

voices of dispersal

A city is composed of different kinds of men; similar people cannot bring a city into existence.

Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls. Each of them withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest. Mankind, for him, consists in his children and his personal friends. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, they are near enough, but he does not notice them. He touches them but feels nothing. He exists in and for himself, and though he still may have a family, one can at least say that he has not got a fatherland.

Alexis de Tocqueville, 1831

The freedom to travel safely and quickly and comfortably on our highways is not a little freedom, it is a big one.

Freedom of the American Road, A Ford Motor film, c. 1930s

I'm Helen Rathburn, the fourth grade teacher at the new elementary school. I came here today just to listen, I didn't expect to say anything. But after hearing some of the arguments against the new highway proposal, I would like to say just one thing. I work all day with children, and they're your children. Your children will have a better country to live in because of these roads. Can't you see that these highways mean a whole new way of life for the children?

Highway Hearing, A Dow Chemical film, c. 1930s

The romantic suburb...a collective effort to live a private life....

Lewis Mumford, 1938

Year by year our cities grow more complex and less fit for living. The age of rebuilding is here. We must remould our old cities and build new communities better suited to our needs.

The City, 1939

What America drives, drives America.

American Automobile Manufacturers Association slogan, c. 1940s

This is Agony Alley—morning rush and evening wait. What's a citizen gonna do? DON'T HONK YOUR HORN. RAISE YOUR VOICE. ASK FOR BETTER HIGHWAYS AND MORE PARKING SPACES. It's your country. Give yourself the GREEN LIGHT.

A General Motors Production, c. 1940s

In one degree or another, the tendency to planless dispersion is world-wide; in a hundred futile ways people seek an individual solution for their social problem, and so ultimately create a second social problem.

Lewis Mumford, 1945

Though only the few penetrate the screen that habits of thought and conduct form in their time, it is good for all of us to pause sometimes, to think, wonder and maybe worry; to ask 'where are we now?' It is always difficult to comprehend one's own time. Because, living in it, the presuppositions of beliefs are obscured by their very familiarity; the customary is outside the realm of questioning and so is easily overlooked. What we are clearly aware of today is our feeling of amazed confusion. A decisive aspect of this general feeling of instability is due to today's technique of communication. Since it stresses the moment, it accelerates the process of rise and fall of ideas. We see different beliefs in quick succession

or simultaneity, contradicting each other, overlapping each other. Faced with such devastating multiplicity, we are often forced to submit to indecision or to opinions, easily changeable, not worth being called convictions. Concerned with form and with the shape of objects surrounding us—that is, with design—we will have to look at the things we have made. With the evidence of our work before us, we cannot escape its verdict. Today it tells us of separateness, of segregation and fragmentation. Pure forms will never bore us. Neither do we ever tire of nature. We have to learn from her to avoid overstatement and obviousness. We have to become aware of nature's subtlety and her fine surprises, and to translate these into our idiom. It is easy to invent the extravagant, the pretentious, and the exciting; but these are passing, leaving us only neurotic aimlessness. The things that have lasted and the things that will last are never subject to quick fashion. That good work and great work have been able to survive, we make take as a sign of the good sense in us, buried under temporary nonsense. Instead of adjusting our work to the public demand of the moment, let us direct it to this true sense of underlying value.

Anni Albers, 1947

The suburban house is the idealization of every immigrant's dream—the vassal's dream of his own castle. It is a universal aspiration to own your own home.

Edgardo Contini, c. 1950

Oh Almighty God, Who has given us this Earth, and has appointed Man to have domination over it, Who has commanded us to make straight the Highways, to lift up the Valleys, and to make the Mountains low, we ask Thy blessing. Bless these, our Nation's Roadbuilders, and their Friends.

Roadbuilders Prayer, 1956

Talking to Americans is usually extremely uphill work. We are afraid to reveal ourselves because we trust ourselves so little. American attitudes are appalling, but so are the attitudes of most of the people of the world. What is stultifying here is that our attitude is presented as the person; one is expected to justify the attitude in order to reassure the person—whom, alas, one has yet to meet, who is light-years away, in some dreadful, private labyrinth. And in this labyrinth the person is desperately trying NOT to find out what he REALLY thinks. Therefore, the truth cannot be told, even about one's attitudes: we live by lies. And not only, for example, about race—whatever, by this time, in this country, or, indeed, in the world, this word may mean—but also about our very natures. The lie has permeated to our most private moments, and the most secret chambers of our hearts. Nothing more sinister can happen, in any society, to any people. And when it happens, it means that the people are caught in a kind of vacuum between their present and their past—the romanticized, that is, the maligned past, and the denied and dishonored present. It is a crisis of identity. And in such a crisis, at such a pressure, it becomes absolutely indispensable to discover, or invent—the two words, here, are synonymous—the stranger, the barbarian, who is responsible for our confusion and our pain. Once he is driven out—destroyed—then we can be at peace: those questions will be gone. Of course, those questions never go, but it has always seemed much easier to murder than to change. And this is really the choice with which we are confronted now.

James Baldwin, 1964

The energy crisis cannot be overwhelmed by more energy inputs. It can only be dissolved, along with the illusion that well-being depends on the number of energy slaves a man has at his command. For this purpose, it is necessary to identify the thresholds beyond which energy corrupts, and to do so by a political process that associates the community in the search for limits. Each community has to identify the levels of inequity, harrying, and operant conditioning that its members are willing to accept in exchange for the satisfaction that comes of idolizing powerful devices and joining in rituals directed by professionals who control their operation. A true choice among practical policies and of desirable social relations is possible only where speed is restrained. Participatory democracy demands low-energy technology, and free people must travel the road to productive social relations at the speed of a bicycle.

Ivan Illich, 1973

Unlike the vacuum cleaner, the radio, or the bicycle, which retain their use value when everyone has one, the car, like a villa by the sea, is only desirable and useful insofar as the masses don't have one. That is how in both conception and original purpose the car is a luxury good. And the essence of luxury is that it cannot be democratized. If everyone can have luxury, no one gets any advantages from it. Above all, never make transportation an issue in itself. Always connect it to the problem of the city, of the social division of labour, and to the way this compartmentalizes the many dimensions of life. One place for work, another for "living," a third for shopping, a fourth for learning, a fifth for entertainment. The way our space is arranged carries on the disintegration of people that begins with the division of labour in the factory. It cuts a person into slices, it cuts our time, our life, into separate slices so that in each one you are a passive consumer at the mercy of the merchants, so that it never occurs to you that work, culture, communication, pleasure, satisfaction of needs, and personal life can and should be one and the same thing: a unified life, sustained by the social fabric of the community.

Andre Gorz 1973

I find myself reconciled to a great deal of ugliness, a great deal of commonness, and I don't object to it at all.

John Brinckerhoff Jackson, 1989

The story is, really, the battle over who we are, how we got that way, where we're headed, what we value, a geography of the soul. We shape our houses, then they shape us. If home is a safe spot that offers security and contentment, a place that restores and sustains us, where we can be both grounded and rooted, then far too many people who seem to be adequately sheltered are, in a more basic sense, homeless.

Tony Hiss, 199

Getting to the bottom of those questions leads directly to issues of national character, of what we value. They come down to who we are, how we got that way, and where we're headed. The battles we fight today over our futures do not have echoes only back to 1956, when Dwight D. Eisenhower changed America forever with the creation of the interstate highway program. Nor does it go back only to the New Deal of the 1930's, during which Franklin Delano Roosevelt shaped America into a society of homeowners. It goes to the core of what makes America America. The forces of change whose emblem is the bulldozer, and the forces of preservation whose totem is the tree, are everywhere at war in this country. The raging debate over what we have lost and what we have gained, as we flee the old urban patterns of the nineteenth century for the new ones of the twenty-first, is constant. Are we satisfying our deepest yearnings for the good life with Edge City? Or are we poisoning everything across which we sprawl? The world of the immigrants and pioneers is not dead in America; it has just moved out to Edge City.... Sociologists who lamented the flight to suburbia claimed the middle class had abandoned the concept of a city. They were wrong. The middle class simply built a new kind of city that functions in a Spanish style. It brought its quasi-public spaces in behind high walls, into the atria, open to the sun streaming through the skylights of the courtyards. There, patrol and control can operate at a high level.

Joel Garreau, 1991

It is apparent in hindsight that the utopia of mass motorization rested on the illusion that the pleasure of early motorists could add up to a general mobility prosperity for the masses. Yet this utopian projection failed to consider that the desires of individuals—in a space subject to limited enlargement—will necessarily run into and diminish each other.... The automobile belongs to a class of commodities that cannot be multiplied at will. Because its attraction requires the exclusion of the masses, the democratization of car ownership destroys its advantages.

Wolfgang Sachs, 1992

A Jacksonian student of landscape can observe a Red Barn hamburger joint, he can remark on its architectural resemblance to certain farm structures of the past, measure its dimensions, figure out the materials that went into building it, record the square footage of its parking lot, count the number of cars that come and go, the length of time that each customer lingers inside, the average sum spent of a meal, the temperature of the iceberg lettuce in its bin in the salad bar—all down to the last infinitesimal detail—and never arrive at the conclusion that the Red Barn is an ignoble piece of shit that degrades the community.

James Howard Kunstler, 1993

That's a lot. To own a house, that's a high price. Too high. I wouldn't do it again. I wouldn't move out here again. I mean, I love my house, but not enough to repeat what I've got. Because it's hard.

Vicky Ivanov, c. 1995

Some of these subdivisions look like army barracks. If you came home drunk, you wouldn't find your house.

Joe Shetina, 1998

Asked to rate their homes and neighborhoods on a scale from 1 to 10, 69 percent of Americans rated their houses 8 or better, and 67 percent gave that endorsement to their neighborhood.

Associated Press, 1999

We ought to begin to ask ourselves what are the limits—of scale, speed, and probably expense as well—beyond which human work is bound to be ugly.

Wendell Berry, 2000

Democracy cannot be possible at a speed higher than fifteen miles per hour.

Ken Avidor, 2001

Don't tell us where we can live.

Steven Korris, 2001

We've heard enough about the "city" and the "country," and particularly about the supposed ancient opposition between the two. From up close or from afar, what surrounds us looks nothing like that: it is one single urban cloth, without form or order, a bleak zone, endless and undefined, a global continuum of museum-like hypercenters and natural parks, of enormous suburban housing developments and massive agricultural projects, industrial zones and subdivisions, country inns and trendy bars: the metropolis. Certainly the ancient city existed, as did the cities of medieval and modern times. But there is no such thing as a metropolitan city. All territory is subsumed by the metropolis. Everything occupies the same space, if not geographically then through the intermeshing of its networks. The metropolis is this simultaneous death of city and country. It is the crossroads where all the petty bourgeoisie come together, in the middle of this middle class that stretches out indefinitely, as much a result of rural flight as of urban sprawl.

The Invisible Committee, 2007