City Magick

Spells, Rituals, and Symbols for the Urban Witch

Christopher Penczak


Foreword by Judika Illes, author of Encyclopedia of 5000 Spells

A Grimoire for the Urban Witch

Today’s modern witch lives, works, and casts not just in the green forests and open meadows but also on rooftops, in city parks, at dance clubs, and on sidewalks. Join Christopher Penczak as he offers a completely metropolitan alternative to creating and living a magickal life. In this new edition of City Magick with a foreword by Judika Illes, author of Encyclopedia of 5000 Spells, you will learn how to:

• Create powerful sigils using street signs, graffiti, and city maps
• Invoke mechanical spirits and call upon devas of the city and city nature
• Gather sacred stones from buildings and construction sites, build altars for television sets, and perform sacred rituals at nightclubs
• Discover city spirits and totems: spiders, cockroaches, crows, pigeons, doves.

For the urban witch, city-dwelling or city-visiting, this is the ultimate book on making high magick among the skyscrapers and the streets.
Foreword

New York City’s skyscrapers are distinctive, not just in appearance, but also in personality. The Empire State, Chrysler, and Flat Iron buildings, for instance, are easily distinguishable, one from another. Each resonates with a unique energy. In their own way, these towering buildings are “living” inhabitants of an urban landscape. If you think I’m only waxing metaphoric, then you haven’t yet read Christopher Penczak’s *City Magick*, a book that will open your eyes and cause you to reconsider all facets of your environment.

*City Magick* is a book that fills a need, that challenges entrenched beliefs about what is and isn’t magical. Over the centuries, many have failed to see the magical power and potential inherent in cities. Philosophers have long perceived rustic life as somehow better and purer than urban living. Various back-to-nature movements have historically warned of the corrupting influence of cities. This perception transcends magic and witchcraft, but it holds special resonance in the witchcraft community.

There is a cherished ideal, one shared by witches and non-witches alike, of the solitary magical practitioner living at one with nature. This person—male or female—resides in perfect harmony with Earth’s natural rhythms. She or he communes with animals, raises plants as needed, or harvests them from secret wild places—ethically, of course—and is just as comfortable and at home in nature as the forest’s native flora and
fauna. This person may brag that their magical senses have become so heightened that they are no longer able to live in the hustle and bustle of the city, with the added implication that there is something deadened about those who do.

This rustic ideal is a goal to which many aspire. And, of course, this ideal—this idyll—is not untrue. It is based on fact. Such witches do exist, now as in the past, and there can be tremendous beauty and power to be found in synchronizing one’s life to the wild. It is a potentially sacred idyll that encourages us to recall the blessed potency of plants and celebrates the bonds between humans and beings of other species. It may also be a vestigial memory of the witch-hunting era, when discreet safety to practice as one pleased could be attained by retreating from civilization into vigilant solitude.

And yet—because it celebrates a way of life that is accessible to comparatively few people in the crowded, industrialized, technologically-oriented twenty-first century—it is also a potentially paralyzing ideal, one that may prevent practitioners from grasping their maximum magical potential right now, no matter where they live, no matter what surrounds them.

This rustic vision is not the whole story, however. Another magical landscape exists, too, albeit one less celebrated by poets and more frequently overlooked. Cities are also magical hot spots. Seekers after knowledge, magical practitioners, and witches of all kinds have historically congregated in urban centers. This is not merely a twenty-first-century affectation, some rationale to make us feel better about being divorced from nature. The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation (The University of Chicago Press, 1996) pays testament to the vibrant community of magical practitioners who inhabited the sprawling urban mass of Alexandria, Egypt in the centuries just preceding and after the dawning of the Common Era.

Then and now, city witches walk in harmony with their surroundings, just like their country cousins. City Magick reminds us that magic surrounds us and is always at hand, if only we can recognize it and learn
to work with it. Urban trees are no less magical than those of the woods. The city is filled with creatures who are familiar in every sense of that word: mammals, birds, and insects, and our bonds with them are potentially as powerful as they would be with more exotic or elusive species. You can grasp your full magical potential now, no matter where you are.

I have a confession. The very first time I saw a copy of City Magick, shortly after its initial publication, I was jealous—I wished I were its author. I remember the moment distinctly. I was in a Borders bookstore in Paramus, New Jersey, one with a particularly miniscule metaphysical section. As I walked past the lone bookshelf, the title City Magick transfixed me, calling out to me like a song title, perhaps the bridge between two beloved tunes of my childhood, the Lovin’ Spoonful’s “Do You Believe in Magic?” and “Summer in the City.” Drawn to pick up the book, I started reading it in the store. The more I read, the more City Magick resonated with me.

I hadn’t yet met Christopher—I would a year later in another New Jersey town, where we would discuss our mutual love of music and comic books—but City Magick had already convinced me that he was a kindred spirit, someone who shared my passionate love of magic and who, like me, had personally experienced the living pulse and heartbeat of the city. In his introduction to City Magick, Christopher writes that he was inspired by Grant Morrison’s comic book series, The Invisibles. For me, City Magick evokes another comic book series: Vertigo’s Madame Xanadu, which obliquely traces the history of witchcraft from the wilds of pre-Arthurian Britain to the gritty streets of Greenwich Village. It is also reminiscent of Neil Gaiman’s Neverwhere in which the city of London itself seems to breathe and pulse and behave as an active participant in the narrative.

Now, some ten years later, rereading City Magick, what strikes me is the revolutionary nature of this book. Too many metaphysical books recycle the same information, but City Magick remains fresh and unique. No other book explores this material in quite the same way or pushes us to expand our magical horizons in quite the same directions. Something
else that struck me upon rereading *City Magick* is just how rapidly our technology has evolved and yet how relevant *City Magick* remains, because the lessons Christopher teaches are not limited to specific types of technology. Instead, they are portals to a modern, urban shamanism, one that is potentially accessible to all.

In these pages, Christopher takes us on a magical tour, and like the best tour guides, he opens our eyes to help us see and comprehend in new and different ways. He challenges us to recognize the magic that eternally surrounds us, no matter where we are. Each and every day, city dwellers and workers walk past the urban landscape without really seeing it, ignoring—or trying to ignore—graffiti, subways, power lines, rats, and pigeons. Christopher doesn’t sugarcoat the city. Instead he encourages us to stop and really appreciate its full power—the good, the bad, the ugly, and the sublime. By extension, *City Magick* enables us to recognize our own individual magical potency and maximize it to its fullest potential.

It’s been quite a few years since I roamed the city streets of Boston, New York, and Los Angeles, wandering between rock shows and experimenting with the spirits of the city and the energy of place. Working for a major indie record label in the heart of Boston was quite a blessing for me. I got to meet with the Who’s Who of both the local and international music scene of the time.

I felt that my struggle to integrate a nature-based magickal spirituality learned in the woods of New Hampshire into the urban environment of Boston would benefit more than just me, so when I lost my job in the music industry, I was sent somewhat unwittingly in the direction of the professional metaphysican, healer, and writer. The result was City Magick, my first published book. Little did I know I would find satisfaction with what magicians call the “True Will” in my new career path.

My first major author tour was a whirlwind, taking me from Seattle down to San Diego, hitting all the major spots in between. I was getting to “meet” all these other cities that I had read about and seen in movies, but never experienced directly while on my travels. The spirits of the cities were all different. Each one had a different feeling, personality, and sometimes apparent gender. Some were loving and welcoming. Others were not quite hostile, but it was certainly not love at first sight. Their architecture, pavement crack “gardens,” and street geometry taught me new lessons, using the techniques I had “discovered” in

Over the years my education in the occult has grown, and I now have a much greater historic appreciation for the overall concept of city magick. Even though I trained in a traditional nature-based Witchcraft tradition, urban Pagan magick has been around since the founding of Sumer’s city-state. You can’t look at Egypt, Greece, Rome, or even London without seeing the ancient cultures modern pagans draw upon today. *City Magick* is a reintroduction to these ancient concepts for modern magicians, pagans, and shamans, who, like me, might have missed that nature is all around them—including the cities—in their effort to reconnect with the wild. May this discovery of the sacred everywhere, even in seemingly unlikely urban places, lead to the realization that all is sacred, and to the manifestation of your own “True Will.”

—Christopher Penczak, 2012
Bright lights and big cities are taking over the world. Little hamlets are filling up, growing dangerously close to urban Meccas. Quaint little towns are birthing strip malls and quickie marts. Noise and light pollution dominate a formerly untainted land. Established metropolises, already vast, are brimming full and quickly swallowing up all the areas around them. New York, Los Angeles, London, and Hong Kong are capitals of industry and finance, and homes to the great world machine connecting everyone. Many of us find ourselves surrounded in these jungles of concrete, glass, and steel. They can be a bit overwhelming.

I have to imagine it’s much like what ancient people felt, surrounded by the dark forests of Europe or the jungles of South America and Africa. As strange as it may sound, the two are very similar. Both are vast, overwhelming places that surround you on all sides. Familiar trails change daily, taking you into unknown territory. Perils may await you at any turn. If you know the landscape and the predators, you will probably survive, but there is always an element of danger. You have to put your natural fears on hold, because this is your home. This is all you know. You deal with it. Both city dwellers and forest folk live in the wild. The city, however, is of our own making. As modern society has destroyed
so much natural landscape to build our so-called civilization, it has, in essence, re-created what it destroyed in these concrete jungles. Some of these archetypal images, tapping the forces of the unknown, are needed. We can’t escape them. Even though we think we are conquering the land, subduing it as decreed by whatever collective gods we follow—the gods of industry and supposed progress—we are really being sucked in to a trap. Our creations try to subdue us in the name of the land. And they are doing a very good job, because we don’t understand what they’ve become.

The city is the new primordial forest. Like the land, it is filled with danger, but can bring sustenance. People live there quite effectively and happily, finding what they need by living in harmony with and honoring all things. Both the concrete and natural jungles are filled with their own beauty. The theaters have plays unparalleled in the surrounding communities. Art and history are respected. Those who revere it create exhibits in museums to share the culture with every one. Merchants peddle their unusual items from around the world. Cities are like the groves of the forest and the oasis in the desert. Like the land, they are full of power.

Those of us in pagan and New Age communities find ourselves in an era that can usher us all back to the land. We are disconnected from the source spirit. We are separated into little compartments, like office cubicles, and have no sense of unity. We are stuck in a polarity of consciousness—“me vs. them,” instead of “all of us together.” We’re all on one ship called Earth, sink or swim. All our fates are bound together. So get back to the land, we are told. Get away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Listen to your inner child. Commune with nature spirits. Commune with the living Earth. Find your totem animal. Hug a tree today. The slogans are endless, and there is much truth to them, but I hate being preached to by any one group that claims to know the way. I trust groups more if they encourage me to find answers within or inspire me to search for my own. I am encouraging you do to that, no matter where you are. If you personally need to change your environment, then do so. Don’t feel you have to move, however, to connect with natural forces. Finding them wherever you are may be the stronger lesson for you.
Nature is the heart of magick. The untouched forest is a place of high prana, or life energy. When we are close to it, we can attune ourselves to the natural cycles and hear the secret voices from the forest. These voices bring us knowledge, power, and wisdom. There, in the wild, it is easier to shut out the distractions of our normal lives. Our normal lives, however, are actually filled with nature. Nature comes in many forms. It finds a voice in anything created. All things are sacred. Everything—including concrete, glass, steel, and even plastic—come from the same source. Don’t be fooled into thinking things are unnatural. Why is one thing, like honey, made from materials found on Earth natural, while another, like a compact disc, made from different materials found on the same planet, not natural? Both are made by other beings, bees and people respectively, from natural resources. The original materials go through a great change.

You can argue the merits of use, need, consumption, chemical change, and biodegradability, but neither item is more sacred than the other. Both bring enjoyment. Both are valued.

Prana is all around us, in different ways and amounts. Unsettled land does have a large amount of this spirit energy, but the city has its own flow of prana. The very creation of the city and its buildings diverts and redirects the prana streams as boulders divert a river. They may divert the flow, but they will not stop it. The pathways and side streets between skyscrapers feel almost riverlike as you walk them. Sidewalks are like the banks of a vast river. People flow, traffic flows, and even warm and cold currents of air flow through them. Spirit flows there, too. It flows with everything.

The city is a powerful landscape of magick, filled with secrets and energy for those who know where to look. Some people, longing for the woods to connect to spirit, put off exploring their magical path because they live in the city. They need to stay at their current job in the city to make enough money to buy that car, or house, or whatever. Then they will find someplace nice and quiet, where they can relax, meditate, set up an altar, and grow their own herb garden. Until then, they will hang out in New Age shops and read lots of books on magick, witchcraft, and crystals. They’ll remain convinced, however, that magick won’t work if they are
distracted by the cars going by or the people in the apartment above, or are surrounded by “unliving” material. They won’t try these practices in the comfort of their own apartments. It’s not the desire to be all-natural that is talking here, however. Rather it is fear or laziness that has taken command. If you don’t want to change your habits or practices, or even if you feel you are not ready, be honest with yourself. Don’t make up an excuse. Don’t think about what stops you. Don’t blame your location. Just do it. You can be spiritual, magical, and pagan living in the city. You can recognize the sacred around you all the time. That is the true magick. This book helps you know where to look in the confused street mazes. You can start your sacred journey from your living room. Then you can bring it to the park. Soon, you will discover you can bring it anywhere, because it is a part of you. Magick is your perception, an active role you take in the creation of your own reality. Your point of view is more a function of magick than your environment. Magick is in every environment.

Our urban dwellings are built on the most natural forces of all—energy vortices. Each center draws people to it, both geographically and spiritually. A settled area may be near resources like fresh water, abundant food, or a port to the sea, but our attraction to it is more than physical. Some other force draws us there. Each city is a sacred site, whether we treat it that way or not. We should start to treat them this way, however. The planet is covered with different sets of energy lines and grids. They are like the nervous system and acupuncture meridians of Earth. Many of the lines cross at certain points in each grid, creating an energy zone, or vortex. Perhaps it is the other way around and the vortex creates the energy lines. The vortices of Sedona, Arizona, have become a popular New Age vacation spot, to the extent that many people believe it is the only such site on the planet. It is a wonderful energy site, but you can find a vortex almost anywhere. They come in all sizes, intensities, and personalities.

Each energy center is like a chakra for the planet, much like our human chakras on the body—the heart, crown, or third eye. Each one has a different personality, characteristics, and function. The quality of the vortex, as well as the way the energy flows through and around our
man-made structures, gives each city its uniqueness. I am sure everyone here has noticed a city where they felt at home, or a city that had “bad vibes.” Your own nature is reacting to the qualities, the personality—the vibe, if you will—of the city. You can instantly like one and dislike another, just as with people, because, in a sense, cities are alive.

Some cities are generally more inviting. Others seem inherently magical, like New Orleans or London. Psychologically, we feel this is because of our conscious association with magick in these locations—voodoo and ceremonial magick, respectively. We must ask, however, why magical practitioners were drawn there in the first place. I am told that something about New Orleans just promotes psychic abilities. The flow of spirit through the districts opens those with eyes to see the spirit world. More activities occur here because there is more of an opening between worlds. If you know this and feel comfortable there, and if you have a good relationship with the city and this flow of energy, then magick can be powerful indeed. This doesn’t mean you have to move to New Orleans, London, or anywhere else to do magick. Every city has magick in it.

Some sacred sites, where a greater number of energy lines converge in a vortex, became temple sites for ancient peoples instead of actual cities. These energy centers are places of worship and power—Stonehenge, the pyramids of Egypt and South America, and the temples in Greece, among many others across the globe. No one settles on these sites, but cities gather close to them, even when the beliefs that fostered them have died out. Other energy vortices become our dwellings. The energy and spirit of the place invites human settlers. It is alive and embodies some form of consciousness, even if we do not readily recognize it. People are drawn to it. The physical benefits of food, water, and shelter are added benefits the spirit of the land manifests to make the area more enticing. As these resources have dwindled, however, we have created new reasons to draw others to this land. Our host vortex, in its own consciousness, may not have conceived of the city structure as our dwelling, but we have created it nonetheless. New cities often get built over the remains of older ones because the vortex draws new people there, even after disaster or
war. Other vortices shift, move, or cease to be active at the end of a city’s life. We, therefore, may have difficulty discovering its remains, because we are not drawn by the swirling energy.

We tend to romanticize ancient cities as beautiful and shining repositories of wisdom, while we demonize the ones we live with here and now. Modern cities are seen as dirty or as dens of corruption, twisting what we value as a society. I wonder how many ancient philosophers of Greece would marvel at Manhattan or Tokyo if we could transport them in time to the end of the 20th century. Quite a few, I think. After a while, however, they would probably begin to recognize problems here similar to those they had in the cities back in their own times. Perhaps they would be saddened that we had not solved them yet. Or they might be happy that if they couldn’t find the answers, it appears that no one else could either. The essence of the city, good and bad, would probably have changed little from then to now.

All cities contain extremes. There are the rich and the poor, the safe areas and the places where you wouldn’t want to be alone late at night. Even with the modern miracles of running water and plumbing, we still have garbage, sewage problems, and pollution. Many ancient cities that we romanticize had sewage flowing through the streets and animal dung on their doorsteps. Most were overpopulated, since so many people were drawn there. Political conspiracies were much more common in the ancient world, involving the outright assassination of those who stood in the way of the ruling party. We may have character assassination, but very rarely does it cross over to a physical act. They may have had their mystery schools and sacred learning centers, but we have amazing libraries and colleges. Our modern public access to information is vastly greater than that of an Old World commoner to access formal education. Formal education and college tuition can be difficult to attain now, but if you want to read a book, all you really need is a library card. As you can see, there is a certain amount of give and take in all urban worlds. I am sure even mythic cities in the Golden Ages of Atlantis and Lemuria had their problems, or they would still be here as shining examples for us, instead
of sunk beneath the waves. On the other hand, perhaps they are myths of our future, of possibilities yet to come.

The cityscape beckoned and we heard the call, mostly through our subconscious and our intuition, but we came. We settled. We created. Others hear the call and continue to come. The vortices continue to draw new people to them, and to the cities. Hopefully we will become more co-creative with the land, instead of trying to dominate it. In our need to control everything, this new dark and mysterious landscape has created its own tricks, traps, and surprises to show us who is boss. Nature, in whatever form it takes, may be our partner, but we are not its master. We have not subdued the city any more than the forest. Make friends with it before it takes you over. Now the concrete jungles are the chosen home for some, evoking a new magical world mythology for our modern psyche. Archetypes have arisen in new forms, retelling ancient stories from our unconscious.

Our new mythic world is based on the popular culture around us. We fall in love with and adore our movie and rock stars, our politicians, and our sports heroes. When our culture is gone, will their names be read as a race of new gods and worshiped by those who follow us? We name Elvis our king, even if only of rock and roll, and mythically expect him to rise from the dead like some Osirian figure, instead of ending his life on the toilet. It is equally hard to believe that our modern-day Dionysus, Jim Morrison, of the Doors, god of poetry and excess, could have met his end in the bathtub. Of course, his death was faked and he’s living out his life in some secret hideaway. His followers leave offerings of empty beer cans and used condoms at his gravesite in France. The rites of rock concerts have become the new sacraments and initiations into ecstatic mysteries. Children screamed hysterically for the Beatles, flailing about madly in a trance-like ceremony. From Alice Cooper, to Ozzy Osborne, and now Marilyn Manson, we have dark figures ushering our children into the primal unknown. Like Persephone, they take them to the lands where we tell them not to play. That earlier famous Marilyn, Marilyn Monroe, is the temptress goddess and minor figure in the downfall of the beloved leader
of Camelot, John F. Kennedy. His spirit, however, will return, like King Arthur’s, when we need the good king again. Sports figures turned wife-beaters and murderers haunt our television sets, our mighty oracle. We are told by this box to get magick shoes with a special name on them and we will run, jump, and play just like the sports gods. If we drink the right soda and eat the right candy, we will live forever, as if we imbibed a magical elixir. Urban legends leave us frightened that we will awaken someday in a hotel bathtub with a kidney removed, another victim of organ pirates. Bloody Mary will appear in our bathroom mirror if we summon her by chanting her name three times. Or very real irate wives will chop off their husbands’ penises and be cheered onward, reliving the mythos of Set and Osiris in a slightly altered fashion. We have created new monsters to replace the ghosts and nosferatu. Undying maniacs in hockey masks will murder us at summer camp. Muamar Kadaffi, Sadam Hussein, or the next would-be conqueror of the Middle East become the devil incarnate, the root of all evil in this world, instead of just ordinary people trying to do what they think is right for themselves and their people. Our desert strikes and wars become the millennium’s holy crusades, rallying the faithful as we wait for alien visitors to swoop down from the sky, finally revealing themselves and bringing us either our much-deserved enlightenment or our equally deserved destruction, depending on which book you read.

Our mythology is very rich and dark. There is a hope, however, from within. Although it appears that many of us are giving away our personal power, at the same time, we are going through such an amazing shift that it’s hard to believe. I think of it as a “shamanizing” of the culture. Although the term originally referred to the medicine men of Siberian tribes, in general, a shaman is one who heals the spirit through making contact with the spirits of plants, animals, minerals, and other worlds. In modern lands and cultures, bereft as they are of true spirit healers who make contact with other worlds, we are reclaiming those powers little by little.

The most striking of these cultural changes appears in the NDEs, or Near Death Experiences, so many people seem to be having. Through these miraculous stories, ordinary people are finding out that there is life
beyond death, and that it is not anything to fear. Most experiences are loving, filled with tunnels of light, glowing beings, and people who have passed on before. The mainstream religious imagery of punishment or reward does not seem to apply. Not many report either hellfire and damnation or pearly gates. Most important, as these seekers discover wonderful new worlds and make striking changes in the way they live their lives, they come back and share this information with the rest of us. We all gain comfort from their stories. They are the modern-day shamans. Through a spirit sickness or near death experience, they gain entry into the land of the dead. They return with knowledge of this world and a power they did not have before. They may use this knowledge and gift to return there, or their experience may be unique. They bring back, however, much-needed spirit medicine for their people. They reclaim our natural power as human beings to travel far and wide, and share that power with all of us.

Are the repeated images of the spirit floating above the body, often hearing what other people in the room are saying, and then traveling to the white light to meet their families who have passed, a cliche of our new mythology? Perhaps, but does that make it any less real? I don’t think so. It’s no more imaginary than going to the underworld to have your heart weighed against a single feather, as in the ancient Egyptian beliefs. Both are real.

Hopefully, the result of these NDEs will be the transformation of modern society and the world. By turning back to spirit, we may be able to simplify many of our world’s problems. We must make sure, however, that the pendulum does not swing too far away from, advances and bring about the opposite extreme. Ideally, spirit and science will both be honored by those well-versed in both subjects. Technology alone is not inherently “evil,” and ancient tradition is not the only “good” way. Thoughtless technology, used without looking at a larger, holistic picture, is dangerous, as we are learning to the detriment of the planet. Tradition hinders us when it completely blinds a society to new information, experimentation, or change. A synthesis of the best of both worlds is needed. We must never forget our roots, nor should we fear change.
The New Age movement, for all its inconsistencies, is largely responsible for people consciously reclaiming their power. Magick is a choice. People are researching their ethical and spiritual roots to take back their lost traditions. Others are taking new and bold steps in that direction, combing other worlds as well as their familiar surroundings. New interest in shamanism grows steadily. Neopaganism and witchcraft have grown by leaps and bounds, stressing the ability to change your reality for the better. More people believe that angels, reality spirit guides, or dead relatives are aiding them in their lives and looking after them. Magick is afoot in many forms.

Meditation and introspection are the first steps. Alternative care systems are gaining acceptance. Acupuncture, herbalism, flower essences, Reiki, past-life regressions, and crystal healing are making strides, in each its own way. Things considered “on the fringe” years ago are each as alternative treatments by the mainstream. Knowing someone who from a nontraditional spiritual path is more common. Brave pagans are coming out of the broom closet to share their beliefs and their magick with those who have never experienced it before. The spirit worlds, the subtle energies, are making a comeback in all our daily lives.

All these changes are greatly needed today. If we are to survive the changes of the modern-day world, new and very old energies need to be integrated into our lives to transform our species. Magick to change our reality for the better must be available to all who need it. We desperately need our shamans, healers, witches, and mystics and we need them everywhere, including in our cities. Honoring magick, the life force from our source god, goddess, or whatever you choose to call it, is paramount. Take this trip through the urban jungle with me, and discover the magick hidden within it. All jungle tools and totems can heal or hurt. You will never know which are your helpers, however, if you are too afraid to take the journey. Walk through the city’s magick. You never know what you may find.