Network News

The 100 Mile City *by Deyan Sudjic. San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace, 1992. 313 pp., illus., $18.95 paper*

The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier *by Howard Rheingold. Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1993. 325 pp., $22.95*
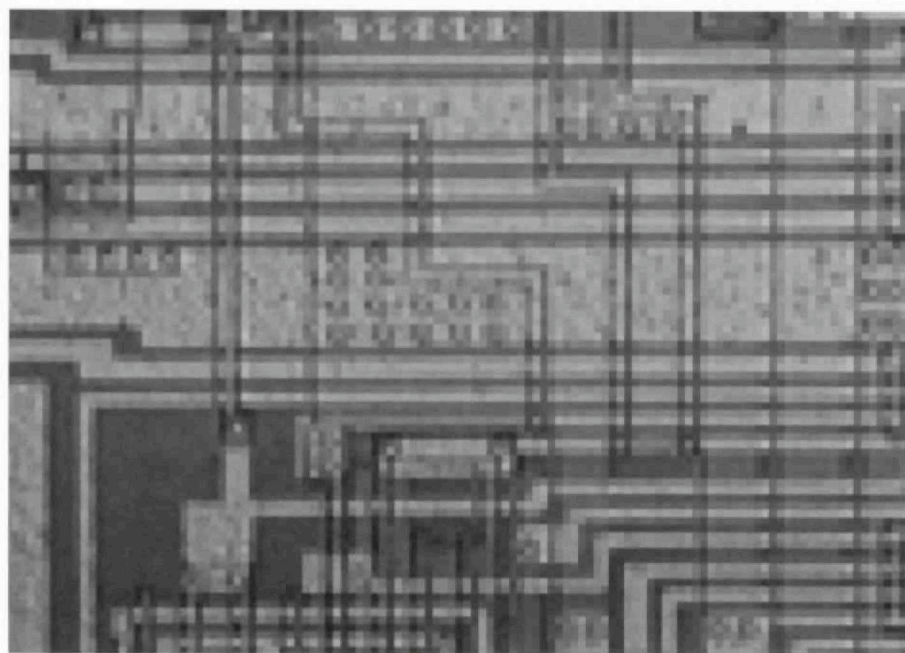
Reviewed by Danny Samuels

The modern city, in the United States and elsewhere, has changed drastically and fundamentally. It has become discontinuous, diffuse, extended, without center or edge. Air travel, automobility, telecommunications, and computers have spun new networks in which people, goods, capital, energy, and information flow freely from place to place. The coming convergence of data and telecommunications channels assures even more fundamental realignments. In the future (according to an MCI commercial), there will be no *there,* because everywhere will be *here.*

Few architects or other observers of the urban scene seem to have absorbed the significance of these changes. Given half a chance, they revert to traditional models. Two new books, *The 100 Mile City* by Deyan Sudjic and *The Virtual Community* by Howard Rheingold, together offer an alternative view.

Deyan Sudjic, trained as an architect, now editor of the British review *Blueprint,* takes an unsentimental and synoptic view of the contemporary world city and the forces that form it. He describes increasing concentrations of wealth, power, and population in fewer and larger cities, such as London, Paris, New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo. These cities have become more closely linked to each other, but also more competitive. The focus within them has shifted from the historic centers to new outlying developments of a scale so vast as to overwhelm architectural and urban space. These have become, in essence, multiple cities within the city, held together by complex webs of transportation and supply. Where most writers have noted these events with heavy criticism, Sudjic lays them out objectively, as history.

In the center third of the book, Sudjic deals in turn with the changing meanings of workplaces, museums, airports, hous-

ing, theme parks and world fairs, department stores and shopping centers, freeways and festival marketplaces, using examples to develop a brief history of each and to show its effect on the city. For example, in his discussion of the airport Sudjic goes beyond the idea of airport as city gateway to talk about Heathrow and DFW as cities in themselves, self-contained and with all necessary services, completely dedicated to the facilitation of movement. In several instances he finds his examples in Houston, discussing (not always glowingly) the Loop as the new Main Street from which one orients oneself to the many nuclei spread over the city, or the Galleria as the original model of the displaced downtown.

In a chapter titled "The Myth of Community," Sudjic directs criticism at those numerous observers of the urban scene who bemoan the loss of a "sense of community," which, he contends, never existed, at least as now construed. The city that the Victorians denounced is now the ideal. The fact is, he writes, "that the idyll of community fostered for commercial and political ends does not accord with the increasingly private world sought for a variety of reasons by an ever-increasing proportion of the population. . . . cities are in reality constantly fluctuating places, with people moving in and out, forming, breaking, and reforming households." Here and elsewhere, Sudjic echoes observations made by Herbert Gans in his 1967 sociological study *The Levittowners.* Gans noted that only planners and tourists look for a physical center to a community; for residents, the community is based not on propinquity but on social groups whose members congregate by means of the car. This is the antithesis to Jane Jacobs, who, in *The Life and Death of Great American Cities,* made an argument for street life that still sways many planners.

Sudjic's central image of the 100-mile city is a force field, pulsating with energy, always moving, ever changing, dangerous

and compelling at the same time. The architect and planner "cannot act against the direction of these events. The only plausible strategy is to attempt to harness the strategy of development to move things in the direction you want."

In *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier,* Howard Rheingold looks through a different lens at the modern condition. For him, the online linkup of millions of computer users into networks based on common interests creates a new form of community, an electronic agora. These "virtual communities" Rheingold defines as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace."

Rheingold is the editor of *Whole Earth Review* and the author of the earlier *Virtual Reality.* His formative networking experience was with *Whole Earth*'s WELL, a "whole community of helpful electronic next-door neighbors." Rheingold is obviously a proponent of what he writes about, and to those of us not completely attuned, his acronym-laden histories and anecdotes can seem fairly prolix. But underlying the enthusiast's prose is an emergent description of new community that connects right back to Sudjic's.

In the electronic community, participants may share scientific research, child-rearing tips, business strategies, political opinions, sexual fantasies, or access to the Library of Congress. The esssence of the electronic agora is the ongoing discussion groups in which everybody can find somebody somewhere in the world to talk with about anything, no matter how particular or peculiar. Curiously, the common language of the Net depends principally on verbal skills – the lost art of letter writing. So far at least, communication on the Net is linear and verbal rather than simultaneous and imagistic.

The networks originated as government- and university-sponsored computer link-ups for conferencing and information access. When the hackers got hold of them (in those days, hackers were the guys operating the mainframes for the government and universities), they used them late at night for around-the-world personal communications and other games. Later, when various networks were consolidated into Internet ("the Net"), that early anything-goes aspect was incorporated and became part of its basic personality. As personal computers have become more widespread and access to the Net cheaper and easier (still not that easy; you need the skills of a junior hacker to get on board), more and more people around the world have joined up. Internet links 15 million, and grows now by 20 percent each month.

Inevitably, such a bustling marketplace attracts the attention of commercial interests. Corporate entities are duking it out over the form and the control of networks of communication (information highways). Questions arise: Can the Net's free-wheeling nature survive? Will the virtual community remain democratic, if a bit messy, or will it be homogenized into another medium for mass advertising? There are questions as well as to whether large segments of the population will be denied access to these potent media, either by the lack of computer literacy or because the cost of admission becomes too steep. And there are other possible threats, in the form of censorship and invasion of privacy.

Taking the two ideas together, the 100-mile city and the virtual community, a new description of the modern city begins to form: it is a complex, fluid, self-organizing system with unanticipated emergent qualities. It exists at the edge of chaos, but the edge is where everything happens. Even while old institutions have dissolved and geography has been rendered irrelevant, new forms of connection have arisen. Movement and communication have become in themselves constituent urban forces. With a slight change of focus, we can foresee a new definition of urban life with vast new opportunities for human interchange and community. The modern city, vital, magnetic, pulsating, will still be an exciting and challenging place to be. ∎