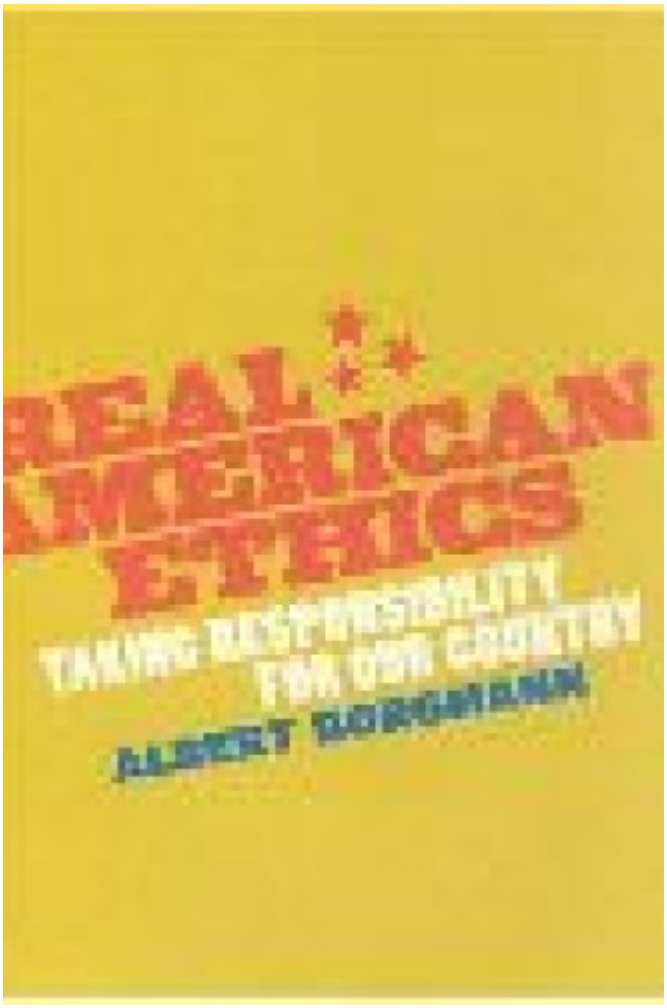
What consumes us

By Daniel T. Spencer in the April 3, 2007 issue

In Review



Real American Ethics: Taking Responsibility for Our Country

Albert Borgman
University of Chicago Press

We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us," Winston Churchill said to Parliament in 1943 after Nazi bombs destroyed the House of Commons.

Churchill’s intuition was that the physical places we construct and inhabit shape the nature of our discourse. Drawing on this principle, philosopher Albert Borgmann examines the institutions and tangible structures that we have built to create the United States and considers what kinds of life these structures make possible.

Our built environment—both physical and political—is not a neutral, passive backdrop, but instead is infused with moral content that shapes who we are and how we live. The urgent moral task is to recognize this relationship, take responsibility for it and ask what kind of life expresses our deepest shared values.

Borgmann says that “ours is a decent country,” but one with troubling features, particularly its waning support for values of equality, dignity and justice, and for traditional American concerns for the poor and the environment. Increasingly these values are displaced by the focus on production, consumption and affluence. The culture of both the household and the community have become attenuated and fragmented in a social context marked by technology and commodification.

Borgmann has given these social dynamics careful attention in previous works, particularly in *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*. In *Real American Ethics* he suggests ways in which ordinary citizens can make changes in their daily actions to reclaim the good life from the forces of technology and commodification in a distinctly American manner.

Reviewing what has made U.S. culture and history distinctly American, Borgmann traces the contributions of Enlightenment figures Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson to show how their views have shaped and grounded moral vision and practices. Generosity and resourcefulness, he contends, are the virtues that distinguish U.S. history when we have been at our best. But now moral malaise and indifference more and more mark U.S. society. “The ground of contemporary culture must be so compacted and barren that a rich and grounded moral vision has a hard time taking root and gaining public support.” The task is to understand contemporary culture in order to devise an antidote.

What most distinctively shapes American life at the dawn of the 21st century? For Borgmann, technology is the key mediating factor in our interaction with the world, and commodification has become the central driving force, accompanied by ever new forms of technology. Neither of these factors is morally neutral. We shape technology and then technology shapes us by delivering commodities that promise

us pleasure, comfort, leisure and convenience, but paradoxically leave us bored and distracted, alienated from what is real—other humans and the earth. Instead of engaging what is real, we commodify things, taking them out of their time, place and community and putting them in the decontextualized market where they are available for consumption, free of any moral claims they might make on us. Hence the latest iPod becomes more important than health care for the uninsured, spending on home theaters more important than providing for public parks, fast food more desirable than the labor of preparing the evening meal.

To frame this analysis, Borgmann reviews contemporary ethical theory. One of the finest features of this very fine book is the dexterity and clarity with which Borgmann leads the reader through the three main branches of ethics—deontological ethics, utilitarian ethics and virtue ethics. Most drawn to virtue ethics—Aristotle is a frequent conversation partner—Borgmann observes that a central problem with traditional deontological ethics (Kant) and utilitarianism (Mill) is that they focus on moral quandaries but leave unexamined the moral qualities of our daily lives, where the good life either thrives or languishes. In contrast to theoretical ethics, practical ethics focuses on the importance of moral practices in grounding the good life but pays too little attention to Churchill's principle that these practices are already conditioned by the environments we fashion. Borgmann posits that instead of theoretical or practical ethics, we need real ethics, which "investigates the moral structure of the material culture and thus reveals the levees, dams, and channels that constrain the course of life, and . . . discloses the things of art and nature that inspire and engage us."

From the perspective of real ethics, two critical virtues Americans need are economy, "the art and virtue of the household," and design,"taking moral responsibility for the built environment." In relation to these, Borgmann discusses a range of activities, from decentering the place of television in our households and reclaiming the cultures of the table and the book to emphasizing local foods and voluntary simplicity. The antidote to the "moral malnutrition" of technology and commodification is the virtue of grace—creating space and readiness for recognizing and engaging the sacred in our midst.

What is needed is a compelling vision that draws us in and reveals the moral vacuity of the life of consumption and commodification. To sketch the contours, Borgmann returns to Jefferson and the lifelong tension he felt between the life of the household and the life of the public sphere:

> Like Jefferson, we should center our lives in our homes, among family, friends, and neighbors. For us today, the ordinary obstacle is neither the struggle for survival nor the demands of public life, but the distractions of consumption. It takes fortitude to leave the cocoons of comfort and convenience. But once we have gathered at the dinner table, wisdom and friendship can be ours, and they in turn can give us the courage to join with our neighbors in the design of a public realm that encourages celebration. Perhaps we can draw from common celebrations the generosity and resourcefulness to meet our obligations of justice and stewardship. Thus the United States may become the country of grace that the people who came here have searched for and worked for.

When it comes to environmental ethics, Borgmann moves from an ethic of respect for the intrinsic value of nature—by implication a hands-off ethic of leaving nature alone so as to not harm it—to an ethic of respectful engagement with the natural world in which we respond to the claims it makes on us. This is particularly helpful in the field of ecological restoration: the claims that a damaged nature makes on us lead us to engage with nature to restore its ecological integrity, and in the process we restore ourselves to the natural world.

With its attention to the Churchill principle and the dynamics of commodification, real ethics can also help us to articulate the general uneasiness about, if not outright opposition to, the neoliberal paradigm of economic globalization. No one opposes meeting the legitimate economic development needs of the world's poorer nations. But meeting those needs through an integrated global system of unlimited growth and commodification of all areas of life is ecologically unsustainable and exports the very lifestyle of technological convenience that Borgmann pinpoints as the root of the moral malaise in the U.S.

We need a vision that reveals the moral emptiness of a life built on consumerism and attracts us instead to a life of excellence. What made the early church so compelling in the midst of the excesses of the Roman Empire was its alternative way of living—"the Way," in earliest lingo. Yet much of the Christian community's inattention to and even complicity with the tangible setting of life in U.S. society makes developing and living out an alternative vision virtually impossible. This is not true of all sectors of Christianity—much of the rapid growth of Pentecostalism can be understood as a rebuke of secular modernity and consumerism. But for the mainline

Christian community to again offer a compelling alternative, it must come to terms with how Americans have built U.S. society and how it shapes us in ways inimical to the heart of the gospel.

Borgmann's analysis of the effects of commodification and consumerism in U.S. society is among the most astute I have read. For that reason I am disappointed that he does not discuss how ordinary citizens can address the siblings of U.S. consumerism and commodification: militarism and imperialism. Granted, Borgmann wants to focus on what has been best in the American moral tradition, and he does show that at their best Americans have been generous toward others and resourceful in building this nation. But all too often this activity has been interwoven with military might and economic power over others. In a recent lecture at the University of Montana, historian Kenneth Maxwell reminded listeners that since the 1890s the U.S. has intervened militarily in Latin America an average of once every 22 months. And people familiar with the U.S. role at the Bretton Woods conference in 1944 know how the current global economic system overseen by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization was designed from the outset to project and protect U.S. economic interests. Any examination of how the tangible setting in which we live shapes our reality must come to terms with how much of this setting has been built through U.S. militarism and economic might.

Borgmann has given us an indispensable guide for understanding the nature of the problems we face and an ethical framework for taking responsibility for changing them, starting with the ways we structure our daily lives. This is a book that should be read and pondered, in solitude and in groups, and then implemented so that we may, as Borgmann hopes, "widen the circle of well-being until it includes everyone in this country and on earth."