

# Anthropology on the town

by Charles Hilly

Once upon a time, anthropologists were supposed to spend all their time out in the bush, smoking hemp with primitive people. Not any more! Some of them may still be smoking hemp, but the old, ethnocentric division between "primitive" and "civilized" peoples has fallen by the wayside. No one is sure which is which now. And many anthropologists have come to town. Some have followed their subject matter from tribal areas to cities, while others have simply realized that their methods apply to city dwellers as well as to inhabitants of tiny villages.

As an urban sociologist, I greet them with mixed feelings. Have they come to fight for my turf, my city? Yet as a student of cities I have to admit they have something: a style of disciplined, direct observation which gets at the experience of living in different nooks and crannies of big cities.

Now, everyone knows what life is like in his own cranny. The trouble is that we don't know enough about each other's worlds — how they overlap, how they differ, how they add up. Sociologists have done fairly well at adding up pieces of individual lives to get the big picture of land use, or the location of different nationalities within a city, or the distribution of crime. Their development of the sample survey has provided a convenient way of detecting the main trends and major subdivisions in big-city population. They have helped design the biggest survey of them all — the census — and have invented some ingenious ways of using numbers from the census to find out where the city is going. The urban sociologists are great at averaging, at finding the main line. That helps in learning whether the population is getting more mobile, or if one national group is sending more of its children to college, or who is getting what during a general rise in prosperity. It is important to know the averages.

Yet once we know the averages, the deviations from the average begin to matter; so does the way it feels to be at the average, or far away from it. That is where the urban anthropologist shines.

We can see the difference in the study of urban poverty in North America. The sociologists and economists have not done a bad job of finding out how many poor people there are by various definitions of poverty, how the proportions have been changing, and roughly who they are. Where they have often fallen down is in analyzing how people got into their various categories, and what it is like to be there.

Three non-sociologists — an anthropologist, a city planner, and a freelance writer — played a large part in turning students of cities back toward greater attention to the ways poor people face life in the city. Oscar Lewis, an anthropologist, began his work by studying everyday life in a Mexican village. Later, he followed his villagers to the slums of Mexico City. There he lived with them and let them tell their own stories while his tape recorder turned. The results were a new kind of book, built almost entirely on the oral autobiographies of the people under study, and a new understanding of the distinct way of life Lewis called the "culture of poverty". Since then, the ideas and techniques Oscar Lewis put into such books as "Five Families" and "The Children of Sanchez" have turned up more and more in the study of North American cities.

The city planner was Herbert Gans, who went and lived in the West End of Boston. The West End was a low-income section, with many Italian families, slated for razing and replacement by a tall complex of expensive apartments. His book, "The Urban Villagers," reporting what he learned, did not appear in time to save the West

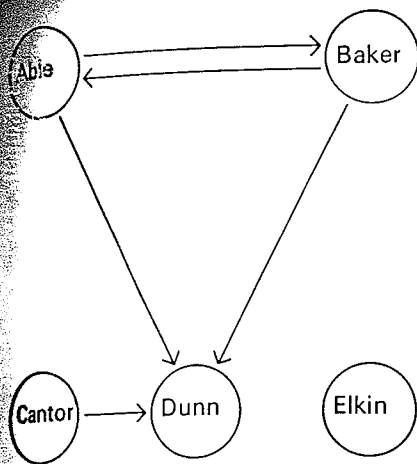
End from destruction. But it raised prickly questions about outsiders' assumptions that the West End was "disorganized" and a "slum", that it was therefore good only for clearance and that its residents had everything to gain through relocation. Since then planners in Boston and elsewhere have taken their responsibility for learning what kinds of communities they are proposing to renew, much more seriously.

Michael Harrington, the writer, tells us himself how he went from a useful but distant, statistical analysis of poverty to a first-hand exploration of its labyrinths:

"After I wrote my first article on poverty in America, I had all the statistics down on paper. I had proved to my satisfaction that there were around 50,000,000 poor in this country. Yet I realized that I did not believe my own figures. The poor existed in the Government reports; they were percentages and numbers in long, close columns, but they were not part of my experience. I could prove that the other America existed, but I had never been there."

Then he went to the streets of New York and other cities to live with the poor. Harrington laid out the results of his inquiry in a powerful book, "The Other America." And the American government listened as it established its anti-poverty program.

It happens that Lewis, Gans and Harrington all wrote influential books. But writing books is not all that comes of the anthropological approach to the city. When the group building the big new city of Guayana, in Venezuela, asked Lisa Redfield Peattie to join them as staff anthropologist, they probably thought she would work mainly at feeding back information about sore spots in people's adaptation to the city, and at explaining what



tures, and helps explain that durability. Thus a piece of work with direct practical applications contributes to the theory of the city as well.

What do these urban anthropologists do besides settling down in slums? Well, that in itself is an important beginning. It is a way of sharing an important experience and gaining acceptance at the same. The trained participant observer has a chance to see people when they take off their business faces, and to accompany them through the full daily, weekly or monthly round. He makes sure he establishes some contact with all parts of the population he is dealing with, not just the talkative élite. He records what he sees in a systematic way — in classified field notes, in a journal, or perhaps on cards representing different individuals or groups. He may very well take a "sociometric" approach, concentrating on the frequencies and kinds of contact among pairs of members of the group. Those observations he can sum up in diagrams of group structure like this hypothetical, but realistic, representation of visiting patterns among a group of housewives in adjoining houses, shown above.

Here, Mrs. Able and Mrs. Baker regularly exchange visits; Mrs. Able, Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Cantor regularly visit Mrs. Dunn; and Mrs. Elkin stays by herself. We can do the same diagramming for other members of the families, or for different kinds of contact, like giving help, borrowing tools or going shopping together.

The people actually involved do not need a diagram to tell them that A and B are close, that D is a center of attraction, or that E is an isolate. However, where the observer is a newcomer, where twenty or thirty households are involved, or where the question is whether the same kinds of clusters keep reappearing, only some sort of systematic recording and analysis

will bring out the true state of affairs.

This general technique has many versions. It can neatly summarize what groups intermarry in a large city, what kinds of people form cliques in a high school, what individuals talk to each other most in an office.

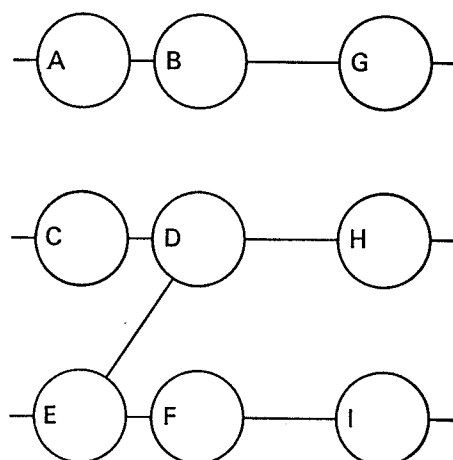
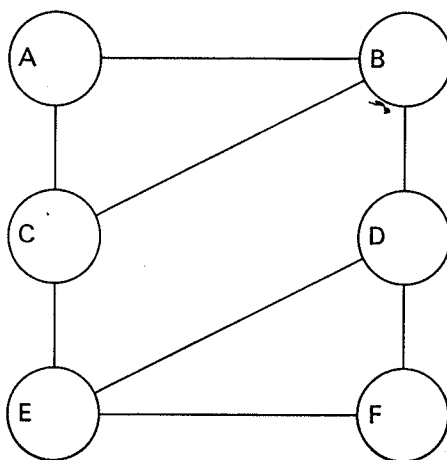
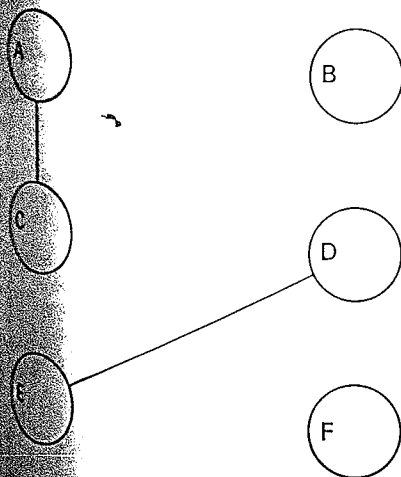
It is a natural starting point for a study of the flow of communications within a neighborhood. And when done at a scale larger than the pair of individuals, it helps us distinguish three vitally different social arrangements (below).

The first might be the structure of a rooming-house district, the second the structure of a Chinese neighborhood, the third a high-rise apartment area.

Sociometric observation can get very complicated. There are simpler and faster ways of getting a sense of social life in one section of a city or another. Very often, all an intelligent observer needs is a stroll through a neighborhood to spot the main points of congregation of the local population — doorsteps, bars, stores, clubs, churches. If they are public enough, he can station himself there and take a small part in local life. Or he can deliberately create his own social situations. When Kevin Lynch, the city planner, was trying to find out what kinds of roads and buildings made strong impressions on people, one of his devices was to stop people on the street and ask them directions to other sections of the city, noting what they used as their points of reference.

Lynch also adopted a slightly more formal way of finding out how people visualized their cities. He asked them to draw maps. His instructions went like this:

*Left: Atomized—pairs and isolates  
Centre: Tight-knit—overlapping sets  
Bottom: Specialized—extensive chains*

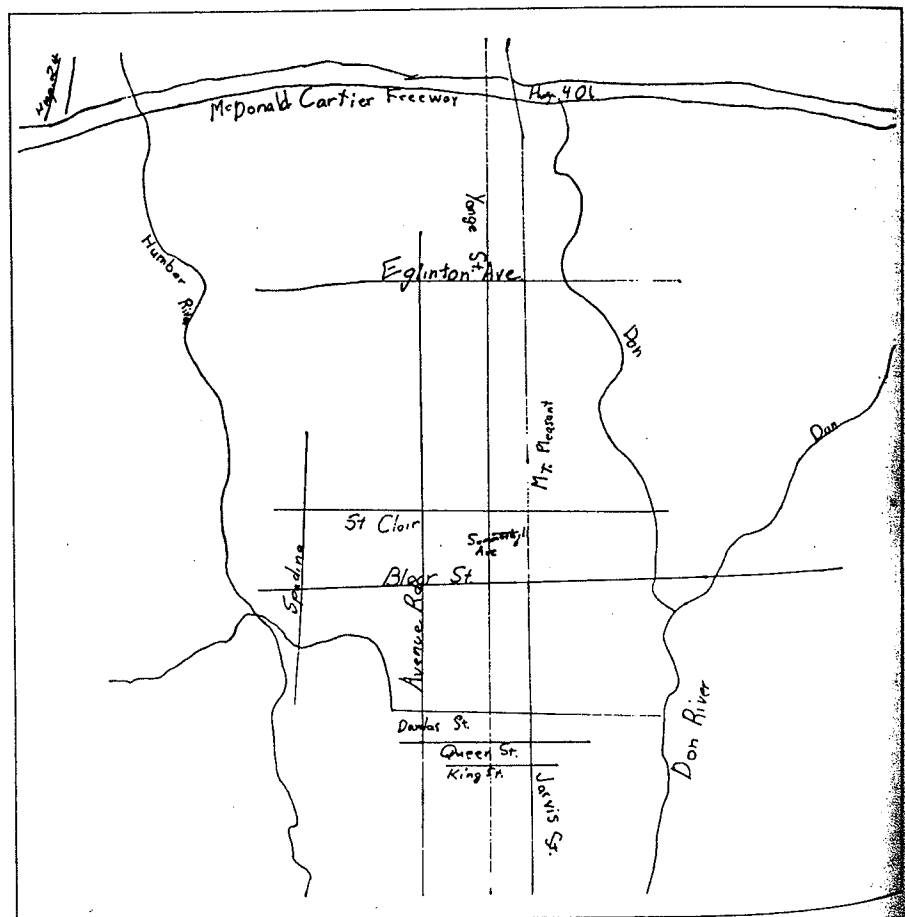
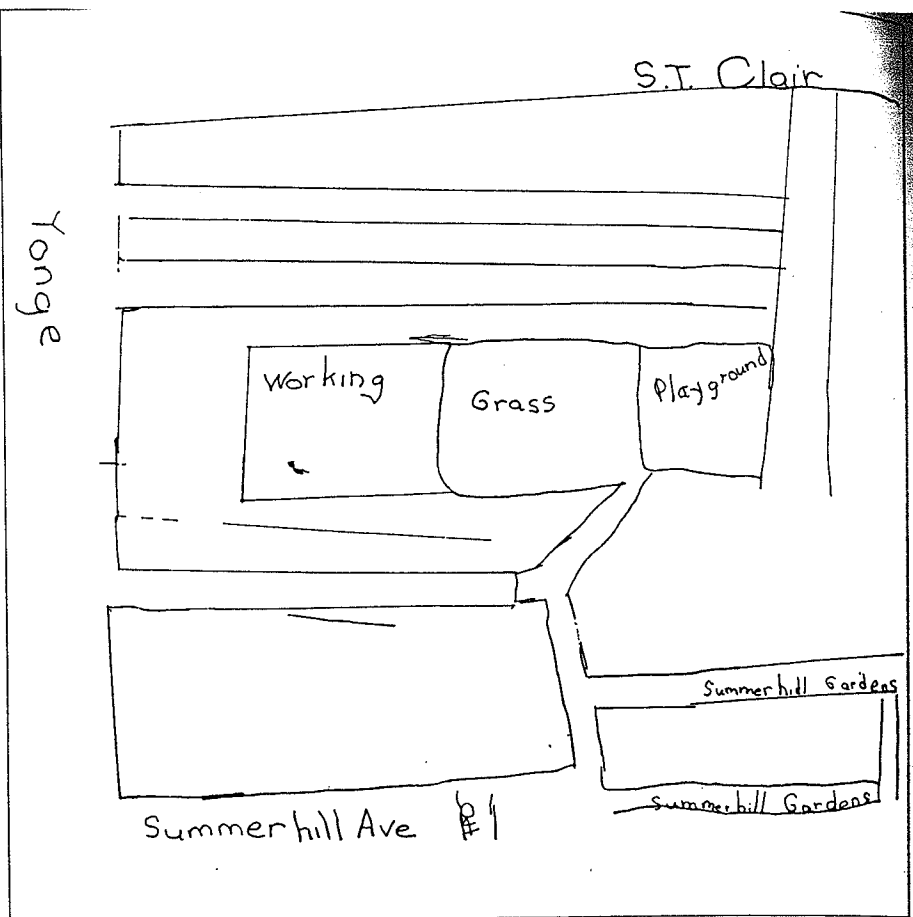


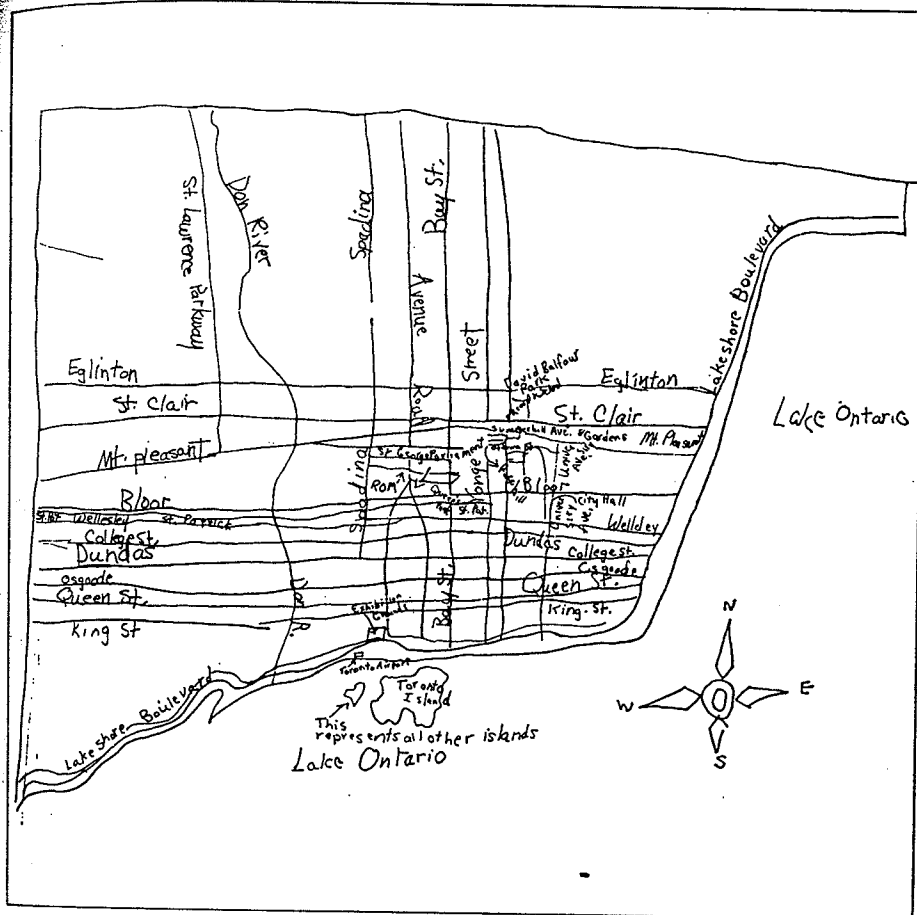
"We would like you to make a quick map of central Boston, inward or downtown from Massachusetts Avenue. Make it just as if you were making a rapid description of the city to a stranger, covering all the main features. We don't expect an accurate drawing — just a rough sketch."<sup>2</sup>

And the interviewer was supposed to note the sequence in which the map was drawn. Everyone marked down Beacon Hill, the Common, the Charles River and the Back Bay, but there were large areas of the central city which simply disappeared from these maps for lack of what Lynch calls "imageability".<sup>3</sup>

With due allowance for skill in drawing and for visual imagination, we have a lot to learn about people's experience with the city from the maps they sketch. As an experiment, I asked my three eldest children to do maps of central Toronto. They are not elegant, but they are revealing. The seven-year-old's world (top right) is the path from home to school and its fringes, with her own block and the play areas she knows best blown up out of all proportion to their actual size. The nine-year-old (bottom right) has grasped the grid pattern of the streets and has had enough experience with the downtown portions of the subway to put some important thoroughfares into the central business district; the appearance of the rivers and of Highway 401 on the map, however, probably comes from booklearning in school. She still gives her own section of the city (from Bloor to Eglinton along Yonge) much more space than its due. The eleven-year-old (opposite page) is aware of too many details for a map on this scale, so many that he gets some wrong and has trouble fitting others together. His map includes the lakefront, and shows places like the Royal Ontario Museum, the Exhibition Grounds and the Airport as well as streets and waterways. Each child's view of the city is selective, but the older children can roam mentally through more of its territory, and they select on different principles. It would be fascinating to see how children of the same ages in other parts of the city played this game.

Instead of starting with real cities, sociologist William Michelson of the University of Toronto asked different sorts of people to map out ideal environments. He did this because he happened to wonder what systematic connection there was between the things people wanted out of life in general and what kinds of communities they preferred, but his technique could be used for many other purposes.





The map-drawer began with his own dwelling, placed a number of facilities like schools, movies, shopping centers and workplaces on the map, then drew a line around the area he would consider his neighborhood. Of the two examples on page 24, the upper one describes a house with a yard some 200 feet square, a neighborhood including schools and a church within a fifteen minute walk, and an area outside the neighborhood containing shopping facilities, a restaurant and a job. The lower one banishes everything but houses from the neighborhood, puts a post-office and a store just across its boundary, places a well-defined street between the house and all other facilities, and then traces detailed separate paths to a wide variety of centers of activity. These are rather different pictures of what the residential parts of cities should be like.

To complement this picture of the ideal world, people can tell us a great deal about what they do with the actual space of the city by simply recounting where they go, what they do and with whom, during an average day. One version of this is the "yesterday interview", in which the interviewer asks the person to give a history of yesterday from 6 a.m. to midnight, including each activity lasting ten min-

utes or more. Another version is the diary kept under the same rules. Either one produces a valuable picture of how much time different kinds of people spend doing what, where and with whom. If they compared their own "time-budgets" with their wives', many husbands would begin to understand why wives are often eager to talk, talk, talk when they get a chance — for so much of their time is spent alone or with no one but small children. The student of cities has other facts to learn from time-budgets, such as when and where in a city the most people are likely to be in sociable contact with others, how much of all the time available to city-dwellers goes into travelling, what activities most people do alone, what sections of the city are used in the daily rounds of old people, or rich people, or newcomers. How do the daily time-budgets of these individuals fit with the maps of the city they would draw?

Again we have gone from a simple notion to a complicated application. Some parts of these questions about the patterns of activity in the city can be broken off for a separate study. Just who is on the street, and when, is in itself an important fact about local life, and fairly easy to observe. Our students at the University of Toronto have

found they can make an informative first contact with a section of the city by going to a local intersection and recording who goes by during scattered five-minute intervals. They set down not only how many people pass the corner, but also a rough judgment of age, sex, and whether they are alone or with others. They can do it by tallying within a grid:

#### alone

	male	female
over 60	+++	
20-60	IIII	I
under 20	I	I

#### in groups

	male	female
over 60	III	+++ I
20-60	+++ IIII	+++ +++ I
under 20	II	II

These distributions vary sharply and informatively from place to place and from time to time.

If only the process of walking by could be slowed down enough for the observer to take copious notes, there would be many other things to jot down: the objects people are carrying, the way they are dressed, the languages they are speaking, how much they dawdle or gawk. A camera can catch some of these things very effectively. The photographs on page 25 show two locations about two miles apart on Bloor Street in Toronto. On the top is a fashionable downtown shopping-apartment complex. On the bottom is a business street or an area heavily populated by European immigrants, especially from Italy. The pictures show the two spots around noon on successive days in December — Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The observer at the shopping-apartment area tends to see well-dressed women on Friday, couples and families on Saturday, practically no one but an occasional single individual on Sunday. Up the street, in the Italian neighborhood, he also sees women — but not so expensively dressed — on Friday, many mothers with their adolescent sons or daughters on Saturday, numerous groups of men roughly graded by age on Sunday. A series of photographs at intervals through the day would show the contrast even better. Even with only

one time of day, the contrasts in activities and populations are obvious.

Of course, it takes a little bit of nerve to tally passers-by or take pictures on the street. For observers with less chutzpah, the objects people leave around them also say something important about their lives.

Here are some ideas culled from different research projects:

count the proportion of door-buttons pushed down in automobiles on the street in different areas, in order to see how willing people are to leave their cars unlocked;

notice how many backyards in a neighborhood contain grass, how many flower gardens, how many trash piles, and how many vegetable patches, to get an idea of the local style of life;

check the percentage of blinds which are drawn, to judge how much people are shutting themselves off from others on the street;

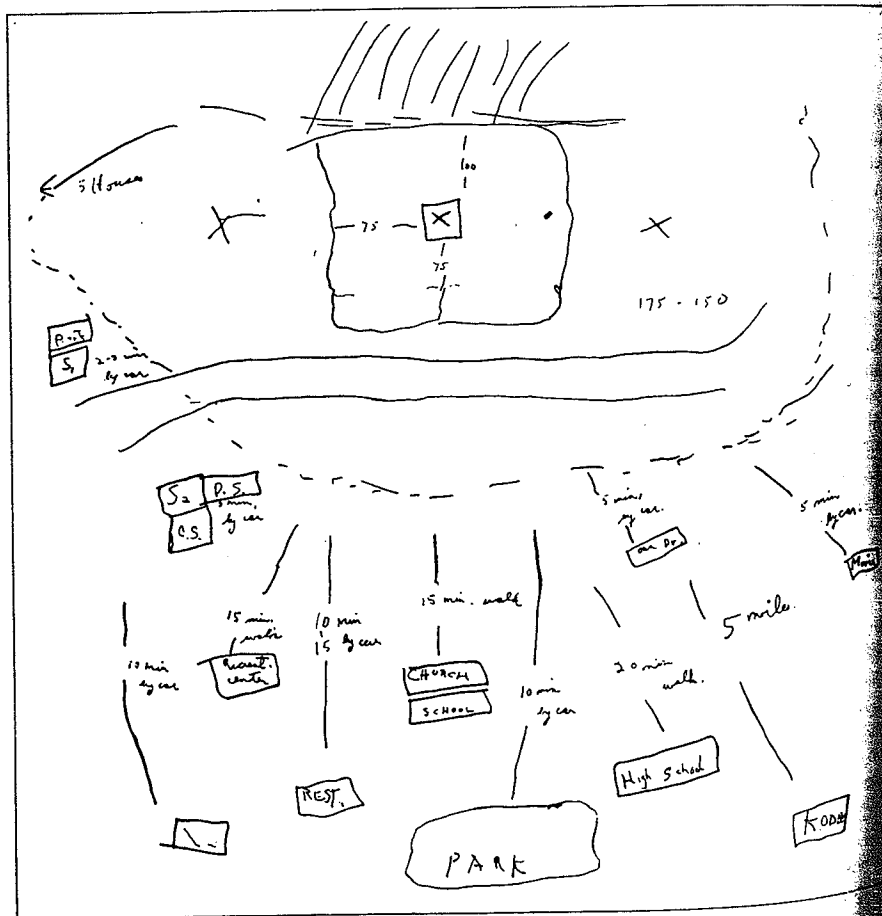
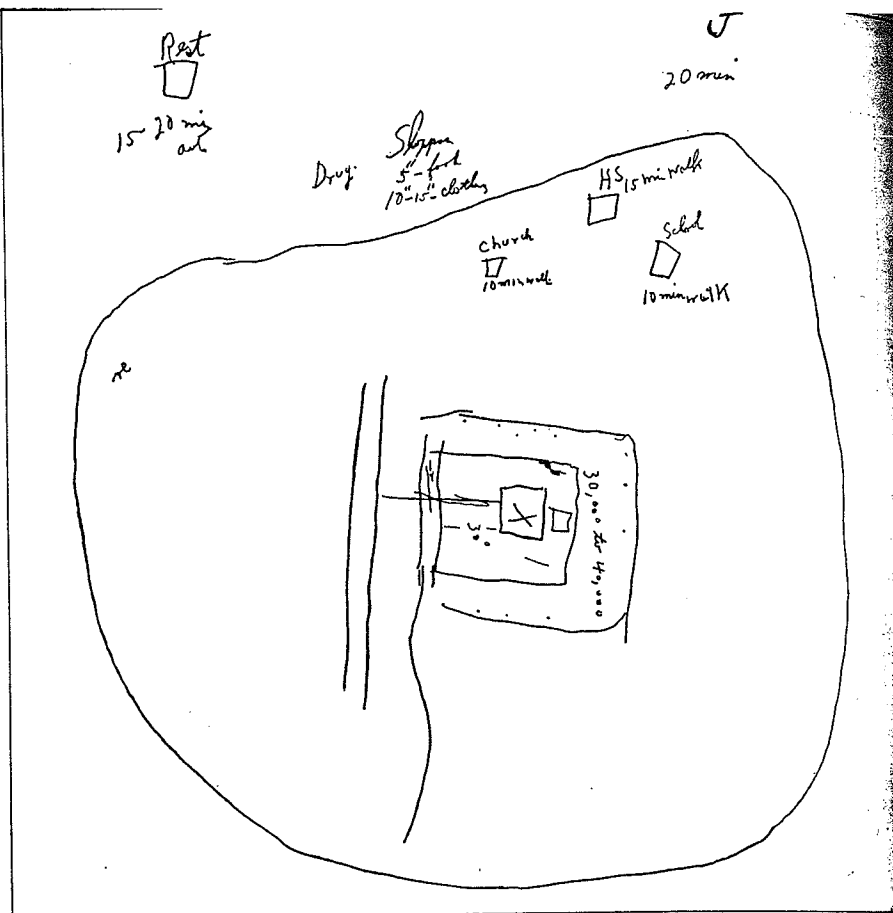
notice how many liquor bottles are thrown out on trash day, and what kind, to guess the home drinking patterns;

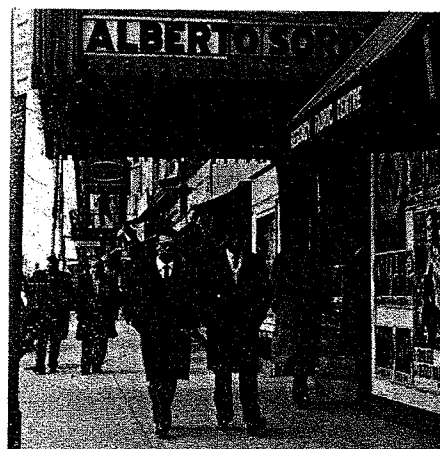
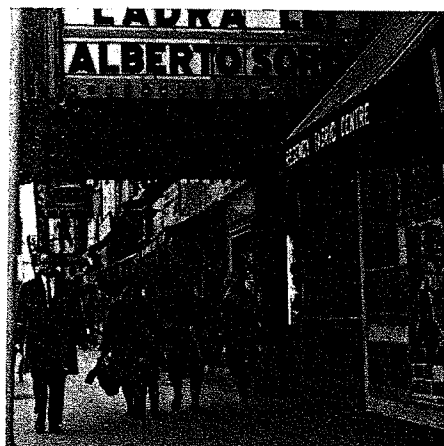
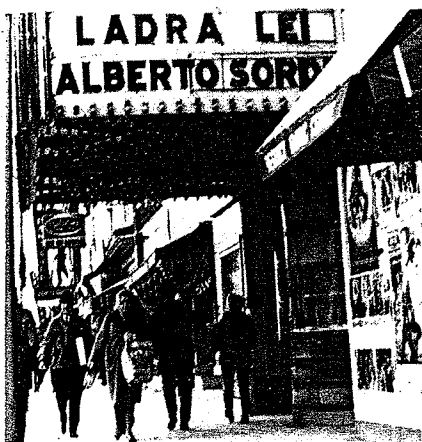
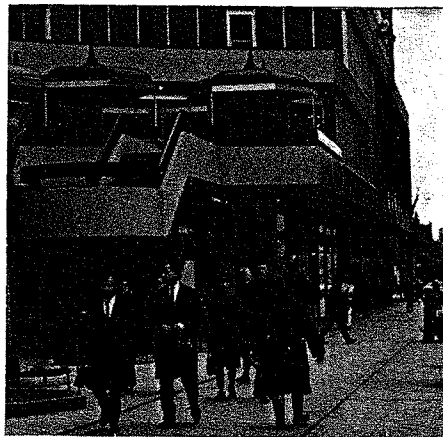
record how many houses have outside Christmas decorations, and how elaborate they are, to gauge how much it is an occasion for public display.

In fact, all of us make such observations half-consciously, every day.

Considering how much a part of everyday life these various sorts of observation are, it might seem that "urban anthropology" is nothing but a dressed-up version of common sense. Is it? It does deal with things everyone knows something about. It should build on good, common sense. But it also has more discipline and greater focus than casual observation does. When a woman steps into a roomful of other women, scans it quickly, then mentally ticks off the boutique-bought dresses, the hand-crafted shoes and the genuine pearls, that takes both discipline and focus. It takes training and attention; almost any wife can (and, unfortunately, will) testify that her husband is an ignoramus on such matters.

The urban anthropologist's discipline shows up in his insistence on observing exactly how somebody says something or just how many people gather in a certain place, as well as his faithfulness in recording the observation for future reference. His focus is on social relations, especially on those





which reveal something important about the way groups are organized in the city.

Many pressing questions about cities need this systematic first-hand treatment. What difference does it make to people's social lives whether they live in separate houses, chains of garden apartments, or tall buildings? Does the dislocation of urban renewal wound people irreparably? Under what conditions do people have strong attachments to their neighborhoods? When are the dispossessed of the city likely to get together and protest their fate? What does it mean to become poor, and to stay poor? How, and when, does assimilation work? Who, and where, are all the lonely people? Urban anthropology can produce at least some of the answers.

The satisfying thing about the anthropological approach to the city is that it brings theory, policy, action and personal experience into contact with each other. Just as some city planners, uneasy at seeing almost all their colleagues working for governments and real estate developers, have started to organize "advocate planners" to criticize official plans and offer alternative proposals on behalf of the people being planned for, so we need skilled

and independent social researchers devoted to scrutinizing the facts and presumptions on which urban policies are based. Like Oscar Lewis, Herbert Gans and Michael Harrington, they will have the chance to deal with vital theoretical issues along the way.

For the same reasons, urban anthropology has an important role to play in education. More so than learning about the history or the government of the city from books, it challenges the student to link his own fate and private experience to the life of the city as a whole. An inveterate city-walker myself, I often send my students out to walk a randomly-assigned section of a city and report back on what they have seen. Even the lifetime residents often find themselves in areas they have never really looked at before. Most of them learn something important about their city, and about themselves.

One final virtue of the methods of urban anthropology is that they still leave room for the gifted amateur. I mean amateur in the exact sense of the word: someone who does something for the love of it. Survey research and much of the large scale quantitative analysis so important to the study of cities depend on teams of specialists

*Top left: Colonnade, Friday  
Top centre: Colonnade, Saturday  
Top right: Colonnade, Sunday*

*Bottom left: Bloor St. West, Friday  
Bottom centre: Bloor St. West, Saturday  
Bottom right: Bloor St. West, Sunday*

and expensive equipment. A few of the techniques I have described here are also easier to use with computers and other machines at hand. But most of the procedures are feasible for a single person with a camera, a tape-recorder, a sketchpad, or just a quick eye and a ready notebook. Many of them consist of making observations most people make anyway, but doing so more systematically. There is nothing wrong with the back-to-nature yearnings of mushroom-hunters and bird-watchers. Why not get back to human nature by watching people?

#### Acknowledgements

Mr. Tilly wants to thank William Michelson for allowing him to reproduce two maps, also Richard Carlton and Kenneth Toldnes for generous assistance in producing the illustrations.