

## GREAT CITY ... TERRIBLE PLACE

*Man does not live by bread alone*



A good architect does not have to be fazed by working under severe economic constraints, however drastic they might be. Having to use only the humblest materials, such as mud or sun-dried adobe bricks, need not prevent him from creating a joyous and triumphal piece of architecture. On the contrary.

Unhappily, the same does not seem to hold true of urban planners. Somehow we get overwhelmed by the physical and economic parameters we face. We forget that our towns and cities are much more than just brick and stones - they have mythical and metaphysical attributes as well. In fact the physical attributes of a city are only a part of our urban experience - and a city can be beautiful as physical habitat, with trees, un-crowded roads, open spaces, etc, and yet fail to deliver that particular, ineffable quality of urbanity that we call: CITY.

We all know examples of this. Bombay, of course, illustrates the very opposite. Everyday it gets worse and worse as physical environment. . . and yet better and better as: city. That is to say, everyday it offers more in the way of skills, activities, opportunity – on every level, from squatter to college student to entrepreneur

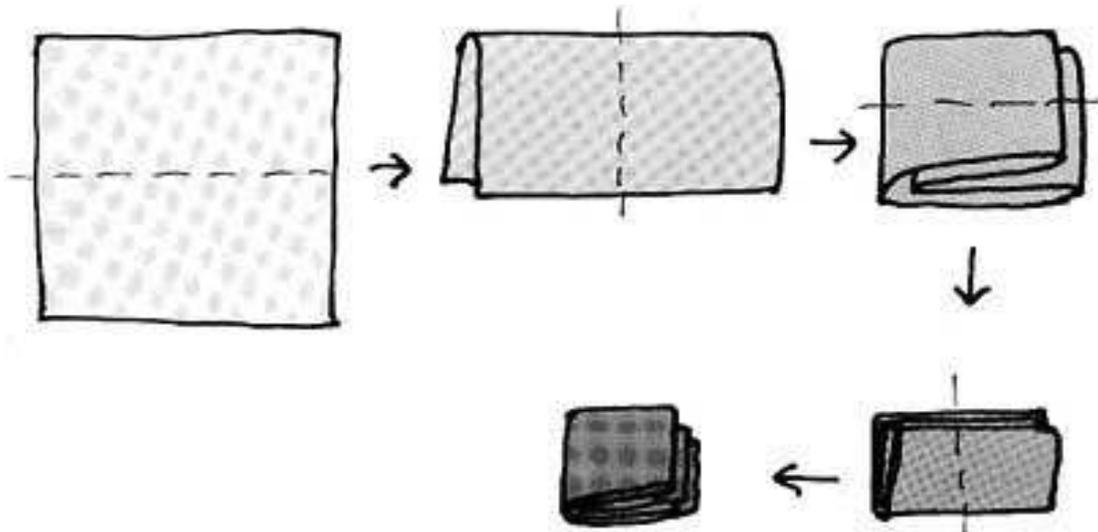
*Ganpati festival at Chowpatty beach, Bombay*



## The New Landscape

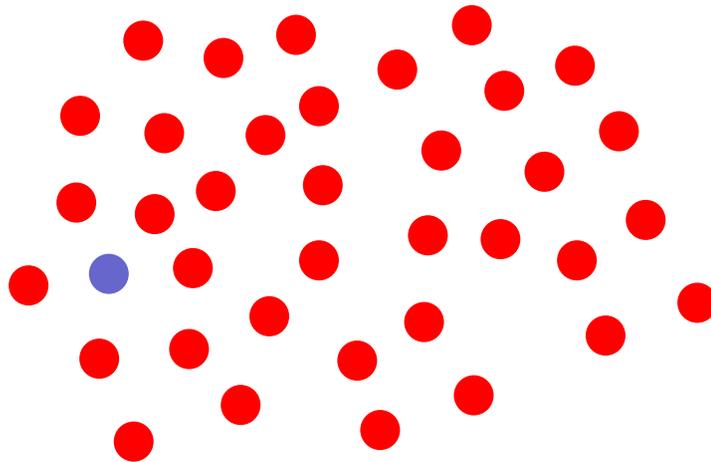
to artist. The vitality of the theatre (and the evergrowing audiences), the range and talent of newspapers and magazines, there are a hundred indications emphasizing that impaction (implosion!) of energy and people which really is a two-edged sword . . . destroying Bombay as environment, while it intensifies its quality as city.

Teilhard de Chardin likened this increasing complexity (which we also experience as we move from village to town to city) with the successive folding of a handkerchief on itself each fold doubling the layers of material i.e. the density of experience. As a biologist, he felt that it was analogous to the blind drive that made life develop all the way from single-cells to more and more complex forms a movement as compulsive, and as irreversible. It is an intriguing insight, and perhaps explains not only why the migrant goes from village to town, but (more importantly) why having experienced the physical degradation of his new life, he still does not return to his village. He has no choice. We only go back to Walden Pond when we can take our complexity with us. Only the madman or the mystic goes out into the desert. And the mystic is really taking his God, his complexity, with him. That leaves only the madman.

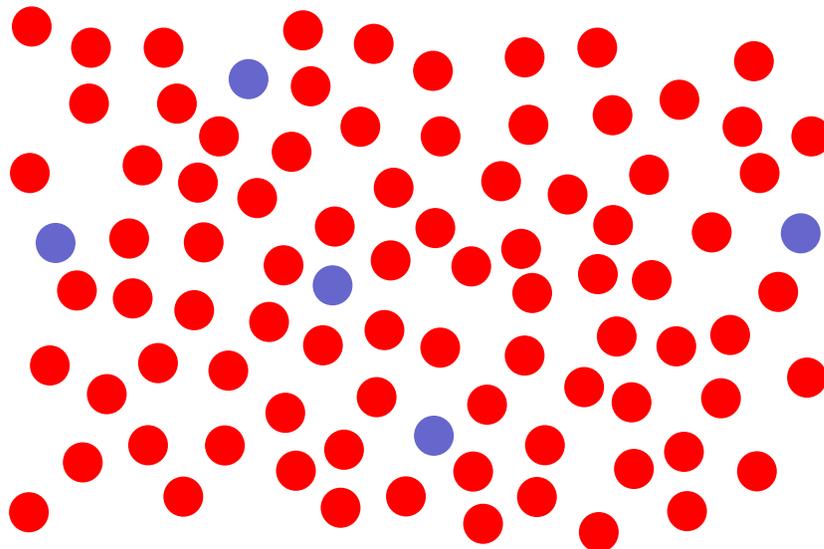


*Great City ... Terrible Places*

An equally incisive explanation of the lure of cities was put forward by the Greek planner Doxiades, the founder of Ekistics. I remember a slide-show he gave, many years ago. . . (huge 60 mm slides throwing clear, monumental images on the screen). First slide: diagram of a village: 250 red dots and one blue one – he's a blue person. Einstein? The village idiot? Anyway, he's different from the rest.

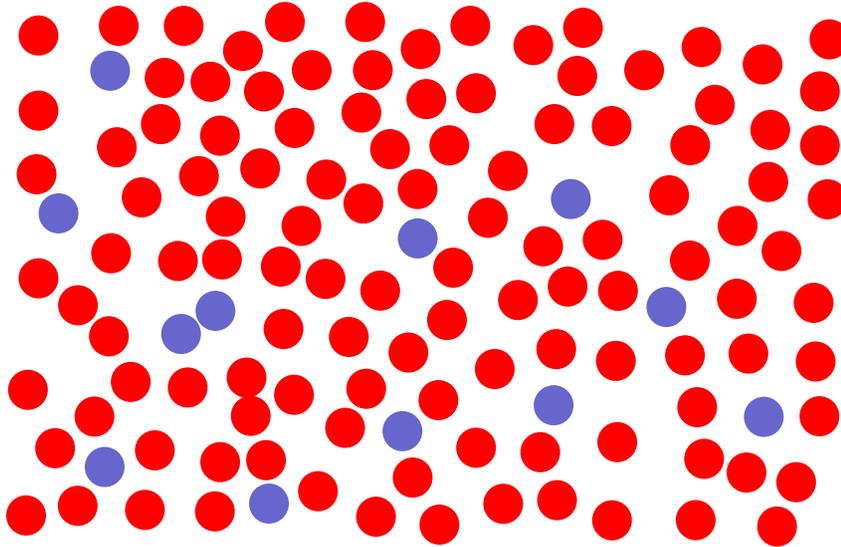


Next slide: a town of 1000 people. Now there are 4 or 5 blue dots floating around.

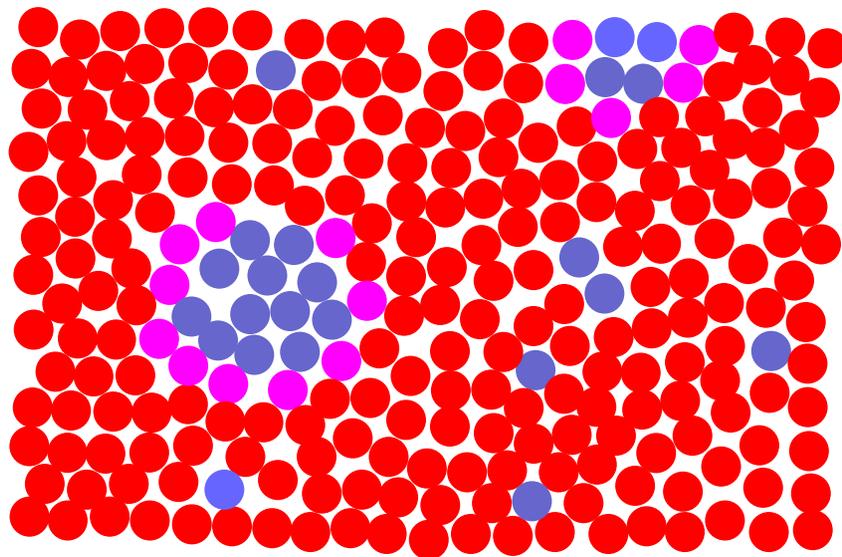


## *The New Landscape*

Next: a town of 25,000 people. Ah! An historic moment: two blue people are meeting for the first time.



Now a town of 100,000. . . and we have several colonies where blue people reside. . . and furthermore, some of the red dots on the fringes of these colonies are turning. . . purple!



*Great City ... Terrible Places*



*Gandhiji launching the "Quit India" movement in Bombay, 1942*

That's what cities are about. Blue people getting together. Communicating. Reinforcing each other. Challenging (and changing!) the red ones. Hence the Quit India movement announced by Mahatma Gandhi from a maidan in Bombay. And Calcutta, in its heyday in the twenties, a powerhouse of ideas and reforms: political, religious, artistic. Hence also the paradox: Bombay decaying as a physical plant, yet improving as a city. . . as a place where blue people meet, where things happen, where ideas incubate.

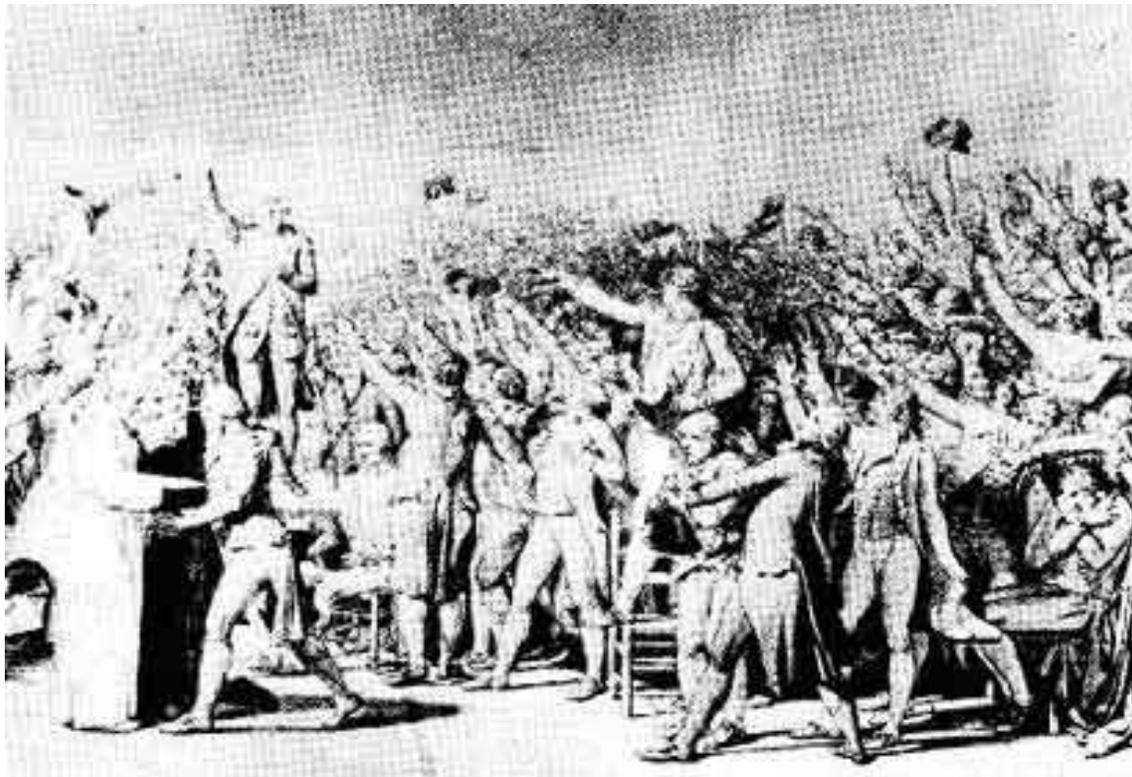


*Indian nurses in the Gulf: urban skills*

## *The New Landscape*

And also, of course, as a place where urban skills grow. For the developing world needs these skills. Today in the Gulf, a surprisingly large proportion of development is in the hands of Third World technocrats: engineers, doctors, nurses, construction firms, hoteliers. They are winning contracts in the face of world-wide competition and from clients who have a global choice. It is truly an extraordinary achievement and primarily for our urban centres which produce these skills. Development necessitates management, and too often the Third World has to import this know-how (via the World Bank and the United Nations). Fortunately India has a wide spectrum of urban centres, varying from small market towns to the great metropolii, all producing an incredible range and diversity of skills. Like the farmlands of the Punjab or the coal fields of Bihar, they are a crucial part of our national wealth. To let them deteriorate is to squander priceless resources – a blunder of the highest order.

*Parisians dicussing their monarch*



## *Great City ... Terrible Places*

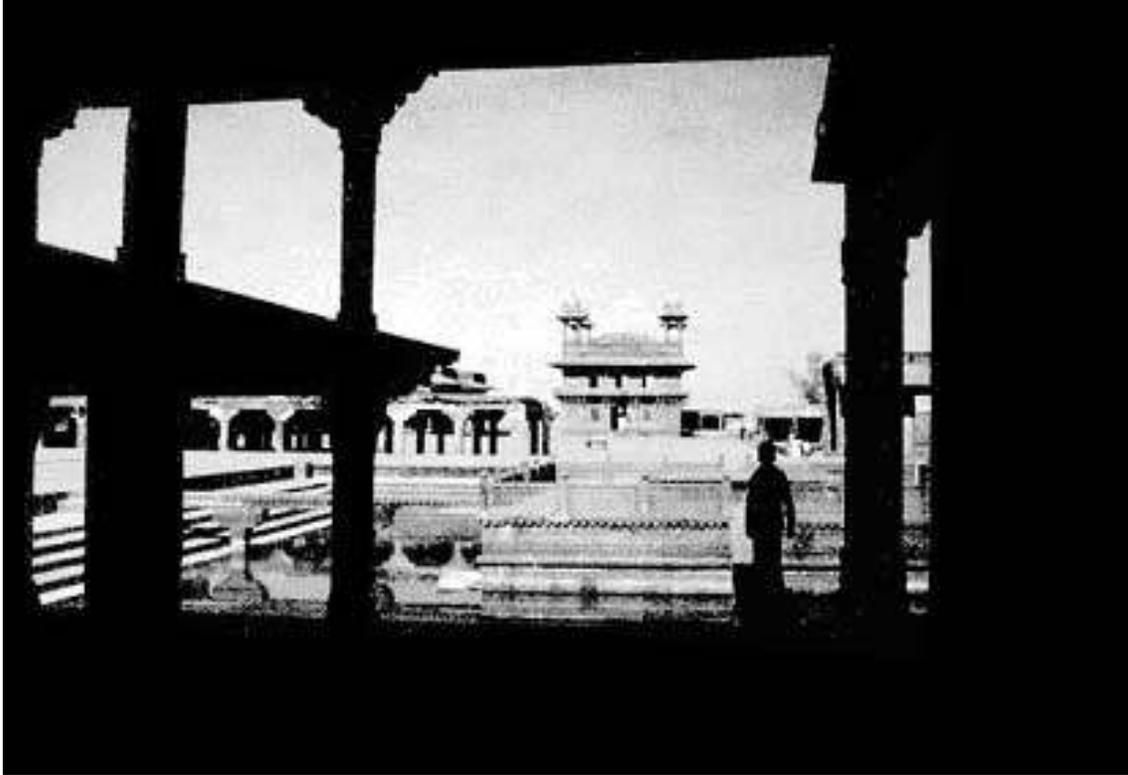
Our criminal indifference to cities like Calcutta or Bombay over the last decades have allowed conditions to deteriorate to sub-human levels. Yet somehow Bombay functions, and with an energy and enthusiasm that is really impressive far more impressive than a showpiece capital like Delhi, because the budget available there per capita is several-fold that of Bombay. Furthermore, cities like Bombay and Calcutta represent a true cross-section of urban incomes, whereas New Delhi has no destitute people (they are all hidden in Old Delhi), and the poorest people you see are government clerks cycling to work and in winter even they are dressed in woollens! The Third World has too many examples of such capital cities, cities whose apparent affluence is misleading – most of all to the politicians and bureaucrats who live there.



*Energy and enthusiasm*

No, the miracle of Bombay is that despite political indifference and apathy, despite lack of resources, . . . some water does get distributed (at least much of the time), buses and trains provide public transport all day and most of the night, etc. . . all accomplished by the skill, energy and dedication of the people of this city. Yet how long will this last? How long before the neglect, the piles of debris, the stinking garbage take their toll and the élan, the enthusiasm, of the citizens slowly disintegrates? Then, as in the case of Calcutta, a kind of apathy begins to set in, a stultifying indifference. . .

## *The New Landscape*



*Fatehpur Sikri: one of the greatest indicators of them all*

Cities have always been unique indicators of civilization – all the way from Mohenjodaro to Athens, to Persepolis, to Peking, to Isfahan, to Rome. You can have great music created during rotten times, even painting, and poetry but never great architecture and cities. Why is this? Primarily, because building involves two essential conditions: firstly an economic system which concentrates power and decision-making; and secondly, at the centre of that decision-making, leaders with the vision, the taste and the political will to deploy these resources intelligently.

The first set of conditions prevails only too often the second hardly ever. The combination is almost unique. Thus Akbar will always be Akbar. Not because of his military exploits (those have been bettered a hundred times over, both before and after his time). He will always be Akbar because, at the centre of that vortex of power, he exercised these qualities.

## *Great City ... Terrible Places*

*Calcutta in the 1880's*



Cities grow. . . and die. . . much faster than we think. Visiting Calcutta today, it is difficult to understand how turn-of-the-century travellers could have deemed it as one of the great metropolises of the world. . . the finest East of Suez. . . a jewel in the crown, and so forth. Could they not see the grave (perhaps terminal) illness that already was tightening its grip on that marvellously humane city? No, obviously there is a time lag during which calamity is not overt. So that late into the '40s and '50s, we still couldn't see the fatal symptoms. . . the writing on the wall.



*and a hundred years later*

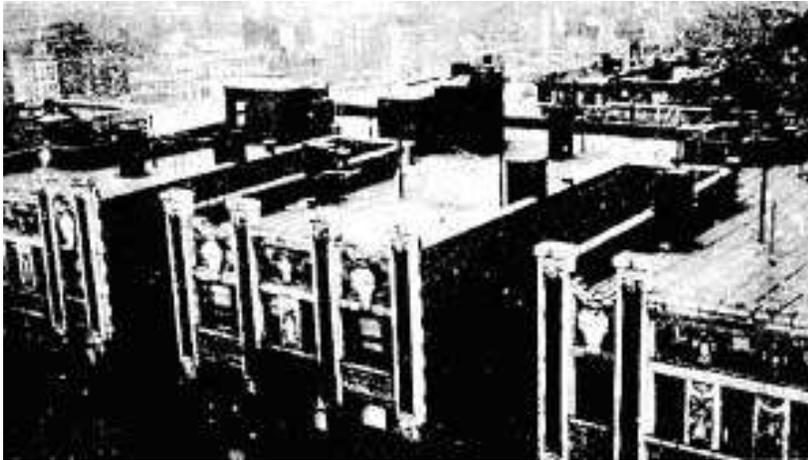
## The New Landscape



Obviously this is true of Bombay. While it is getting better and better as city, and disintegrating (very rapidly and quite unnecessarily) as environment... perhaps what we are experiencing is the last burst of energy. .. the spastic twitches before the end. Living in this city we wouldn't notice it ourselves.

If you drop a frog into a saucepan of very hot water, it will desperately try to hop out. But if you place a frog in tepid water and then gradually, very very gradually, raise the temperature, the frog will swim around happily... adjusting to the increasingly dangerous conditions. In fact, just before the end. . . just before the frog cooks to death... when the water is exceedingly hot. . . the frog relaxes. . . and a state of euphoria sets in (as in hot-tub baths). Maybe that's what happening to us in Bombay, as everyday we find it getting to be more and more of a *great city*... and a *terrible place*.

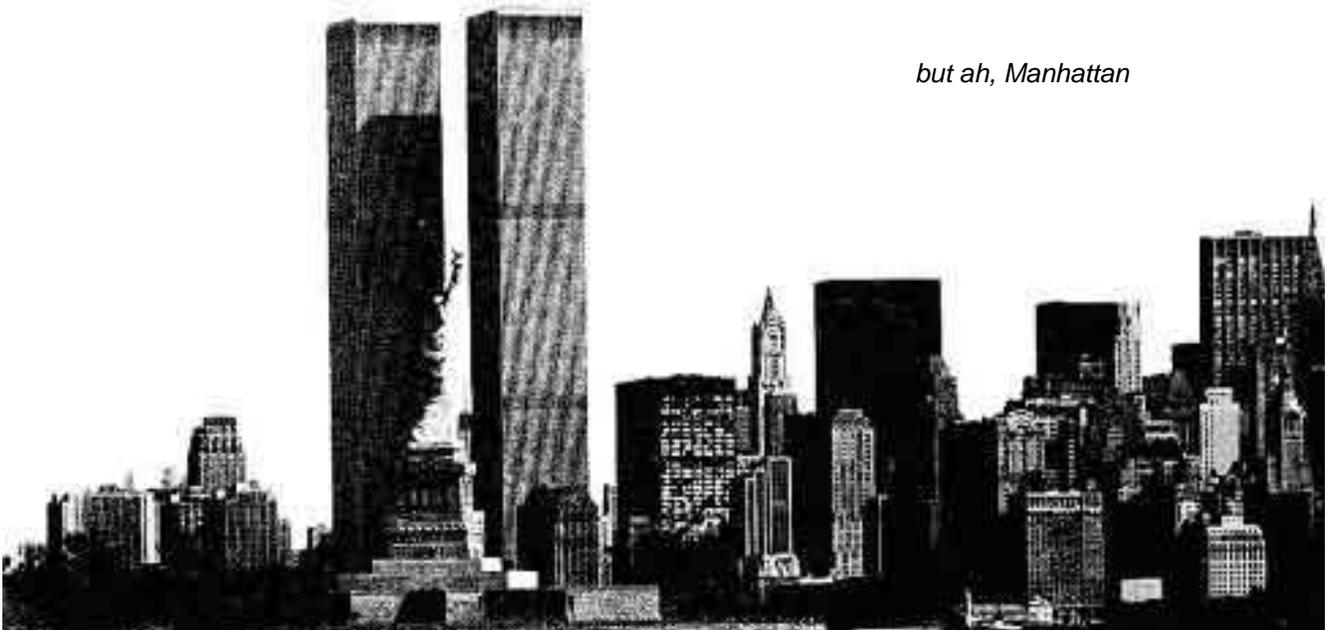
*Great City ... Terrible Places*



*A grid of pigeon holes*

But perhaps this has always been true of all the world's great metropolii. We do not see their physical reality we're so immersed in their mythic qualities. If you were to visit Manhattan, but could not feel or comprehend its myths. . . what would you see? A monotonous grid of traffic intersections and buildings like pigeon-holes much like Cleveland, Detroit, and a dozen other North American cities. But Fifth Avenue. . . Central Park. . . 42nd Street. . . the very names are magic! We do not hear them for what they really are mere numbers on a map, planners shorthand. They have become the stuff of which dreams are made!

So also with the burgeoning metropolii of the Third World. What to the outsider may appear as a mere mass of humanity, spreading in all directions to infinity, to the people themselves could well be a place of unique opportunity, with truly mythic dimensions.



*but ah, Manhattan*