Design matters: The city and the good life

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Western ideas about good cities descend from Athens, Jerusalem and Rome. From Athens we inherit two seminal ideas: that the good life is the life of moral and intellectual excellence, and that the good city is one that makes this good life possible for its citizens. From Jerusalem comes a third idea: that a city's excellence is also measured by the care it exhibits for its weakest members. And from Rome we inherit the idea that a city's beauty is warranted by and represents its greatness. This ancient view of cities, though it acknowledged the central role of commerce, was essentially moral and aesthetic.

Today's common wisdom is different. It views the city as governed by impersonal market forces, and devotes little thought to the good life or to the relation cities might have to the good life.

The city is a central metaphor and theme in Christianity. Christian scripture depicts the end of the human pilgrimage as a heavenly city, the New Jerusalem; and the relationship between this world and the next was articulated paradigmatically for Christians in the fifth century in St. Augustine's classic *The City of God*.

Systematic philosophical thinking about urbanism antedates Christianity, going back to Aristotle, who wrote some four centuries before Christ that the best life for human beings is lived in community with others, and most particularly in a polis. This "city-state" was typically small in scale, with flexible but definite physical and geographic characteristics. It happened also to approximate the size of subsequent historic towns and urban neighborhoods—and for an obvious reason: it is an area that can be comfortably walked. Its size fit the embodied nature of the human person. Of the polis Aristotle wrote that it is a community of communities, "the highest of all, embracing all the rest . . . [aiming] at the highest good: the well-being of all its citizens."

The Christian might say that Aristotle is not quite right on this point. The church is the highest of all communities, for it aims at the truly highest good: people's eternal well-being. Augustine addresses this tension in a way that became definitive for Christians. He contended that in its life on earth, the church is but a single member of and participant in that community of communities which is the earthly city. With respect to its divine vocation, however, the church represents and to some extent embodies the heavenly city. *Pace* Aristotle, the highest of all communities therefore is indeed a city: it is the City of God, of which the church is its earthly herald, symbol and sacramental anticipation. Christians recognize that on earth we have no lasting city but seek the city that is to come. Christians therefore possess a dual citizenship.

Aristotle argued that human beings are by nature social animals that thrive in cities. Historically, Christians have agreed, but maintain that human sociability reflects the inherent sociability of the one triune God. It is important therefore not to regard Augustine's use of the term city as mere metaphor. Both Alasdair MacIntyre and Peter Brown (writing about the classical polis and Augustine respectively) have emphasized that in the premodern world human identity was bound up with particular communities and particular places. (This indeed was essential to the appeal of Augustine's thesis: Christians belong to a city, a heavenly city—God's city.)

And it is worth noting that the modern disintegration of the traditional city, which I will shortly describe, coincides with the (now disintegrating) modern notion of the self as disembodied and ahistorical. We might recall that the frequently used metaphor "the church in the public square" derives from the historic presence of real churches on real public squares. The power of this metaphor diminishes as we lose and forget how to make real public squares fronted by real churches.

Urban social life as both reality and ideal became problematic with the rise of the industrial city. As recently as the 18th century Samuel Johnson could say of London: "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford." But with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the urban setting became known as the site of disease, pollution, crime, squalor and ugliness. William Blake wrote of England's "dark satanic mills," and Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times* describes the prototypical industrial city of Coketown in terms more hellish than heavenly.

Every urban reform movement of the past 200 years—from England's Hygiene Acts to America's City Beautiful Movement to modern zoning laws to modernist architecture to the creation of public housing and the rise of environmentalism and historic preservation—has been a response to the social and cultural problems created by industrialism.

Several of these reform movements—such as the 19th- century urban parks movement, without which contemporary big-city life would be almost unlivable—have made permanent contributions to our experience and understanding of good city life. Others have been more problematic.

Americans have largely succeeded in one area of reform: we have separated the noxious aspects of industrial production from city life, exporting them to regions outside the city or to other countries. But this has not meant that America has been making or promoting good cities. Since World War II the U.S. has excelled chiefly at creating a pattern of development known as suburban sprawl.

The ubiquity of suburban sprawl has come to constitute a serious physical, intellectual and cultural problem of its own. This problem today is engendered and sustained by virtually every institution responsible for the creation of the built environment: the real estate development industry; the construction industry; federal, state and local regulatory agencies; the rule-of-thumb manuals of transportation engineers; the lending policies of banks; the professions of architecture and planning; the patrons of architecture; and above all the zoning ordinances that regulate where and how buildings get built.

What exactly is the problem with suburban sprawl? The Congress for New Urbanism has identified a set of interconnected problems, all related to the physical characteristics of sprawl. Suburban sprawl fosters disinvestment in historic city centers; excessive separation of people by age, race and income; extreme inequality of educational opportunity; pollution and the loss of agricultural lands and wilderness; record rates of obesity; and sheer ugliness.

New Urbanists are not environmental determinists; they are not arguing that suburban sprawl creates these problems all by itself. They do argue that there is a reciprocal relationship between the built environment on the one hand and people's character and social relations on the other. As the charter of the New Urbanism says: "Physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems,

but neither can economic vitality, community stability, and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework.”

The very physical structure of suburban sprawl makes it virtually impossible for people of different generations and different incomes to live in close proximity to one another—and not only live close together but also work, shop, play, learn and worship in the same neighborhood. The automobile-dependent suburb effectively demobilizes and disenfranchises those without cars and those unable to drive, notably children (whose parents must become chauffeurs) and the elderly.

To live in suburbia has become an American ideal; but it is a contradictory ideal, for suburban sprawl voraciously consumes the landscape that is the very substance of its promise. The suburban ideal simply cannot deliver on its promise of convenience, mobility, natural beauty, individual freedom and well-being for all. Its self-contradictory dynamic is evident in the way those who have most recently arrived in suburbia are often the people most vociferously opposed to its extension (the political phenomenon that has come to be known as NIMBYism—“Not In My Back Yard”).

The cultural ideal and reality of suburban sprawl are perhaps most insidious in the way they undermine the formal and cultural patterns—the urban patterns—by means of which human beings have traditionally sought to achieve the good life. The postwar suburban ideal caters to the illusion that unpleasantness in life can be avoided. Christians especially should understand that unpleasantness in life cannot be avoided.

In contrast to suburbia, the traditional city is a complex institution designed to address and transform the unpleasant aspects of human life by means of community, culture and civil society. To live in a civitas is to be civilized. To live in a polis one must learn to be polite, perhaps even to acquire some polish. Urbanites sometimes become urbane.

I am contrasting two formal paradigms of human settlement: the traditional town or traditional urban neighborhood and the post-1945 automobile-dependent suburb. My division of history at the year 1945 may seem extravagant or simplistic, but that year effectively represents the temporal demarcation between the routine creation of walkable human settlements and the creation of those that require mechanical transportation to perform the majority of life’s daily tasks.

With other members of the Congress for New Urbanism, I contend that the mixed-use walkable neighborhood is the sine qua non of urban design and that it ought to be a focus of both public policy and urban planning, whether such neighborhoods are considered in isolation or in relation to other neighborhoods. A neighborhood standing alone in the landscape is a village; several neighborhoods in the landscape constitute a town; many contiguous neighborhoods in the landscape together constitute a city or a metropolis. To make traditional villages, towns, neighborhoods and cities today—like the places we love to visit (villages and towns like Cooperstown and Key West; small cities like Annapolis, Savannah and Santa Barbara; and big cities with distinctive neighborhoods like Boston, New York and Chicago)—requires a conscious and conscientious rejection of the way we've been making human settlements since 1945.

We can identify at least four kinds of order in a good city: an ecological order: an economic order, a moral order and a formal order. A good city clearly is part of an *ecological* order—it is a means by which humans live over an extended period in the natural landscape. If the city is made well, both the human animal and the ecological order of which it is part will thrive. If the city is not made well, both humans and the ecological order will eventually suffer.

The *economic* order of a good city is characterized by marketplace diversity and entrepreneurial freedom. Its purpose is twofold: to create and distribute the material goods and services necessary to the material well-being of the populace, and to create the surplus wealth, and hence the leisure, necessary for the various kinds of cultural endeavors—music, art, scholarship, sport—that are the hallmarks of civilization.

Just as important, however, is the *moral* order. The marks of this order are the existence of various religious, civic and political institutions that shape and restrain individual behavior. Such institutions seek to educate individuals in a variety of moral and intellectual virtues, and to promote regard for the common good. If these institutions are healthy, they promote and sustain a shared sense that the city is not only a marketplace but also a moral community, and that the market exists for the community not the community for the market.

The *formal* order of the city is what architects typically think about when they think about the city—the pattern of buildings, squares, streets and sidewalks. Most people intuitively understand the relationship between the formal order of a city and its

economic order, because they know it requires economic power to build significant buildings. The relationship between the formal order of a city and its moral order may be less obvious but is no less significant, for every formal order reflects and embodies some moral order (whether it’s admirable or decadent).

The traditional view of the good life in the West is that it is lived in community. In the traditional city, that moral view is embodied in its formal order. A counterpoint to that view is evident in the formal order of the automobile-dependent suburb.

European architect Leon Krier, the most influential traditional urbanist of our time, has compared the traditional urban neighborhood to a slice of pizza (Figure 1). A neighborhood is to the larger city what a slice of the pizza is to the whole pie: the part contains within itself the essential qualities and elements of the whole.

In the case of a city made of neighborhoods, this means that a neighborhood contains within walkable proximity to one another places to live, work, play, learn and worship. Within the legal boundaries of a postwar suburb, by contrast, the elements of the “pizza” are physically separated and at some distance from one another—as if the crust is here, the sauce over there, the cheese someplace else and the pepperoni way out yonder. A suburb may have places to live, work, play, learn and worship, but these activities are confined to single-use zones that are typically distant from one another and require access by car through a pedestrian-hostile environment. By analogy, a postwar suburb has all the ingredients (in Aristotelian terms, the material cause) of a pizza, but it is not a pizza precisely because it does not have the form of a pizza. A postwar suburb may contain the ingredients of a city, but it is not a city precisely because it lacks the physical and the social form (the formal cause) of a city.

What are some of the key features of the formal order of traditional towns and cities and the neighborhoods of which they are constituted? Cities are composed of a private-economic realm and a public-civic realm which are distinguishable but mixed together in close proximity (Figure 2).

City form is made out of blocks of buildings that define a public realm of streets, along with plazas or squares typically fronted by civic buildings or focused on a centralized monument (Figure 3). Plazas are hard-surfaced, while squares are usually green spaces. Plazas are more common in European cities, squares in Anglo-American cities. Neither are common in those parts of America built since 1945.

Virtually all urban streets connect; culs de sac are rare. Although there is a recognizable hierarchy of streets according to traffic capacity (and hence size), urban streets always accommodate pedestrians. American towns and cities often line their streets with trees; European cities tend to limit trees to boulevards and avenues.

Primary urban streets carry large volumes of car traffic, but unlike suburban arterial streets they have on-street parking, which protects pedestrians, and wide sidewalks, which safely and comfortably accommodate people on foot (Figure 4).

Secondary urban streets are narrow, and usually permit parking on one or both sides (Figure 5). They allow traffic to connect to major streets, but their narrow width requires cars to move slowly, creating an inherently safer pedestrian environment. Lanes or alleys constitute a third kind of street, essentially a service street for garage access, utilities and trash collection.

Private buildings relate to the street in a consistent and disciplined manner (see Figures 4-5), and are used primarily for commerce and for dwelling. Such buildings front and give spatial definition to streets, and often shelter a mix of uses. Buildings used primarily for commerce may also have residences above the ground floor, and buildings primarily intended as residences may also shelter small offices or businesses.

Good towns and city neighborhoods provide a variety of housing types, often (unlike suburbs) on the same block. In addition to various kinds of detached single-family houses, there may be row houses, apartment buildings, coach houses, and apartments located above stores. The consequence of this concentrated mix of housing is that the young and the old, singles and families, the poor and the wealthy, can all find places to live within the neighborhood. Think of the low-rise, high-density character of neighborhoods in Paris, London or Charleston, or any pre-1945 American town or city neighborhood, which are characterized above all by a beautiful, walkable, convenient public realm that more than compensates for their small building parcels. Small ancillary buildings are typically permitted and encouraged within the backyard of each lot. This small building may be used as a rental unit of housing or as a place to work; it may also be properly regarded as an example of private sector affordable housing.

Schools are within walking distance of the homes of students and teachers.

Good cities provide parks of various sizes throughout neighborhoods for both passive and active recreation.

Prominent sites are reserved for civic buildings and community monuments. Buildings for education, religion, culture, sport and government are sited either at the end of important street vistas or fronting squares or plazas.

Civic, commercial, residential and recreational buildings and uses are located within pedestrian proximity of one another—typically a five-to-ten-minute (one-quarter-to-one-half-mile) walk. This is the historic physical and anthropological measure of good urban culture. This rule does not presume that everyone who lives in the neighborhood necessarily works in the neighborhood. Nor does it mean that people will or should cease to have cars. It does mean that a significant reduction in car travel is possible, and that residents who are too young, too old, too poor or too infirm to drive a car remain able to live independently within the community.

The formal characteristics of traditional towns and urban neighborhoods are easily learned by attending carefully to the most beloved cities and neighborhoods in the world. Nevertheless, making such neighborhoods today is very hard, not only because we have largely lost the requisite cultural and social habits, but also because in most places zoning laws (which mandate segregated uses) and street design regulations (which are crafted exclusively to make streets efficient for cars rather than also safe for pedestrians) make it literally illegal to build such environments.

Can the art of traditional urban design be renewed? And can we learn once again to be happy in traditional towns and cities—not only as a moral antidote to individualism, inequality and the misuse of environmental resources, and not only as an aesthetic antidote to suburban sprawl, but also for the sake of the genuine goods and pleasures (including both communal belonging and individual freedom) of traditional urban life? These are the questions that have been taken up over the past ten years by the Congress for New Urbanism.

The CNU includes architects, planners, developers, engineers, government officials and ordinary citizens committed to revitalizing and promoting traditional urbanism. As New Urbanists came to realize that existing zoning ordinances, street design manuals and housing industry practices were all impediments to making traditional towns and neighborhoods, they began developing new kinds of zoning ordinances;

found sympathetic traffic engineers to help write a different set of street design standards; renewed the practice of creating high-quality pattern books to guide home-builders; and learned how to persuade lending institutions of the economic advantages of financing traditional neighborhoods. The result is that there are now more than 200 New Urbanist mixed-use projects under construction in the U.S. and throughout the world, and hundreds more being planned (though this remains but a fraction of new construction taking place).

New Urbanism has aroused vocal opposition from both the political left and the political right. For the left, New Urbanists are too closely involved with the marketplace and too content with “conventional” aesthetics. New Urbanism is alleged to be just a prettier version of suburban exclusivity (“Disneyesque” is the preferred term of opprobrium), and out of step with the ironic postmodern zeitgeist. For the right, in particular the libertarians, New Urbanists are too closely allied with government regulatory control.

These criticisms are category mistakes. The fact that both opposition to and support for New Urbanism come from across the political spectrum suggests that current political categories may not apply. New Urbanism is arguably nothing so much as a classic Tocquevillian democratic “association” active primarily at local levels of community and government. New Urbanists work both substantively and procedurally to fight precisely those tendencies toward individualism that Tocqueville recognized as the most serious threat to the culture of democracy, for which free associations of citizens were the primary remedy and of which suburban sprawl is arguably our culture’s foremost physical embodiment.

If the New Urbanism has an Achilles’ heel, it is that its projects do not yet measure up to its own professed objectives. New Urbanist “greenfield” projects in particular—mixed-use developments built on previously undeveloped land—for the most part have yet to coalesce into genuine towns and neighborhoods (though given their physical infrastructure and the passage of time they probably will do so, unlike their sprawl counterparts). Moreover, because New Urbanist developments remain rare, and because they have undeniable market appeal, they tend to be expensive.

This discrepancy between the ideals and the reality of New Urbanism is due in part to the fact that New Urbanist proposals to date are mostly being pitched to and driven by the housing market. While it is impossible for New Urbanist projects to succeed outside the market, it is clear—even to New Urbanists—that the ideal of

mixed-use, walkable and above all economically and generationally diverse human settlements will not be realized solely by market forces.

Since good towns and cities manifest and promote a moral order as well as an economic order, churches obviously have an interest in the form of cities and a potentially important role to play in the revival of traditional urbanism. It is worth noting that that New Urbanists derive their ideas about public space and formal order in large part from traditional cities in which churches and their ancillary institutions have been key players. Church communities continue to erect buildings—for worship, for education, for health care, for dwelling—that are potentially important components of traditional neighborhoods. Moreover, churches are a kind of community in which at least in principle (unlike in suburbia) membership is not primarily a function of class or age. The church therefore would seem to have much to offer the New Urbanist enterprise out of its own long intellectual and spiritual traditions—not least a serious and sophisticated view of human nature and human community, a pastoral mandate to serve rich and poor, and a long history of urban and architectural patronage.

At the same time, the lessons about place and character that the New Urbanists are relearning are lessons that churches also need to relearn. All too often churches unthinkingly comply with the cultural presuppositions of suburban sprawl. This compliance is evident in new church buildings located in the midst of large surface parking lots; in the frequent attempts by older neighborhood churches to tear down adjacent buildings to provide parking for a suburban constituency; in well-meaning but misconceived programs that create housing for the elderly or low-income persons as concentrated enclaves rather than components of walkable mixed-use neighborhoods; and in their almost complete indifference to the aesthetics of a shared public realm.

What can churches do both to save and be saved, urbanistically speaking? Churches could assume a more significant role in neighborhood building by rethinking church development procedures in at least two areas. The first has to do with the size of new churches. Many new evangelical megachurches and Roman Catholic parish churches are so big as to be intrinsically antiurban. A new church building required to seat more than about 700 people will almost inevitably be situated in a parking lot rather then amid a walkable neighborhood—and that’s a problem for urbanism.

The second, related area has to do with land use. A new suburban church complex typically occupies six to 15 acres on which will be located a church building, perhaps an associated school and a surface parking lot—and that's it! In contrast, my own Chicago parish church and elementary school are located on two city blocks that together take up ten acres, but those blocks include—in addition to the church and school—over 100 dwelling units in a variety of buildings two-to-three stories tall, more than 15 businesses, and nearly 200 on- and off-street parking spaces for the public. My parish church is a genuine neighborhood center, in contrast to new suburban churches, which function (in terms of formal order) as the center of parking lots.

Of course, new suburban churches don't have to promote densities at the scale of a Chicago neighborhood in order to promote better human settlements. Figure 6 shows how a 700-seat church and a 400-student elementary school (with a gym) could occupy a ten-acre parcel of land that could also accommodate some small-town-sized single-family building lots, a block of row houses fronting a plaza and a public square, and a short block of mixed-use buildings fronting the square. With accessory buildings (coach houses with garages below and a small living or work space above) permitted on the single-family house lots, this design makes room for 41 private development parcels, allowing up to 70 dwelling units and four ground-floor shops; off-street parking for 82 cars; on-street and plaza public parking for 216 cars; and additional Sunday parking available for up to 90 more cars on the perimeter lanes of the property. The parcel is also laid out to allow street connections to future development adjacent to the property.

A development approach such as this also has the potential to help congregations finance their building projects by forming partnerships with developers to build the nonchurch portion. (It is also likely to require a change in the local zoning ordinance—but there are plenty of good New Urbanist designers around to assist congregations and parishes in this endeavor.)

For such a project a congregation need not presume that all members will live in the adjacent homes, or that everyone who lives in the adjacent units will be a member of the church. Nor would such a development in any way constitute a complete neighborhood. But it could be the nucleus of a complete neighborhood, one which has a church community at its enter, and the potential to promote growth in an urban rather than suburban sprawl pattern (much as the most beautiful parts of contemporary London grew in the 17th and 18th centuries around small residential-

square developments). This model is only suggestive, of course; there are many legitimate strategies for how church communities might come to promote and reclaim a better physical presence in the earthly city.

I have been arguing that good cities are an essential component of the good life for human beings, who are made in the image of God, and that urbanism—for good reason—is a privileged symbol in the Christian imagination. Post–World War II suburban sprawl is the antithesis of good urbanism. To the extent that we Christians simply accept the premises of suburban culture, we compromise both the substance of our faith and the effectiveness of our evangelical efforts. Churches will better contribute both to the good of the City of Man and to our witness to the City of God by promoting the formal order of traditional urbanism.