

Part 3 ⑥ Cities as Symbols

Values are often transmitted and shared through icons which come in many forms. A whole city can be an icon. Although people often attribute deep symbolic meaning to some rural landscapes (as did the Lake District poets in early 19th-century England or Chinese artists painting mountain gorges), cities are even more crowded with the kinds of symbolism in which human values are imbedded. As stages for political theater, which employs icons, they have played a vital role in the cohesion of polities. In the layout of their streets, in the shape of their buildings, in the way they commemorate collective memories, in their historic links to the master narratives of people, and in many other ways, cities have been symbols of implicit values.

No matter what their circumstance people need a sense of selfhood, which entails internalization of values reinforced by society's symbols. Membership in a community assists the internalization of values; the internalization of values makes community possible. (See the discussion of community in Chapter 17.) The words "community" and "city" are not necessarily synonymous. Community is not necessarily defined in terms of territory. A community can cut across national boundaries; or it can span smaller space than a whole city. However, it has often been most apparent and intensely felt at the local level. Cities and their symbols have provided an important context for the evolution of selfhood for better or worse depending on the kinds of communities they fostered. Cities, of course, are multidimensional, but form is not the least of their dimensions. From the form of a city we can learn much about the society and polity with which the city is related.