



## 6 Settings and Rituals

**W**E DO NOT SEEK SHELTER IN ISOLATION. WE LIVE IN communities. These shared settings provide the larger context for our lives, multiplying and enriching our relationships. They have, as well, their own communal rhythms and rituals that measure our possibilities for choice.

Each community has its own present aspect, the product of the past that has created it. To understand its present, we must understand its history. Planner Timothy Beatley writes, “The essential histories that define a place . . . are not just the built form or natural landscapes; they are the meanings and particular human histories that personalize them. Every community has a rich history and many compelling stories to tell about its past and the former residents who lived, married, raised families, started businesses, and undertook community and civic projects.”<sup>1</sup>

Over the past 200 years in the United States, our settings have changed dramatically. There has been a major shift of scale as we have moved from a rural, agrarian society to a highly urbanized one. There are lessons to be drawn from tracing this historical shift. If we can see what we have gained and lost, we might better understand what needs to be restored.

As our settings have changed, so have the connections between nature and machine, between natural rhythms and contrived ones. Life on family farms and rural villages was usually steady, inevitably linked with the cycles of day and season. Natural rhythms offered people endless chances to recite the same tasks, presumably making slightly different choices and learning slightly different lessons each time. On the other hand, in landscapes of rapid growth such as modern cities, people must often reevaluate their constantly changing circumstances. In the American Midwest this change began in the late 18th century.