Definition: **urbanism** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1. The study of cities, especially in relation to the social, economic, political, and cultural systems which develop within them and how these are influenced by the nexus between communities and the built environment and the hinterland.

urbanist noun

Summary Article: **urbanism** from *The Dictionary of Human Geography*

Three common definitions for this highly contested term can be distinguished:

1. *The typical way of life of people who live in a city or town.* In this first sense, the concept is usually traced back to Louis Wirth (1938), a Chicago school sociologist who witnessed and described urbanization in Chicago in the early twentieth century as a process of change to the moral order and the decline of community. The division of labour and sociocultural and socio-economic diversification lead to both fragmentation of individuals’ lives in cities and to the normal expectation of living in the proximity of ‘unknown others’. Using the criteria of size, density and heterogeneity, Wirth claimed the specificity of ‘urbanism as a way of life’. Often, this quality of urbanism is confused with the notion of urbanity, which ascribes characteristics such as sophistication, refinement and courtesy to individuals or communities.

2. *The study of life in cities and towns.* In this second sense, urbanism combines a scientific method of urban enquiry and an often linked practice of socio-spatial engineering (planning) typical of complex modern societies.

3. *Urbanism now often refers to the way people live more generally.* Magnusson (2005) is only one of a succession of commentators who, since Lefebvre (1970 [2003]) foresaw a modern ‘urban revolution’, has claimed that it is ‘only recently that preponderantly modern urban societies have emerged’. The traditional split of town and countryside has been eliminated. As society becomes more urbanized, the city disappears as the distinct object of enquiry and practice, and urban society overall becomes the object of scientific enquiry and policy action. Critics have argued that this is both an ethnocentric and a teleological use of the term, since it equates urbanism with (and by implication normalizes) a model specific to the global north. Thus Robinson (2004, p. 710) insists: ‘This phantasmagoria of urban experiences in the west, this western “modern,” often fails to capture the inventiveness and creativity of people in poor cities, more often tied to the heroic (tragic?) resilience of urban dwellers in the face of extraordinary difficulties, rather than to the creative potential of city life.’

French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (2003 [1970]), arguably the most influential urban theorist of the past fifty years, was critical of the ideological and state-centric qualities of urbanism as a state-led...
project of modernization: 'Urbanism . . . masks a situation. It conceals operations. It blocks a view of the horizon, a path to urban knowledge and practice. It accompanies the decline of the spontaneous city and the historical urban core. It implies the intervention of power more than that of understanding. Its only coherence, its only logic, is that of the state – the void. The state can only separate, disperse, hollow out vast voids, the squares and avenues built in its own image – an image of force and restraint' (ibid., pp. 160–1). This state-centred urbanism militates against the possibilities of the urban and against the promise of the right to the city in urban society. In Lefebvre’s own notion of an urban society, which now encompasses the globe, urbanism in this sense will ultimately need to be critiqued and overcome to make way for liberated urban everyday life.

If urbanism is our way of life more generally, it can also be used as a prism through which human societies and their futures can be understood. The postmodern urbanism of Los Angeles was discussed in this manner during the 1980s and 1990s (see los angeles school). In the same sense, commentators have looked at other cities more recently as windows into a common future: ‘Dubai is an extreme example of urbanism. One of the fastest growing cities in the world today, it represents the epitome of sprawling, post-industrial and car-oriented urban culture. Within it, large numbers of transient populations are constantly in flux’ (Katodrytis, 2005). The term ‘urbanism’ has of late also been used in compound phrases to describe either real developments in the constitution of cities or normative prescriptions on how to build (better, more sustainable, more liveable) cities. Among the former is the term ‘transnational urbanism’, popularized by Michael Peter Smith (2001a), who believes in the establishment of cities as places through multifarious social relationships in spaces across national borders (see transnationalism). Among the latter, the term ‘urbanism’ has now been resuscitated by the followers of the architectural style and practice of New Urbanism which, with its higher than usual densities and architectural features such as front porches and back alleys, is ostensibly meant to be a realistic answer to urban sprawl in North America. Observers have called this a ‘new suburbanism’, which invokes notions of density and residential community believed absent from common suburban forms of urbanism. (Lehrer and Milgrom, 1996). Similarly, Timothy Luke has appealed for ‘contemporary urbanism as public ecology’, which puts ecological issues into the centre of the urbanist project today (Luke, 2003).

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