



# The Seduction of Place: The City in the Twenty-first Century

*By Joseph Rykwert*

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**The Seduction of Place: The City in the Twenty-first Century** By Joseph Rykwert

One of the most highly respected architectural historians of our time takes on the question of whether or not we have the cities we need and what we can do to create them.

To understand why people love or hate their cities and why cities succeed or fail their inhabitants, Joseph Rykwert examines a broad spectrum of urban centers. Among them are Mexico City, the world's largest metropolis, sprawled around its old center; Berlin, newly reunited and furiously rebuilding; New Delhi and Islamabad, new capitals that exist alongside older towns; grandly planned cities like Chandigarh, Canberra, and Brasília; and more modest new towns like Columbia, Maryland, and Celebration, Florida, built in an attempt to correct the problems endemic to big cities.

Rykwert looks at image, style, and ornament; at public space and buildings; at infrastructure and street layout; at the visual qualities of contrast, strife, and energy that contribute to a city's appeal. Discussing both successes and failures, he suggests ways in which we can retain--or return to--the sense of place and individuation that determines the nourishing character and soul of the urban landscape.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

The subtitle to this, the tenth book by architecture professor (and lively writer) Joseph Rykwert--namely, "The City in the Twenty-First Century and Beyond"--is a whopping misnomer. It is only in the final chapter that Rykwert pays attention (and briskly, even then) to urban developments of recent years and to what we might expect in the 100 years to come. What this book really is, despite what its subtitlers intended, is at once a broad-ranging and satisfyingly detailed social history of some of the great cities of the modern world (mostly the Western one, with a marked emphasis on the two cities Rykwert calls home--New York and London--plus Paris) and an inquiry into how well they have served the material and spiritual lives of the people who inhabit them.

Ranging comfortably and coherently back and forth between the Old World and the New, Rykwert begins with the Industrial Revolution, its factories, the throngs of poor country people that flooded the cities to work in them, and the subsequent 150-year challenge faced by urban centers to house, transport, and entertain these throngs cheaply, space-consciously, and hygienically. But *Seduction of Place* is not so much a people's history of the city as it is a vibrantly researched and chronicled play-by-play of the big public--and some private--works of the major metropolises. The book also tackles the luminaries--including Haussmann, Olmstead and Vaux, L'Enfant, and Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand (who pioneered the enduring school of axial planning at Paris' Ecole Polytechnique)--whose names are often uttered in the same breath as the parks, boulevards, and edifices they brought to life.

Social critics like Tocqueville, Marx, Engels, Fourier, and Ruskin are just as well-represented here, however, ably providing the basis for Rykwert's persistent question of what cities ought to be and how responses to that have diverged and evolved over the years, apart from what they have become, for better or ill, and how they got that way. Even though the book takes a more or less familiar course through the 20th century--from the emergence of subways, skyscrapers, and modernism through postwar urban planning, suburban sprawl, and subsequent urban decay and attempts at renewal--Rykwert knows when to dart away from well-known people, places, and things to chronicle the planning of lesser-known English "New Towns" or of distinctly 20th-century cities like New Delhi, Islamabad, Australia's Canberra, and--rather famously--Brasilia, the ultimate "zoned" city.

The final chapter pays the requisite nod to the postmodernist implications of, for example, Celebration, Florida, (Disney's controversial new spin on the "company town") but is really distinguished by Rykwert's startlingly on-the-mark reading of how such wildly popular mega-museums as the new international Guggenheim franchise (with Gehry's Bilbao "branch" currently eclipsing Wright's New York "flagship") have come to best personify the encroachment of corporate globalization in the urban civic realm. It is a fitting conclusion for a book that manages so gracefully to wed an engrossing history of urban growth with the deeper intellectual, cultural, and ethical questions it raises--the very questions that the speculators, preservationists, and "ordinary citizens" will still have to answer in creating and sustaining the great cities of the 21st century. --*Timothy Murphy*

#### From Publishers Weekly

The city is at the center of the modern world: whether we live in one or not, they affect our lives through commerce, culture and civitas. In this complexly argued, beautifully written and provocative meditation on the nature of cities, Rykerk (*The Idea of a Town*) investigates the intricate relationships between the

individual and the urban. By examining the historical development of cities from the invention of the water lock in mid-15th-century Italy that helped facilitate water transport, to the founding of U.S. utopian communities, such as New Harmony in the early 18th century, to the expansion of Manhattan into a grid of streets in the mid-19th century, he explores how cities grew to meet human needs, analyzing which needs remain unfulfilled. In full command of a wide range of knowledge, Rykwert blithely moves from a discussion of how the aesthetics of John Ruskin and William Morris dovetailed with the political theories of Engels to how changes in tourism affected urban planning and development. These large themes match the "grandiloquence" of those great cities and the role they played in the development of the last three centuries. At the book's end, Rykwert discusses how contemporary cities can be made more congenial, drawing upon examples such as the role of the car in modern China, the urban theories and activist agenda of Jane Jacobs and the place of museums in the urban landscape. Rykwert uses nuance, practicality and foresight to show how, through "little plans" composed of "sobriety and effective actions," cities can be useful and wholesome to those who inhabit them. (Sept.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Urban planning holds a natural fascination for most people. Children gather around a game board of Monopoly, adults log onto the computer for Sim-City, and we all play out our fantasies of finally getting it right. Rykwert, an architect, professor, and author of numerous books, notably *The Idea of a Town* (1988), provides a broad historical picture of the diverse factors that have shaped our cities. He touches on advances in technology and science, the development of artistic and architectural styles, and the quest of social reformers and philosophers to form perfect utopias as well as combat the undesirable by-products of cities, like traffic and pollution. Rykwert's fast-moving narrative, conversational in style, spans biblical times to modern Bilbao, but he focuses special attention on two periods that saw huge waves of dispossessed rural populations: the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries and the mid-twentieth century. Too vast in scope for serious research purposes, Rykwert's survey is nonetheless a well informed, accessible, and very interesting introduction to the field. *James Klise*

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