The Church Building as Sacramental Sign

BY PHILIP BESS

If the church is to be a witness to the Heavenly City, Christians must once again be not only good patrons of architecture, but also (and even more) good patrons of urbanism. Heralding the City of God is only made more difficult by acquiescing in the Suburb of Man.

T hink with me about the church building in the city and the church building as a city; about the inside significance of the church building and the outside significance of the church building; and, above all, about the church building as a visible witness to the mystery of the ongoing life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

CITIES AND THE GOOD LIFE

The philosopher Aristotle, who lived some four centuries before Christ, is the intellectual wellspring of western thinking about the form of cities, or urbanism. The best life for individual human beings, he observes, is the life of moral and intellectual virtue lived in community with others and most particularly in a polis, or city-state.

The city is a central metaphor and theme of historic Christianity. Scripture depicts the end of the human pilgrimage as a heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. In the fifth century, Augustine describes the distinctive character of Christian vocation as our simultaneously being citizens of two cities: an earthly city and a heavenly city, the City of Man and the City of God. In Augustine's view, the Church is a sacramental mystery seeking to make her members over the course of a lifetime fit citizens for the City of God; we become thus in part by learning to be good citizens in the City of Man and by loving the City of Man with a properly ordered love, never forgetting

that our first loyalty is to the heavenly city that is our origin and destiny.

Aristotle says of the polis that it is a community of communities, "the highest of all, which embraces all the rest, [aiming] at the highest good," which is the well-being of all its citizens.[1] Now at one level a Christian might say this is not quite right, inasmuch as the Church would be characterized as the highest of all communities, aiming at the highest good—the eternal well-being of all its citizens. But here again, Augustine offers the insightful hermeneutical key. In her life on earth, the Church is but a single member of and participant in that community of communities which is the earthly city. But with respect to her divine vocation, the Church recognizes that here she has no lasting city, but seeks the City of God that is to come—and not only seeks but represents and to some extent even embodies it. Thus it is more true than even Aristotle knew, that the highest of all communities—embracing all the rest and aiming at the highest good, which is the well-being of all its citizens—is indeed a City: it is the City of God, of which the Church is its earthly herald, symbol, and embodied anticipation.

In the following passage we glimpse Augustine's inclusive urban vision and the complex relationship between the earthy and heavenly cities:

> [While] this Heavenly City is a pilgrim on earth, she summons citizens of all nations and every tongue, and brings together a society of pilgrims in which no attention is paid to any differences in the customs, laws, and institutions by which earthly peace is achieved or maintained. She does not rescind or destroy these things, however. For whatever differences there are among the various nations, these all tend towards the same end of earthly peace. Thus, she preserves and follows them, provided only that they do not impede the religion by which we are taught that the one supreme and true God is to be worshipped…. Indeed, she directs that earthly peace towards heavenly peace: towards the peace…[that] is a perfectly ordered and perfectly harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God, and of one another in God…. This [heavenly] peace the Heavenly City possesses in faith while on its pilgrimage, and by this faith it lives righteously, directing towards the attainment of that peace every good act which it performs either for God, or—since the city's life is inevitably a social one—for neighbour.[2]

INDIVIDUALISM AND SPRAWL

The life of the city as "a social one" is a reality and ideal that since the Enlightenment and the rise of the industrial city has become increasingly problematic. Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America* (1835), noted the inherent tendency of democratic societies to foster a culture of individualism. There is now a large volume of academic and popular literature devoted to modern society's discovery and celebration of the "autonomous self."[3]

Our society's view of selfhood is reflected in the spatial forms of the built environment—and the physical expression of individualism is post-WWII suburban sprawl. The culture of individualism has affected, if not corrupted, virtually every institution responsible for the creation of the built environment: from the profession of architecture, to the institutions of architectural education, to the institutional patrons of architecture, to the organization of the construction industry, to the rule-of-thumb manuals of transportation engineers, to the lending policies of banks, to the legal framework represented by zoning ordinances that regulate where and how buildings get built. The vision of both the City of Man and the City of God to which I referred earlier stands in the sharpest possible contrast to the suburban ideal that has become our culture's dominant paradigm for the good life.

> American suburbs cater to the illusion that unpleasantness in life can be avoided. The traditional city is designed to transform the unpleasantries of human life by means of community, culture, and civil society.

Suburban sprawl is problematic because it renders cross-generational, mixed-class communities of place impossible. The automobile suburb—of its very nature, owing to its physical characteristics—effectively demobilizes and disenfranchises that significant percentage of the population which is too young, too old, too poor, or too feeble to drive an automobile. Suburbia cannot deliver on its promise of convenience, mobility, beauty of the natural landscape, and individual freedom and well-being for all. Its contradictory nature is evidenced in that the persons who have most recently arrived in suburbia are often the people most vociferously opposed to its continuing extension, the political phenomenon that has come to be known as NIMBY-ism, or "Not-In-My-Back-Yard-ism."

Our suburban cultural habit undermines the formal patterns, the urban patterns, by which human beings traditionally have sought to achieve the good life. The American suburb is a cultural conspiracy catering to the illusion that unpleasantness in life can be avoided. But Christians above all must surely understand that unpleasantness in life cannot be avoided; and I think it is not too much to say of the traditional city that it is a complex institution designed to address and transform the unpleasantries of human life by means of community, culture, and civil society.

TRADITIONAL NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMMUNITY

Design professionals who are interested in traditional architecture and urbanism agree that the mixed-use walkable neighborhood is essential to

good urban design and ought to be a focus of both public policy and our design efforts. A neighborhood standing alone in the landscape is a village; several neighborhoods in the landscape are a town; and many contiguous neighborhoods constitute a city or a metropolis. But to make traditional neighborhoods today requires a conscientious rejection of the way we have been making human settlements since 1945.

Léon Krier, the most influential traditional urbanist of our time, famously compares the traditional urban neighborhood to a slice of pizza. A neighborhood is to the larger city what a slice of the pizza is to the whole pie — a part that contains within itself the essential qualities and elements of the whole. In contrast, the separation of uses typical of the modern suburb (and typically mandated by modern zoning) is analogous to separating all the ingredients of the pizza from each other — the crust here, the sauce over there, the cheese someplace else, the pepperoni way out yonder, and so on. This latter arrangement has all the ingredients of the pizza, but it is not a pizza precisely because it does not have the form of a pizza. Similarly, the post-WWII suburb has all the ingredients of a city, but it is not a city because it lacks both the physical and the social form of a city. And the reason this matters is because the very purpose of the city — the good life for human beings — is not as separable from the formal order of the city as our cultural ideal of suburbia leads us to believe.

Traditional cities have a characteristic form, Krier observes. The private, economic realm and civic realm are identifiably separate but necessarily mixed together. Streets are defined by blocks of private buildings, while hard-surfaced plazas or garden-filled squares are typically fronted by civic buildings or focused on a monument. Virtually all urban streets connect; urban culs-de-sac are rare. Although there is a recognizable hierarchy of streets according to traffic capacity, urban streets always have on-street parking and wide sidewalks to safely and comfortably accommodate pedestrians (and, in some places, the patrons of outdoor cafes).

Often the buildings have a mix of uses. Those used for commerce may have residences above the ground floor, and buildings primarily intended as residences may shelter small offices or businesses. Good cities provide a variety of housing types, often on the same block. In addition to various kinds of detached single-family houses, there may be row houses, flats, apartment buildings, coach houses, and the aforementioned apartments-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. Small ancillary buildings are typically permitted and encouraged within the backyard of each lot. In addition to parking, this small building may be used as one rental unit of housing or as a place to work.

Good neighborhoods have good schools (particularly elementary schools within walking distance of both students and teachers) and parks

of various sizes for both passive and active recreation. They reserve prominent sites 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.

All of these civic, commercial, residential, and recreational buildings and uses are within pedestrian proximity of each other — a one-quarter- to one-half-mile walk. The most important implication of this is that persons who are too young, too old, too poor, or too infirm to drive a car remain able to live a relatively independent life in their community. The car becomes a convenience rather than a necessity.

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Making neighborhoods of such quality today is as simple as looking closely at, emulating, and attempting to improve upon the most beloved cities and neighborhoods in the world. Unfortunately, making such neighborhoods is as hard as the fact that in most places in America today it is literally illegal to build such environments and also that — to complicate matters even further — we have lost the cultural habit of doing so.

THE LOGIC OF CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

I have been contrasting two formal paradigms of human settlement — the traditional urban neighborhood and the automobile suburb. Today, urbanists are sounding alarm bells: the social and cultural costs of sprawl are excessive, sprawl itself is culturally and environmentally unsustainable, and the only alternative to suburbia is the revival of the art of making traditional cities. What are the implications of these ideas for church architecture?

Father Timothy Vaverek suggests that the first duty of the church building is to be an image of the Church as a whole, of that communion of God and human beings across time wrought through the mystery of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension. "The entire building is therefore 'sacramental' in that it visibly represents the Church, the kingdom of God present now in mystery," Vaverek urges. "The church building is an icon of the Church herself and a witness to the kingdom."[4] Good church buildings proclaim the Church's faith in visible signs and evangelize the neighborhood, the city, and the nation. Nonbelievers point to them as stunning examples of art as well as mysterious, public symbols of Christian piety.

What form or forms, then, should twenty-first-century church buildings take? Several characteristics of sacred architecture, common in many cultures, seem to be grounded in created nature and human nature: a recog

nizable verticality (in height or depth); a concern for light and shadow; a care for craft, durability, and material particularity; the conscious use of mathematics and geometry as formal ordering devices; a compositional and artistic unity; and a sense of hierarchy, by which I simply mean formal evidence that some things are regarded as more important than others.

Other formal aspects of Christian church buildings iconographically reflect something of the nature of the Trinitarian God who has revealed himself through created nature and in human history through Jesus Christ and various manifestations of the Holy Spirit. The *centralized plan based upon the geometry of the circle* symbolically represents the unity and changeless perfection of God. The *great, high-roofed hall of the basilican plan* represents the dynamic movement of nature and history toward their end in God. The *cruciform plan* includes the preceding argument; yet it also symbolizes the mystical Body of Christ and best expresses—at the crossing of nave and transept—the intersection of heaven and earth and the communion of God and human beings at the axis mundi. There may be a contemporary argument for the *elliptical plan* as expressing the dynamic relationship and movement between the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist.

The style of the church building, as well as its form, can be an expression of the Church's mission. The style of *Classicism,* with its interest in the proportions of the human figure, can be a celebration by the Church of the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity. The *Gothic* style's verticality and its ethereal quality of light is a celebration of the mystical presence of God the Holy Spirit. *Exuberant localized vernacular expressions* can be a fitting testimony to the endlessly creative energy of God the Father.

Finally, a case can be made for *monastic simplicity and austerity* of buildings to express the Church's voluntary solidarity with the poor. "I shall say nothing about the soaring heights and extravagant lengths and unnecessary widths of the churches, nothing about their expensive decorations and their novel images, which catch the attention of those who go in to pray, and dry up their devotion," wrote the Cistercian monk, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). "Let them be, since it is all to the glory of God. However, as one monk to another, may I ask [this] question...'tell me, O poor men—if you are really poor men—why is there gold in the holy place?'... The stones of the church are covered with gold, while its children are left naked. The food of the poor is taken to feed the eyes of the rich, and amusement is provided for the curious, while the needy have not even the necessities of life."[5]

THE CHURCH ON A PUBLIC SQUARE

We have been thinking about the church building itself. What about the church building's immediate context? If the neighborhood church is to be both an identifiable community center and witness to the Heavenly City, Christians must once again be not only good patrons of architecture, but also (and even more) good patrons of urbanism. Heralding the City of God

is only made more difficult by acquiescing in the Suburb of Man.

Unfortunately, it is not the church on the public square but rather the church in the parking lot that is the paradigm for church architecture today. So what can congregations do about that?

Let's start by comparing two good-sized and by certain standards thriving churches. The first is located in west suburban Chicago, on a ten-acre site that is entirely occupied by the parish church building, a rambling single-story parish elementary school, a large surface parking lot, and, initially, a retention pond required for the water run-off created by the parking lot. (The pond has subsequently been attached to storm sewers and drained, and the land now serves as a depressed, i.e., below-grade, athletic field.) This programmatic arrangement is what the parish asked for and, more importantly, what the suburban zoning either required or allowed.

Instead of building a church and parking lot on six to ten suburban acres, why couldn't a congregation build a church, a public (not private) square, perhaps a school, and the beginnings of a mixed-use neighborhood?

Compare this with a church and elementary school located on two adjacent Chicago city blocks. In addition to the church and the school, there are over 150 on-street and off-street public parking spaces, as well as more than a dozen businesses and over 100 dwelling units in buildings predominantly two and three stories tall. This urban church is a genuine neighborhood center, easily accessible by both car and foot from its dense urban surroundings. In contrast, the suburban church lacks a sufficiently dense and pedestrian-accessible adjacent neighborhood of which to be the center.

Consider now an alternative form of suburban development, but one with interesting implications for urbanization. Its precedent is the development of the London residential square. Beginning in the seventeenth century, when London was a dense but still small city, aristocratic estate-holders would contract with a developer to build on a six- to ten-acre parcel of land a square surrounded by housing and, in a few cases, fronted by a parish church. This happened on the outskirts of London for a period of about 200 years. Small residential square developments (some 350 to 400 of them) proliferated over the landscape. Eventually housing filled in between the squares, and what you ended up with is modern-day London, a world-class city noteworthy for its many beautiful albeit casually distributed residential squares. Savannah, Georgia, is a more regularized but no less beautiful contemporaneous colonial American variation on that pattern of development and directly indebted to it.

So here is my proposition: When congregations build today, why couldn't they play a part analogous to the London aristocrat? Instead of building a church and a parking lot on their six to ten suburban acres, why not build a church, a public (not private) square, perhaps a school, and the beginnings of a mixed-use neighborhood? (See the illustration below.) Why couldn't a congregation partner with a developer and use some of the proceeds from the development of its property to pay for part of the construction of its church building(s)? Why couldn't churches use this strategy to begin to integrate affordable housing and commercial buildings into suburbia as part of mixed-use neighborhoods? And who's to say that an initially random proliferation of such developments across suburbia—once the exemplary pattern was established—over time might not become, as it did in London, the very physical and spiritual centers so pointedly lacking in contemporary suburbia?
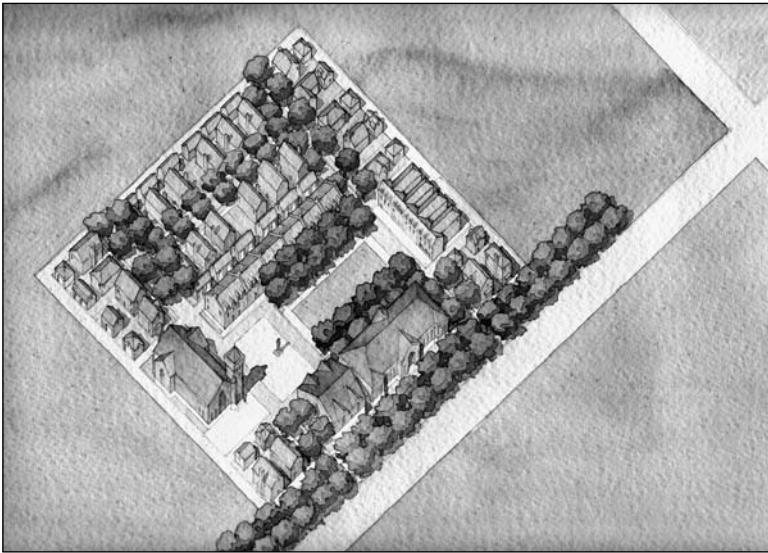
Drawing by Elizabeth McNicholas, courtesy of Thursday Associates.

This proposition, of course, presumes that contemporary Christians have at hand or can develop the aesthetic and spiritual resources—not least the desire—needed to promote good cities; and this may be assuming a lot, at least at the present time. Nevertheless, the challenge we face today is the same challenge Christians always face—to be true to our calling to celebrate, witness to, and foreshadow the coming City of God.

NOTES

1 Aristotle, *The Politics,* Book 1, Chapter 1 (1252a 1-6), and Book 3, Chapter 9 (1280b 32-35), translated by Benjamin Jowett.

2 Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, Book XIX, Chapter 18, translated by Robert Dyson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 946-47.

3 Classic descriptions of the culture of individualism include Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 1987); Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, second edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); and Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, updated edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996). For critiques of individualistic views of the self and an outline of a "transmodern" account of the self, where the sources of meaning and purpose transcend the individual, see Paul C. Vitz and Susan M. Felch, eds., *The Self: Beyond the Postmodern Crisis* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006).

4 Fr. Timothy V. Vaverek, "The Church Building and Participation in the Paschal Mystery: Assessing the NCCB Document Built of Living Stones," *Sacred Architecture*, 5 (Spring 2001), 10-15 (available online at *www.sacredarchitecture.org/pubs/saj/features/nccb. php,* accessed May 30, 2006).

5 Bernard of Clairvaux, "An Apologia to Abbot William," chapter XII, in Michael Casey, translator, *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux,* Volume 1 (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1970), 63-66.

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