

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 PARASKEVAS

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,

coyotes and a bald eagle. There are no interstate highways here, no major airports, no subways, no commuter railways. 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.

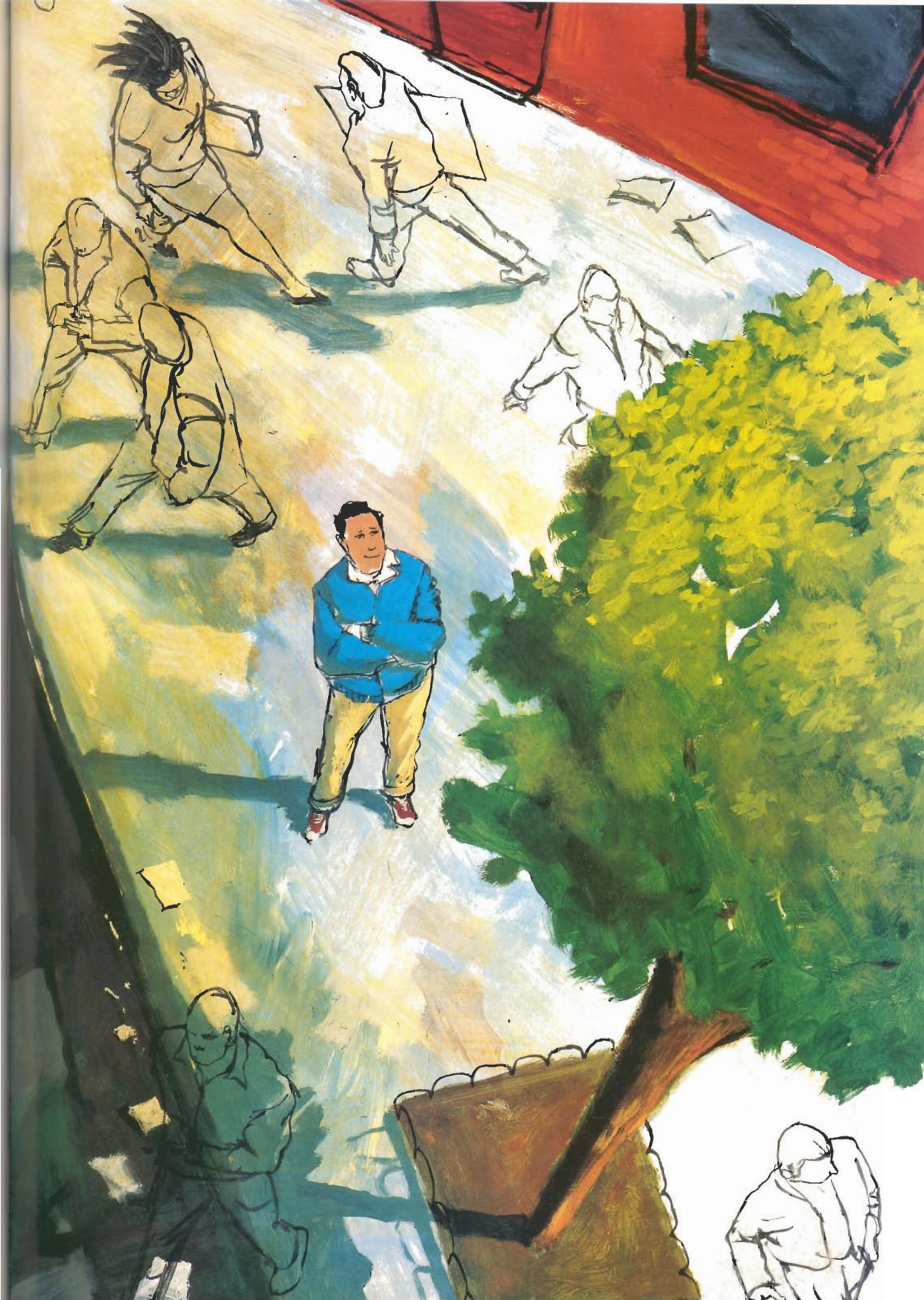
But the frenetic pace of my old urban life had slowed, and my senses had reawakened as if an anesthetic were wearing off. For the first time I felt that I shared a place with others and that the community we formed—and that formed us—was worth preserving, promoting, and sharing. I joined a local nonprofit 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

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 Sullivan, 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 ate each other.” But the views of James Madison and Alexander Hamilton prevailed. Madison stripped away the civic overtones of a republican form





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of government, calling it merely "a government in which the scheme of representation takes place." He likewise turned factionalism and private interest—vices 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, *civitates*, 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 teenager, 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 Manhattan. Years ago in Brooklyn's 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

racket, but it's our own lives that clatter so. Basil the Great, after leaving the city of Caesarea in the fourth century, wrote, "I have abandoned my life in the town as the occasion of endless troubles, but I have not managed to get rid of myself." And the Stoic philosopher Seneca observed in his essay "On Noise": "There can be absolute bedlam without so long as there is no commotion within.... For what is the good of having silence throughout the neighborhood if one's emotions are in turmoil?"

Rather than cultivating repose, we find ourselves hurrying through our daily tasks. How often we define the place where we are now in terms of where we next have to be. Time is a taskmaster, or worse, an opponent to be cheated or squeezed. Even our leisure time is organized, scheduled, and hurried. We distract ourselves with television, Walkmans, car phones, appointment books, and the World Wide Web.

We screen our calls, tint our car windows, shop by computer, eat processed foods, and live and work year-round in climate-controlled environments. And

not just in the city. Farmers can spend \$80,000 for tractors with air conditioning and high-end music systems, and satellite dishes can turn any rural homesteader into a couch potato. There is no easy escape from the rhythms of our industrial/information culture. But these habits of living combined with a poorly designed urban setting can have an overwhelming effect in driving us inside our own four walls, apart from each other, and away from an invested and participatory community.

To combat this communal dysfunction, many social critics call for heavy reinforcements: large-scale urban renewal projects, government programs, social legislation, radical paradigm shifts, and even revolution. But if the urban din is not the only cause of chaos, neither is the work being done in urban architecture, civic renewal, and historic preservation the only solution for promoting civility and place. What creates ideal cities is the

interplay of well-designed streets and neighborhoods and the capacity of urban dwellers to be aware of their place and of one another—to become citizens. The most well-designed city will have little impact on civic virtue if we fail to reinforce that virtue within ourselves.

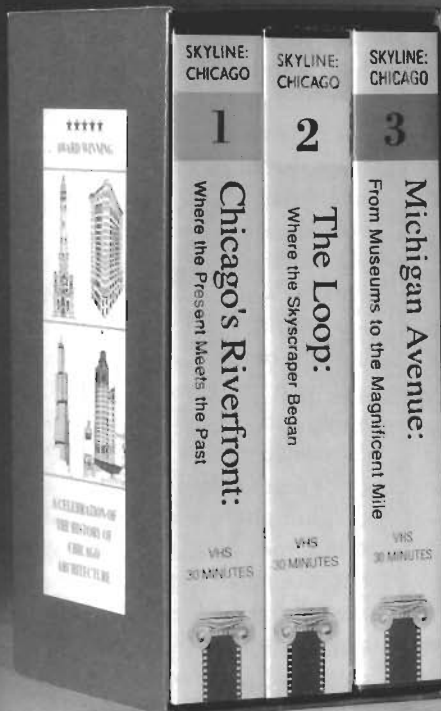
Awareness begins, to use poet and writer Kathleen Norris's words, by "being grounded in the present." Whether in rush-hour traffic or on a crowded subway platform, the present

moment is the only moment in which we encounter our world directly. It's a tenet of the world's oldest philosophical and spiritual traditions that living mindfully in the present puts us in direct contact with ourselves and others.

Combined with the now of the present is the here of this place. Black Elk, the Sioux medicine man, said that the center of the world is right where we are, our own bodies mini-universes interacting with weather, season, and geography.

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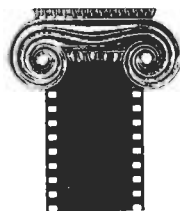
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We should also resist the promptings of our divided brain to separate life into work and leisure, weekday and weekend, city and country. Everyone needs to visit quiet and wild places from time to time, whether in a city's botanical gardens, parks,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

Cities are not simply the sum of their concrete and steel. One can purchase maps that highlight landscapes and not interstates, that categorize by geology, watershed, or bioregion. What was this place a century, a millennium, or an ice age ago? Who lived here before European settlement? What is the history of this building or neighborhood? Orient yourself with compass, map, and history book, and you'll begin to notice wind direction or the sun's lowest point in winter or time's longer cycles.

Though nature unencumbered is sometimes scarce in cityscapes, the human interactions of community and neighborhood are abundant. Corner stores, ethnic restaurants, laundromats, churches, homes for the elderly, sports teams, taverns, fairs, festivals, and local

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

Craftsmanship can also be a source of community. Bakers, tailors, farmers, and woodworkers offer both their skills and stories; their shops and markets emanate the sounds and smells of good work, tradition, and the materials of their trades. Regular customers feel at home and stay just a moment longer, perhaps with a growing sense 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, snowshoeing, meditation, painting. Take a species inventory of a local park. Instead of surfing the Web, read the masters of nature writing (my favorite is Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*). Join a local nonprofit. Slow down your breathing instead of turning up your Walkman. Slow down.

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 test and some practice," he wrote. "Why should I need to suffer the torture any longer ...?"

I have no desire to return to an urban

setting, fearful, I suppose, of losing what fledgling awareness I have gained and unwilling to leave a place that has a hold on me. But I return often to the cities of my youth, and I recall with pleasure the traditions and neighborhoods I left 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), remi-

niscised with old classmates about the hell we raised, and observed the interactions of people absolutely at home in this setting. The band played to an appreciative audience of elders sitting in folding chairs while young children weaved through the streets. Folks ate, drank, and danced.

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 heat 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. **E**

William Vitek 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.



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