

*Inland Architecture*, by Phillip Bess

reviewed by [Norman B. Bendroth](#) in the [October 18, 2000](#) issue

Philip Bess likes cities, especially Chicago. He likes cities that work--cities that do not just promote commercial and cultural activity and move traffic, garbage and pedestrians efficiently, but that create a space for human flourishing. Cities are not utilitarian entities governed by impersonal market forces. They are moral entities, Bess argues. A professor of architecture at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, he is one of a few thinkers doing serious theological reflection on the state of modern architecture and urbanism. This concern is well reflected in this collection of essays spanning some 15 years.

Bess, a neotraditionalist, argues that "architecture in every age should be orderly, durable, comfortable, beautiful and reflect the social significance of the institutions it signifies and the virtues it symbolizes." Traditional architecture pays attention to a formal and moral order that values both individual freedom and communal belonging.

Bess laments that public and civic buildings such as libraries, churches, schools, museums and seats of government, which once occupied the foreground of the urban landscape, have become secondary to commercial and residential buildings, which are often icons to inflated egos and monuments to the market. A further sign of demise is that former ballparks are now "mallparks," driven by market and franchise concerns rather than the natural urban constraints of location, context and the people using the facility. All this amounts to "nonadaptive" architecture.

Bess has little patience with postmodern, deconstructionist architects and thinkers. Ultimately they fall on their own sword, he argues, because the premises and internal logic of their architecture cannot sustain the world they wish to create. The philosophical foundations of poststructuralism (Nietzsche's "will to power" and Marx's radical materialism) either elevate the individual without an adequate accounting of belonging and justice, or celebrate belonging and justice at the expense of freedom. A view which promotes radical, autonomous individualism and discounts any narrative as being "true" or right cannot at the same time sustain a case for social justice. The logic inherent in poststructuralism promotes the

abandonment of public life.

Bess proposes a theological paradigm that makes more sense of the "givens" of our earthbound nature--the desire for individual freedom, belonging and justice. Jan van Eyck's painting "The Mystic Adoration of the Lamb" serves as a fruitful paradigm of the good city for Bess. In it we see heaven as both a garden and a city where nature and culture are affirmed and redeemed by God. In the garden--once a symbol of the tyranny of nature--we find the faithful assembled, and within the city--once a symbol of the tyranny of the group--the skyline is not a rigid order but an informal assembly of buildings that take note of their larger context.

Human cities should proximate the heavenly city as a "community of communities," a place for freedom and belonging, compassion for the poor, justice for all, a moral order that limits the individualism that free economies promote, and "a formal order of buildings and spaces that privilege the public realm over the private, and are beautiful enough to stir the individual aesthetic sensibility."

This book is a delightful read, drawing on classical and modern sources, accessible to architects and nonarchitects. It is for anyone interested in the consequences of ideas on the city.