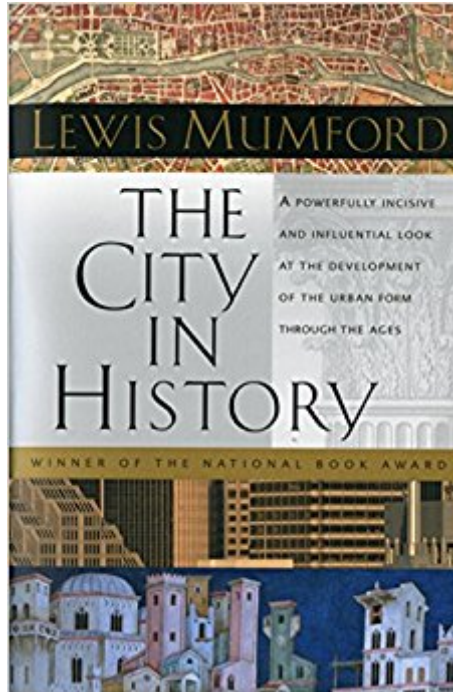


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# The City In History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, And Its Prospects



## Synopsis

The city's development from ancient times to the modern age. Winner of the National Book Award. "One of the major works of scholarship of the twentieth century" (Christian Science Monitor). Index; illustrations.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Lewis Mumford deftly explores the formation and development of the city from its early Mesopotamian and Egyptian roots to its modern day manifestations. It is the logical extension of his earlier works on the subject, in particular "The Culture of Cities," which has been partially absorbed into this volume. Of particular interest to me is his analysis of the walled versus open cities, and the sharply opposing world views of the progenitors of these cities. Mumford was particularly drawn to the early Hellenic and later medieval town planning ideals. He noted how the early cities knew their limits, and established satellite communities, rather than continually extend their boundaries. Loose-knit federations were formed, which were much more democratic than were the Roman and Baroque regimental cities. He charts the evolution of modern city planning ideals, very critical of Le Corbusier's "Radiant City" and other megalomaniac ideas which arose in the 20th century. Mumford favored the "garden city" ideals of Ebenezer Howard, which recognized the destructive impact of industrialization on urban centers; rather than those schemes which extolled the industrial city as the city of the future. Mumford is careful not to over reach, or at least let you know when he is forming suppositions. His annotated bibliography is immense, and probably the single most compelling aspect of this book for those who want to read more on the subject. The new Harcourt

paperback edition, which came when I ordered this volume, has a more handsome cover than that shown in this listing.

Things Lewis Mumford likes: medieval towns and "garden city" ideals. Things Lewis Mumford does not like: Roman cities and capitalism. If you can make it through this dense, comprehensive work you will have a much better understanding of the history of cities. You will learn how they came into existence, what functions they performed, and what purposes they filled throughout time. Mumford asserts that "human life swings between two poles: movement and settlement." To illustrate this, he takes readers from the earliest cave dwellings up to the modern era. Well, the modern era of the 1960s, when *The City in History* was written. Though he has been criticized for veering off-point with his anti-capitalist sentiments and his fears about the future, as well as his failure to acknowledge any contributions made by certain periods (i.e. Roman), this is still a book to be reckoned with. *The City in History* is still referenced by urban planners, sociologists, etc. today and really makes you think about cities in a whole new way. This may not be the book you take with you to the beach, but it is still one of the best starting point for those who want to better understand how the urban form has evolved (you should also check out *Cities Perceived: Urban Society in European and American Thought, 1820-1940*). The style may be dry at times (with so much information to touch on, this is difficult to avoid), but Mumford presents things in an interesting way. Like his point that the dead were the first in history to have permanent dwellings! Graveyard - I never thought of that, but it's true!

After two hundred pages I wanted to give this book five stars, but after finishing it, I was almost ready to give it three stars. This book is what it says it is, "*The City in History*". Starting in the neolithic era, Mumford marches through all of recorded time and place (place being limited to the Near East, Greece, Rome, Europe and America) to bring, you, the reader, his thoughts on the role and "prospects" of the city. In the beginning, it's an exhilarating ride. Mumford is not shy about advancing bold arguments. Although the book starts with sections on the city in Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, he doesn't really get excited until he gets to Ancient Greece. I'd say it's clear from the text that Mumford is a fan of Ancient Greece, particularly Athens between the 7th and 6th century B.C. Then it's off to Rome. Mumford is a harsh critic of Roman culture. His critique of the Roman method of burial (take bodies just outside city limits, dump, bury) contrains so much righteous indignation you might think the Romans were still pottering around when he wrote this book. After Rome, we get an equally stirring defense of the Middle (don't call them "Dark" around

Mumford) Ages. Mumford is a big fan of the city in the late middle ages. As an example, Mumford uses Amsterdam. Specifically, what Mumford likes about this time period is the community involvement by the ruling elites. Like many other social critics, Mumford is not a huge fan of the impact that capitalism and industrialization have had on the modern city. Unlike some of the other reviewers below, I don't really hold that against him. He was writing in the sixties, people!!! However, I do admit that by the last hundred or so pages, when Mumford starts despairing of the future of the city, the whole tirade started to get tired. I'm not sure I would recommend this for a general reader.

This is more than a look at the development of the urban organization. It's an examination of society as a whole. This is one of the few books that actually covers all interesting areas of human social development, i.e. political science, religion, sociology, anthropology, economics, etc. The book more than tells the story of the city's development, it explains why today's society functions in the way it does.

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