Building a City That Honors God

BY BENJAMIN J. BRUXVOORT LIPSCOMB

While most urban theology focuses on poor and marginalized people, urban planning is more interested in form and function. Two books reflect a new type of writing on the city: carefully attentive to how buildings "behave," they are insistently grounded in Scripture and its narrative of creation, fall, reconciliation, and redemption.

Until quite recently, Christians who were concerned about the condition of American cities have confronted a choice between two bodies of work, each of which more or less ignores the other. There is, on the one hand, "urban theology" or the "theology of the city" as this has developed from Harvey Cox and other theorists of the "secular city" in the 1960s, through the writings of Jacques Ellul, up to present-day enthusiasts for urban ministry. On the other hand, there is the literature of urban planning, to which Christians have not made a large contribution, but which is increasingly religious in spirit—characterized by an impulse to build (or at least facilitate) community, to enact justice, to make of our cities "a better place to live."

It would be too simple to say that the pastors and academics who read urban theology are principally interested in people—especially the poor and marginalized who seek opportunity or escape in urban centers, but often find only alienation and exploitation—while the professionals and citizen activists who read about urban planning are principally interested in form and function. Urban theologians have thoughts about the physical degradation of the urban environment; and, in many recent books about urban planning, the authors' interest in form is grounded, finally, in how the

built environment affects its inhabitants for good or ill. Still, as a prediction about what one would find under discussion on a randomly selected page from a book of urban theology, and what one would find on a randomly selected page from a book on urban planning, the generalization has merit.

I am encouraged, then, at the recent emergence of a new type of scholarship on the city: scholarship grounded in the discourse of urban planning that takes up the concerns of urban theologians, and scholarship that begins from the concerns of urban theologians and moves toward issues of form. Two fine instances of the new type, one from each side of the aisle, are Eric O. Jacobsen's *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003, 192 pp., $18.99) and T. J. Gorringe's *A Theology of the Built Environment*: *Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 292 pp., $27.99). Both books attend carefully to how buildings "behave." And they are insistently theological, grounded both in the text of Scripture and in the scriptural narrative of creation, fall, reconciliation, and redemption.

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FROM URBAN PLANNING TO THEOLOGY

"We do not see cities or traditional neighborhoods in this country because we have not lived in them or thought specifically about them for a long time. We tend to think of them as abstractions—a city is a place where humanity is gathered in large numbers. And so our discussions about…cities tend to be indistinguishable from discussions about crowds," Jacobsen writes. "This oversight has been reflected in our theology as well. Try to find any concrete description of what actually constitutes a city in our myriad theologies of the city, and you will see what I mean" (pp. 64-65).

It is not easy to define a city, as Jacobsen readily admits. The book's second half consists of a point-by-point discussion of what he calls six "markers" of the city, markers intended to focus our attention on the characteristic features of a well-functioning, urban community: (1) the provision of substantial public space; (2) a close, integrative mixture of uses; (3) a vibrant (or at least functional) local economy; (4) the presence of a significant number of aesthetically excellent edifices or spaces (especially public spaces); (5) a sufficiently large and dense population to generate and sustain the practices of high culture; and related to this, (6) the impossibility of knowing all or nearly all of the people one meets in public space. Although

Jacobsen does not stress the point, the first four of these are also markers of well-functioning small towns, confirming the New Urbanist thesis that cities are put together from smaller units, neighborhoods, which—if removed from their urban surroundings—would be small towns.

Jacobsen's book is full of wonderful, homely illustrations of each of these markers, and one of his major aims is to explain their significance to Christians who have not thought about such matters. Nevertheless, the more important part of the book is the preparatory discussion of the first half that grounds and motivates the detailed, concrete analysis that follows.

There we find a helpful distinction between two presently dominant versions of Christianity: the "private Christianity" of most evangelicals, which is focused on the conversion of individuals; and the more engaged but sometimes heterodox "public Christianity" of mainline denominational leaders. Neither, in Jacobsen's view, attends sufficiently to the physical and formal qualities of urban space.

Jacobsen also offers a nuanced discussion of scriptural portrayals of cities, negative and positive. While in the end he affirms the cliché that "the Bible begins in a garden but ends in a city," he connects this affirmation to the scriptural theme of God bringing good out of evil, taking human institutions that may have begun as manifestations of alienation or hubris and redeeming them. The first two cities in Scripture are Enoch (the work of Cain, the wanderer) and Babel. The last, of course, is the New Jerusalem.

Finally, he recommends that Christians see themselves as stewards—or, should we say, "superintendents"—of the built environment, by analogy with the stewardship for the natural world urged by Christian environmentalists. The principles for intelligent stewardship of the built environment, he suggests, are by and large those codified in the *Charter for the New Urbanism* (2001), which is appended to Jacobsen's book, along with a lucid and comprehensive glossary and a judicious annotated bibliography. The *Charter* is also available in PDF format at the Congress for the New Urbanism's website, *www.cnu.org*. Since Jacobsen surveys the movement in "The New Urbanism" on pp. 28-36 of this issue, I will not summarize the twenty-seven principles of the *Charter for the New Urbanism*, other than to say that they consist in the cultivation and maintenance of his six markers of city life.

FROM URBAN THEOLOGY TO PLANNING

Except for the emerging type to which it belongs, Gorringe's book contrasts with Jacobsen's in every way imaginable. Jacobsen, while he plainly knows very well what he is about, is first and foremost a pastor and a citizen-activist; his aim is to popularize a particular vision of urban stewardship and redemption (a vision with which I am strongly sympathetic). Gorringe is an academic's academic, casually conversant with a vast range of theological, philosophical, technical, and social-scientific literature. His prose is dense and allusive; between a third and a half of his book consists

of framed quotations from other authors, and one can sometimes read a half-dozen or more pages, unable to form a confident opinion of Gorringe's own views. Jacobsen is an American, well-traveled but firmly at home in the United States—indeed, in Missoula, Montana. Gorringe's paradigms are primarily British, secondarily in the global south, and his work only rarely achieves the grounded particularity of Jacobsen's anecdotes. Finally, Jacobsen, while critical of some trends in evangelical thought, is plainly an evangelical himself. Gorringe, by contrast, is a respectful theological liberal.

Gorringe conceives of his project as an extension of the work of Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Jürgen Moltmann, Harvey Cox and Jacques Ellul (1912-1994), and liberation theologians and prophets of "postmodernity." He is deeply engaged with urban theology, but wants (like Jacobsen) to work out more concretely what it means to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" which is both home and not home (Jeremiah 29:7). Toward this end, he brings the theologians mentioned above into a complex and fruitful encounter with classic theorists of the city, Aristotle (384-322 BC), Vitruvius (died ca. 50 BC), and Alberti (1404-1472); British architects, John G. Howard (1864-1931), Sir Raymond Unwin (1863-1940), and Dennis Sharp; and North American urbanists, Lewis Mumford (1890-1995), Richard Sennett, and Jane Jacobs (1916-2006). It would be impossible, in this short space, to do justice to the richness of the ensuing discussion, but let me note some of Gorringe's prominent themes.

Gorringe, with many recent theologians (above all, Robert W. Jenson), insists upon "Trinity…[as] the Christian name for God" (p. 183). His project is comprehensively motivated and organized by the doctrine of the Trinity: for every topic he introduces—be it space or land, the dwelling or the city, a region or the whole earth—he asks how God interacts with it as creator, reconciler, and redeemer. He often describes God as confronting "the Powers," a term borrowed from Walter Wink for the spiritually charged organizations and systems that texture and too often dominate our lives. Following his Trinitarian scheme, Gorringe calls for the actualization of the created potential of the Powers, the correction of their injustices, and their ever unfolding redemptive transformation.

This may sound abstract, even abstruse, and frequently it is. But, over the course of Gorringe's book, a clear, forceful view emerges of what the Christian's priorities should be with respect to the built environment. This view is, at one and the same time, more radical and more permissive than Jacobsen's.

First, the radicalism: the Christian should see land as a gift of God and, therefore, as our possession only in a qualified sense. While Gorringe acknowledges at one point that unequal distributions of land are not inherently unjust, he seems convinced that all actual disparities of any consequence are unjust. His view is that property, if not shared in the face of need, is theft—a view one can study, he reminds us, in a number of patristic and

medieval Christian authors, not to mention the biblical prophets. Not that Gorringe favors just any mechanism of redistribution. But he does regard as unjust, for example, the vast holdings of the wealthiest English and Scottish landowners.

Gorringe's radical egalitarianism is foundational also for what he says about the dwelling and, by extension, the town and city. Gorringe advocates "a new vernacular" language of planning that will involve everyone, as much as reasonably possible, in the work of design and construction. The epigraph to Gorringe's book—"would that all the Lord's people were prophets" (Numbers 11:29)—is well chosen; his vision is of a world of people, each with his or her own adequate *nahalah* or inheritance, who return thanks to God by building with sensitivity to context and neighbors, human and nonhuman. Gorringe's vision has its attractions, although I do not think it satisfactorily acknowledges the ways in which the common good is served by the division of labor and the cultivated expertise of architects.

In other respects, though, Gorringe is more permissive than Jacobsen. Where Jacobsen sometimes repeats as gospel the most over-the-top remarks of critics of suburbia, Gorringe seeks and finds positive possibilities in this form, considering it too as something to be redeemed. Jacobsen is understandably focused on convincing actual and potential suburbanites to return to the city, where there is so much to be done. But in so doing, he sometimes loses touch with his most important insight: that an artifact's potential for good is measured by the redeeming power of God, not by the short-sightedness of its human maker(s). This is related to another fault in Jacobsen's book: his characterization of rural communities as existing for the sake of urban ones. Again, Gorringe is more nuanced; he characterizes cities at their best as symbols and centers of whole regions, but accords to the rural its own integrity and dignity.

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Given the depth of his engagement with other relevant bodies of literature, Gorringe's reading of New Urbanists is surprisingly slight. He quotes from journalist Philip Langdon, but does not reference Leon Krier, Andres Duany, or Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. And, notwithstanding Gorringe's engagement with the great critics of urban space, he has little to say about design.

FROM VISIONS TO EXECUTABLE DESIGN

So a divide remains between those who begin with questions of how to minister to the poor and those who begin with questions about how urban forms affect people's behavior and sense of well-being. I cannot say that one is a better starting point than the other. But, with community-minded urban planners facing their greatest opportunity and challenge in helping to reshape New Orleans and other hurricane-wrecked communities, the need has never been greater for prophetic visions of justice to be brought together with executable design. These two books, although they differ significantly in substance and tone (and thus in their ideal audience), are therefore provocative and timely.

BENJAMIN J. BRUXVOORT LIPSCOMB
is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Houghton College in Houghton, New York.