I, too, attended the Urban History Conference in Chicago; in fact, that may have been the most important qualification for commenting on the papers today. Actually, I'm serious. I see this plenary session as a belated response to the confusion and anxiety displayed a year ago. Most of us at the time were so stunned at the impasse, at the discordance between exciting small sessions and hand-wringing plenary sessions, that we did not offer much guidance out of the quagmire. These two fine responses offer me the opportunity as well to articulate my own lingering concerns about the state of urban history.

Margaret Marsh's paper serves us well in analyzing the history of the "new urban history" and the newer rejection of it. From her we learn that "urbanists" (to the extent that they exist today) have abandoned the investigation of urbanization—the process of urban change—in a desire to give more attention to the agency of change and to uncover the meaning of urban life for the individuals who lived it. In place of city as process, we get city as site, locale, and canvas, city as place to watch people work through other identities—of social class, gender, race, ethnicity, and so forth.

While Marsh gives us a history to the present dilemma, Philip Scranton presents an agenda for the future, and a very important agenda at that. He wants us to return to the old concerns with the economic structures of cities. In some ways this looks like the old urbanization, what Marsh has told us we have—for good reason—left behind. Is Scranton taking us back to the same concern with the process of urbanization? Is this one of those cycles of revisionism where we end up where we started?

I would argue, however, that if we look carefully at what Scranton is calling for, it's really quite different, and it grows out of a rejection of the "new urban history" as much as it invokes it. If we look carefully at Scranton's language, he speaks of "city building," "city formation," "city making," and "city breaking," all words that imply agency—people doing things. The old urbanization model, in contrast, like its close cousin "modernization," implied inevitability and predictability. The task of the historian was to uncover the "motor of change." Once the process was understood, neither people nor particular places did much to alter it.

Scranton's city, moreover, is not the pre-packaged "city" traded by the urbanization folks in another way. He is willing to expand it to region and contract it to industrial district, depending on the particulars he wants to explain. What he cares most about are bringing together people and economic structures and putting them on an axis of time and space.
So should we conclude that Marsh and Scranton are coming out in different places, at odds with each other? Marsh is urging continued pursuit of the study of city as place with a focus on the social groups—or agents—who work out their gender/class/race/ethnicity within the city. Scranton is calling for renewed attention to city making and unmaking, particularly as it involves industrial and other economic structuring and restructuring, with, as I have pointed out, implicit attention to who is responsible for the process, as well as how and why.

I would suggest that Marsh and Scranton are not as far apart as they may seem. Although Marsh uses the language of “city as place,” “locale,” and “canvas” when she speaks theoretically in her paper, when she talks about her own work she goes beyond that model. She shows in her own research on suburbs that suburban space was shaped and reshaped by actors—men and women—who brought gender considerations to bear on creating both public and private space. In the end, then, Marsh’s own important work shows us that city or suburb is not just a setting but a place in itself made and changed by real people’s needs and desires.

So where do we end up? Do we have a new prescription for urban history, a response to the quandaries of last October? Let’s take stock. On the one hand, we still endorse much of the old agenda of the so-called “new urban history.” We still want to understand the city as space in time. We still want to understand change. While we are interested in the microlevel of social experience that operates on both a smaller and larger scale than the city (as expressed in family and gender, class, race and ethnicity), we still want to know about larger structures that impinge on individual’s social experience—such as industries, commerce, and business—and that are often defined on the city-level.

On the other hand, we are no longer content with accepting “urbanization” as a process, a system that has an inevitability and a predictability across place. We demand actors—elites and non-elites—who build/form/make/break/structure and restructure districts, cities and regions in pursuing their own interests. And finally, I would like to add two more considerations to this prescription for a newer urban history. First, I am still attracted to the city as a focus of study because it forces historians to see relationships across narrow categories of experience. Modern history—particularly American—has become extremely fragmented in recent years, with the isolation of social, political, economic, cultural, labor, immigration, gender, and Afro-American history. A focus on the city forces us to contend with how one arena of experience interrelates with another—how class, gender and family, race, ethnicity and religion, economic structure, power and government, for example, intersect in people’s lives. When we take away the unity of place, we tend to become conceptually more restricted to one or two categories of experience. In this way, city as locale is more than a canvas—it is a theoretical commitment to exploring complex interrelationships.
Second, the city is more than a canvas in another way. While most of what we have been discussing today is about how people make the city, that city, as a product of human agency, in turn affects people. Let's take a case that recently has been very much in the news—the racial tensions in Crown Heights. That story is not just about Jews and Blacks, but about their interaction in a particular place—the Borough of Brooklyn in the City of New York—at a particular moment in time. That city is a construction of people both powerful and weak who have helped shape particular economic, political and cultural structures, and in turn that city shapes behavior within it. In other words, there is a dialectical process at work where people make cities, but those cities, as human creations, in turn have a powerful impact back on people.

In closing, I would like to thank Margaret Marsh and Philip Scranton for their thought-provoking papers, which have reminded me, and I hope you, that writing about—and living in—cities is a demanding but tremendously stimulating experience.