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REVIEWED BY MARSHALL BERMAN

Moment of Grace

The American City in the 1950s

by **Michael Johns**

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Happy Days, Green Lights, Crash

For American cities, the 1960s began a prolonged horror show. The prime monster was the ever expanding Federal Highway System — the largest public works project, people said, since the Pyramids.¹ All over America, from the biggest cities to the smallest, the FHS worked as an engine for ripping up downtowns. In just a few years, hundreds of solid city neighborhoods turned into fragments lodged between freeways and entrance / exit ramps. Thriving businesses found themselves cut off from their customers. Venerable streets became parking lots. Beloved hotels and department stores, so vital to civic identity, were forced to close.

Even as the FHS ravaged downtown, it created overpowering reasons for moving, “offers you can’t refuse,” as the wiseguys in *The Godfather* said. Capital, jobs, and people took the offers and left. Meanwhile, millions of Southern and West Indian blacks poured into Northern cities in search of the entry-level jobs that were disappearing fast. Meanwhile, a heroin epidemic spread, leading to a prolonged explosion of violence. It happened all over, but cities felt it worst. Everyday city life got harder and scarier.

Our two political parties recognized that there was big trouble, but they dealt

with it in very different ways. Democrats offered programs to help people in trouble (“Model Cities”); Republicans blamed them and punished them for the trouble (“planned shrinkage”). Still, they shared an underlying desire to change our cities from centrifugal into centripetal places, where energy went “flying from the center” to the edges. And both were willing to spend billions on highways, on giant malls just off the exit ramps, on new towns and “edge cities” right behind them. As the ’60s turned into the ’70s, central business districts all over the country were crumbling, poor minority neighborhoods were burning down, suburbs and exurbs were booming. Our urban policy came to look like a fabulously successful plot to destroy cities.

American culture has always seethed with antipathy toward cities. It goes back to New England Puritans, to Virginia planters, to pastoral nostalgia for a lost or disappearing rural life. But the anti-urbanism of the highway program is ultra-modern. Its vocabulary is first laid out in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Scott Fitzgerald’s jazz-age romance and America’s first great celebration of car culture. After the hero’s shocking death, Fitzgerald’s narrator tries to understand his life. What was the secret of his aura, the source of his “heightened sensitivity to the promise of

Book Review

life”? On the last page, at last he gets it: “*Gatsby believed in the green light.*” The narrator sees this belief as a disaster, a fatal innocence, yet he is still in awe: it is “the last and greatest of all dreams.” Fitzgerald could see where our country was going. After the Second World War, that green light was installed as the guiding light of American urbanism. It wasn’t until the 1960s that the light began to change.

Michael Johns, Professor of Geography at Berkeley and author of *Moment of Grace*, was born in 1958. He grew up in the ’60s, in the midst of the troubles I described and also in the midst of widespread nostalgic yearning for “the good old days *before*” — before the troubles broke out, before the machine in the garden, before the green light. He has written a book that is a kind of monument to life “before.” A small monument, like Edith and Archie Bunker’s upright piano, clocking in at under 150 pages, yet serious and real. Still, Johns writes about the 1950s the way he might write about the 1650s, reconstructing it out of books, imagining it in his head, trying to create an historical vision out of whole cloth.

At first I found it strange to read an account of my childhood world from this young man. Then I realized, if the world survives and life goes on, isn’t this the way it’s got to be? As for me, the fact that I was there then means I’m old now. But I went to college, and I learned something about perspective. From the perspective of older generations, younger generations always get it wrong, and they *must* get it wrong before they can discover what they can know and who they can be. Harold Bloom, talking about generations of poets in *The Anxiety of Influence*, gets this just right. I can still remember how my elders abused me for not knowing the Depression or the Second World War because I wasn’t there; I swore I’d do better when my time came. Well, it’s come. I don’t mean that I won’t criticize Johns’s vision. But I have to give this kid some slack.

Johns opens his book with great fanfare: “America reached its peak as an urban society in the 1950s” (1). His is a story of years of steady rise in incomes,

cheap housing, tremendous expansion in public education, substantial improvements in everything that can be measured. Everybody prospered, including the poor. Johns leaves out the realm of healthcare, but penicillin, antibiotics, prenatal obstetrics, and polio vaccine brought real progress there. Johns believes that the age of the *Kinsey Report* facilitated “increased sexual intercourse,” but it was all in the family, and, along with television and improved birth control, kept married couples cozily at home.

Johns is strongest and most fluent when he blocks out the form of the 1950s city to demonstrate its structural wholeness: “the American city of factories, downtown shopping, and well-defined neighborhoods” (1). I would have appreciated more narrative detail on what made “the American city” American: how were “American” cities different from European or Asian ones? *Moment of Grace* doesn’t say. It’s like one of those small healthy meals from which everything toxic has been removed, and there isn’t much left. But it may be that a slender bulk is better suited to block out a classic form. And the form, the type, the overall pattern is rendered well.

Johns believes the classic pattern for American cities was laid out late in the 19th century. The essence of this city was “downtown.” Johns defines “the essential parts of a downtown”: “the rail station, trolley lines, office buildings, grand hotels, department stores, five-and-dimes, theatres, city hall, a nearby warehouse district, and a wholesale produce market” (2). He highlights “retail streets” and he argues that, without anybody planning or even noticing, the everyday experience of walking and shopping on those streets could educate people, could connect them with a larger world and a public life. And he is very good on department stores, on “the material and imaginative hold these giant stores once had on American womanhood” and on their power to educate women for a public life from which they were mostly excluded.

Johns appreciates those 1950s women. (My mother was one, I can see now.) He speaks of their “voluptuousness” — what a pleasure to find this word

in a work of scholarship! — and of the way their dress and style “lent downtown an air of romance” (23). His illustrations skillfully bring this out: you can see the continuity between the groups of ordinary women on his downtown streets and, say, the stars of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. At first, there seems to be a clash between his love for the profane, for sexy “downtown,” and his yearning for the holy, for grace. If our cities “had” grace in the 1950s and then “lost” it, what fatal sin did we commit at the decade’s end? (And what kind of cruel God would play with us like this, giving us Grace then taking it away?) Maybe it’s our downtowns themselves, full of fleshy temptations and alluring ideas (for the connection, see *Matthew 5*),² that are our primal sin? Something about Johns’s austere, flat, black-and-white tonality reminds me of radical Protestantism. His real, unsung heroes may be Protestant holy sinners like Hester Prynne, star of *The Scarlet Letter*; or novelist John Updike, who deeply wants to get saved but also deeply wants to get laid, and not only refuses to renounce either desire, but has the *chutzpah* to conceive of an afternoon with a sweet woman in a downtown hotel as a moment of grace.

The suburbs play an important role in Johns’s vision. But he imagines 1950s suburbanites who “relied on the city”. Like my parents in the Bronx, they commuted to work during the day; they “enjoyed themselves in the city at night” (12 – 13); they knew their place in a larger constellation, and they recognized the city as the sun. In Johns’s happy days, cities and suburbs coexisted peacefully, not locked together in nasty zero-sum games.

Through most of *Moments of Grace*, Johns writes in flat, depersonalized voice that makes the book feel longer than it is and makes reading it like driving through roadblocks. Why does Johns write this way? Is it an American Calvinist legacy? Or is he trying to give readers a short course in 1950s culture, so much of which was dense, masked, closeted, ironic, and self-ironic, encrypted in code? The trouble with writing like this is that the vision gets lost. Is he depending on

his readers to stay in his valley of dry bones out of faith? Maybe he's putting all his readers to a test. Some of us will pass, some won't.

At the very end, at last, Johns writes as if he really cares. His very last paragraph is a subsection called "The Suburbanization of Everything." In post-1950s American cities, he says, "old clusters of corner stores give way to shopping centers built around parking lots. . . . New high-rise buildings feature underground parking garages and built-in health clubs, minimarts, and drugstores, so their residents don't have to use the streets. If America reached its peak as an urban civilization in the 1950s, it has since become a quintessentially suburban one — even in its cities" (117–118).

The big line here is "so their residents don't have to use the streets." The antithesis that supplies its emotional power is "streets" *versus* "residents." Johns is telling us he hates the America of today because the green light has killed the street. He laments that our glorious expanse of city streets, once a real Eden that spread all over America and nourished the smallest cities along with the greatest was something we didn't know and didn't care that we had. After forty years of green lights that never changed and arrows that pointed only forward, a society of the streets in America is all but destroyed. Even in our own cities — or what is left of them — even in our own country, we are only "residents." We have lost a primary source of life. Johns says this well.

Now at last we can see why he's so angry, and why he wrote the book. So what's not to like? Why was I so mad that I couldn't read it for more than a year? Why did I feel that long stretches of it were being channeled by Dr. Pangloss? Johns's "Happy Days" vision made me feel totally excluded — just as I felt totally excluded all through the 1950s themselves.

Some disclosure is in order. My 1950s were framed by the Cold War: the American and Soviet nuclear arsenals that really could blow up the world; the leaders brandishing warheads at each other while telling their people not to worry —

maybe when *Mad's* Alfred E. Neuman (born 1953) said "What, Me Worry?" he was addressing them; the CIVIL DEFENSE SHELTER signs all over — when I asked my parents if there were really shelters behind the signs, my father said, "Let's hope we don't find out"; the double-layered bookcase in my parents' house, segregating the books they were willing to show the world from the books for our eyes only; the teachers who abruptly disappeared from school ("Where's Dr. Hlavaty?" "He's . . . not here"). They were framed by gang violence, which got me beaten up and robbed several times, and taught me to look over my shoulder every minute and always be ready to run. (I'm still ready, though in my arthritic sixties I can't run.) Mugging kids who were "civilians" was a standard gang initiation rite, but in the '50s they left adults alone, which is why adult media look back on the era as safe. On the other hand, no one was safe from the violence of the engineers: the Cross-Bronx Expressway runs today where my old neighborhood used to be. My '50s were framed by lots of talking to myself alone in bed at night (where it was safe) or with a couple of friends coming home from school, or with my mother after my father died, and saying "This can't go on," "It has to change," and hoping we weren't whistling in the dark.

Now I know this is Johns's book, not mine, and there's no reason for him to be telling my life story. But the 1950s were an age of incessant, explosive conflict, and trying to tell the story without the conflict is a hopeless road to nowhere. At the book's end, when he rages against "the suburbanization of everything" (117), his point is to denounce a technopastoral worldview that wants to delete all the conflict from modern life. Good point! But then, when he tells his own story, he needs to beware the airbrush's fatal allure. Whenever Johns finds himself celebrating the 1950s "center of gravity," its "sense of community," its "close familiar whole," its "clearly defined roles for men and women," its compulsory "separation of black and white," its "overall cultural coherence," its "strong sense of patriotism" (4–6), he

needs to scrutinize himself closely. Alas, he doesn't. All through *Moment of Grace*, anytime he encounters nostalgic discourse, his whole critical capacity collapses. If people say things like "Everyone looked smart," or "I always knew where I was," he doesn't think to interpret or frame, he simply believes. If a woman tells him, "Downtown in the 50s . . . had 'a greater sexual spark' than it does today" (23–24), it doesn't strike him that maybe this senior citizen — old enough to have felt sexy fifty years ago — is talking about her own youth and process of getting old. Johns simply takes her utterance as evidence that downtowns have lost their sexiness. If Paul McCartney sings, "I believe in yesterday," it proves to Johns not that people need to believe, but that yesterday was better.

When Johns's sources are men of power, his style of credulity is dangerous, rather than just silly. Discussing what he calls the '50s "surge to the suburbs," he focuses for a moment on "city planner Robert Moses," talking about how happy families were to make the move: "Any house or apartment of their own in any subdivision looks like Heaven."³ Johns takes Moses at face value, as if he were a disinterested observer. In fact, at mid-century, no American bureaucrat or politician had as much power as Moses to force masses of people to behave according to his will, to decide where they were going to live and how. Through the years, his bridge and highway projects destroyed hundreds of city neighborhoods and hundreds of thousands of people's homes. Explaining the Cross-Bronx Expressway to the press, he said, "In an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax."⁴

Did they hate him? "I hope they do!" he thought. Their hatred proved his power. Eventually, some victims of his meat axes learned to make and swing axes of their own. Years of mass mobilization, this time supported by brilliant manipulation of media, blocked Moses's next giant project, the Lower Manhattan Expressway. (Similar movements arose all over the country: they stopped highway projects in Boston, San Francisco, New Orleans, and elsewhere; they are one of

the signatures of the American '60s.) Had Moses succeeded downtown and obliterated Canal Street, 34th and 125th Streets were planned to be next to go. New York became the only American city without an expressway slashed through its center. Somehow I had missed that “heaven” remark. But the image of Moses blowing up people’s houses while telling the adoring media that those people feel like they are going to heaven, looks amazingly like one of Komar and Melamid’s *Classic Moments of Stalinism*.⁵ Moses’ career exhibits the violence and malice built into 1950s political culture. It also shows you don’t have to be a Communist to be a Stalinist.

Why bring up Moses up again? His career dramatizes the repressed dark side of the '50s. “City planner Robert Moses”? This is like giving an E-Z Pass to Tamburlaine the Great! Moses in the '50s, more than anyone, made the mold for those expressways that cracked open so many American cities and killed so many of the streets and downtown neighborhoods that Johns laments and loves. Those dread roads got their immense budgets, offers that no city could afford to refuse, through the Federal Highway System. The people in the way were part of a generation that had lived through the New Deal and the Second World War. They trusted the government, they had good manners, they saw themselves as part of a larger whole, they believed “the community” should come first — and their vibrant cities were largely destroyed. When they woke up at their new addresses, it was often green and pleasant. But you can trust Robert Moses’s sadistic genius to seize the *mot juste* on their new lives: the big fact of life was that they were “*subdivided*,” their suburban identity reduced and constricted their being. Subdivided middle-class people were among the first victims of our postwar policy of uricide. It took another decade before their children — my generation — learned to organize and fight. If the parents were subdivided, the children found new ways to multiply. We made trouble, got arrested, created panic in the streets and on the highways, in order to stop that damned green light.⁶

There is a dialectical irony here to

which Johns seems blind, one that bears directly on his urban vision. When people on the '60s Left were actively concerned with the city, their urban ideals were a lot like Johns’s idealized '50s, organized around active street life and vibrant downtowns. But my generation saw how our cities were self-destructing, how they were being victimized by their own political machines and public authorities. We realized Americans were helpless to protect their '50s streets and neighborhoods until they learned to overcome their '50s good manners and conformity. To save what was left of the '50s city, people had to learn to rough up the '50s world.

When Johns celebrates the downtown city street, I’m sure he knows he is on the road Jane Jacobs laid out forty years ago. In fact, Jacobs is a perfect fit for his picture of big city women who “lent downtown an air of romance.” Her road to romance was to agitate, organize, and fight for downtown’s existence. She knew our streets would turn into ash-heaps unless respectable people were willing to act up. When she left the USA in 1968, several indictments were pending against her. (Are they still pending?) It makes sense that our greatest celebrant of the street is one of the people who invented the '60s. Her classic, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), is not only a romantic symphony, but also a manual for making trouble. She is close to ninety now, but just as romantic and just as iconic as ever: in a photomontage in the April 4, 2005, *New York* magazine, a colossal Jacobs looms protectively over the Hudson shoreline.

I’ve been using Scott Fitzgerald’s green light and the Federal Highway program to grasp the American 1950s. Their radiance was the promise of an endless onward flow of progress without a single stoplight. It took a generation to understand how much of the radiance was a mirage, how much of the promise was a delusion. In reality, that road without stoplights stopped so much of the life around it: not only the lives of the people in the neighborhoods along the road, and the people in its way, but even the lives of the people in the cars. This wasn’t obvi-

ous at the start; it had to unfold in real places in real time. Americans had to live through it before they could learn.

Their collective learning cut across the country’s political divisions. The '60s Left marched through streets, assembled in parks, came to know itself through demonstrations that were musical, colorful urban festivals. Even if there were ugly encounters with counter-demonstrators or police, the overall feeling was magical: the city was ours. And the Left was just a small part of it. In the '60s, it seemed as if wherever there were streets, there were street fairs, block parties, sidewalk cafés. Parks became primary stages for every kind of music, and for every kind of people that played or loved it, to mix and merge. Hippies created “Be-Ins” (I helped organize one along the Charles), and masses of squares came.

By the end of the '60s, despite all the stresses we know so well, more Americans were using urban space more intensely than ever. As businesses moved out along the highways, suburbanites depended on cities less but learned to appreciate them more. You could see the emerging concept “metropolitan area” as a form of suburban appreciation. You could see it in the boom in “festival markets,” urban theme parks aimed at suburbanites who ached with nostalgia for urban density and diversity. You could see it in the backlash prompted by Gerald Ford’s 1976 New York Drop Dead speech: it was harder now to convince Americans that the collapse of their cities meant nothing to them. There were more people than ever who felt that being in a city was a way to be fully alive. By the end of the 1970s, our green lights had reversed their flow and increasingly led *into* the city.

Thus American cities today are hard to live in precisely because so many people want to be here. Michael Johns writes as if his model city is long forgotten and in danger of being lost. But really, it’s being remembered with tremendous force. Thanks to the power of post-'60s American culture, millions of people have come to grasp the virtues of old city streets and downtown neighborhoods as places to live the good life. They have read Jacobs

and Johns, even if they've never heard of them. The force of their desire undermines old stabilizing structures like rent control, drives housing costs through the roof, and puts both market pressure and human pressure on all the people who have lived in downtowns for most or all of their lives. The nasty word most often used to describe the new people is "gentrification." But this isn't fair: most of the people who want to be here tomorrow are no more "gentry" and no more sinister than the people who are here today.

By a weird irony, real human understanding and cultural progress have led more people than ever to demand what Henri Lefebvre called "the right to the city." But our society seems very limited in its capacity to create more city life. Maybe in the 21st century, the force that W. H. Auden called "Eros, the builder of cities" will break through. If it doesn't, then the city of tomorrow will devolve into what Hegel called the primal tragic scene: a Pyrrhic struggle to the death in which both sides win. □

NOTES

1. See Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) for the best overall account of the Federal Highway Program.
2. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that people who have lustful thoughts or feelings, even if they don't act on them, will go to Hell.
3. Robert Moses, "Build and Be Damned," *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1950. The full quotation is: "To young couples with one or two small children fed up with life in a city sardine can or goldfish bowl, often with elderly in-laws, any house or apartment of their own in any subdivision looks like Heaven — and it is this craving for a home and bit of ground that the shrewd realtor counts on for quick sales and a big return on very little equity."
4. An often-quoted line, apparently voiced at a public hearing.
5. Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, artists now in their sixties, defectors from Brezhnev's USSR, created "Sots Art," a Soviet incarnation and travesty of Pop Art. Brilliant satirists of Stalinism, they are obsessed with its iconography in its purest, i.e., most totalitarian forms. Their work evokes the Catholic obsessiveness of James Joyce. Its high points are enormous paintings with titles like "Stalin and the Muses." See Rimma and Valery Gerlovin's essay in *Russian Samizdat Art*, Charles Doria, ed. (New York: Willis Locker and Owens, 1986), and a *New Yorker* profile by Ian Frazier, "Partners," December 29, 1986. For Komar and Melamid's post-Soviet thoughts, see "What Is To Be Done With Monumental Propaganda?" in *Artforum*, May 1992.

6. Robert Caro's monumental book, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and The Fall of New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), is at once the definitive classic account of Moses' career and a perfect expression of the cultural energies that mobilized against him and his projects in the 1960s. My book, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982; Penguin, 1988), is another "Sixties book." Its chapter on New York offers a discussion of Moses that both builds on and criticizes Caro.