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HAMBURG: THE PERFECT CITY?

"I have just arrived back home from Europe with 850,000 other-half-wits who think that a summer not spent among the decay and mortification of the Old World is a summer squandered."

- Will Rogers

I am standing in a public square, a large area dominated at its center by a former gatehouse along a historical highway dating from the Middle Ages. The gatehouse has now been transformed into the world's loveliest Burger King.

I'm standing off to the side, sipping a steaming mug of rich Columbian in front of a bakery whose artistic display rivals that of the Louvre, if somewhat more limited.

I've been walking since the crack of dawn and it is now early afternoon. I've been here for two days and my Rockports are already showing some wear and tear. I'm in a city that is not well known in the States and I've yet to run into another American. It is a city made for walking. This pause for coffee is something I do each hour, trying to rest for just a few moments, thinking about what I have seen, perhaps whispering into my small tape recorder.

And now, as I take into the swirling crowds before me, going about their business on a very typical spring day, I try to put this place into some sort of perspective.

I think of designing my own city from the ground up. What kind of place would I design? How would I make it liveable, a place where suburbanites flocked instead of fled?

It would, first of all, have to be on the water. I'd have a lake come up to the edge of the city, no two lakes, one that hugged a series of stately hotels, private homes, and graceful shopping streets. The second or outer lake would be surrounded by deep green carpets of parkland with intersecting canals, leading to suburbs with rolling lawns leading up to gentle docks and perside restaurants.

My city would have sailboats in the harbor and a giant pavillion serving tea and coffee with delicious snacks, all glass enclosed at the foot of the inner harbor. In the winters, the lake would freeze and suburbanites could ice skate their way to work downtown.

I'd have cobblestone streets and red brick architecture connecting fabulous indoor shopping centers that were only permitted to stock high quality goods.

I'd stock my city with lots of publishing houses and historic buildings, and a population that worked notoriously hard and played the same way. There would be a world-class symphony and concert orchestra, and entire sections of the downtown area would be devoted to art galleries and antique bookshops.

In order to allow as many citizens as possible to enjoy the good life, I'd make sure that my city was safe and that it had one of the highest standards of living in the world.

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My city would be filled with great restaurants, especially ethnic eateries with authentic cuisine. Just for fun, I'd set up sausage stands throughout my city, offering up cold beer, hot chocolate, and sausages that were the best on earth.

In addition to my lakes, open squares, historic buildings, and cultural diversions, I'd want my city to have a waterfront, a magical kind of place where giant ships passed in review along a promenade filled with shops selling more than twenty varieties of fresh fish sandwiches, and hot potato pancakes with boysenberry jam. It would be a working harbor, one of the busiest in the world, and it would serve to connect the residents to both land and sea.

My city would have nightlife, lots of it, and a transportation system that was absolutely efficient, clean, and safe. I'd probably have it operate on the honor system.

Finally, I'd try to graft on aspects of other cities I have come to love. I'd have the efficiency of Zurich, the style of Paris, and, from Venice, I'd sprinle my city with canals and bridges, more than any other city on earth.

Of course, my work would be in vain. Because the city described above, already exists. It is called Hamburg, Germany. For purposes of accuracy, I will refer to it by its proper name, the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg.

I've been staying at the Marriott, the Hamburg hotel that seems to operate on the most comfortable scale for U.S. visitors. While the hotel offers a high degree of amenities such as an on-premises "health farm", it's comfortable rooms and superior restaurant, come at a very reasonable price. What I like best about the hotel is its absolutely choice location, just a block off the Gansemarkt, a charming square just off the lake, at the end of ther famed Jungfernstiegm shopping street. Out of the corner window of my hotel room I could see old fashioned street lamps illuminating a quiet street of small chops like Chanel.

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