

The Ideal City

How can urban dwellers experience the deep connection to community and land that seems so natural in the country?

BY WILLIAM VITEK

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL PARASKHVAS

A walk in the park A sense of community, what Canadian naturalist John Livingston describes as "an awareness of simultaneous *belonging* to both a society and a place," accrues slowly—not through large public gestures but through life's small daily lessons. Mine began 10 years ago in a river valley in northern New York State, a half-rural, half-wild landscape with expansive skies, rocky soils, and five Adirondack rivers slowing to a crawl northward to the St. Lawrence River. Here in my village, population 10,000, I have observed great blue herons, wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, a great horned owl,

orders to the contemporary back-to-the-land movement, people have been fleeing cities in search of serenity, simplicity, and community. The literary sources of community and place stretch back to Aristotle, Machiavelli (*The Discourses*), and Jefferson—and forward to Gary Snyder, William Sulliv-
van, and Daniel Kemmis. The voices of American writers like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Wendell Berry call out from wild and rural places to warn us away from the traps of contemporary life.

Growing interest in community and place, in the idea of becoming rooted in the land, has engendered a new movement of writing and thinking on communitarian themes. Although this movement, of which I am a part, is not confined to rural places, many of its strongest advocates and exemplars reside there. But what about the city? The work of urban communitarians, while strong on theory and systemwide alternatives, often lacks the personal narratives that put theory to practice. (Kemmis's *The Good City and the Good Life* is a delightful exception.) At first glance the proposition that urban dwellers can make discoveries and commitments similar to their rural counterparts is not easy to defend. How can an urban dweller experience the same deep connection to place and community that seems so natural in the country?

Today's cities reflect America's earliest political beginnings. Thomas Jefferson had hoped to nurture America on the traditional republican government used centuries earlier among the Greeks and Romans, believing that equality, virtue, and simple living were found more often in rural and agricultural life than in the crowded cities, "where the people are each other." But the views of James Madison and Alexander Hamilton prevailed. Madison stripped away the civic overtones of a republican form

coyotes and a bald eagle. There are no interstate highways here, no major airports, no subways, no commuter railroads. Fewer than 10 high-rise buildings (seven stories or less) have been built in the entire county, the largest in square miles in New York State. There is little crime. Children walk to school, and stranded motorists receive quick assistance. We know our neighbors even if we don't always like them.

Two years after I moved here from the city, I became friends with Clark Decker, a fifth-generation dairy farmer, and his family, and I soon found myself helping in the barn three mornings a week. I milked cows, gathered maple sap, and helped build a barn. As I went about my daily business I began to notice favorite trees, migrating geese, and the sun's seasonal trek across the sky. On my own property I cleared stumps, including a gnarled old willow, and grew a garden for my family. My city friends considered much of this behavior exceedingly odd and uncharacteristic.

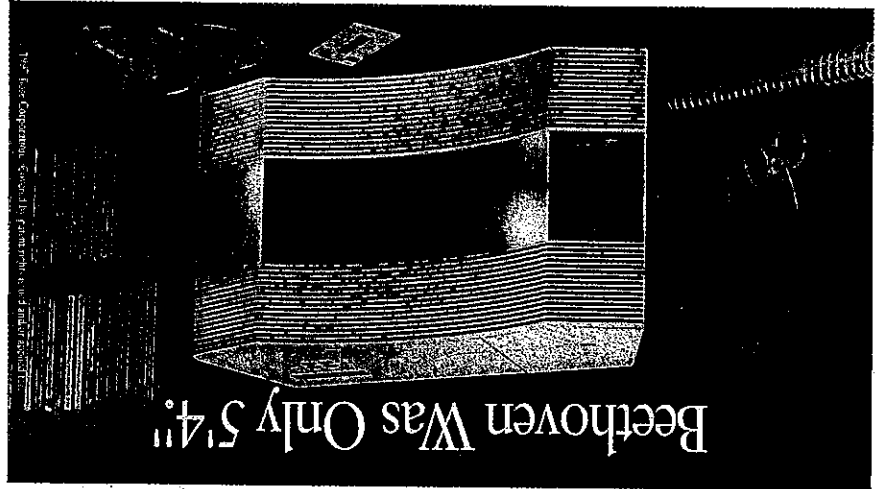
But the frenetic pace of my old urban life had slowed, and my senses had reawakened as if an anesthetic were wearing off. For the first time I felt that I shared a place with others and that the community we formed—and that formed us—was worth preserving, promoting, and sharing. I joined a local nonprofit organization committed to "peace, social justice, and a sustainable environment" and served on the county's environmental management council. Though normally shy, I spoke up at public meetings.

I cannot know for certain whether the move to the country after 30 years of living in cities made possible my commitment to a place and a community or whether it was coincidental with other changes going on in my life. But I discovered that I was not alone. From the oldest monastic

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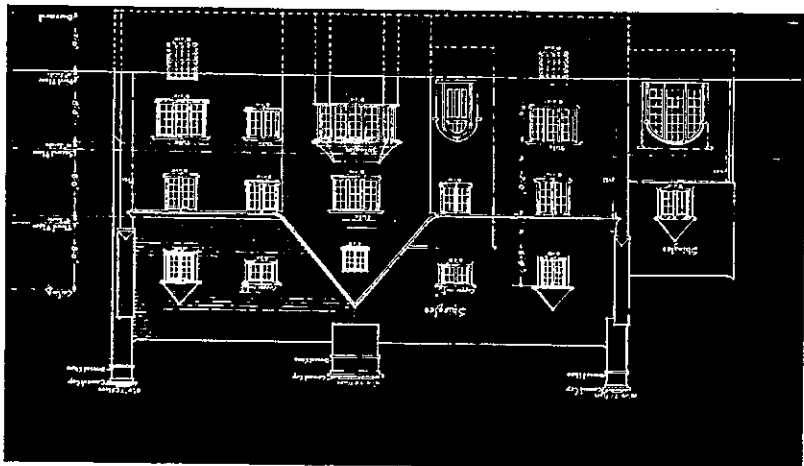


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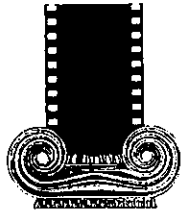
RENT



of government, calling it merely "a government in which the scheme of representation takes place." He likewise turned factionalism and private interest—votes for civic republicans—into virtues in the new American republic. Hamilton claimed that the young nation's strength and longevity depended on commerce and manufacturing, so he advocated an economic system that encouraged individual ambition and emulated England's factory system. The contemporary results, both intended and unforeseen, of these philosophical prescriptions are many: a government at all levels with neither mandate nor interest in promoting civic virtue; a public that participates in the democratic process only minimally and with a divisive notion of self-interest; a nation devoted to commerce, manufacturing, technology, and new markets; a sense of restlessness abetted by unprecedented mobility; and a preponderance of lessons in consumerism—but few in citizenship. Of course, architects, planners, and developers share some of the blame. So few of our urban places are designed as true cities, *ciuitates*, where decisions about layout, population density, and future growth are made thoughtfully to promote virtue and civility, not left to whim or chance. Too often the typical American city is haphazard, dirty, congested, decrepit, and loud. If American society were a renege, the city would be its bedroom. Such an atmosphere fosters distrust and distraction and leads to a slow contraction of our senses. But this is not the whole story, as any city dweller knows. Urban neighborhoods still offer the proper human scale for daily interactions and the motivation to care about one another. The streets are narrow and tree lined, the sidewalks wide, and nearly every block has a coffee shop or a newspaper stand. Nor do wild things stop at the city limits. We know that peregrine falcons have nested in Prospect Park, where I was playing softball instead of writing my dissertation, there was in center field the fragrance of chamomile and in the nearby pond a mallard pair raising a brood. The problem, then, is not entirely a matter of where we live, but of how we live as well. Cities can make quite a

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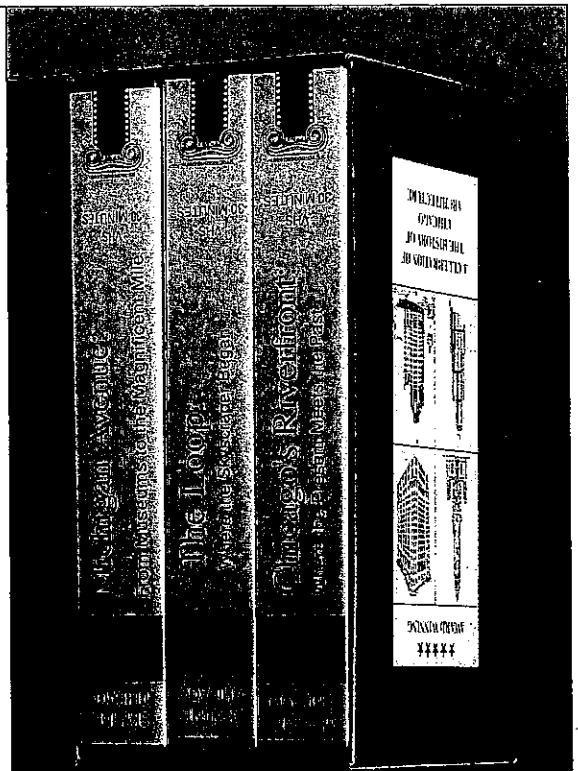
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Though nature unencumbered its ter or time's longer cycles. direction or the sun's lowest point in win-

book, and you'll begin to notice wind self with compass, map, and history building or neighborhood? Orient your- settlement? What is the history of this age ago? Who lived here before European place a century, a millennium, or an ice watershed, or bioregion. What was this interstates, that categorize by geology, maps that highlight landscapes and not concrete and steel. One can purchase Cities are not simply the sum of their has a scent; snow is wet or dry.

cover sidewalks and windshields; rain come alive. Springtime buds and pollen then it must also be the place where we rhythms. If the city is where we live, cycles, nature, neighbors, and our own become when we pay attention to see more clearly what our daily lives can circumstances so much as opportunities to viewed as escapes from our urban cir- hinterland. But they should not be dens, parks, or riverfront, or out in the to time, whether in a city's botanical gar- to visit quiet and wild places from time end, city and county. Everyone needs work and leisure, weekday and week- of our divided brain to separate life into We should also resist the promptings relationships in their chaotic wholeness.

experience the immediate world and its or Chicago's Michigan Avenue one can thing but slow and deliberate, but even- route. City walking is sometimes any- freedom to choose our own pace and bodies to good use, and it gives us the change in weather. Walking puts our see faces, taste the humid air, sense a take in the world. We hear conversations, also the best pace by which our senses can body takes obvious delight. Walking is fence the here and now. It mimics the- Walking is the single best way to expe- only willing to look.

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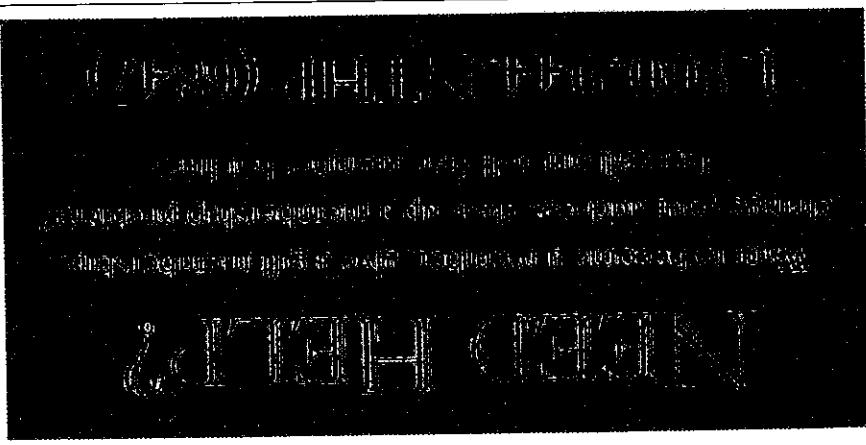
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government provide the context and forms that make social and civic life possible and meaningful.

Craftsmanship can also be a source of behind. Last summer, while visiting my parents in Schenectady, N.Y., I attended for the first time in 20 years an annual Italian feast at my childhood grammar school and local parish, a three-day affair with music, food, and familiar faces. I said hello to some of my teachers (nuns who seemed immune to aging), reminisced with old classmates about the hell maces about the hell

of belonging.

These suggestions, of course, are starting points. For those of us who feel especially rootless, conscious acts of rebellion may be required. Turn off the television for a month. Walk more, and not just for exercise. Take up a hobby, what forester and philosopher Aldo Leopold describes as "a defiance of the contemporary": gardening, bird watching, archery, snow-



I felt a twinge of sadness because I once belonged there but left.

It was their feast, their time together. They were a community celebrating itself. I felt a twinge of sadness because I once belonged there but left: Now I was nothing more than a welcome visitor. But the vitality I felt on that summer night is real, and it's evident in neighborhoods and cities throughout America.

For those who remain in urban areas by choice or by necessity, there is hope not in leaving, but in staying put and digging in. Home is where the here is, community and place just other names for citizen and *civitas*, ancient ideals and natural sentiments open to each of us when we become practiced in the slow and steady expansion of the self. Like the heart of a fire on a jack-pine cone that frees the seed for regeneration, awareness is the focused energy that makes both city and citizen prosper.

But don't expect immediate results. Awareness is a process of getting our choices back. It requires active remembering, living in the present and in the presence of others, commitment to the future, and a willingness to stand out in the crowd. Even the most dedicated citizen may be defeated by city life: Seneca conceded that it is sometimes simpler to keep away from the din altogether, explaining in "On Noise" that after living for a time in the city, he was moving elsewhere. "What I wanted was to give myself a rest and some practice," he wrote. "Why should I need to suffer the torture any longer...?"

William Vittek teaches philosophy at Clarkson University in Potsdam, N.Y., and is coeditor, with Wes Jackson, of *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*.

