The 100 Mile City by Deyan Sudjic
A review by Ray Watson

For 304 of the 309 pages in his book Sudjic tells you why the 19th century version of core city and suburbs is no longer the appropriate paradigm for the 20th century city. In the remaining five pages he gives you his new paradigm, "the 100 mile city." A place without any single dominate center as its focus. Where "the home" has become "the centre of life.......From it, the city radiates outwards as a star-shaped pattern of overlapping routes to and from the workplace, the shopping centre, and the school.”

He further describes it as a place which is full of "self-contained abstractions that function as free-floating elements. Each destination caters to a certain range of the needs of urban life, but they have no physical or spatial connection with each other in the way that we have been conditioned to expect of the city.” In his paradigm Los Angeles is the entire Los Angeles basin not merely the central core of the city.

Sudjic's new paradigm is much the same as Joel Garreau described in "Edge City - Life on the New Frontier.” The difference is that Garreau's is appropriately reportorial and Sudjic's historical. Sudjic resurrects the conflicting urban theories we have all grown up with and one by one dumps them into the trash heap of irrelevance. Garreau traveled around the country and did what any good reporter should do. He described what he saw. Sudjic went to urban theorist writings and plans and compared them to today's urban conurbation's. Essentially what they both found was we are now all living in the new "100 mile city.”

For those of us who struggle in this field Sudjic's book is a welcome arrival. Whether one accepts his new paradigm or not his clear argument for rejecting the old paradigms is the intellectual wake up call we all need. He suggest that rather than lamenting about the loss of "public plazas" where our citizens can meet in a "civic way" our profession needs to recognize that “public plazas” no longer are the places of choice for our citizens to meet in a “civic way.” He takes to task those in our profession who remain trapped in the old paradigm and its urban is good and suburban is bad ideology. He rejects the notion that because the vast majority of our public now drive themselves to work and shop and live in suburban "track" houses that they engage any less in “civic” affairs than asserted to have occurred in the old paradigm.

Sudjic does not make judgments about whether the "100 mile city" is a better or worse place in which to live. He does, however, make a judgment that the old central city theories are now mostly history and what we need is a more meaningful constructive dialog on how best to reconcile our late 20th century realities with an appropriate urban form and institutional framework that reflects those realities.

His thesis is "that a whole range of fundamental urban changes whose causes had been building up for some time took effect in the course of the 1980s and resulted in the recasting of the shape and character of the city.” He builds his argument around five cities in particular: London, Paris, Tokyo, New York and Los Angeles. However, when he describes each of these cities he does not confine his definition of them to their historic core. To him Irvine, Santa Monica and the San Fernando valley are all part of his 100 mile city. And in describing them Sudjic acknowledges both their independence and dependence to and from each other.

As for the architecture and urban spaces of our historic cities we architects love to talk about he says they have become "overwhelmed by the sheer scale of new building." And as a result "they have swallowed up most civic functions.” Sudjic says this, however, not in the tone of the traditional nostalgic architectural lament but rather as a description of what the city in fact has become. His point is that these “forces” of change are so powerful that they have forever swept away the historic concepts of the walking city with its dominate cultural, governmental and commercial core.

Perhaps, Sudjic's reason for writing this book could be summarized in the following two sentences from his concluding chapter. "For the planner or the architect to ignore the currents that are shaping the city is clearly futile. Enormous amounts of energy have been expended on means of reconstructing the traditional European city, as if this were possible by the simple exertion of will.”

Clearly Sudjic doesn't believe that possible and for 309 pages makes a compelling argument why.