Introduction: Variations on a Theme Park

With the precise prescience of a true Master of the Universe, Walter Wriston recently declared that “the 800 telephone number and the piece of plastic have made time and space obsolete.” Wriston ought to know. As former CEO of the suggestively named Citicorp, he’s a true Baron Haussmann for the electronic age, plowing the boulevards of capital through the pliant matrix of the global economy.

This comparison isn’t meant to be flip: Wriston’s remark begs fundamental questions about urbanity. Computers, credit cards, phones, faxes, and other instruments of instant artificial adjacency are rapidly eviscerating historic politics of propinquity, the very cement of the city. Indeed, recent years have seen the emergence of a wholly new kind of city, a city without a place attached to it.

This ageographical city is particularly advanced in the United States. It’s visible in clumps of skyscrapers rising from well-wired fields next to the Interstate; in huge shopping malls, anchored by their national-chain department stores, and surrounded by swarms of cars; in hermetically sealed atrium hotels cloned from coast to coast; in uniform “historic” gentrifications and festive markets; in the disaggregated sprawl of endless new suburbs without cities; and in the antenna bristle of a hundred million rooftops from Secaucus to Simi Valley, in the clouds of satellite dishes pointed at the same geosynchronous blip, all sucking Arsenio and the A-Team out of the ether.

In fact, the structure of this city is a lot like television. TV’s main event is the cut, the elision between broadcast bits, the seam-
less slide from soap opera to docudrama to a word from our sponsor. The "design" of television is all about erasing differences among these bits, about asserting equal value for all the elements in the net, so that any of the infinite combinations that the broadcast day produces can make "sense." The new city likewise eradicates genuine particularity in favor of a continuous urban field, a conceptual grid of boundless reach. It's a process of erasure much noted. In the 1950s and 1960s, the alarm was sounded over "urban sprawl" and "Megalopolis," the spread of an uninterrupted zone of urbanization along the American Northeast coast, a city become region. More recently, attention has focused on the explosion of so-called "suburban cities" on the fringes of existing metropolises. In this vast, virtually undifferentiated territory—stretching from Fairfax County, Virginia, to Orange County, California—homes, offices, factories, and shopping malls float in a culturing medium, a "non-place urban realm" that provides the bare functions of a city, while doing away with the vital, not quite disciplined formal and social mix that gives cities life.

The city described in this book, though, is not simply a phenomenon of extent. Its growth no longer merely physical—a matter of egregious densities or metastasizing reach—the new city also occupies a vast, unseen, conceptual space. This invisible Cyburbia—so aptly evoked by Wriston—takes form as necessary, sprouting like sudden mushrooms at capital's promiscuous nodes. What's missing in this city is not a matter of any particular building or place; it's the spaces in between, the connections that make sense of forms.

The history of cities is embedded in the ways their elements are juxtaposed, the structures of art and regulation that govern urban amalgamation. Questions both of what goes with what and what yields to what are at the basis of urban form-making. Traditional cities have adjudicated such questions via relations to central places. Whether agora, castle, piazza, or downtown, the idea of a city of centers stands, at a minimum, for the idea of a spatial city, a city in which order is a function of proximity. This physical city has historically mapped social relations with a profound clarity, imprinting in its shapes and places vast information about status and order. Whether "the other side of the tracks" in a small town, the New England commons, or the bar-graph of real estate values
visible in the Manhattan skyline, social order has long been legible
in urban form. In the new, recombinant city, however, the legibility
of these orders has been dramatically manipulated, often com-
pletely obscured. Here, anything seems to go with anything—hier-
archies are both reinforced and concealed, at once fixed and
despatalized. Value is still a function of location, but the invisible
hand has learned a new geometry. As phone and modem render
the street irrelevant, other dimensions become preeminent. Main
Street is now the space between airports, the fiber-optic cables
linking the fax machines of the multinational corporations' far-
flung offices, an invisible worldwide skein of economic relations.
Liberated from its centers and its edges by advances in commu-
nication and mobility and by a new world order bent on a single
citizenship of consumption, the new city threatens an unimagined
sameness even as it multiplies the illusory choices of the TV system.

Three salient characteristics mark this city. The first is the
dissipation of all stable relations to local physical and cultural
geography, the loosening of ties to any specific space. Globalized
capital, electronic means of production, and uniform mass culture
abhor the intimate, undisciplined differentiation of traditional cit-
ties. The new city replaces the anomaly and delight of such places
with a universal particular, a generic urbanism inflected only by
appliqué. Here, locality is efficiently acknowledged by the inclusion
of the croque-monsieur at the McDonald’s on the Boul’ Miche or
the Cajun Martini at the airport lounge in New Orleans (and you’re
welcome to keep the glass). This “place” is fully ageographic: it
can be inserted equally in an open field or in the heart of town;
the inward-looking atrium hotel is as apt to the featureless green-
ward as it is to teeming unreclaimed downtowns. With its com-
ponents reduced to a repetitive minimum, space is departicula-
ized. Obsessed with the point of production and the point of sale, the
new city is little more than a swarm of urban bits jettisoning a
physical view of the whole, sacrificing the idea of the city as the
site of community and human connection.

A second characteristic of this new city is its obsession with
“security,” with rising levels of manipulation and surveillance over
its citizenry and with a proliferation of new modes of segregation.
The methods are both technological and physical. The former con-
sist of invasive policing technologies—domesticated versions of the "electronic battlefield"—and a growing multitude of daily connections to the computer grid, ranging from encounters with the automated teller to the full-blown regulatory environment of the electronic workplace. The physical means are equally varied: parallel, middle-class suburban cities growing on the fringes of old centers abandoned to the poor; enclaved communities for the rich; gentrification; the globe-girdling cocoon that envelops the business traveler as he or she encounters the same airport, hotel, and office building from Denver to Dubai; the lacework of overhead and underground circulation systems imposed in Minneapolis or Edmonton to permit shoppers and office workers to circulate in climate-regulated security through threatening urban territory. This impulse to a new urban segregation seems ubiquitous: throughout America, city planning has largely ceased its historic role as the integrator of communities in favor of managing selective development and enforcing distinction.

Finally, this new realm is a city of simulations, television city, the city as theme park. This is nowhere more visible than in its architecture, in buildings that rely for their authority on images drawn from history, from a spuriously appropriated past that substitutes for a more exigent and examined present. In most American cities, the "historic" has become the only complicit official urban value. The result is that the preservation of the physical remnants of the historical city has superseded attention to the human ecologies that produced and inhabit them. Today, the profession of urban design is almost wholly preoccupied with reproduction, with the creation of urbane disguises. Whether in its master incarnation at the ersatz Main Street of Disneyland, in the phony historic festivity of a Rouse marketplace, or the gentrified architecture of the "reborn" Lower East Side, this elaborate apparatus is at pains to assert its ties to the kind of city life it is in the process of obliterating.

Here is urban renewal with a sinister twist, an architecture of deception which, in its happy-face familiarity, constantly distances itself from the most fundamental realities. The architecture of this city is almost purely semiotic, playing the game of grafted signification, theme-park building. Whether it represents generic historicity or generic modernity, such design is based in the same calculus as advertising, the idea of pure imageability, oblivious to
the real needs and traditions of those who inhabit it. Welcome to Cyburbia.

This book is not an attempt to theorize this new city but to describe it. The sites discussed are representative; they do not simply typify the course of American urbanism but are likely to be models for urban development throughout the world. The frame of reference is thus limited: it is not about Soweto, the South Bronx, or Dhaka. Nor is it directly about Urbino, Paris, or Savannah, those pleasant centers of traditional urbanity. And yet it is. The danger in this new city is in its antithesis: in Victor Hugo's famous phrase, "This will destroy that." The new city has the power simply not only to bypass the traditional scenes of urbanity but to co-opt them, to relegate them to mere intersections on a global grid for which time and space are indeed obsolete.

"City air makes people free," goes a medieval maxim. The cautionary essays collected here describe an ill wind blowing through our cities, an atmosphere that has the potential to irretrievably alter the character of cities as the preeminent sites of democracy and pleasure. The familiar spaces of traditional cities, the streets and squares, courtyards and parks, are our great scenes of the civic, visible and accessible, our binding agents. By describing the alternative, this book pleads for a return to a more authentic urbanity, a city based on physical proximity and free movement and a sense that the city is our best expression of a desire for collectivity. As spatiality ebbs, so does intimacy. The privatized city of bits is a lie, simulating its connections, obliterating the power of its citizens either to act alone or to act together.

This is the meaning of the theme park, the place that embodies it all, the ageographia, the surveillance and control, the simulations without end. The theme park presents its happy regulated vision of pleasure—all those artfully hoodwinking forms—as a substitute for the democratic public realm, and it does so appealingly by stripping troubled urbanity of its sting, of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work. In the "public" spaces of the theme park or the shopping mall, speech itself is restricted: there are no demonstrations in Disneyland. The effort to reclaim the city is the struggle of democracy itself.