Editor's Note: At the annual meeting of the PHA in Pittsburgh in October, a session devoted to the "new urban history" and beyond provoked substantial comment and many calls for the papers to be published. What follows are revised versions of the papers delivered by Margaret Marsh and Philip Scranton, respectively, and Lizabeth Cohen's commentary on them.

Old Forms, New Visions: New Directions in United States Urban History

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In the fall of 1990, about 250 urban historians—myself, Philip Scranton, and Lizabeth Cohen among them—came together in Chicago. One purpose of the meeting was retrospective, to commemorate the golden anniversary of the publication of Arthur Schlesinger's pathbreaking article, "The City in History." The other was, if not prospective, at least firmly grounded in the present: to assess the state of research and writing in urban history. For at least this participant, the conference exhibited a surprising duality, perhaps even a dichotomy. On the one hand, in several of the plenary sessions, distinguished practitioners of urban history expressed keen disappointment (and a few even evidenced a sense of genuine angst), over the loss of a unified focus in the field and its ostensible inability to develop a coherent new theoretical approach. On the other hand, little of that sense of near-crisis found its way to the smaller sessions, in which scholars engaged spiritedly in discussions of their own research. Participants in most cases integrated established approaches into fresh subject matter, or forthrightly challenged the old ways without losing sight of the city as the focus of their concern.

In spite of an initial inclination to dismiss the anxieties about the lack of theoretical unity, and to concentrate instead on the strength of the new research, I have since come to take the former as seriously as the latter. Both the disappointment and the excitement, I believe, genuinely represent the current state of urban history. At the same time, this tendency to decry the dissolution of what once appeared to be a unified field seems to suggest—erroneously, in my view—that urban history has somehow failed. The old unity has dissolved, it is clear, but I do not believe that urban history has failed. Instead, its successes have come in a form quite different from what has been expected in the sixties and early seventies.

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To begin to understand how those of us who have worked in this field can have such different ideas about its current state, we might well start with a brief backward look at the history of urban history. Early on, dualities and implicit contradictions were evident, in part because what we called the "new" urban history
in the 1960s and early seventies grew out of goals that were not always complementary. The first was a passionate commitment to find in history a set of keys that would enable policy makers to gain a more enlightened perspective on contemporary urban problems. In this quest, for so it must be defined, scholars drew much of their inspiration from an earlier group of activist scholars, the social ecologists of the Chicago school of the 1920s. Another influence on the "new" urban historians came from a more recent empirical trend in the social sciences, particularly political science and sociology. This was a fascination with what seemed then the dazzling possibilities of computer analysis. Quantification, it was believed, would help historians to know how those urbanites who left no diaries or letters, who were not the actors mentioned in nineteenth century city biographies—in other words, the workers and the poor—experienced the past. The new method was to be not only a tool to allow historians to unlock the meaning of previously intractable sources, but also a way, they hoped, towards a new, more accurate, history.

From the urban ecologists, the "new" urban historians derived the idea of the city as a living organism, an idea that was at the heart of their insistence that the proper subject of urban history was the development of, and changes to, that organism—or, as they more often phrased it, the process of urbanization. From the empirical social sciences these historians took their fascination with quantification, a fascination that led many of them (including Theodore Hershberg, who created the Philadelphia Social History Project) to become methodological missionaries. That first generation of urban historians spoke with a powerful voice. In following their example, numerous graduate students, including myself, explored the process of urbanization by concentrating on geographic or social mobility, on urban institutional life, or on specific urban groups. In practical terms, the exigencies of quantitative research, given the primitive (by today's standards) state of computer technology, meant that for the most part, the works resulting from such methods amounted to limited, well-crafted "case studies," the preferred monographic form. In their adoption of the case study, then, in practice if not always in theory, urban historians tended to assume in effect that while no two cities were exactly alike, urban structures and processes were similar enough to enable the scholar to make reasonable generalizations about the process of urbanization as a whole, based on one "case."

Throughout the early seventies, the attractions of a subfield that offered a consistent theoretical approach resulted in a number of important individual studies. However, criticism soon emerged, particularly of the limitations of what seemed to be a developing methodological orthodoxy. Among the most telling criticisms was that the very nature of quantification narrowed the range of research questions that could be asked. These studies had intended to bring to historical attention the lives of relatively anonymous Americans; but in aggregating such life-matters as occupation and family structure they more often than not simplified a more com-
plicated reality of urban life for both individuals and groups. In effect, quantitative techniques could serve to narrow the research agenda. For a discipline conceived with a zeal to tell the stories of the inarticulate, there was an irony in the emphasis on mobility, which in personal terms tended to emphasize success.6

Criticisms such as this had their effect, and urban historians broadened their research to accommodate them. In doing so, they often came to the conclusion, in the exploration of the urbanization process from the viewpoint of labor, or ethnicity, or politics, or culture, that the idea of “city as process” did not appear to explain what was going on in urban America. Some historians found this notion discouraging. Indeed, some of the “founding fathers”—there were few, if any, founding mothers—of the “new” urban history simply opted out, including some of its most passionate advocates, such as Theodore Hershberg. So did several of its most interesting practitioners, such as Richard Sennett. Others, equally frustrated with limitations of concept or method, searched for a more compelling explanatory variable: While retaining a focus on city as site (granted, an important and particular kind of site), they found one or another set of explanatory variables more compelling—for example, class, with its racial and ethnic dimensions; culture, embracing manners, leisure, or sports; or gender (also complicated by race and ethnicity).7

The questioning of the centrality of “city as process” has transformed urban history; however, in spite of the theoretical and methodological disarray that we can argue has resulted, in my view urban history has been enriched. But if the pioneering works of urban history in the sixties and early seventies, with their premium on methodological innovation, exposed the theoretical foundations of urban history as inadequate, let us not forget that such works also led to a validation of the importance of the city as an essential locus of cultural, class, and gender accommodation as well as conflict. This is urban history’s achievement, and it can point the way to a new vision (or perhaps more accurately, to new visions) for the future.8

Over the course of the past decade or so, urban history has shown a much greater willingness to make use of the insights of women’s studies and anthropology, in addition to its longer-term reliance on urban geography, to extend its understanding of the social and cultural uses of public and private space. In the 1960s and early seventies, most urban historians probably would have insisted that the patterns of city life were defined by the city; now they are more likely to see the city almost as a “canvas” and to argue that the patterns they discern are illustrated in the city instead. This fundamental difference in emphasis may begin to restructure the field itself; thus far, one can only say that the new studies demonstrate new directions in it.

An illustrative group of recent books may serve to exemplify this new direction. Although they fall into several distinct categories, for the most part these
studies have in common their use of the city as a *locus* for change. The formation of class is the subject of one group of studies. While class has been a common focus for labor historians, these are works by urbanists, such as Stuart Blumin's *Emergence of the Middle Class*. Relying to a considerable extent on the experience of Philadelphia, Blumin casts an old subject in a new light, demonstrating how an emerging middle class actively sought to differentiate itself from the working class. The "workers," unlike themselves, continued to labor with their hands rather than their heads. Members of the new middleclass, in their private as well as public lives, contributed to the segmentation of urban social life. In one sense this picture conforms to Sam Bass Warner's now classic work—*The Private City*—but instead of attributing the change he describes to the pervasive effects of urbanization, as Warner did, Blumin demonstrates how individuals and groups made conscious choices. Those choices in turn were influential in shaping the social structure of the city. This antebellum separation of non-manual from manual labor required the complexity of an urban setting, and cannot be seen separate from it. Unlike Blumin's work, most studies of class formation, such as Richard Stott's *Workers in the Metropolis* (which, as a study of antebellum working-class formation is a good complement to *The Emergence of the Middle-Class*) or Billy G. Smith's study of "The Lower Sort" in Philadelphia in the 18th century, center on the working-class rather than the middle-class. Crucial to such works, Smith's in particular, is the powerful role played by the city as "place." In many of the best of the recent works on urban history that highlight what we might call the culture of class, there is an attempt to connect culture, public life, and politics, and to do so in a way that demonstrates the active role played by the members of the groups studied. Looking at a later era, the 1920s and thirties, Lizabeth Cohen has developed a compelling argument that workers, instead of reacting passively either to the incursions of mass culture in the twenties or the depression of the thirties, were active shapers of their own culture, and as responsible for their political success as were the larger forces with which they had to contend. "External influence by no means tell the whole story," Cohen argues, and "their effectiveness in thwarting or encouraging workers' efforts depended as much on their own inclinations as on the strength of their opponents or allies." Among those who have been studying class and culture, gender has for the most part received less attention than it deserves, I would argue. There are exceptions. One study that does succeed in integrating the meaning of women's work into an overall study of working-class culture is S. J. Kleinberg's recent book on Pittsburgh's working class in the late nineteenth century, *The Shadow of the Mills*. If one problem is that those who focus on urban class formation sometimes have a tendency to give gender short shrift, a somewhat different situation often occurs in those studies in which historians of women use the city almost as a stage set. In such works, the center of the "action" is the agency of women workers, not the ways in which those workers interacted with the urban environment. Lisa Fine's
thoughtful study of women clerical workers, *The Souls of the Skyscraper* is a good example of this kind of analysis. Fine demonstrates that these women were not simply hapless pawns in the hands of corporate decision makers; rather, they created opportunities for themselves, and altered elements of the structure of clerical work. Clerical work, she demonstrates, was not inherently gendered, but had to be constructed as feminine, a process in which women were agents as well as objects. The drama of the lives of these women is played out in the city, and the city as place is central to it, but there is little analysis of how these women, and their lives, might have changed the city. In another Chicago study, Joanne Meyerowitz's *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930*, there is a greater attempt to show how the needs of women workers who lived in non-familial settings created new demands on urban social space. In general, however, in reviewing the women-centered histories published since the 1980s, the most—perhaps the only—explicit attempt to place gender at the heart of an urban history that comes to mind is Christine Stansell's study of women and class in mid-nineteenth century New York, *City of Women*, although my own recent work on suburban America attempted to integrate physical and social geography into a gendered and class-based analysis of one kind of urban space. (Throughout the history of suburban America, I argue in *Suburban Lives*, women and men acted to shape and reshape the suburbs both spatially and culturally, and in the process became changed themselves. This is not to deny the actions of larger institutional forces, but to recognize the agency, albeit unequal power, of various groups.)

Class-formation, gender, and culture were concepts that did not receive overt attention by many of the pioneers of the "new" urban history of a generation ago, although much of their work demonstrated genuine sensitivity to the struggles of racial and ethnic minorities. To these new priorities historians of the past decade have added as well an emphasis on the concept of agency, which has loomed large in studies of those groups without a guaranteed access to the formal instruments of power. Most of these new emphases seeped into urban history from such sister subfields as labor, cultural, and women's history. Those who would still like to hold on to the unifying conceptual construction that the proper subject of urban history is the urbanization process itself may find it difficult to accommodate these other concepts; however, if instead of seeing the urbanization process as an active entity we see the contending groups within the city in those terms, then we can imagine those "agents" defining, redefining, and changing the process of urbanization.

Mary Ryan's venturesome *Women in Public* provides an illuminating example of the emergence of new insights when the focus of urban history shifts from urbanization as process to city as place. As she demonstrates in a chapter evocatively subtitled "Gender and the Geography of the Public," one use of "social space, especially the everyday use of city streets," is as "a scaffolding upon which both gender distinctions and female identity are constructed." To "chart the borders of public and private in urban space" is not useful only for those seeking
to understand the public role of women. It can be applied more broadly, to enable historians to understand how different groups envision space, how they use it, and how patterns and processes change as a result of such use.\textsuperscript{13}

The concept of agency, when combined with the implications of the work of scholars in such fields as industrial history, women's history, and the various new forms of cultural studies, can also bring back an important part of urban history, one that the field, in its search for methodological and theoretical integrity, seemed to fall short in: Rendering accessible the historical experience of the inarticulate and the marginalized. If the "new" urban history failed a generation ago in attempting to bring to life the experience of anonymous urbanities while still keeping them close to social experience, the new directions in urban history promise to rectify that mistake. Most of us members of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, and similar associations, spend our time working with local sources that provide us with a sense of the immediate experience of individuals and groups within a particular kind of social, cultural, economic, and political space. By maintaining an interest in theory and structure, we can keep in sight the larger framework of our research. We can develop a research agenda that, in illuminating issues central to human experience, makes our own contributions both larger and more compelling.

Notes
1. The Chicago Conference was held October 25-27. Entitled "Modes of Inquiry in American Urban History," it brought together a broad range of scholars in the field. Selected conference papers are scheduled to be published as conference proceedings. The plenary session of the Pennsylvania Historical Association which resulted in this forum was not intended as a response to the Chicago conference, however. For this forum, readers should be aware that Philip Scranton and I agreed to a rough division of labor to avoid repetition. My task was to concentrate principally on the social and cultural dimensions of urban history, while his was to center largely on economics, labor, and industry.
2. It is difficult to say what caused this dualism, other than that the plenary speakers had been invited specifically to discuss broad theoretical and methodological questions, while the smaller sessions dealt with individual research issues.
3. Not all urban historians of that first generation were adamant quantifiers, as the distinguished historical geographer Edward Muller reminded me at the PHA conference; however, for many of us, the quantifiers seemed to offer the most advanced methodological and theoretical approaches. Eric Lampard was one of the major advocates of an ecological approach, as outlined in his "American Historians and the Study of Urbanization," American Historical Review, 67 (1961), 49-61.
4. The Philadelphia Social History Project brought together scholars from several disciplines to work together on a vast quantitative study of Philadelphia, relying on machine readable data; much of that data was from nineteenth century manuscript census reports. A number of scholars who spent time at the Project produced individual volumes, and one volume came out specifically from the project: Theodore Hershberg, ed., Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family, and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1981).
5. The case study method has produced numerous rich and significant studies, of which one of

6. For a discussion of all these issues, see Howard Gillette, Jr., “Rethinking American Urban History: New Directions for a Posturban Era,” *Social Science History*, 14 (1990), 203-228.

7. Theodore Hershberg, after the disbanding of the Philadelphia Social History Project, moved on to study contemporary public policy questions. Richard Sennett, who coedited with Stephan Thernstrom *Nineteenth Century Cities* (New Haven, 1969), has also departed the field.

8. My own academic career illustrates these shifts. Enamored of quantification as a graduate student, I wrote a dissertation on suburbanization in Philadelphia. Margaret Marsh, “The Transformation of Community: Suburbanization and Urbanization in Northern West Philadelphia, 1880-1930,” Ph.D. diss. Rutgers University, 1974. Dissatisfied with the disjunction between what I had hoped to do with my subject and my actual results, after doing a few articles I put suburbanization aside for a few years to work on a study of women anarchists, whose interest for me lay in their attempts to create a political culture absolutely at odds with mainstream America. I thought I was leaving what I had begun to consider the confines of urban history, but instead I came to see urban America with new eyes. See Margaret Marsh, *Anarchist Women, 1870-1920* (Philadelphia, 1981). As I tried to understand the relationships between gender and radicalism, and was influenced by the new developments in women’s history, I began to be interested in examining the interconnections between the civic and private dimensions of individual and group life. Eventually, this led me back to suburbanization, but now I could look at the middle-class suburb as a particular kind of space, one of the functions of which was to mediate between private and public dimensions, dimensions that were gendered as well as influenced by class and ethnicity. Such an approach also led me into the debate about the meaning of gendered “spheres,” as the nineteenth century defined the designated roles of men and women, and into an analysis of the permeability of those spheres. See Margaret Marsh, *Suburban Lives* (New Brunswick, 1990). My own experience in having my sense of urban history enriched by research in other disciplines is not unique.

9. The works that are discussed below, nearly all of them dating no further back than 1989, were chosen explicitly for their recency and for the way they are emblems of specific kinds of new scholarship important to the “new visions” in the title of this essay. For a fuller discussion of the field, see Gillette and Miller, eds., *American Urbanism*; Gillette, “Rethinking Urban History,” and, on the suburbs, Margaret Marsh, “Reconsidering the Suburbs: An Exploration of Suburban Historiography,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 113 (1988), 579-605.


12. Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore, 1990). All through this essay, whenever I try to conceptualize the overall significance of the changes with which I am dealing, I find myself seeing it as a change from urbanization as “process” to city as “place.” However, that terminology is inadequate. As the reader can see from the examples cited, the best
of the new studies show "agents" of various kinds functioning within a city that changes as a result of their "agency." Then, in many cases, the city seems to work changes on the agents. My terminology makes the city seem little more than a backdrop for the main action. And yet, even when that appears to be the case, the "backdrop" keeps changing, which in turn alters the action. As yet, however, I have been unable to come up with a terminology that suits the dynamic relation between people and place that I sense is going on in the newest of the urban history being written in the last few years.