

CITY STORIES OF NATURE AND GRACE: AN URBAN PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

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“A good culture of building almost certainly requires an understanding of man as an intermediate being: simultaneously part of, different from, and responsible for nature.”



I was born in west suburban Chicago into a family of midwestern Baptists more verbal and musical than visual, and lived there long enough to become a Cubs fan, before being uprooted and transplanted west at the age of six. But that early move also made me, in some partial but formative way, a child of the California desert-and-coastal-plain automobile suburbs of the fifties and sixties. Though in my childhood and youth I had spent tourist time in big city downtowns, and attended college in a traditional pre-1945 town in greater Los Angeles—even living in a coach house in a gridded neighborhood adjacent to campus during my senior year—I lacked both urban sensibility and urban eyes. Call me sub-urbane. My first powerful urban memory, unpleasant and unforgettable, dates from when I was twenty-one. A month before beginning graduate school at Harvard, I had driven east from California (via Chicago, where I made my first visit to

Wrigley Field), parked my car in the near-west suburb of Newton, and taken the T to Harvard Square. I was completely unfamiliar with Boston. It was late August, and at 4:30 in the afternoon I emerged from below ground into 98-degree heat and comparable humidity, entering for the first time the human zoo of Harvard Square. I thought I would suffocate.



My life is a mystery. Or so the Church tells me. As her aspirationally if fitfully obedient son, I do not argue. Belatedly I have found that what she teaches rings true. Whence, whither, why the singularity of my genetic makeup and consciousness? The possibilities and limits of my body? The interests that get me out of bed in the morning? The things I fear, the persons I love, the world for which I hope? Somehow I became a Catholic. Somehow I became an urbanist. I am neither alone in nor exhausted by these identities, and I can even be understood—truly if only partially—as a type. But as Aristotle knew, in the end it is not the type that is most real, but the thing itself. And as the Church knows, it is not the type of person that is real and beloved of God, but the person.

But it is not just my life that is a mystery. So is yours. You and I are comrades in mystery, indeed mysterious comrades in a mystery; and one of the truths of the mystery we are and the mystery we inhabit is that some kind of “we” precedes every human “I.” Pace the social contract theorists (and their social-constructionist successors), it is true: although it is the human person who is beloved of God, communities precede human persons,¹ and we are members of communities before we realize it. The late Edward T. Oakes got this profoundly right in his 1999 critique of Enlightenment social contract theory and its half-truth of individual autonomy:

Vast swaths of political theory stemming from the Enlightenment speak of human beings as pre-social monads whose sociality stems from a subsequent decision to join a group from a prior isolation . . . the theory of “the

1. This truth is illuminated par excellence by the Christian understanding of God’s self-revealed mystery as a unity of eternal divine substance in a communion of three eternal persons.

social contract.” Unfortunately for its advocates and despite its vast influence, it is a total fiction, a complete distortion of the nature of the social life of humans. . . .

Once it is recognized that the notion of a social contract is a fiction and that human sociality is an essential component of human nature, it then becomes immediately clear that community [*Gemeinschaft*] takes priority . . . over society [*Gesellschaft*]. . . .

[All] contractual relationships are first founded on a prior community of kinship relations, which themselves are founded on ineluctable biological realities of mammalian life: mother/child, begetter/conceiver, infant/adult, and so forth. Human sociality is *entirely* an outgrowth and expression of these unavoidable relationships, which are no more “agreed upon” by some hypothetical caucus of Australopithecenes than is human existence itself. No one chooses to be born, or to be born male or female, etc., nor does anyone in primitive communities choose the role of hunter, gatherer, and so on. Even later social identities of status—king, shaman, crone, warrior, matriarch, seer—are grounded in these more fundamental mammalian relations and not in some fictitious contract or verbal agreement. In other words . . . the individual always comes *from* [community], not *to* it.²

In a succinct reformulation of the classical characterization, you and I are best understood as “dependent rational animals,”³ i.e., embodied persons characterized by animal passions and rational agency, both receivers and givers of care, whose lives as rational agents and caregivers begin in total dependence upon others and, moreover, will always be bracketed by susceptibility to those common vulnerabilities (notably illness and the infirmities of age) that most starkly reveal our ongoing dependence. But you and I depend upon others not only, not merely, and perhaps not even most importantly to ensure our own survival, but also to achieve goals we together regard as good. We depend upon others not only to live but to live well.

2. Edward T. Oakes, “Nature as Law and Gift,” *First Things* 93 (May 1999): 44–51, at 47–48.

3. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1999).

Done well or poorly, every community aims at some good.⁴ A farmers market organizes to sell food, a baseball team to play baseball, an orchestra to make music, a police force or militia to protect citizens and preserve civil order. Some communities aim specifically at more comprehensive, perforce higher, goods than others. A family and a city-state exist in their own distinctive ways to promote human flourishing both over the course of an individual lifetime and across generations. The Church shares this same end, extended into eternity. Nevertheless, though in the providence of God these respective goods ultimately converge and cohere, there is similarity and there is difference. A farmers market is not a city-state, an orchestra is not a family, a baseball team is not a church. We look to the appropriate community to achieve the specific goods we seek, and realize only later we have achieved other goods, even a single good, for which we did not originally realize we were striving.

Some may recognize these reflections about persons and communities as short summaries of three foundational principles of Catholic social teaching: the dignity of the individual human person, social solidarity, and subsidiarity in the organization of civil society. Together with several other principles,⁵ they are the Church's guiding precepts for achieving more just and generous civil societies. Articulated in the modern world through a series of papal encyclicals authoritative for Catholics, these principles are offered for consideration by the Church to all persons of goodwill and for the sake of the common good. Catholic social teaching is grounded in nature and human nature, and to a large extent is knowable through reason alone. But it is also grounded in specifically Christian doctrine, most especially in the Church's understanding of the world as not only nature but, more importantly, creation.

A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable. That is how we end up worshipping earthly

4. See Aristotle, *Politics*, I.1.

5. Additional principles include the human person understood as both social animal and moral agent, requiring both virtue and grace to turn toward good and away from evil; the common good as the purpose of civil government; the human stewardship of creation; public policy with a bias for benefits to the involuntarily poor; and religious freedom as a fundamental human right.

powers, or ourselves usurping the place of God. . . . The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise, human beings will always try to impose their own laws and interests on reality. . . .

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature,” for it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance. Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion.⁶

Catholics and others at home with theological or metaphysical ways of thinking will find the foregoing familiar. In the increasingly secularist city of the global economy and its identity-politics ghettos however, many if not most people will not. Even students enrolled in a classical school of architecture at a Catholic university, who often bring with them both a strong environmentalist ethic and a predisposition to urban life, do not easily recognize that their coherent or incoherent understanding of environmental stewardship, cities, and even architecture depends upon their coherent or incoherent understanding of nature and human nature—and that any understanding of nature and human nature of necessity raises questions essentially philosophical and religious. Especially daunting is the challenge of initiating secularized students into classical humanist urbanism,⁷

6. Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 75–76.

7. “Classical humanist urbanism” refers to the broad tradition of premodern Western urbanism informed by and descending from Plato, Aristotle, the Bible, Vitruvius, Augustine, Alberti, and others, a tradition extended globally during the modern era and expressed in various local accents up until the middle of the twentieth century, at which time it was overthrown by modernist urbanism—*cum*—suburbanism (itself the end of a process several centuries in the making). The distinguishing feature of classical humanist urbanism is its teleological understanding of the city as a just and generous community of communities inhabiting a durable and beautiful built environment, the cumulative purpose of which is to make it possible for human beings to live the best life possible, and to be well in this world and the next.

which (like urbanism generally) originated in a view of both nature and man that was grounded in sacred order. As a living tradition, classical humanist urbanism can scarcely be understood apart from such grounding.

What do I mean by “grounded in sacred order?” Most basically, that good cities and good architecture bear witness to the transcendent majesty and the necessity of God. This includes the cities and architecture of human cultures whose un-



Architecture grounded in sacred order: *above*, Antwerp City Hall (1564); *right*, detail of Madonna and Child (*middle center*), Justice (*bottom left*), and Prudence (*bottom right*) presiding over the city (all images by the author or in the public domain, unless otherwise noted)



derstanding of God ranges from imperfect to erroneous.⁸ But how should we approach these topics in a culture that thinks of God at best as an aspect of reality, rather than its necessary condition (resulting in religious privatization and religious indifference), and at worst as an oppressive illusion (resulting in aggressive suppression of religion)?

Mutatis mutandis, it is just this question that sociologist Peter Berger confronted as an amateur theologian nearly fifty years ago in his petite and quirky classic *A Rumor of Angels*.⁹ Concerned about the truth of religious claims rather than their utility, and acknowledging that many modern secular persons are simply unable to entertain arguments for God that begin with God, Berger proposes instead starting with ordinary human experiences that have extraordinary implications, experiences that point beyond themselves toward an overarching sacred order. He calls these “signals of transcendence,” and without suggesting that his own list is anywhere near exhaustive, proposes five: our empirical human propensities for order, play, hope, damnation, and humor. None of these are offered as “proofs” of God, but Berger does contend that all of them point beyond an immanent frame of reference.

8. I mean the terms “sacred” and “sacred order” to refer primarily to the transcendent reality of God, who can be known in part through reason and more fully through God’s self-revelation, including epiphanies that constitute the foundation and core of human religious experience (cf. the phenomenological characteristics of religious experience in Rudolf Otto’s 1917 *Das Heilige*, and my own gloss on the latter, “Making Sacred: The Phenomenology of Matter and Spirit in Architecture and the City,” in *Till We Have Built Jerusalem* [Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006], 65–77). I here note however a different sense of “sacred” prominent in the work of René Girard, who writes of the sacred as a kind of anthropological by-product of (and mask for) our human propensities for mimetic desire, mimetic rivalry, and scapegoating. I am not here disputing Girard’s anthropological insights—indeed, I find Girard’s arguments largely convincing, and what they illuminate startling—but note that Girard himself as a Catholic suggests a differentiation between these understandings of the sacred similar if not identical to my own. See Brian McDonald, “Violence & the Lamb Slain: An Interview with Rene Girard,” *Touchstone* 16, no. 10 (December 2003): 40–43.

9. Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969). Berger’s book remains impressively (and distressingly) timely. It is remarkable not least for the more or less Aristotelian-Thomist approach taken by its neo-Kantian Lutheran author.

One of Berger's most striking propositions is his first, what he calls the "*argument from ordering*"—not an argument from discovered order but rather from human beings as orderers.

Consider the most ordinary, and probably most fundamental of all [ordering gestures], a mother [reassuring] her anxious child. A child wakes up in the night, perhaps from a bad dream, and finds himself surrounded by darkness, alone, beset by nameless threats. At such a moment the contours of trusted reality are blurred or invisible, and in the terror of incipient chaos the child cries out for his mother. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that, at this moment, the mother is being invoked as a high priestess of protective order. It is she (and, in many cases, she alone) who has the power to banish the chaos and to restore the benign shape of the world. And, of course, any good mother will do just that. She will take the child and cradle him in the timeless gesture of the *Magna Mater* who became our *Madonna*. She will turn on a lamp, perhaps, which will encircle the scene with a warm glow of reassuring light. She will speak or sing to the child, and the content of this communication will invariably be the same: "Don't be afraid, everything is in order, everything is all right." If all goes well, the child will be reassured, his trust in reality recovered, and in this trust he will return to sleep.



Raphael, *The Madonna of Loreto* (1508-1509)

All this, of course, belongs to the most routine experiences of life and does not depend upon any religious preconceptions. Yet this common scene raises a far from ordinary question, which immediately introduces a religious dimension: *Is the mother lying to the child?* The answer, in the most profound sense, can be “no” only if there is some truth in the religious interpretation of human existence. Conversely, if the “natural” is the only reality there is, the mother is lying to the child—lying out of love, to be sure, and obviously *not* lying to the extent that her reassurance is grounded in the fact of this love—but, in the final analysis, lying all the same. Why? *Because the reassurance, transcending the immediately present two individuals and their situation, implies a statement about reality as such.*¹⁰

Berger contends that one of the roles of every dutiful parent is that of world-builder and world-protector, that a parent represents not only the order of a particular family or particular society but “order as such, the underlying order of the universe that it makes sense to trust.”¹¹

It is a role that the mother in this scene plays willy-nilly, regardless of her own awareness or (more likely) lack of awareness of just what she is representing. “*Everything* is in order, *everything* is all right”—this is the basic formula of maternal and parental reassurance. . . . Not just this particular anxiety, not just this particular pain—but *everything* is all right. The formula can, without in any way violating it, be translated into a statement of cosmic scope—“Have trust in being.” . . . And if we are to believe the child psychiatrists (which we have good reason to do in this instance), this is an experience . . . essential to the process of becoming . . . fully human. [At] the core of *humanitas*, we find an experience of trust in the order of reality. . . .

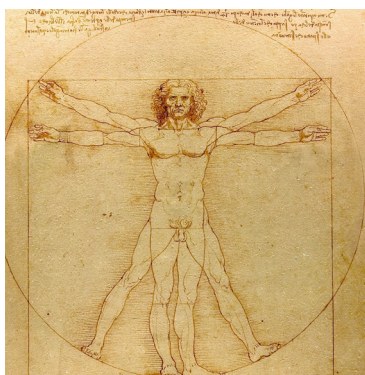
This argument [from ordering] is metaphysical rather than ethical. . . . In the observable human propensity to order reality there is an intrinsic impulse to give cosmic scope to this order [implying] not only that human order in some way corresponds to an order that transcends it, but that

10. Ibid., 53–54.

11. Ibid., 56. This insight underscores the existential trauma for children of parental divorce or death.

this transcendent order is of such character that man can trust himself and his destiny to it. There is a variety of roles that represent this conception of order, but the most fundamental is the parental role . . . [which is] a witness to the ultimate truth of man's situation in reality. . . . [It] is perfectly possible . . . to analyze religion as a cosmic projection of the child's experience of the protective order of parental love. What is projected is, however, itself a reflection, an imitation, of ultimate reality. Religion, then, is not only (from the point of view of empirical reason) a projection of human order, but (from the point of view of what might be called *inductive faith*) the ultimately true vindication of human order.¹²

I greet this idea of “inductive faith” *en passant*, warmly and with a tip of the hat to the openness to experience, reason,



Examples of order in
Renaissance humanism
(clockwise from top left):
Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*; Santa Maria
della Consolazione in
Todi, Italy; aerial plan of
Palmanova, Italy



12. Ibid., 56–57.

and truth it evinces. Berger is perhaps better at natural theology than Christian theology, and at any rate he is the first to admit that his own liberal Protestant Christianity, though orthodox with respect to the First Person of the classic Christian creed, is heretical with respect to some of the subsequent articles. But my purpose in citing his “argument from ordering” is to note that what Berger says about the world-building and world-protecting character of parents—that the world they build and protect may both reflect and imitate a transcendent reality—is true in spades of cities, both ancient and modern.¹³ Viewed empirically, in ways evident and mundane, cities always and everywhere embody and symbolize what their makers believe is most real and most true. But viewed anthropologically, cities (like families) point beyond themselves to transcendent truths and realities of which their denizens may be but dimly aware, if at all.



It took me about a semester to acclimate to Cambridge and Boston, to feel comfortable walking the precincts of Harvard and Harvard Square, and taking the T to my fieldwork assignment at Boston's old Charles Street Jail. At the end of the academic year I moved to western Massachusetts where I spent a year, before returning to Harvard to complete my degree. But from the moment I set foot back in Cambridge I felt completely happy and at home in the city, and have felt at home in cities ever since. It took me longer to understand why.



A city is a complex collective human artifact. (A modern city is so massively complex that the nineteenth century created the urban park in order to reintroduce city dwellers to the benefits of the natural landscape, improved). And yet, insists Aristotle, the city itself is natural.¹⁴ So before moving to considerations of urbanism proper, let us stay a moment longer with empirical

13. And why not? The family is good because it best secures those necessities that make it possible to live. The city is good because it makes it possible to live well (see Aristotle, *Politics*, I.2).

14. Aristotle, *Politics*, I.2.

observations of nature. What can we say of human nature within the immanent frame?¹⁵ First, we can say that human beings are part of nature, but we are also a kind of animal exceptional in several respects. No other animal species appears capable of altering, as a species, the ecology of the planet, only *homo sapiens*. And yet both the fact and the import of human exceptionalism are contested.

A widespread utilitarian view common to the modern era (foundational for cultural revolutions both industrial and sexual) places man above and outside nature. A second view, a sort of shadow of the first, understands man as morally subservient to nature, if not indeed a kind of plague on nature. Some who hold this view would seem happy to remove man from nature altogether. An increasingly vocal (and explicitly atheist) cohort presents a third view, one that places man entirely within nature, while insisting that nature is all there is. And a fourth view understands man as an intermediate being. Only within this latter view of nature and the human person, I aver, can environmental stewardship be a coherent and operative concept.

We can infer man's status in nature as an intermediate being from our specific human powers, and apart from biblical religion (although this idea also belongs to biblical anthropology). But the inference drawn from our powers is itself metaphysical. Between what realms do human beings mediate? There seems no reason to doubt either the general scientific understanding of our animal nature or the general philosophical understanding we have inherited from Aristotle and Aquinas, who understand the human being as a certain kind of animal. But human beings also transcend our animal nature by virtue of the peculiar character of our collective human powers: our capacity for complex symbolic thinking, the sophistication of our tools, our ability to steward nature, our demonstrated interest in telling truthfully both nature's story and our own.¹⁶ Our powers themselves are

15. The ideas that follow are treated at greater length in my "Even Mother Nature Has An Agent": Environmental Stewardship as the Duty of An Intermediate Being," <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/07/even-mother-nature-has-an-agent>.

16. "[Man] is . . . essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth" (Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981], 216).

a “signal of transcendence.” Moreover, it is precisely (and only) our intermediate status vis-à-vis nature, on the one hand, and an order which transcends nature, on the other, that gives coherence, not only to environmental stewardship, but to any critical moral evaluation of human actions within and upon the natural order.

Human beings act upon the natural order by and within which we are both sustained and constrained. We err in imagining that either nature or man is complete, and err again in imagining that either nature or man is simply benign. Our own well being—individual and communal—requires us to use nature prudentially, to understand nature well, and to intervene in nature cautiously, while at the same time our too often too-dimly-perceived divine vocation as stewards challenges us to act upon and behave toward nature generously. Our human capacities include both the ability to improve nature and the ability to spoil it, but the very language of “improvement” and “spoliation” implies a source of value that can only come from outside nature’s “immanent frame”—an implication arguably better understood by most people prior to the advent of secular modernity. Premodern religious cultures and metaphysical realists (and all religious cultures are implicitly metaphysically realist) know in general what this source of value is. Jews and Christians know more specifically who this source of value is, and also have an understanding of nature as creation. All human flourishing requires that we understand and respect simultaneously the nature within which we are embedded, the reality of nature within ourselves, and the nature of reality beyond ourselves.

In the biblical vision, the end and fulfilment of creation is a new heaven and a new earth, in which all things cohere, all tears have been wiped away, and hosannas of gratitude and praise are eternal—a fullness of being depicted explicitly as urban, the holy city New Jerusalem, the city of God.¹⁷ But if a singular sacred city is the transcendent telos of creation, what prompts us to project sacred significance upon, and ascribe sacred significance to, even our mundane cities?

The short answer: it is in our nature to do so. Most human beings seem to experience individual freedom as good.

17. A prolepsis of this state of eternal blessedness was evident in the streets of Chicago’s Wrigleyville neighborhood in the early hours of November 3, 2016.

Most human beings seem to experience communal belonging as good. But although both freedom and belonging are indeed great goods, it is easy to see that in our fallen world they exist in tension and that finding the proper balance between them is the work of a lifetime. C. S. Lewis observed of reading and worship and love that they heal the wound without destroying the privilege of individuality. So too cities. This is to say that any good city, as a community of communities, not only is the locus of multiple human goods, but is also both a source and emblem of the great human good of civilization, to which all cities have collectively given their name.¹⁸

In Catholic social teaching, the emphases upon the individual person, communal solidarity, and subsidiarity in civil society restate a theme as old as Aristotle, that the best life for human beings is the individual life of moral and intellectual virtue lived in community with others. For Aristotle, the primary community for living well was the *polis* (city-state), and among the characteristics of the *polis* was its ability to provide sufficient wealth and leisure (“external goods”) for the habitual individual performance of good acts.¹⁹ But this means that the city as a community of communities—which is to say as a locus of multiple goods—is necessarily a complex thing. What then is its nature? What are its constituent elements? How do these elements as parts of the city relate to the whole, such that the city’s multiple goods may be understood simultaneously as both subservient to and the very substance of the city’s larger common good?

The nature of a thing is its end, and for both Aristotle and Christianity, the *telos* of the city is human happiness (*eudaimonia*): blessedness temporal in a *polis* and blessedness eternal in the *civitas Dei*. The constituent elements of temporal happiness include a certain degree of health (“bodily goods”), a certain degree of wealth (“external goods”), and most importantly moral and intellectual virtue (“goods of the soul”).²⁰ Eternal happiness

18. For an extended consideration of these themes underscoring the difference between premodern and postmodern cities, see Norris Kelly Smith, “Crisis in Jerusalem,” in *The Chicago Tribune Competition, Late Entries*, ed. Stuart Cohen and Stanley Tigerman (New York: Rizzoli Press, 1980), 2:106–10.

19. Aristotle, *Politics*, VII.1.

20. Ibid.

includes all these goods, transformed and perfected by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, the forgiveness of sins, and communion with God.

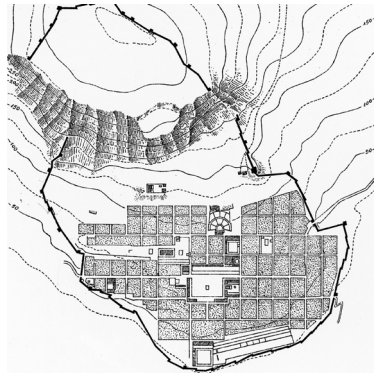
So what are the constituent elements of a city? However one might characterize them, I want to suggest that they are essentially the same for both the premodern city and today's emerging postmodern/hyper-modern city,²¹ with two significant differences: 1) the premodern city was generally much smaller than the hyper-modern city, as few as 100 to 200 acres, rarely more than a square mile (640 acres); and 2) whereas the premodern city was a community that understood itself to exist within sacred order, today we tend to think and speak of the hyper-modern city as an economic artifact existing entirely within the natural order. In accord with these differences, both kinds of city distinguish themselves physically. But let us consider first what virtually all premodern cities have in common, before turning to the peculiarities of the modernist and hyper-modernist city. We will take as our model for premodern urbanism the polis and its descendants, and—at the scale of large cities—the traditional (i.e., walkable, mixed-use, spatial) urban neighborhood.

In considering first the origin and nature of cities as historic things, and the polis as the paradigmatic urban community, I hasten to point out that the Greeks did not invent cities, that the best cities are not necessarily Greek, and that even the distinctively Greek polis antedated Greek theories of the polis. Nevertheless, the Greeks thought well about the polis, with Aristotle giving us a thorough enough account of its character and ends

21. With respect to urbanism, I am using the terms “postmodern” and “hyper-modern” synonymously. I am also passing over both twentieth-century modernist urbanism and the post-1950 automobile suburb: the former because it is now apparent that modernism as a secular utopian (and hence teleological) ideal was a comparatively brief historic moment of transition from the transcendent utopian ideal of classical Western urbanism (also teleological) to the anti-utopian and a-teleological ideology of contemporary hyper-modernist urbanism; and the latter because the extensive infrastructure required to support low-density automobile suburbs is economically unsustainable, which is becoming apparent and will soon be more widely understood. For an elaboration of this characterization of modernist urbanism, see my “Building on Truth,” *First Things* 249 (January 2015): 47–53. For an extended and ongoing analysis of the economic unsustainability of post-1945 suburban infrastructure, see the work of Charles Marohn and cohorts at <http://www.strongtowns.org/>.

in the *Politics* that even today it remains (or should remain) an authoritative starting point for thinking about cities in all their complexity, including cities quite different in scale and symbolic content from those of Ancient Greece.

Cities are founded for different reasons. They may be planned (as many premodern cities were) or unplanned; may start for purposes religious, economic, military, or recreational; may be known as a place of work, or a place of pilgrimage. Regardless, as cities develop they acquire some common characteristics. Moreover, cities benefit from and are related to the development of agriculture as a reliable source of food. While obvious, it is nevertheless important to note that both agriculture and cities are place based. Historic cities are urban-agrarian units in which city life and agrarian life exist in a reciprocal and symbiotic relationship: farmers produce the food cities need and cities provide markets for the food farmers produce. This is only one of several fundamental reciprocal and symbiotic relationships inhering in cities. But to recognize urban life and agrarian life as related to one another and as place based is to distinguish both from prior nomadic societies of hunters and gatherers, to recognize civilization as an historic human development, and also to grasp that the city and the agrarian landscape flourish or fail together.



The Greek/Ionian colonial city of Priene (fourth century BC, ruins in modern Turkey), a polis “after the modern fashion which Hippodamus introduced” (Aristotle, *Politics*, VII.11)



“An artist is identical with an anarchist,” [Gregory] cried. “You might transpose the words anywhere. An anarchist is an artist. . . . An artist disregards all governments, abolishes all conventions. The poet delights in disorder only. If it were not so, the most poetical thing in the world would be the Underground Railway.”

“So it is,” said Mr. Syme.

“Nonsense!” said Gregory. . . . “Why do all the clerks and navvies in the railway trains look so sad and tired, so very sad and tired? I will tell you. It is because they know that the train is going right. It is because they know that whatever place they have taken a ticket for, that place they will reach. It is because after they have passed Sloane Square they know that the next station must be Victoria, and nothing but Victoria. Oh, their wild rapture! oh, their eyes like stars and their souls again in Eden, if the next station were unaccountably Baker Street!”

“It is you who are unpoetical,” replied the poet Syme. “If what you say of clerks is true, they can only be as prosaic as your poetry. The rare, strange thing is to hit the mark; the gross, obvious thing is to miss it. We feel it is epical when man with one wild arrow strikes a distant bird. Is it not also epical when man with one wild engine strikes a distant station? Chaos is dull; because in chaos the train might indeed go anywhere, to Baker Street, or to Bagdad. But man is a magician, and his whole magic is in this, that he does say Victoria, and lo! it is Victoria.” . . .

“I tell you,” went on Syme with passion, “that every time a train comes in I feel that it has broken past batteries of besiegers, and that man has won a battle against chaos. . . . I have the sense of hairbreadth escape. And when I hear the guard shout out the word ‘Victoria,’ it is not an unmeaning word. It is to me the cry of a herald announcing conquest. It is to me indeed ‘Victoria’; it is the victory of Adam.”²²



22. G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 10–11.

The premodern city was understood by its inhabitants to be located in sacred order,²³ and was necessarily constituted by several distinct, overlapping, and reciprocal orders. Any city—traditional or modern—in its mundane reality is always a demographic or-



Representations of the world and sacred order: *clockwise from top left*, Precinct, Square (New Haven Green, courtesy of Erik Vogt), Building, and City, as microcosms

23. Mircea Eliade gives multiple examples of how premodern territories, cities, and buildings evince their location in and intersection with sacred order in “Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred,” the first chapter of *The Sacred and The Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1956), 42–43, of which the following characterization is representative: “[The] true world is always in the middle, at the Center. . . . Whatever the extent of the territory involved, the cosmos that it represents is always perfect. An entire country (e.g., Palestine), a city (Jerusalem), a sanctuary (the Temple in Jerusalem), all equally well present an *imago mundi* . . . severally and concurrently [representing] the image of the universe and the Center of the World. This multiplicity of centers and this reiteration of the image of the world on smaller and smaller scales constitute one of the specific characteristics of traditional societies.”



Clockwise from bottom left, the sacred, environmental, demographic, moral, and economic orders of the city

der, an environmental order, an economic order, a moral order, and a formal order.²⁴ But the premodern city in sacred order is never only one of these orders; it is simultaneously each of them, with each order affecting and being affected by every other.²⁵

Any living city (as opposed to a ghost town or a ruin) is a demographic order, constituted by a population of human beings that (per Aristotle) is one of its material causes and for which sta-

24. Again, the rough outline for this schema may be found in Aristotle, *Politics*, esp. VII.

25. Consider as an example the reverberations resulting from the biblical commandment of Sabbath observance (see Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 71). Where biblical religious sensibility is strong, Sabbath observance places a constraint on economic activity, sometimes up to and including the implementation of so-called "blue laws" and legal limitations upon how land and even livestock are utilized. In turn, where laissez-faire economic activity is presumed to be the highest moral good, or economic interests the de facto driver of all human social relations, Sabbath observance may in time suffer; as may the productivity of overused agricultural land; the durability and beauty of both the public and private realms of our cities when these architectural virtues become subservient to maximizing short-term profits; the character of persons and societies that seek this latter end; the economic health of society itself; and the natural world's ability to sustain human life. As Pope Francis observes, "Everything is connected" (*Laudato Si'*, 91, 117).

ble families are foundational, sustained over time by more or less replacement level (or higher) rates of birth and/or in-migration.²⁶

A city is an environmental order, a transgenerational artifact by means of which, for millennia, the human animal has dwelt in and upon the landscape. Human beings and our cities do this in better and worse ways, but over time must for our own well being do so in ways that sustain both the city and the landscape it occupies, most especially the city's water supply, its air quality, and the quality of its occupied and adjacent land.

A city is an economic order of production and exchange, the wealth of which depends upon reliable access to food through agriculture and/or trade; a division of labor sufficient to provide for the needs of the population; a surplus of useful products and/or raw materials to exchange; and surplus wealth that allows leisure and the development of high culture, as well as benefits of "inefficiency" including the development of new work, competition, and economic diversification.

A city is a moral order of character ideals and prohibitions, "oughts" and "shalt nots," of laws and customs, a realm of ethics and politics and institutions that taken together define the goods the community values and the character virtues required to achieve them. In addition, at least in Aristotle's view, the moral order of a city is related to its demographic order. The best cities combine magnitude with good order—"law is order, and good law is good order; but a very great multitude cannot be orderly"—and therefore there is a limit to both the population and the area of a good city.²⁷ Moreover, although moral order

26. This point appears to elude contemporary urban theorists who imagine sustainable cities composed of Baby Boomer retirees and young childless professionals (cf. Richard Florida's "creative class" theory of ascendant urbanism, or Edward Glaeser's view of cities as highrise communities of the above average), and also those of us who by mental habit simply take replacement demographics for granted. This myopia can be corrected by engaging the recent work of amateur and professional demographers such as Phillip Longman, Jonathan Last, Nicholas Eberstadt, and Brad Wilcox.

27. Aristotle, *Politics*, VII.4. In Aristotle's view, if a city is to be well governed and public office assigned according to merit, it is necessary that its population not exceed the ability of citizens to know one another's character, either personally or by reputation. This assertion—and that of the entire classical humanist urban tradition of which Aristotle is a wellspring—is obviously challenged today by the size and scale of the modern industrial

in the premodern city was invariably linked to sacred order, the moral order of any city, premodern to hyper-modern, is almost unerringly depicted in its formal order.

Last but not least, any terrestrial city is a formal order: it exists in a specific location, and is composed of buildings and the spaces they define, well or poorly. This is to say that every *civitas* is also an *urbs*. What is the role or purpose of the formal order of a city? In the classical humanist city, a good formal order will be shaped by, support, express, and represent the other orders of the city. A good urban formal order—an ongoing and necessarily cooperative and cumulative enterprise—will do this by showing, in its formal arrangements, the sacred order within which it exists; by promoting family life across generations; by occupying the landscape well; by facilitating commerce; and by representing and encouraging through the beauty and gravitas of its building and spatial forms piety, justice, and other civic virtues. But what are the fundamental features of good urban form itself?

Considered abstractly and non-visually, good urban form is characterized by:

1) A proximate mix of life activities, mundane and ceremonial, located within a certain comfortably walkable distance (and note that if the urban walk itself is beautiful, people can take pleasure as much in long city walks as in hikes in the countryside).²⁸

city. It was also challenged by the scale of certain cities of classical antiquity, notably Athens, Rome, and (eventually) Constantinople. Nevertheless, most premodern-era cities were comparatively small: five to twenty thousand people, with the most prosperous of cities rarely exceeding fifty thousand people. At the same time, it is also possible to see in Aristotle's argument one source of the Catholic social principle of subsidiarity: certain necessary things are done best at a certain scale.

28. Traditional cities are walkable because they antedate mechanical means of transport, though the latter can be and have been successfully grafted onto and planted under traditional cities. The catastrophic error of modernist and postmodernist urbanism has been to organize city form entirely around the automobile as a substitute for, rather than a complement to, walking. Whatever means of mechanical transport we may invent as conveniences, human beings should nevertheless make walkable mixed-use settlements because such settlements befit our nature as dependent rational animals (i.e., embodied creatures who, except in infancy and infirmity, walk). Although natural law arguments as such have little traction in our postmodern cultural condition, the best common sense arguments for walkable mixed-use settlements (including but



A measure of good traditional urbanism: 100–200 acres, which is roughly equivalent to a one-quarter-mile radius/one-half-mile diameter/five-to-ten minute walk, as indicated by the red circles (drawing courtesy of Leon Krier)

2) A spatial environment organized hierarchically within a network of solids and voids, in which most buildings shape public space (and therefore go comparatively unnoticed) and a few buildings stand out (and are designed to stand out).²⁹

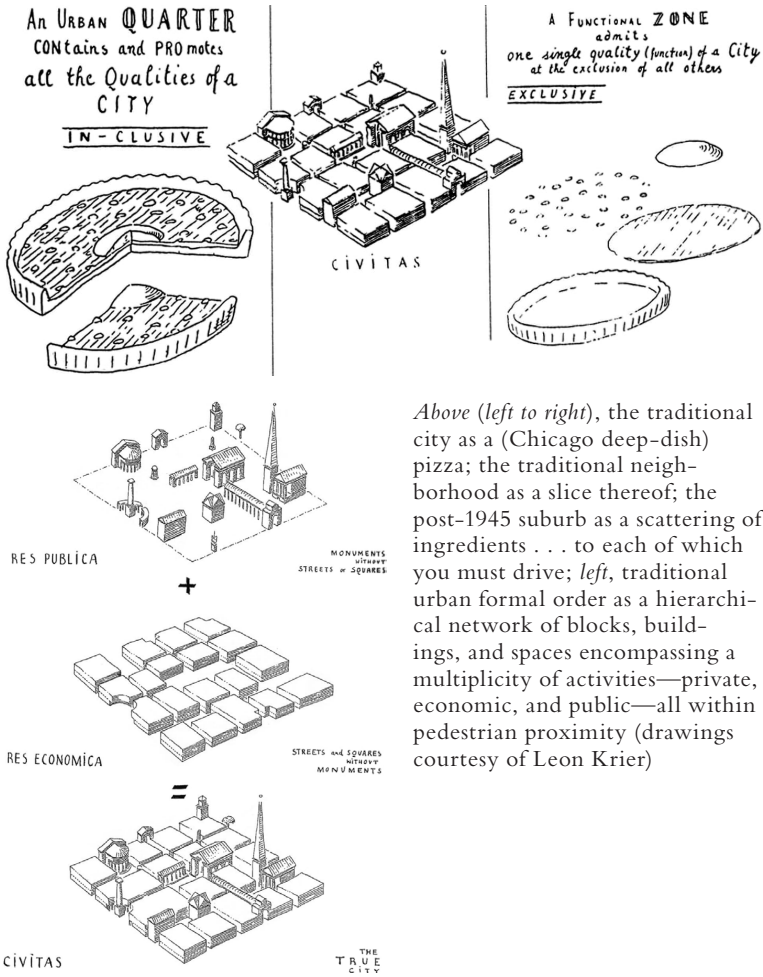
3) Buildings generally exhibiting the classic architectural virtues of decorum, beauty, convenience, and durability.³⁰ The latter virtue in particular is a consequence of building in conditions of comparative scarcity, using local low-embodied-energy materials employed in conditions not far removed (literally and figuratively) from their extracted state—think stones, stone blocks, sand, slate tiles, fired clay bricks and tiles, and wood timbers, all requiring minimal transit and manufacturing costs.

Note also that durable, low-embodied-energy buildings are sustainable buildings. The oldest structures on earth are made of stones and/or bricks piled up in compression, with pitched roofs that direct away from the building the water that other-

not limited to arguments from urbanists such as Leon Krier and The Congress for the New Urbanism) are implicitly natural law arguments. For a more extended consideration of this latter proposition, see my “The Polis and Natural Law: The Moral Authority of the Urban Transect,” in *Till We Have Built Jerusalem*, 157–88, with responses to objections in “A Realist Philosophical Case For Urbanism and Against Sprawl” (in two parts), *Public Discourse* (July 11 and 13, 2011), <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2011/07/3379/>.

29. “For millennia on end the buildings of our cities made manifest an institutional hierarchy: the size, cost, and complexity of an edifice were directly related to the power and public significance of the institution that it symbolized. The palace and cathedral were large, the mayor’s mansion and the parish church were of medium size, and the shopkeeper’s house was small” (Smith, “Crisis in Jerusalem,” 106).

30. See Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, I.II.5–7 and I.III.2.



Above (left to right), the traditional city as a (Chicago deep-dish) pizza; the traditional neighborhood as a slice thereof; the post-1945 suburb as a scattering of ingredients . . . to each of which you must drive; left, traditional urban formal order as a hierarchical network of blocks, buildings, and spaces encompassing a multiplicity of activities—private, economic, and public—all within pedestrian proximity (drawings courtesy of Leon Krier)

wise will eventually destroy it.³¹ Sustainable buildings are a major component of environmentally and economically sustainable cities. Another component is the compact mix of uses within pedestrian proximity, which under modern conditions minimizes the cost of both sanitation and transportation infrastructures, as well as the consumption of fossil fuels.



31. Proverbial builder wisdom: “There are two kinds of flat roof: those that leak, and those that are going to leak.”

By the time I left Massachusetts in 1978 for architecture school in Virginia, I had married and been living happily in Cambridge for several years. At some point during that time, my job took me to a conference in Bangor, Maine where one of the featured speakers was Dr. Gardner Taylor, pastor of a large African-American Baptist church in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn. My wife and I had taken the homiletics course he taught as a visiting professor at the Harvard Divinity School. The grandson of emancipated slaves, he was from Jim Crow era Baton Rouge and had been educated for ministry at Oberlin, moving to New York in 1948 at the age of thirty. As a California suburban kid now happily living carless in Cambridge, I still could not get my head around living in a city the size of New York, and I asked him how he had made the adjustment from life in Louisiana to life in Brooklyn. I do not recall Dr. Taylor's exact words from forty years ago, but I do remember like yesterday the kind wisdom of his reply. Life in a city the size of New York, he said, can be overwhelming, especially if you imagine you can comprehend or conquer or consume it all at once. That ambition is a source of deep frustration and anxiety for many. But if you have the good fortune to arrive at, or be born into, a smaller community within the city, a congregation or a neighborhood in and by which to engage and be engaged, not only can you come to feel at home in that community, but over time you may come to feel that the entire city is your home, and your neighborhood a solid foundation for a good life both within and beyond its borders.



The traditional city is a realm of building and spatial reciprocity in which a variety of urban *building* types contain, and even more importantly define, a variety of urban *spatial* types. Without minimizing the need for a recognizable hierarchy of vernacular-to-classical buildings, as well as background and foreground building types, I want to emphasize here the spatial character of traditional urban formal order. Urban space, both internal and external to buildings, is not a vague or ethereal concept, nor is it void without form, but rather exactly the opposite: urban space is void with form. Traditional urban space is an artifact, a thing human beings make, a variety of shaped and occupiable voids. Thus understood, urban space is the very medium of traditional city life, wherein historically most of what is important in human social life takes place, whether in a private room or on a

public street or plaza.³² In traditional cities, exterior urban space has been the medium of public life in particular: sites of religious and civic ceremony as well as commercial exchange, where laws are promulgated and public punishments meted out. The interior spaces of private buildings may be sumptuous or modest depending upon the relative wealth of their occupants, but the spaces of the public realm—the “outdoor rooms” of the city—belong to rich and poor alike, and under just and generous and prudent civic leadership, the public spaces of the city will be durable and beautiful and decorous, in accordance with both their civic purpose and their status as the common wealth of the city.

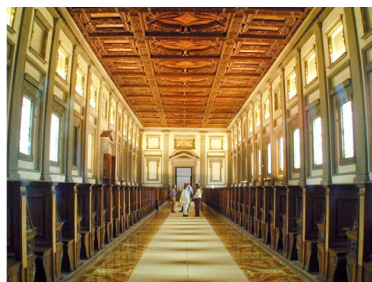


Centralized urban space: outdoor rooms defined by buildings: *left*, plaza; *right*, square

The external spaces of the classical humanist city evolved over time, and eventually came to refer to a class of more or less distinct things possessing specific names denoting various spatial types—park, plaza, square, boulevard, avenue, street, alley—along with such semiprivate urban spaces as the courtyard, the cloister garden, and the forecourt. And in the traditional city, just as there was a hierarchy among building

32. The opposite of space is anti-space: a condition of formless void within which one encounters some variety of more or less solid objects. The terms are Steven Peterson's, and as terms are meant to be merely descriptive (“Space and Anti-Space,” in *Harvard Architecture Review* 1 [Spring 1980]: 88–113). Most of the natural world as found is anti-spatial, but over time traditional cities became a realm of spaces. One of the great revolutionary consequences of modernist architecture and urbanism has been to re-habituate formerly urbane human beings to living in a quasi-natural anti-spatial environment.

types ranging from public to private, there was a similar hierarchy among spatial types. Even today, in a traditional city or town—imagine yourself in Venice or New Orleans or Paris or Boston or Cooperstown or Santa Barbara or Florence, or any town or city in the Western world and its outposts built before 1945—it is still possible to take a pleasant walk through a private-to-public sequence of spaces: from an interior room, down the stair to a foyer, through an exterior forecourt, down a street, up an avenue, into a public square, and from there (or even, from the street forward, at many points in between) into a church or courthouse, museum or library, post office or shop.

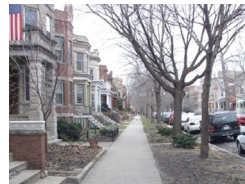


Interior to exterior urban spatial sequence: *clockwise from top right*, from interior room to stairway/vestibule to courtyard to street to plaza



In 1981 I received a graduate degree in architecture from the University of Virginia, where over the previous three years I had begun to acquire architectural eyes. I had known even before leaving New England that eventually

I wanted to live in a city larger than Charlottesville. I would have returned happily to Boston after graduation, except that I wanted to live in a National League city so that on occasion I could see the Cubs play. I therefore decided to limit my job searches to Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Eventually I realized that, because what I really wanted was to see the Cubs (and because Chicago has fairly good architecture), I should look hard for a job in Chicago. It took me a week of pounding the pavement before I got a job offer I could afford to take, but finding a place for my young family to live was less complicated than it has since become. At that time, Chicago was still a middle-class town, and by then I was savvy enough about urban living to recognize a good neighborhood when I saw one. Pondering Gardner Taylor's advice, we rented the top floor of a classic Chicago three-flat in the old ethnically German Lincoln Square neighborhood, within walking distance of the parish church, school, library, movie theater, public park, and the L train that would take me to my job in The Loop in less than thirty minutes. Over the course of twenty years, my wife and I raised our three children in Lincoln Square before gentrification in the late nineties eventually drove us two miles further west. In that



Clockwise from top left, the author's neighborhood in Chicago (the circle equals a quarter-mile radius, or at most a ten-minute walk); public park and library; parish church; school; home street; plaza and shops; avenue and theater

time we did manage to see a few Cubs games, which also revealed to me the happy reciprocity between urban baseball parks and the neighborhoods in which they are embedded.



Left, “Wrigleyville,” Chicago, circa 1923; right, Wrigley Field in its neighborhood context, circa 2001



What life have you, if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of GOD. . . .

When the Stranger says: “What is the meaning of this city?
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?”
What will you answer? “We all dwell together
To make money from each other”? or “This is a community”?³³

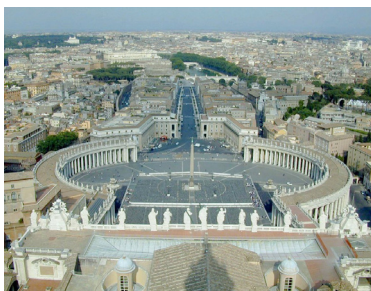


For more than 250 years human beings have worked to accommodate cities and civilized life to the demographic, environmental, economic, and moral disruptions of the industrial revolution. Some of these accommodations, necessitated by the explosive population growth and physical expansion of industrial era cities, have been hugely successful. One thinks of public health and hygiene standards, the rise of the great urban parks, the extensive urban public transportation networks dating from the latter half

33. T. S. Eliot, “Choruses from ‘The Rock,’” in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952), 101, 103.

of the nineteenth century—"lo! it is Victoria"—and the wave of consistently good buildings and urbanism and public works projects, particularly in the United States, from about 1880 to 1940. All these are examples of adaptive urban innovations that work with and allow the basic features of spatial, hierarchical, walkable, mixed-use traditional urbanism to continue to exist in (and as) city neighborhoods, within the modern mega-city birthed by the industrial revolution. The result is some of the most beautiful and livable towns and cities the modern era has produced. Yet almost overnight—though one can argue in hindsight that precipitating events were a long time brewing—this tradition of walkable, mixed-use cities as the primary locus of the good life for human beings was almost completely lost, both as cultural knowledge and as a cultural ideal.

Since the mid-twentieth century, America has been the world's premier exporter of culture. Consider how architectural and urban paradigms in America from that time forward have changed. Any American who lives today in a city, town, or even village dating from before 1945 is a beneficiary of the very good traditional architecture and urbanism created in that fecund period between 1880 and 1940. This was the result of the felicitous meeting of modern technology, wealth, and classical humanist architectural and urban sensibilities. It is no exaggeration to say that perhaps 90% of what makes cities like Boston, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco livable and lovable today was built before 1945. (If the reader doubts this, imagine any of these places minus the majority of their post-1945 modernist and hyper-modernist buildings, or the ubiquitous surface parking lots that often replaced entire blocks of perfectly good urban background buildings.) How and why was America's architectural and urban renaissance displaced by modernism after 1945? In large part, it was displaced because a succession of historical calamities—World War I, the Great Depression, the Shoah and other totalitarian mass murders, World War II—first in Europe but eventually in the United States shattered the confidence of the West in its own historic culture. This made the West sympathetic to avant-garde apostles of progress and their favorable disposition toward architectural modernism's negations and Cartesian rationality. These included modernism's negation of ornament, traditional construction practices, and public space, as



Left, traditional urbanism as spatial: Piazza San Pietro and Via della Conciliazione, Rome; *right*, modernist urbanism as anti-spatial: Le Corbusier's 1922 Plan Voisin for Paris—rational and ordered, but not spatial (see n. 32)

well as its abstract rationalization of buildings, planning, and land use—"form follows function," "less is more," functional zoning, separation of uses—that all together became the mid-twentieth-century intellectual foundation for both "urban renewal" and the automobile suburb. These principles were promoted in service to an immanent progressive-but-stillborn social utopia, a disappointment made all the worse by the omnipresent on-the-ground ugliness of modernism's aspirational built environment.

Unfortunately, good and coherent habits of building once lost and replaced by inferior building habits, practices, and laws are very hard to relearn. The anti-utopian hyper-modernist successors to utopian modernism still depend on decades of deference to the modernist idea of an avant-garde, even though hyper-modernism increasingly appears a private *gnosis*, a secret knowledge looking suspiciously arbitrary, precisely because hyper-modernism proposes no public or teleological criteria for architecture and urbanism in reference to which hyper-modernism itself can be critiqued. Thus contemporary countermovements, which seek to build according to classical humanist canons of architecture and urban design, are absurdly criticized for the cost, ornamentation, and alleged irrelevance of their buildings by apologists for hyper-modern buildings that cost more to build, require more frequent maintenance, are themselves ornaments, and will likely stand less than half as long as good traditional buildings. And yet, as architecture always does, global hyper-modernism gives built form to prominent cultural ideals: in this case the arcane aesthetic preferences of the architects who serve

the crony capitalist oligarchy that oversees and profits from a “global” economy, the benefits of which are being shared, at best, unevenly.



Left, Whitman College (2007), Princeton’s first traditional residential building since the 1920s. Though both well built and popular with students and alumni, Whitman College has received strong criticism from the mainstream architectural community, both for its aesthetic and for its reported construction cost of \$136M, at \$450/sf. *Right*, Lewis Library (2008), by Frank Gehry, reportedly constructed for \$75M, at \$850/sf. It has not received similar opprobrium from critics, although compared to Whitman College its first major renovation is certain to be sooner, and its overall lifespan shorter. The discrepancies between these two buildings and how they are evaluated by the architectural community raise questions at every level about the nature and purpose of both architecture and cities.



Present day downtown Chicago: the hyper-modernist city skyline as symbol of the global economy



I joined the Church in 1978 at the Easter Vigil of the parish of St. Paul in Harvard Square, just prior to my departure from the Puritan precincts of Cambridge for the Enlightenment precincts of Charlottes-

ville. My reasons at the time for becoming Catholic (apart from the work of the Holy Spirit) were anthropological and ecclesiological: I realized I had come to a Catholic understanding of both human nature and the Church. But my entrance into the Catholic Church was surely facilitated by the beauty of the liturgies (and especially the music) at St. Paul, which was home to the Boston Archdiocesan Choir School. Beauty and goodness, as much as truth,³⁴ will arrest you, engage you, please you, judge you, elevate you, and can, if you let them, re-orient your life to God. The music at St. Paul was catnip to my (Baptist) pilgrim soul, but it was architecture school and the Mass that began to restructure how I understand the world. Architecture school required me for the first time to really look at things, which made it possible for me sometimes even to see them. And the Mass especially, as well as the Church's liturgical calendar, began over time to re-form me (an ongoing process to be sure), providing me both an alternative sense of time and a way to understand occasional surprise experiences of "verticality" in daily life, which experiences I could only describe as "signals of transcendence" until the Church taught me the meaning of sacramentality.



Do the social and material arrangements of the modern global city and automobile suburb have a long-term future? Even aside from perennial threats of war, terrorism, and supervolcanoes, there is no shortage of apocalyptic scenarios that would expose our hyper-modern building culture as untenable and unsustainable. Environmentalists warn of rising tides, the need for resilient cities, and ensuing massive population migrations. Economists warn of the end of cheap energy and the pending fiscal disaster of unfunded pension liabilities. Social conservatives warn of the decline of marriage, family, and civil society

34. Maybe more: "The only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments, namely the saints the Church has produced and the art which has grown in her womb. Better witness is borne to the Lord by the splendor of holiness and art which have arisen in the community of believers than by clever excuses which apologetics has come up with to justify the dark sides which, sadly, are so frequent in the Church's human history" (Joseph Ratzinger in Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985], 129–30).

as ideals, even as social scientists document the growing number of children being raised in fatherless families and the social pathologies that follow therefrom. Demographers warn of pending long-term negative consequences of multiple generations of below-replacement fertility rates (including unsustainable welfare-state services). And young adults, fearful of crushing debt in a context of limited employment options, delay in forming families. Together these constitute an array of negative feedback loops, the cumulative effects of which promise a shrinking economy, a bruised natural environment, and diminishing opportunities for human happiness. Pick your nightmare scenario: it is not hard to foresee that any event or set of events that contracts the global economy will also undermine today's financing conventions for both sprawl infrastructure and expensive architectural experiments, which require frequent repair, do not last very long, and are displeasing to the eye.

Or perhaps an emerging if inchoate populism will simply rebel against the rule of a global elite that refuse the limitations, responsibilities, and pleasures of any locally lived reality—a refusal embodied in hyper-modernist architecture and urbanism. Alternatively, perhaps the elite will put two and two together, and begin to recognize and act upon some currently unseen affinities. Consider: today's passion for locally-produced food and locally-manufactured goods seems to reflect an intuitive desire to relocate life within more stable and enduring social and material contexts. Consider that traditional building materials locally sourced and produced—which in their manufactured state are not far removed from their natural state (e.g., stone, brick, tiles, wood)—combine both low-embodied energy and (when properly assembled) high durability; and that relative to the respective practical and aesthetic purposes of buildings and diet, traditional building materials are to modern building materials as real food is to chemically-processed food.

The primary dilemma of urbanism in the contemporary world is the vast scale of the modern city. At that scale, what might be a more durable and felicitous alternative to our current paradigms of sprawl and hyper-modern urbanism? One such alternative is *The Notre Dame Plan of Chicago 2109*, an ongoing project initially undertaken by a group of University of Notre Dame School of Architecture faculty, alumni, and graduate ur-

ban design students. A full account of *Chicago 2109* is a story for another time,³⁵ but its approach to architecture and urban design differs from today's in at least four substantive ways: 1) its holistic regional scope; 2) its approach to land use, which revisits the classical humanist understanding of the polis as an urban-agrarian unit, reconceived at the scale of a metropolitan region; 3) its proposal for a known range of traditional low-density-to-high-density/rural-to-urban settlements, spatial in character, at densities not prohibiting taller structures but nevertheless fully achievable as towns and cities ascending from single-story detached buildings to six-story party-wall buildings; and 4) the nonexclusive but nevertheless normative or default practice of making buildings and cities with durable materials locally sourced and produced.

But what kind of society and culture would construct, inhabit, and flourish in such a metropolitan environment? Without presuming the disappearance of complex economies, divisions of labor, and technological innovation—though presuming, for fixed near-term demographic reasons, that the pace of technological progress will likely slow for an extended period—flourishing metropolitan economies will generally benefit from increased local food production and increased local industry and commerce that employ more local people. In their very suggestive book *The Next Progressive Era*, Phillip Longman and Ray Boshara call for the revival of an old American ideal and the rise of a “new yeoman” culture that values and profits from ideals of family, work, and thrift embodied in forms of local agriculture, industry, and commerce. Charles Murray's *Coming Apart* and Robert Putnam's *Our Children* are perhaps unintended complements to the work of Longman and Boshara, but the latter is the best shorthand description of the kind of local cultures and economies that might support widespread human flourishing in traditional architectural and urban settings. To their account I would add only this hard conjecture: although I believe, with the Church, that not everyone is called to procreate, a new yeomanry will also require a post-liberal natalist culture that idealizes, privileges, and supports male-female marriage and two-parent households

35. A warehouse of *Chicago 2109* ideas and images can be found at <http://www.afterburnham.com> (still under construction).

that cumulatively achieve at least replacement fertility rates. If such a culture seems far-fetched today, I say only that it is imaginable consequent to an eventual recognition by postmoderns, both conservative and progressive, of an unavoidable economic fact: that any provision of social welfare services from either the public or private sector depends absolutely upon replacement fertility. Relatedly, no material solution to the tragedies besetting that growing class of American children descending into poverty and violence can succeed so well as a broadly shared family ideal that privileges, in both culture and law, the presence of a married mother and father. The Aristotelian-Thomist intellectual tradition is clear about nothing if not this: strong families are not a sufficient condition for human flourishing, but they are nevertheless a necessary condition, and therefore warrant both normative status and communal support. Absent a revived pronatalist culture of marriage (as well as a renewal of humanist urbanism), our near future is surely one of growing inequality, oligarchy, neo-feudal dependence, and architecture and urbanism as spectacle.

Whatever our future may be, a more humane and beautiful built environment will require builders, architects, urbanists, and the communities they serve to re-establish as normative a culture of building that rests on commonly understood foundations. A good culture of building almost certainly requires an understanding of man as an intermediate being: simultaneously part of, different from, and responsible for nature (the latter proposition following from the former two). Beyond this, a good culture of building requires a teleology of building; a teleology of urbanism; a theory of construction as it relates to the durability and sustainability of the built environment; a theory of the city's relationship to the natural and cultivated landscape; a theory of architecture and cities as these relate to economic exchange (perhaps including a new appreciation of Henry George); and a theory about architecture and urbanism's aesthetic, symbolic, and sacramental dimensions as these pertain to beauty, moral order, and sacred order, respectively. For the sake of good urbanism, it is also likely that most architects and builders themselves need to be members of the communities for whom and within which they design and build.



Possessed by sacramental sensibility one begins to see God in all manner of things and persons, indeed “in all things and above all things.” Picture this ordinary little occasion for an unexpected epiphany: my then ten-year-old son’s end-of-the-year Catholic elementary school sports banquet.³⁶ A classic scene: a school gymnasium filled with perhaps five hundred people—children, parents, teachers, a few grandparents; the greasy chicken and pasta buffet supper; the keg discreetly located in a small room just off the main gymnasium floor from which we adults would bring our draft beers back to tables full of kids; the low buzz of conversation throughout the evening punctuated by rounds of applause as boys and girls would come up to receive recognition and reward for their participation in basketball and/or volleyball (“Well done, good and faithful children!”); the two parish priests working the room and having a good time; my son and I and some good friends (his and mine) sharing a table. Looking around the room, I realized I knew perhaps sixty of these people well, and another couple hundred by face or by name either from the school, the parish church choir, the neighborhood park where I had coached baseball for several years, or various commercial or professional associations. And there were others present who I did not know but perhaps my son did. It hit me with a startling existential immediacy that this is the good of living in a good neighborhood: a fair amount of (apparent) chaos naturally proper to free beings, but also a network of relationships from intimate to casual to anonymous, grounded in a variety of common activities and belief as well as (and not least) place. Moreover, upon reflection, I suspected that similar scenes of convivium can be found in scores of neighborhoods throughout Chicago and elsewhere, and that not only are they the essence of traditional small town and urban neighborhood life, but ultimately, understood or not, the essence of our life in God.



Alasdair MacIntyre begins *After Virtue* by asking his reader to consider a hypothetical future in which science as a shared and coherent enterprise has suffered a catastrophe. Although it is

36. I have described this particular scene in my “In the Neighborhood,” *Image: A Journal of Religion and the Arts* 38 (August 2003): 75–77.

able to be reconstructed with pieces of its former substantive and methodological unity, its practitioners do not recognize its broken character. They fail to see that the apparent scientific practices in which they are engaged are not actually coherent and are not really science as science had previously been understood. Such, MacIntyre contends, is the actual state of present day morality, which since the shattering of Christianity at the beginning of the modern era has devolved into a series of interminable, incommensurate, and irresolvable arguments, precisely because contemporary moral discourse itself masks the emotivist/subjectivist assumptions of contemporary moral utterance. For as logical positivist philosophers, postmodernist theorists, and increasing numbers of non-academics now “know,” when human beings think we are talking about morality we are “really” only talking about ourselves and our desires.

Like the broken science in MacIntyre’s imaginary world and the emotivist morality in the real world, both the discourse and the practice of contemporary architecture and urbanism have become deeply incoherent. For both morality and architecture/urbanism, this incoherence follows from the absence of any clear conception of human nature that would give forceful substance to what these endeavors are for. Which is to say: morality, architecture and urbanism, and human nature itself have all become problematic because we lack any shared sense of their telos or even of their teleological character. This is bad news, and will likely result in more bad news to come. And yet, from beyond the dispiriting realm of contemporary architectural culture there is still good news: we can still see, literally with our own eyes, intact premodernist ensembles of good buildings that together constitute beautiful urbanism.

These are beacons that can guide us to where we need to go. Speaking recently of Catholicism and the arts, the poet Dana Gioia referred to several distinctive features of Catholic religious sensibility: that we understand ourselves first and foremost as both sinners and pilgrims, as imperfect beings on a journey; that life is a mystery; that evil is real, alluring, and powerful; that creation is sacramental and the greatest spiritual truths embodied; that suffering can be redemptive; that grace is always present for us to accept or reject; that the city of God is present

among us; and that the fine arts—“especially architecture”—give us glimpses of what the city of God looks like.³⁷

The Catholic urbanist in particular knows that progress toward the city of God, though real, is not necessarily linear, but that even in hard times grace abounds. The multifaceted vocation of the Catholic urbanist now, whether as designer or statesman or teacher, is to recover and extend urbanism in its best and fullest dimensions; to profess the telos of the city in terms of human well being; to acknowledge and make place for both competitive and cooperative virtues; and to give cities form as durable and beautiful places both spatial and hierarchical, across a range of densities corresponding to where their citizens find themselves most at home along the human flourishing spectrum of freedom and belonging.

Of work such as this the twentieth-century Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.” But although it is true that human beings often hope without apparent reason,³⁸ the reason for our hope may be correctly inferred from hope’s character as a theological virtue. The Catholic urbanist commits himself to the work of the city, not only because such work is a task for a lifetime, but because the best city, God’s city, is the very work of creation itself—the end toward which all things move, and have been moving from the beginning. □

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37. Dana Gioia, “Catholic Imagination and Contemporary Culture,” 6th Annual Convocation of Fellows at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMyQ6WQJSxc>.

38. See again Berger, on hope itself as a signal of transcendence.