

The City: Pompeii 79 A.D., Manhattan, 2022

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (May 2022)



The City, Jakob Steinhardt, 1913

The City

Cars pass each other on the vibrant boulevard, bisecting the modern city into a mathematical grid of traffic arteries and stark-faced strangers. The automobile defines man's passion for perpetual motion.

The faceless occupants of steel, space-conquering chariots are oblivious to each other, their destinies intertwined like the calculated angles of a spider web. A reckless move here, an indiscretion there, and the life of the unsuspecting lamb is sacrificed to the forces of expediency.

In our era—what Jacques Barzun refers to as the “distinctive spans of time” that is 500 years—locomotion has become internalized. Life is no longer characterized by our zest for motion. Instead, it is crystallized by it.

The modern city resembles nothing that romantics could have conjured up at the start of the twentieth century.

With the polished precision of an experienced barber, modern man moves effortlessly through the concrete and steel maze of geometric patterns – semi-cognizant of space and time. In the city, there is safety in numbers. This is where man has come to settle, in the entrails of a kaleidoscope of moving parts that rarely acknowledge each other.

Viewing this human drama from a high-rise refutes the exaggerated view that postmodern man has of himself. In our time, the beehive and ant colony have been magnified and amplified in ways that our ancestors could have never suspected.

Like a beating heart, the city pulsates, ebbs and flows with incessant activity.

While millions experience this twenty-first century spectacle,

few give much thought to its origin. Modern cities are framed by the contours of automobile windows. Drivers look out onto a world that resembles their inner constitution, for individuals only see what their moral/spiritual disposition allows them to see – no more.

Driving in a mechanical manner, few of us are amused by our surroundings. Self-imposed myopia is not a luxury that charioteers could afford in ancient times. Trekking through ancient cities, nighttime and countryside hazards abounded. With motion comes untold danger. The greater the speed and space traversed, the higher the possibility of bursting the core of the moving parts.

Will future technologies obliterate our sense of self, or has man already been gutted?

How would a speeding arrow look to a complacent woolly mammoth? This question holds equally true for man. Only today, we are not privy to the essence of motion. We just have names for this and that—speed for its own sake. The act of naming gives us the illusion that human reality has changed since ancient times. It has not. We remain sightseers of a reality we imagine ourselves entitled to manipulate.

The city breathes like an appeased fire dragon.

The city, a technological aurora borealis, awes people who possess a spirited sensibility for detail and keen perspicuity. The recognition of this reality makes for a heroic existence: man, a latter-day Ulysses in a raging sea, Don Quixote de la Mancha fighting windmills. How else could we have conquered the marriage of man and civilization?

For some people, the city merely offers polychromatic order and rhythm to their daily grind through human existence.

Touching the clouds, our architectural creations beckon our attention. Steel and glass towers glance down at Lilliputian

pedestrians below, leaving our imagination to fend for itself.

I drive slowly, experiencing the world like a newborn discovering his hands for the first time. Driving through glittering boulevards, my sight is transfixed by sky-hugging monuments that Mies van der Rohe refers to as “skin and bones” –buildings that make visible man’s spirit.

Our steel and glass testament to utility transcend us—at least for the time being—colossal towers that celebrate the strife and joy of the human person. How often do we misappropriate the value of the things nearest to us?

Behind these conspicuous gods to verticality, the sun begins to set on another day, in a place and time that a century ago was considered the distant future.

Past and Future: God and the City

What a strange idea is the future. What a sensation, to know that tomorrow and tomorrow, and tomorrow might never arrive. Our anticipation of a time that has yet to come is a singular human trait. While living in the immediate present, we are consumed by the promise of future days. Our fascination with the future makes man a future-oriented entity. The future frames the present.

Are we the protagonists of the future that people long ago imagined? How would we appear to builders of Ziggurats and Egyptian pyramids?

Homer, Plato, Dante, Galileo, and Pascal would gasp at the sight of the world we have fashioned from will, sweat, and toil. Who can deny that the future has always served as the seat of man’s noblest ideals?

The future is the projection of the present into eternity.

We can only intuit God's perspective. As part is to whole, the finite is to infinity. Man can only scratch the surface of God's inscrutability. As existential persons, we must learn to wear our skin well and accept strife and limitation.

A Pompeii of Glass, Herculaneum of steel, the city of God made of flesh and blood, and molded by spirit—the city is our destiny. The Iron Age has come to fruition in all its implications.

The difference between our shimmering metropolises and Pompeii is not the height of our glass towers or Pompeii's tragic burial in ash, rather the stillness of the night air in that ancient city trapped in the shadow of Vesuvius. The stagnation brought on by the march of time has made the ancient world a museum for the banal curiosity of postmodern voyeurs.

In our time, the wind whispers of things to come, the effervescent quality of the future. Man is inebriated with the thought of controlling the future. Driving through a modern city, we are made to believe that the world is a series of points measured by the distance between streetlights. Having tamed darkness, the restless voices that rumble through this mysterious, incarnate modality of human reality—we are now brazen enough to make demands on God. The absence of darkness has made our sense of security infectious, yet delusional.

In antiquity, cities were dedicated to the gods and the good favor that veneration brought to its inhabitants. The destruction of Babylon meant famine and death, a curse to its desecraters and destroyers. Today, the city is the main culprit of man's desire to obliterate God. Our pathological penchant to no longer survey the night sky has petrified our imagination and atrophied our sensibility.

Man Begins to Bury the Dead

About one hundred thousand years ago man began to bury the dead.

What is the night air like in cities dedicated to the memory of the dead? A city to the dead commemorates that which once appeared transient in nature. Burial of the dead is a novel idea.

The inquietude of nomadic restlessness gave way to a stationary confrontation with human reality: settlement. Settlement and the establishment of roots meant the creation of villages. The respectful disposal of the dead has served man as a civilizing force.

Motion tamed is sentiment gained.

The city is practical in aim, brilliant in its ability to root us to a place and time. The dead are no longer left to the ravages of weather, beasts, and ruthless time. This suggests greater respect for the dead and life than during man's nomadic past.

For the first time, the dead share the places that the living occupy. "They are there ... and there ... all around us," reflects a youngster carrying water from an ancient riverbank.

Park Avenue

Today motion finds purpose in the rhythm of the modern city.

Let us make no mistake about it, motion is cyclical. In our time, motion consists of mechanical intervals. Life no longer meets time head on, rather circumvents it.

Time and human life are naively viewed by postmodern man as separate entities. This is one of the many indiscretions of postmodern man that slander human history.

Unlike nomads traversing the landscape without human attachments or memory, the city tames space and time, like a beast of burden that was once irascible to the human touch. The city even gives us the dangerous illusion that we have conquered death.

The Seagram Building and the House of the Vettii

It is dusk.

Standing at a traffic light in Manhattan, I see the Seagram Building up ahead.

The city vibrates with the undulating pulse of strangers going about their daily ritual. Curiously, my mind wanders back to my walks through Pompeii. I think of the stillness of the nighttime air in that forsaken place. I imagine Vesuvius spewing forth vile from its boiling liver. Who can say when danger is imminent and when it is just a word in a language we recognize?

Watching pedestrians crossing the street, I think about Pompeii's forgotten splendor. I begin to doubt my memories of lunching outside the House of the Vettii, of contemplating the final, horror-filled hours of the petrified souls that I witness on the ground before me. I imagine Pliny the elder's last hours. Was the writer of *Naturalis Historia* frightened to death or consumed by deadly fumes?

I hear the sound of horns coming from automobiles behind me. I am not in a hurry, not today. I no longer hear the sound of my engine, but I know I am moving once again.

A devastating earthquake in 62 A.D. was hardly the momentum-infusing call for Pompeians to become mobile—to flee their city. They looked around, took stock of their losses and began to rebuild. The eruption of 79 A.D. hardly left them an option

to contemplate the essence of life and death.

Necessity is the mother of invention and an impetus for motion. Moving through Manhattan, I am inspired by the details that make this a marvel of human ingenuity.

I am moved by the world around me. In some respects, I am the city. The driver behind me seeks a faster lane.

The Seagram Building looms larger. Her skin of glass reflects the last vestiges of sunlight, as this twenty-four-hour period becomes conscribed to eternity.

I expect Mies van der Rohe to walk past me at any moment. I have been looking forward to coming to the corner of Park and 53rd since I was a young man.

Like a musical score that allows for improvisation, the city is the culmination of spirit. The vitality of its inhabitants can be read objectively. I find myself afloat in the energy of the city. Weightless. Does eternity embody lightness of being?

I am in the presence of spirit manifested in time. I see myself sitting behind the steering wheel of my automobile, reflected in a glass building. I arrive at the Seagram Building.

Walking on its large granite dais, I am transported to 1958, when the building was completed. What novelty, this glass giant. Fluid and transparent, like water in a glass, the Seagram Building ushered a new way of conceiving motion.

The city is a mixture of imagination and homage to the past. The inhabitants of the city internalize the past.

Imagination and the Past

From its demotion as the arbiter of the rhythm of life,

imagination remains viable only for people who conceive it as a guide for living. People who are consumed by the fury of the present do not abide by the rules of imagination. Blind motion is what matters, for motion for its own sake creates the illusion of removing us from the past.

Looking at the sleek lines of this glass monolith, I discern the rigor of its design. Mies van der Rohe married utility to aesthetics through an act of will.

From childhood, Mies van der Rohe observed and remembered. A brick here, mortar there, the assemblage of a structure is forged with spirited hands. When the proponents of chic finally caught up with him, they attacked him as not being progressive enough.

The city is the culmination of science and technology, and a reservoir of the human spirit. Existence in primitive conditions could not afford indecision and sloth – qualities that aim at self-destruction. Ironically, these same qualities are welcomed in the social foliage that is the metropolis today. Man can hide in the city – even from himself – in the mixed bag that is the postmodern city, each inhabitant living in a personal cave.

Man began building skyscrapers after the advent of the steel beam. Where would a mole rather live, above ground exposed to danger, or underground in a protective environment of its own creation?

The city is a moral laboratory.

Is it technology driving morality or morality fueling technology?

We have the moral/social conditions that we create. Some cultures had thatch roof abodes while others worked in bronze. The question is: what becomes of technology after the self has been eviscerated?

Walking around the Seagram Building, I wonder how the great step pyramid of Saqqara looked to the inhabitants of Egypt, circa 2,650 B.C. Granted, Saqqara was the great cemetery of Memphis. The colossal dimensions of a pyramid-tomb appear odd for us today. What Geist motivated its creation?

Though the great step pyramid only holds the remains of a dead pharaoh, we cannot dismiss it as a tomb. The tomb of the pharaoh served a purpose.

Consider Mies van der Rohe's assertion that buildings should be functional: "I believe that in architecture you must deal with construction directly, you must, therefore, understand construction. When the structure is refined and when it becomes an expression of the essence of our time, it will then and only then become architecture. Every building has its position in a strata—every building is not a cathedral. These are facts, which should be understood and taught. It takes discipline to restrain oneself."

He adds: "Refinement, grasping the essence of the time and fitting into the proper position of architectural strata." This can help us better understand the pathos that inspired the construction of the great step pyramid.

Immortality of the soul informs the technical precision of the ancient Egyptians. Immortality: The continuation of spirit in a non-carnal realm. This is hardly a new concept. This singular conviction served to make ancient Egyptian civilization a force that has lingered into our time.

The pyramids fit in with Mies van der Rohe's idea of placing structures in the proper position in a strata of architecture. The idea that all buildings cannot be cathedrals respects the hierarchy of values.

I drive off.

In my rearview mirror, I witness the majestic building

reflecting the light of what is now an artificial day.

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