impossible. It polarises the schools themselves. They are in the front line of urban decline, both its victim and its cause. This is such a big problem that it deserves, and gets, a chapter of its own later in this book. If a school is perceived to be a good one by local parents, its pupil numbers rise, it gets more money from the government and can expand – the money follows the pupils. Mothers and fathers who care about their children's education want to move into the catchment area of a good local school. Wealthier, owner-occupier parents have a much better chance of making this move than poorer ones living in council and housing association homes. This can push up house prices around the school, meaning you have to be wealthier still to make the move needed to get your children into it. Head teachers call it 'selection by mortgage'. Middle-class children whose parents are willing and able to fund helpful extras such as computer hardware dominate the intake. They have good reason to value education and they expect their kids to come away with clutches of qualifications. Most teachers would prefer to teach in this kind of school so head teachers find it easier to pick the best of them, which makes the school still more attractive to parents.

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The process tends to move in the opposite direction for schools serving declining inner city neighbourhoods or big, post-war council estates further out. The intake is dominated by children from poor households often lacking a home environment that encourages learning. The output has few or no qualifications. The school, and the quality of its teaching, are dragged down by its troubles. The government struggles to improve such schools and there are 'superheads' who have turned around some of those facing the worst of circumstances. But they are swimming against the tide. If our schools were less polarised between private and state education, and between very good and very bad state schools, their pupils would do better overall.

It is not just the unevenness of our education system that is sabotaging any chance of moving towards a meritocracy. Growing up in a deprived, declining urban area means shrunken horizons, stifled hopes and stunted opportunities. Of course, in a liberal democracy that craves new talent, some people escape from slums to enjoy brilliant careers, make their names and fortunes. Some young people who triumph over adversity do so because their innate quality wins through. Others may succeed because hardship nurtures some talent that would never have blossomed under an easier upbringing.⁶ But both types are exceptional. For every child from a bad neighbourhood who succeeds, there are dozens who could have been contenders but never had a chance. Raised in a wealthier home by confident parents they would have found happiness in work, in learning and travelling, bringing up children and making a home. Instead they will have shorter, emptier, lives. They are more likely to suffer mental and physical illness,

to be victims of crime or to become criminals, and to be bad parents. They will have no idea about how good life in a rich Western country can be for the majority of its citizens. But they will know enough, through television and visits to town centres and dealings with authority, to realise that they are missing out on a great deal and that the rest of society veers between blanking them out and holding them in contempt.

12 Swathes of our conurbations seem to be hopeless after decades of desertion and population loss. The extra costs to society of trying to cope with this failure and turn things around are colossal.* The bills for crime and insurance are much higher than they would otherwise be. So are those for policing (by officers who usually commute from the suburbs), for convicting offenders and then locking them up. People in deprived urban areas receive higher health and education** spending per capita than the population as a whole, and their need for state benefits – to help with rents, unemployment, low incomes, disability, council tax – are much greater. Their children are more likely to be placed in care, their families are more likely to need the help of social workers. The local councils that cover such areas are given extra government grants because they are so needy. All this extra public sector money is spent trying to compensate for the private sector's disinvestment, but it does not succeed. As the needs of the local people and the scale of the dereliction carry on rising, the area may succeed in bidding for some of the money the government earmarks for urban regeneration. By then the rot has usually gone too deep.

This process of pumping in more and more taxpayers' money as conditions deteriorate fails to turn things around because people who have money and choices do not want to live there. Employers do not want to have their workplaces there. And crucial state services such as schooling, policing and health services tend to deteriorate too because these are difficult places in which to provide them, and because residents' complaints go unspoken or ignored. Urban regeneration schemes that only attempt to make the local people better off – by giving them training, or better housing and schools, or subsidised jobs – will often disappoint. If, for instance, such a scheme gives a family steady employment, it will use the extra income to leave the area.

So it's as important to attract outsiders with jobs and money who have a choice about where they live to move into the area. It means spending some of the regeneration money not on poor local people but on outsiders, for example, in subsidising developers to build homes for sale. You may find this unjust, but a growing number of councils and other organisations involved in regeneration now accept it and have changed their priorities.

*A government-commissioned study found that public spending in the most deprived wards of three cities (in Liverpool, Nottingham and the London borough of Brent) was nearly 50 per cent higher per head than in

their least deprived wards. Public spending across these cities was also substantially higher, per capita, than the national average – 30 per cent in the case of Liverpool. G. Bramley, M. Evans and J. Atkins, *Where Does Public*

Local and national government need new policies to prevent the concentration of poor people in inner city and social housing ghettos. (Social housing is jargon for council and housing association homes; both have now acquired a tragic reputation for being anti-social.) If they succeeded there would be big savings in public expenditure and less crime and unemployment. Britain would become a less ashamed, more relaxed nation. If, however, we do not shift towards pro-urban, pro-social mixing policies, then we will lose a great deal more countryside under suburban sprawl and gain plenty more of roads and traffic. Worse than these, though, will be the widening gap between rich and poor. Our cities will become more like the USA's grotesquely divided conurbations than they already are and the bills will go on rising.

Arguably the greatest disappointment of Labour's first term in office for 18 years was the slow progress in reducing relative poverty and absolute inequality. The number of people in households with very low incomes in 1998/99 (defined as less than 40 per cent of average incomes after housing costs) was nearly nine million or one in seven citizens – half a million higher than in 1996/97 and *four times* the level of the early 1980s.⁷ And this despite several years of solid economic growth and shrinking unemployment.

The government could claim that its introduction of a statutory minimum wage and other tax and benefit-based income supplements would sharply reduce poverty and inequality in the coming years. Its problem is that it has to make expensive interventions in people's incomes in order to compensate for what appears to be an underlying increase in earnings inequality. What is causing the gap between prosperous and poor to widen?

It is partly the premium salaries commanded by skilled, educated people in a global economy that depends increasingly on knowledge, information and creativity. It is partly the legacy of years of high unemployment which crushed individuals and families and left many unable to benefit from the boom. But high unemployment also crushed entire neighbourhoods while planning and housing policies have concentrated poor people and made their prospects worse. The gap is widening because poverty clings to places as well as to families.

We need to prevent it from doing so, but this involves going against the grain of individual freedom and choice. The majority of Britons who can afford their own housing want to live in suburbs, smaller towns or the countryside and they usually choose to get as far away from the poor as their budgets allow. This brings us back to the widely shared ideal of a meritocratic Britain and the huge, never-to-be-resolved conflict surrounding it. We want equal opportunity for everyone but extra for our children and ourselves; one crucial way of striving for that extra is by

Spending Go? A Pilot Study to Analyse the Flows of Public Expenditure to Local Areas, London, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1998.

**Up to the age of 16. Beyond that, the much greater middle-class take-up of sixth form and higher education opportunity comes into its own.

choosing to live in a more affluent area. Any policies which forced the prosperous to live closer to the poor, which made families settle in places they do not wish to, would be impossible to implement. This would be another kind of social injustice and democratic politics would, quite rightly, rule it out. People have to be attracted into cities by an urban renaissance, by improvements to the physical and social environment that benefit everyone.

But, at the same time, there has to be much more restraint on building over greenfield sites. The penultimate chapter sketches a radical reform of Britain's planning system that could do that. The form of what is built also has to change – higher densities (but not overcrowding, nor smaller rooms, nor an end to private gardens) and streetscapes which look as if they are designed for people, not their cars. More terraced houses and apartments (do not call them flats), more mixing of homes, workplaces and shops, less space wasted on over-broad roads, roundabouts and functionless grass verges.

The agenda is the re-urbanisation of Britain, and it has at last moved into the political mainstream. For years it was the preserve of environmentalists and a few radical architects and planners who have concentrated on buildings, transport and public space rather than on people's feelings about cities and each other. Sometimes the urban revivalists have displayed a woeful lack of realism. *Going to Town*,⁸ a cheerful pamphlet published in 1998 by the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the Civic Trust, has plenty of good ideas. But it seriously underplays some of the most important forces driving those with choice out of cities. Its opening paragraph puts 'ill-equipped and overcrowded' schools in a list of urban ills, side-stepping something far more important and intractable – that they are seen to be bad schools where you do not get many or any GCSEs. Crime and poverty in cities receive little more than a mention.

Designing buildings and masterplanning entire urban quarters that look wonderful is a much more controllable, predictable process than turning urban fortunes around. Artists' illustrations and models usually show little people contentedly shopping, strolling and sipping coffee on terraces. But will real people with real money want to live in the city?

In 1999, a government-appointed Urban Task Force, chaired by the superstar architect Lord Rogers of Riverside, published a superb report advising ministers on how to achieve an urban renaissance.⁹ It was packed with 105 firm recommendations and numerous further proposals, most of them excellent, which government ought to get on with implementing. Yet, to my mind, the task force erred at the outset in stating that urban regeneration must be 'design led'. It will be led by people, by public and private money, and by addressing the inequalities between inner city and outer suburb, between declining conurbations and booming hinterlands, between north and south.

Above all, we have to achieve a good social environment in our towns and cities. The failure to give this proper weight in the debate to date explains why

urban regeneration has remained a minority taste despite being a political priority for decades. It is not surprising that the most important players in this game, the house-buying public and the housebuilding industry, have not been won over. That will only happen when there are clear signs that the problems of poor schools, crime and polarisation can be overcome.

We need to bring jobs and wealth into deprived areas by encouraging people with money to live in them, or next to them. And we need to stop areas from becoming deprived because residents who make money choose to get out of them. By people with money I mean home-owners and potential home-owners, a category that includes most British adults.

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Much of what this book argues for can only be done by central and local governments and their various arms, with the support of – or at least with minimum resistance from – business people, investors, developers and housing associations. It is, after all, for governments to lead and organise when the pursuit of self-interest goes against the collective interest. But there are other compelling reasons why it falls to government to rock the boat, to fashion a new, more compact and socially mixed kind of suburbia and to interfere with the deep-rooted, long-running tendency to quit urban areas. Whitehall and Westminster and the town halls are, effectively, landlords to Britain's poor. It is the social housing they financed which dominates the most deprived parts of Britain. And it is they who allow suburbia to carry on spreading out from towns and cities by granting planning permission for developers to build on greenfield sites. This facilitates the flight from cities, thereby contributing to the urban decline which the government then spends huge sums trying to reverse. The state helped make this mess and it is up to its neck in it.

Even so, the state cannot do it alone. People's attitudes to cities will have to change. I ought to say something about my own. Until 1993 our family's home was a small, terraced, late Victorian house in the inner London borough of Greenwich. It was in a street and an area with a mixture of social housing and owner occupation, densities were fairly high, and the journey to work by public transport was quick and easy. Then we moved eight miles further out to an archetypal inter-war semi on the very edge of London, in Bromley, to an area of almost uniform owner-occupied housing a quarter of a mile from Green Belt countryside. Densities were low, commuting to the centre was long and tedious. If that made me a hypocrite, then at least I was a contrite and dissatisfied one. The main reason for moving out of inner London was the same as many other people's; that we believed that our children would get a better state education. We missed Greenwich, which was a livelier, more interesting and convenient place than Hayes, Bromley.

Attitudes and culture can change. Many of Britain's big cities still have beautiful, desirable residential areas near their hearts such as Glasgow's West End and Bristol's Clifton. More and more children have been leaving their suburban homes for big city universities and finding that life there can be, well, interesting. And each year an increasing number of Britons visit continental cities like Amsterdam, Paris



and Barcelona where urban living is more the norm for all classes. They come away wondering why our own conurbations are so segregated and drab. There are, furthermore, more and more people who will not join in the national fantasy of owning a rural cottage. Among them are Britain's millions of citizens from ethnic minorities. They do not see the countryside as a long lost home; it is a place where white people still stare at them.

So there is hope and the possibility of change. An urban renaissance could turn out to be more than a government slogan. We can revive our towns and cities by making them places where people with choices would want to live. We need to think about sharing the city, of achieving a social balance, for there would be no overall gain if an urban renaissance merely forced the poor to shift, concentrating them somewhere else. Before looking at how these things can be done, we have to try to understand how our cities became so divided and unloved. That requires some history.

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Chapter 2

DARKSHIRE AND COKETOWN THE APPROACH TO 1900

I am always haunted by the awfulness of London: by the great, appalling fact of these millions cast down, as it would appear by hazard, on the banks of this noble stream, working each in their own groove and their own cell, without regard of knowledge of each other, without heeding each other, without having the slightest idea how the other lives – the heedless casualty of unnumbered thousands of men. Sixty years ago, a great Englishman, Cobbett called it a wen. If it was a wen then, what is it now? A tumour, an elephantiasis sucking into its gorged system half the life and blood and the bone of the rural districts.

Lord Rosebery, Liberal Chairman of the London County Council,
quoted by Ebenezer Howard in *Tomorrow*, 1898¹

The whole of the island – set as thick with chimneys as the masts stand in the docks of Liverpool; that there shall be no meadows in it; no trees; no gardens; only a little corn grown upon the house tops, reaped and thrashed by steam; that you do not even have room for roads, but travel either over the roofs of your mills, on viaducts; or under their floors, in tunnels; that, the smoke having rendered the light of the sun unserviceable, you work always by the light of your town gas: that no acre of English ground shall be without its shaft and its engine.

John Ruskin, *The Two Paths*, 1859²

A Lancashire village has expanded into a mighty region of factories and warehouses. Yet, rightly understood, Manchester is as great a human exploit as Athens.

Benjamin Disraeli, *Coningsby, or The New Generation*, 1832 [1844]³

I HAD A HISTORY TEACHER who would wearily tell the class, several times each term, that nothing was ever really new. Every thing had already happened, somewhere, sometime, before. His favourite example concerned the hippies who, by the early 1970s, were waning. Hippies were old hat, he would say. They had been around in the French Revolution; *les incroyables* were famed for their outrageous hairstyles and clothing. The daftness of this argument made us break out of our adolescent torpor. What about, say, moon landings (also waning in the early 1970s)? Surely they were genuinely original? After a moment's thought he pointed out that the Chinese had invented rocketry nearly a thousand years earlier.

The debate about cities is also nothing new. Arguments about the evils of the urban environment, the sprawl of suburbia and the implicit abandonment of the poor by the rich have been going on for centuries. Even so, things change; there are fresh opportunities to get cities right. A lightning tour through the past two centuries, stopping at four stations along the way, allows us to recognise how our cities became so segregated and why they keep on growing outwards while large parts of their innards rot. It also helps us to see what these new possibilities are. Our first halt is at 1900, to fling a backward glance over the nineteenth century. From then on we roughly halve the length of time crossed to each successive station, focusing more and more closely on the approach to the year 2000.

Over the years, one history has been about the city within. On the inside, the city is a stressful, unhealthy, overcrowded environment where both physical and social conditions are bad, especially for the poor. But people have had to put up with this because of the sheer necessity of the city to industry, trade and economic growth, and perhaps to culture and government as well. The need for businesses and workers to be in the city forces up land values, making landlords and developers squeeze too much onto every available square foot. Growth engenders more growth; hence the repulsive nineteenth-century imagery of the wen (cyst) or tumour. The great issues have been how to better house the poor and how to improve the urban environment.

Another history has concerned the city without, mourning the loss of beloved countryside resulting from the disgorgement of suburbs that transport improvements allowed. And fearing that huge areas of Britain would eventually be entirely built up. And launching attack after attack on these growing suburbs. They have faced repeated accusations of being badly planned, wasteful, and of acting like parasites on the cities they grew from. They have been criticised, again and again, as boring, escapist dormitories for small-minded, inward-looking people. Often this has been

motivated by snobbishness, a case of people sneering at their perceived inferiors who have tried to climb one rung up the social ladder by moving to the suburbs. The salvoes have come from aesthetes raging against vulgar tastes, against feeble, backward-looking architecture and from left-wing thinkers dismayed by the social uniformity of the suburbs and the shunning of the poor that their development implied. You can see their point, but there is something futile and misguided in much of this criticism. It does not really engage with the fact that suburbanisation is a long-running mass movement that has bettered millions and millions of lives.

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At the dawn of a new century we can be confident that no previous hundred years has witnessed such awesome change. In 1900 the British establishment felt similarly privileged. It was their exploding cities which most impressed, appalled and divided them. The world had never seen such things. The nation's population nearly quadrupled in the nineteenth century and by 1851 over half of the people were living in towns and cities, an urbanisation landmark which the United States would not reach until 1920. The first national Census, in 1801, found only one British town with a population above 100,000 – London with 959,000 inhabitants. By 1901 there were twenty-five, nine of them with over a quarter of a million people, while the number of Londoners had swollen to 6.5 million. The proportion of the population living in towns and cities had risen from a third to more than three-quarters.⁴

Good Victorians struggled to make sense of these cities, to bring order, civilisation and justice amid their darkness. And it was darkness. The colours of the Victorian city are mostly dark greys, browns and blacks – smuts and smoke, soot-encrusted brick, grime, excrement, stagnant streams and rivers, fog. The idea of a permanent urban night was a popular literary metaphor. Some railed at the ugliness of cities, some wished or forecast that they would fade away. The greatest worry was the urban poor, who were regarded with as much fear as pity.

Rapid population growth, combined with the physical separation of the classes that was the hallmark of nineteenth-century cities, turned the poor into a great unknown. Who were these people who no longer went to church, who drank, who lived in such squalor and sometimes died like flies? Was a new, degraded race being bred in the cities? If there was a war, would they be any use as fighting men? Would Chartists and socialists inflame them into revolt? The poor – and especially those at the very bottom of the heap, the Irish immigrants – were something less than human in the minds, speeches and pamphlets of both reformers and reactionaries. The favourite term to describe poor housing was a rookery, accommodating a croaking, breeding mass of scavenging beings perched one on top of each other.

The shadow of Victorian urban poverty was cast down our century and can still make us shudder today. There is something akin to a national guilt about it, passed down through the nineteenth-century's great novels, through today's media and

political debates, school history lessons and textbooks. We still have the habit of thinking of the most deprived city dwellers as subhuman. How else could a word like ‘underclass’ gain such wide currency, or tabloid journalists refer (among themselves) to the roughest and poorest of their readers as ‘pond life’?

But industrialisation and the explosion of cities that was part of it did bring about an overall rise in living standards. People ‘got on’ and the middle class expanded. Death rates came down, from around 26 per 1,000 people each year in 1800 to 16 in 1900.⁵ As increasingly prosperous consumers the Victorians demanded single family homes in new suburbs and got millions of them. They installed the public transport systems that made longer journeys to work – well beyond walking distance – possible, first to the middle classes and then to the upper working classes. The semi-detached home, the halfway house between country villa and terraced town dwelling that became the twentieth-century’s chief suburban symbol, was invented early in theirs.⁶ They belatedly engineered large reductions in the risks of disease that resulted from concentrating huge numbers of people. By the end of their century they were close to accepting that the free market would never provide a huge section of the poor with acceptable homes and that large-scale subsidy – by charities or the state – was needed.

In 1800 houses were creeping out along the roads that radiated from the larger towns and cities, sometimes joined together in terraces, while more and more detached villas were appearing in the surrounding market gardens and meadows to add to this ribbon development. Places that we would recognise as suburbs already existed but they were few and small. The term was already in common use; Chaucer had made a disparaging reference in his *Canterbury Tales* written more than 400 years earlier.* Both rich and poor were to be found living outside the city, the former at some distance, the latter right next to it. Travelling in each day by private carriage or on horseback to attend to one’s business while sleeping in a fine country house miles outside town was nothing unusual. But the land fringing the built-up area had, for centuries, been a place for undesirables who needed to be close to the city but whom the townspeople, or the authorities, wanted to keep out. The most foul-smelling industries could be found there along with frowned on entertainments and people breaking the closed shop of the urban craft guilds.

For most of the nineteenth century, the growing numbers of industrial, increasingly urban, labourers needed to live very close to the new factories, workshops, docks and mines. They walked to work and it was quite common to go home during meal breaks or for wives or daughters to bring food to the factory.

* *Where dwelle ye? if it to telle be.
‘In the suburbes of a toun,’ quod he,
Lurkyng in hernes and in lanes blynde,
Where-as thise robbours and thise theves, by kynde,
Holden hir pryvee, fereful residence.*

From the Prologue of the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale

**When Sir Titus Salt had his new alpaca mill built in the countryside near Bradford in 1853 he also commissioned 850 homes (mainly two-bedroom terrace cottages), 45 almshouses, 2 churches, a school, bathhouses, shops, a 6-hectare park, steam laundry and a hospital. Saltaire had twenty-two streets and took almost 20 years to build.

New housing often had to be put up near the new workplaces and a few factory owners took pride in providing clean, well-ventilated homes built to last, sometimes on a grand scale.** But most built as cheaply and as densely as possible, while the bulk of labour had to rely on what the rental market rather than employers would provide. Even if single cottages were originally constructed to house single families, relatives and other lodgers would crowd in. It was common to have half a dozen adults and children sleeping in each small room, several to a bed. The most desperate slept in damp, badly ventilated cellar rooms.

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Some of the large merchant houses along the main streets in the old town centre would be subdivided for numerous poor families. The yards and gardens behind the big old houses would become jam-packed with tiny terrace homes. These would enclose a small court connected to the street by a narrow entrance, often covered and tunnel-like. The dozens of residents in each court would share one or two latrines unconnected to a sewer. Large parts of the old centres turned into stinking mazes of these chaotic courts connected by alleys one or two yards wide. Further out from the town centre, on greenfield sites, two-storey terraces of back-to-back housing were thrown up along new streets. The front side of each house would open directly onto the street, the back would share a windowless wall with the row behind.

There might be some fairly high density building for the wealthy near the town centre, in imposing, speculatively-built terraces which sought to make a collective rather than an individual statement about the high rank of their inhabitants. In London, aristocratic developers had already begun to lay out exclusive estates between the old, walled city and the Palace of Westminster in the seventeenth century. This trend continued in and around the West End through the nineteenth century, creating tracts of grand homes and neighbourhoods that have stayed extremely wealthy to this day. In other burgeoning cities the old elite and the *nouveau riche* were more likely to decamp into the countryside proper, building detached villas and mansions set amid large gardens. Smaller and medium-sized industrial towns came to be dominated by the new workers' housing scattered around the mills and mines that brought them there. But in the very largest cities and the great ports, where commerce, finance and administration grew alongside industry, the suburban growth was more variegated. There was a larger market for middle- and upper-class suburbs.

Karl Marx's collaborator Friedrich Engels sums up the social geography strikingly in his description of mid-century Manchester. At the time it was Britain's second

Other rare examples of large nineteenth-century industrialists providing carefully planned housing with amenities for their workers on greenfield sites were soap tycoon William Lever's Port Sunlight, Birkenhead, constructed from 1888, and chocolate magnate George Cadbury's Bournville outside Birmingham from 1894.

largest city with a population of around 400,000 and the greatest manufacturing centre in the world:

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all Manchester proper, all Salford and Hulme, a great part of Pendleton and Chorlton, two thirds of Ardwick and single stretches of Cheetham Hill and Broughton are all unrivalled working-people's quarters, stretching like a girdle, averaging a mile and a half in breadth, around the commercial district. Outside, beyond this girdle, lives the upper and middle bourgeoisie, the middle bourgeoisie in regularly laid out streets in the vicinity of the working quarters, especially in Chorlton and Ardwick, or on the breezy heights of Cheetham Hill, Broughton and Pendleton, in free wholesome country air, in fine comfortable houses passed once every half or quarter hour by omnibuses going into the city.⁷

He goes on to condemn the 'hypocritical plan' that hid slums behind rows of shops lining the thoroughfares leading into town. Today, Manchester's deprived inner city girdle has widened itself by a couple of miles, and his fine comfortable houses have either vanished under later council housing or been subdivided for tenants who are not of the bourgeoisie. Shops and other commercial premises along the main roads still do a pretty good job of concealing sad neighbourhoods with littered streets and abandoned houses from passing traffic.

Engels' long description of Manchester in *The Condition of the Working Class in England from Personal Observation and Authentic Sources* bristles with anger and disgust. As his title suggests, he was challenging his contemporaries to doubt his findings. The young German was convinced that England was at the cutting edge of the most stupendously important period in world history, and that Manchester was on the very edge of that edge. But what is most startling about this urban portrait painted more than 150 years ago is that its main features are so recognisably modern; the separation of rich and poor, the wealthy, outermost suburbs, then a 'doughnut of deprivation', then a large commercial district at the core with heavy traffic, brightly lit shops, big offices and hardly any homes remaining because high property values had squeezed them all out.

This is the essence of the twentieth-century British and North American city. It anticipates the influential 'ecological model' of the modern conurbation developed by the University of Chicago sociologist E.W. Burgess in the 1920s and taught to generations of geography students. The further out you travel, the more affluent the suburbs become. In Burgess' scheme of things the most recently arrived immigrants, the poorest of the poor, live just outside the commercial core, in the oldest, most dilapidated and overcrowded properties – as the Irish did in mid-nineteenth-century Manchester, followed by the Pakistanis and Afro-Caribbeans in big British cities after the Second World War.

In pre-industrial cities rich, poor and middling lived close to each other, with the finest dwellings for the wealthiest inhabitants nearest the centre. Victorian cities

separated social classes as never before and Manchester seems to have done this earlier than most. Historians have argued that there were other British towns where the middle and upper classes stayed near the centre for longer (in London, they never left), and where rich and poor remained intermingled well into the nineteenth century. Maybe so, but by 1900 segregation was the urban norm.

The image of suburbs falling into neat, concentric rings based on their class ranking is, of course, an oversimplification. A more realistic diagram for the big British city at the turn of the century is of these rings broken by wedges which had been shaped by public transport routes and barriers like rivers, railway lines and parkland. Some working-class neighbourhoods extended to the city edge, some middle-class enclaves stretched to the heart of the city. Often the wealthier neighbourhoods tended to be on better drained, higher ground and out to the west, where the prevailing winds kept the smoke from factories and houses away. For our purposes, what matters is that when families with incomes and wealth chose to move in the city, it tended to be outwards. Today they still do.

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By 1900 the capital and the nation's other big cities had disgorged numerous suburbs, each larger than every British town excepting London had been 100 years before. The four parishes that made up the old London borough of Camberwell had, for instance, seen their combined population climb from 40,000 at the 1841 Census to 260,000 in 1901.⁸ What had been quite separate villages in 1800 were entirely engulfed.

The process of suburbanisation looked something like this. The ribbon development along the roads leading out of cities would thicken from individual houses to terraces. Entire streets lined with homes would go up on the fields behind these roads and within two or three decades the meadows and market gardens would vanish completely. Next the big gardens surrounding mansions that had been built decades or centuries earlier with usually urban-made fortunes would be sold off as building plots, and often the mansions themselves would be demolished to make way for housing. This obliteration was the work of tens of thousands of small, speculative building firms which, considering their numbers, managed to turn out remarkably uniform housing.⁹ They used pattern books, they had a pretty similar idea of what their market wanted and as the century passed they relied increasingly on mass-produced materials. Their products would usually be for rent and the builders would commonly be leasing their plots for between 30 and 100 years from landowners – often aristocrats, sometimes fairly humble smallholders – on condition that they build houses on them. When these building leases expired, the land reverted back to the original landowners (or whoever had since bought the freehold) who could then profit by raising the rents. Sometimes the building land was sold freehold, and sometimes on the 'fee farm' or 'chief rent' basis, in which the land was granted in perpetuity but was still subject to fixed annual payments to the vendor.

A complicated suburbanisation market developed with various players. There was the landowner, the housebuilder, the developer acting as middleman and laying

down streets and sewers before selling off building plots, the investor (often a moderately wealthy individual rather than a bank or some other financial institution) providing capital for the builder or eventually buying the completed homes as an investment. The same person or organisation might take several of these roles in creating a suburb. As the century passed, a few made colossal fortunes, larger companies became more common and the expanding building societies financed the construction of huge numbers of new houses, mostly for rent rather than owner occupation.

Suburbanisation was a major industry that pushed towns and cities out into the countryside in fits and starts as recessions came and went. Old paths and roads, field and woodland boundaries determined the shape of the buildings plots, so while order and harmony might prevail among the new streets on any single plot, the overall layout of the growing town looked chaotic. Land was supplied relatively cheaply and with few restraints, allowing a particularly English taste for single-family houses to be satisfied. One home per family was what the Victorian reformers advocated on the grounds of moral and physical health, and in the second half of the century it was supplied in bulk to the middle and much of the working classes but never to the poorest families.

In Scotland, however, four- to five-storey tenements with one or more homes on each floor were the norm. These handsome stone buildings, some built for high-income tenants, are what makes cities north of the border so obviously different from English ones. This was probably due to the widespread use of fee farm – or feu farm as it is known in Scotland – tenure. The vendor of land for housing development would negotiate as high a permanent annual rent as possible, which put pressure on the purchaser to maximise the number of tenants and so build higher. Once tenements began to appear instead of cottages and two-storey terraces, this cemented the high price for development land around the growing Scottish towns, reinforcing the high-rise habit.¹⁰

The new suburbanians were hoping to escape epidemics and high infant mortality. Drainage, clean water and fresh air were key selling points on the edge of cities in which cesspits overflowed, cellars became flooded with ordure and ‘varying attenuations of sewage’ from shallow boreholes masqueraded, as the pioneering suburban historian H.J. Dyos so nicely put it, as drinking water. The 1845 auction particulars for a plot of building land in Camberwell read:

Bath Road already runs through the estate and has a Famous Sewer already constructed from one end to the other, and there is a deep gravelly soil throughout this locality forming also a natural drainage which, together with the salubrious air for which the neighbourhood is proverbial, have gained for Peckham its present celebrity for promoting health and longevity.¹¹

The better sort of Victorian suburbia: tenements in Glasgow’s West End, facing