

# Civic Art and the City of God: Traditional Urban Design and Christian Evangelism

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The city has historically been regarded as the place most conducive to the good life for human beings and is also a central metaphor and theme of historic Christianity. However, the Industrial Revolution unleashed a social and cultural revolution that has led to a devaluation of the city as a reality and a corresponding ascendance of suburbia as a cultural ideal. The consumption of the landscape by post-World War II suburban sprawl, the corresponding ecological and aesthetic degradation of the natural environment, a growing sense that civility itself is in decline, and a conviction that these problems are related intrinsically to *the physical form of suburbia*, has led to a movement to revive the physical forms of traditional cities known as New Urbanism.

This essay argues that a conscientious effort to make churches a part of new, traditional, urban, formal settings will both better promote the church's evangelical mission on behalf of the City of God and contribute to the civilizing function of the City of Man, and proposes several practical strategies for churches to promote traditional urbanism.

## Introduction

This paper makes two, related contentions, and a third in the form of a proposition. The first is that good cities are an essential component of the good life for human beings and that urbanism is a privileged symbol of the historic Christian imagination. The second is that post-World War II suburban sprawl is the antithesis of good urbanism and that, to the extent that Christian churches simply accept the premises of suburban culture, we compromise both

the substance and the effectiveness of our evangelical efforts. The proposition is that Christian churches can better contribute both to the good of the City of Man and our witness to the City of God by more conscientiously seeking within our means to promote the physical forms of good traditional urbanism. The argument that follows is therefore organized into four parts:

1. the centrality of urbanism to historic Western and Christian images of the good life;
2. a characterization of the formal order of traditional cities;
3. an introduction to New Urbanism as a social and political movement intended to promote traditional urbanism in a physical and cultural context of sprawl;
4. some thoughts about how Christian evangelism might be promoted through more conscientious efforts by Christians to commit ourselves to traditional urbanism.

## Cities and the Good Life

The city is a central metaphor and theme of historic Christianity. Christian Scripture depicts the end of history as the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21ff.), and the relationship between this world and the next was articulated paradigmatically in the fifth century by Saint Augustine in *The City of God*. Systematic philosophical thinking about urbanism antedates Christianity, however, going back to Aristotle, who wrote that the best life for individual human beings is the life of moral and intellectual virtue lived in community with others and, most particularly, in a *polis*. Aristotle's argument really constitutes two claims about the good life for human beings: one about the centrality of moral and intellectual virtue; the other about the centrality of the *polis*; and these were the subject matters of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* respectively. I have written elsewhere about the importance of the virtues to New Urbanist thinking about cities today,<sup>1</sup> and what follows focuses primarily upon the *polis* and its formal order.

If Aristotle is the intellectual wellspring of Western thinking about cities, it was Augustine who identified most clearly a peculiar and distinctive character of the individual and corporate Christian life and vocation, which is that Christians are members of *two* cities: an earthly city and a heavenly city, the City of Man and the City of God. In Augustine's view of things, the Church is a sacramental mystery that seeks to make her members, over the course of a lifetime, fit citizens for the City of God; and we become thus, in part, by learn-

ing 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 wrote of the *polis* that it is a community of communities, “the highest of all, embracing all the rest ... [aiming] at the highest good”<sup>2</sup>: the well-being of all its citizens. Now, at one level, a Christian might say that 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 its 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 that is to come (cf. Heb. 13:14)—and not only seeks but represents and, to some extent, even embodies it. And so, more than even Aristotle himself knew, the highest of all communities—embracing all the rest, aiming at the highest good: the well-being of all its citizens—is indeed a city: It is the City of God [Figures 1–3],<sup>3</sup> of which the Church is its earthly herald, symbol, and embodied anticipation.



**Figures 1–3**

Bottom central panel and details of the Ghent Altarpiece (1430) by Hubert and Jan Van Eyck: A tableau of Heaven, the best life as New Eden and New Jerusalem.

We get something of the flavor of Augustine's and the Church's inclusive urban vision, and of the interesting and complex relationship between the earthy and heavenly cities in the following passage from *The City of God*:

[The] heavenly city, then, while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens out of all nations and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages, not scrupling about diversities in the manners, laws, and institutions whereby earthly peace is secured and maintained, but recognizing that, however various these are, they all tend to one and the same end of earthly peace. [The heavenly city] therefore is so far from rescinding and abolishing these diversities, that it even preserves and adopts them, so long only as no hindrance to the worship of the one, supreme, and true God is thus introduced. Even the heavenly city, therefore, while in its state of pilgrimage, avails itself of the peace of earth and, so far as it can without injuring faith and godliness, desires and maintains a common agreement ... regarding the acquisition of the necessities of life, and makes this earthly peace bear upon the peace of heaven.... In its pilgrim state, the heavenly city possesses this [heavenly] peace by faith; and by this faith it lives righteously when it refers to the attainment of that peace every good action toward God and man; for the life of the city is a social life....<sup>4</sup>

The life of the city as "a social life," however, is a reality and ideal that, since the Enlightenment and the rise of the industrial city, has become increasingly problematic. There is now a large volume of academic and popular literature devoted to the individualist and emotivist turns of modern society and to the latter's discovery and celebration of the "autonomous self." What was noted by de Tocqueville in the first half of the nineteenth century as an inherent temptation of democratic societies<sup>5</sup> has moved from a tendency to a triumph, as Philip Rieff declared in the (ironic) title of his 1966 book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*.<sup>6</sup>

However, what Rieff there prophetically identified as "an impossible culture" (noting that there may be inherent anthropological limits to "the freedom of men to atomize themselves")<sup>7</sup> is becoming more evidently self-contradictory; and so it was that in July of 2001 I listened with great interest to a lecture at Calvin College by New York University psychologist Paul Vitz about "the self in postmodern therapeutic culture." Professor Vitz spoke of the trajectory of the modern self toward being defined by consumption; of the self's disintegration, and the celebration of that condition in the theory and literature of postmodernism; and then of an emerging "transmodern" self that is reexamining and reappropriating certain premodern themes of the self as both *embodied* and *relational*.

Alasdair MacIntyre has reminded us in *After Virtue* that good histories are not just about ideas and not just about actions in the world but, rather, about how ideas are shaped in a social context of actions, and about how actions are the embodiment and expression of ideas.<sup>8</sup> If MacIntyre is right about the reciprocity between actions and ideas, we should not be surprised that a “disintegration of the self” and a “disintegration of the built environment” might, over time, occur together. There is a contemporary crisis of architecture and urbanism coincident with and no less profound than what Vitz characterizes as the contemporary crisis of the self. This crisis has affected, if not corrupted, virtually all the institutions 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 name (and physical expression) of this intellectual and institutional crisis is *suburban sprawl* [Figure 4]; and the vision of both the City of Man and the City of God to which I have referred earlier stands in the sharpest possible contrast to the suburban ideal that has become our dominant paradigm for the good life.

**Figure 4**

**Suburban Sprawl**



There are, of course, some historically understandable reasons for why this paradigm has come to be: the long-term cultural trauma of the Industrial Revolution; the short-term trauma of World War II; the fact that human beings are biological creatures grounded in and with affinities for the natural order, which we husband (if not romanticize) as nature preserve, agricultural landscape, and garden; the post-war proliferation of the automobile; the twentieth-century modernist architectural ideology of progress; and the fact that post-war suburbia is wholly a creature of national and local governmental policies and laws that have facilitated and continue to facilitate the creation of suburban sprawl. Although trauma excuses bad judgments, it neither excuses the perpetuation of their consequences, nor justifies the formation of bad habits.

To be sure, it is not true that there is no grace in the suburbs;<sup>9</sup> nor is it true that there are no communities in the suburbs. Such communities as do exist however tend *not* to be communities of place; and they *are* communities that effectively disenfranchise that significant percentage of the population that at any given moment is too young, too old, too poor, or too infirm to drive an automobile. In addition, the automobile suburb ultimately cannot deliver on its promises of convenience, mobility, the beauty of the natural landscape, and individual freedom and well-being for all. Its dynamic is expansive; and the best evidence of its contradictory nature is that the persons who have most recently arrived in suburbia are often the people most vociferously opposed to its continuing extension.

Our suburban cultural habit is perhaps most insidious in the way it undermines the formal and cultural patterns—the *urban* patterns—by means of which, human beings have traditionally sought to achieve the good life. The post-war American suburb is the final flowering of a long-running cultural fantasy that unpleasantness in life can be avoided. While it is certainly understandable for persons to want to avoid unpleasantness (especially if they are rearing children), unpleasantness in life can *not* 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.

Fortunately, just as premodern ideas of the self as embodied and relational are being reexamined and reappropriated by certain contemporary philosophers, so premodern ideas about urban form are being reexamined and reappropriated by a group of design professionals and citizens under the institutional umbrella of the Congress for the New Urbanism.

## Urban Form 101

Before discussing at greater length the agenda and methods of the Congress for the New Urbanism, I would like to provide a brief account of the formal order of traditional cities: “Urban Form 101.” Although there is ongoing discussion among New Urbanists about the best agents and mechanisms by means of which to deal with land-use issues at metropolitan and regional scales, there is a virtual consensus among New Urbanists that the *neighborhood* is the *sine qua non* of urban design. For most of the past century in America, planning policy generally has focused upon mechanized means of transport; and public policy, specifically regarding human habitat, has focused upon housing, on the not unreasonable theory that shelter is a crucial element of human well-being. Yet, we are belatedly coming to recognize an ancient insight: that housing is a necessary but insufficient measure of a good human environment.

Man does not thrive by housing alone, and human beings better flourish when our housing is located in proximity to other things that we do in our lives. We are recognizing, in other words, that the mixed-use *walkable* neighborhood ought to be a focus of both public policy and our design efforts, whether such neighborhoods are considered in isolation or in relationship to other neighborhoods. A neighborhood standing alone in the landscape is a village; several neighborhoods in the landscape, a town; many contiguous neighborhoods in the landscape together constitute a city or a metropolis. Nevertheless, to make traditional neighborhoods today requires a conscientious rejection of the way that we have been making human settlements for the past fifty-seven years.

Every city (or town or village) is an overlapping, conflicting, and multidimensional order; and if we think of any good city, we can identify at least four kinds of order: an ecological order, an economic order, a moral order, and a formal order. A good city quite clearly is itself and occurs within an *ecological order*. It is a transgenerational artifact by means of which the human animal dwells in and on the landscape. If this artifact is done sensitively and well, both the human animal and the ecological order of which it is part will thrive. If it is not done well, both—especially human beings—will suffer in the short- and long-term.

The *economic order* of a good city is characterized by marketplace diversity and entrepreneurial freedom. Its purpose is twofold: to create and distribute the material goods and services necessary to the material well-being of the populace, and, beyond this, to create the surplus wealth necessary for the various kinds of nonsubsistence cultural endeavors—music, art, scholarship, sport—that are the very hallmarks of urban culture. Just as important, however, is the recognition that a good city is also a *moral order*.

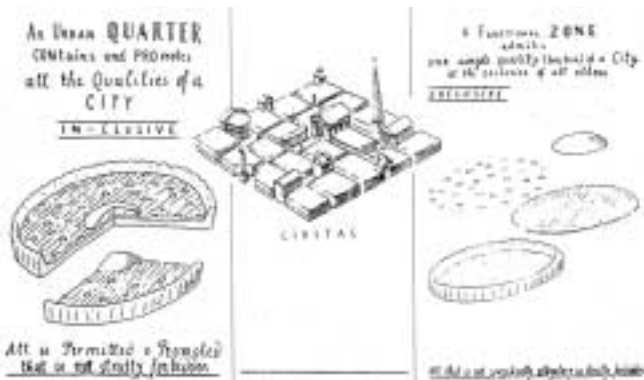
The marks of this order are the existence of various religious, civic, and political institutions that are sufficiently strong and influential to restrain the excessive individualism that a free economy encourages. Such institutions will seek to educate individuals in a variety of moral and intellectual virtues and to promote among individuals a sincere regard for the common good. If these institutions are in good working order, they will be promoting and sustaining a shared sense that the city is not only a marketplace but also a moral community, and that the market exists for the community and not the community for the market.

Finally, the *formal order* of the city is what architects typically deal with and is what architects typically think of when they think about the city. Most people intuitively understand the relationship that exists between the formal order of a city and its economic order, because it requires economic power to build significant buildings, but we may have more trouble seeing the relationship between the formal order of a city and its moral order. I suggest that the traditional Western view of the good life as individual excellence lived in community is evident also in the formal order of the traditional city and is a kind of counterpoint to our individualist/emotivist culture that manifests itself physically as suburban sprawl.

Leon Krier, the most influential traditional urbanist of our time, has graphically compared the traditional urban neighborhood to a slice of pizza [Figure 5]. A neighborhood is to the larger city what a slice of the pizza is to the whole

Figure 5

An urban neighborhood is like a slice of pizza; a post-war suburb is not.  
(Drawing courtesy of Leon Krier)





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 forth. This latter arrangement has all the *ingredients* of the pizza, but it is not a pizza because it does not have the *form* of a pizza (in Aristotelian terms, it possesses the *material cause* of a pizza but lacks the *formal cause* of a pizza).

Similarly, the post-war 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 that this matters is because *the final cause (telos) of the city—the good life for human beings—is not so separable from either the material or formal causes of the city as our cultural ideal of suburbia imagines.*

So, what are some of the key features of the formal order of traditional towns and cities? Another famous Krier drawing diagrammatically illustrates several characteristics of the formal order of the traditional city [Figure 6]:

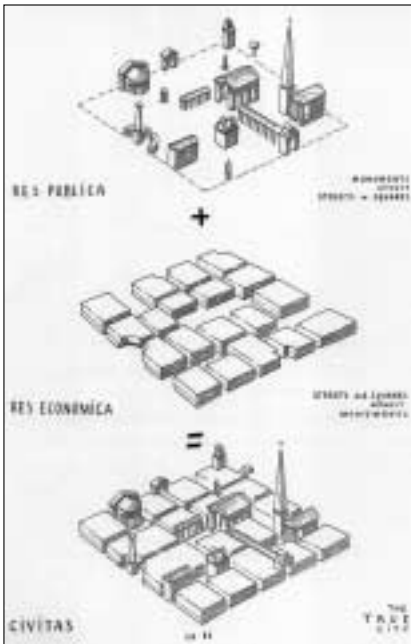


Figure 6

The formal order of the traditional city: small blocks, streets, and squares, background private buildings, and foreground public buildings. (Drawing courtesy of Leon Krier)

- Cities include a private/economic realm and a civic realm, identifiably separate but necessarily mixed together.
- Cities are made of blocks of buildings that define a public realm of streets defined by private buildings, and of plazas and/or squares typically fronted by civic buildings or focused on a centralized monument.
- Plazas are hard-surfaced [Figure 7], while squares proper are usually a planted green space [Figure 8]. Plazas are more common in European cities, and squares more common in Anglo-American cities. Both are rare in America after 1945.

**Figure 7**

**Plaza: Ravenna, Italy**



**Figure 8**

**Square: Boston, Massachusetts**



- Virtually all urban streets connect; urban cul-de-sacs are rare. Although there is a recognizable hierarchy of streets according to traffic capacity (and, hence, size), urban streets always accommodate pedestrians. American cities tend to line most of their streets with trees; European cities tend to limit trees to boulevards and avenues.
- Primary urban streets—typically designated as boulevards [Figure 9] and avenues [Figure 10]—carry large volumes of traffic but, unlike suburban arterials [Figure 11], have on-street parking to protect pedestrians and have wide sidewalks to accommodate not only pedestrians but also, in some places, the patrons of outdoor cafes.



**Figure 9**  
**Boulevard:**  
**Boston, Massachusetts**



**Figure 10**  
**Avenue: Chicago, Illinois**



**Figure 11**  
**Suburban Arterial**  
**(photo, courtesy of**  
**Patrick Siegman)**

- Secondary urban streets are narrow and usually permit parking on one or both sides [Figure 12]. They allow traffic to connect to major streets, but their narrow width requires cars to move slowly. This creates an inherently safer pedestrian environment. Lanes constitute a third kind of street, essentially a service street for garage access, utilities, and trash collection.



**Figure 12**  
**Secondary Street:**  
**Charleston, South Carolina**

- Private buildings—buildings for commerce [Figure 13] and for dwelling [Figure 14]—relate to the street in a consistent and disciplined manner. The private buildings that front and spatially define streets often shelter a mix of uses. Buildings primarily used for commerce will often have residences above the ground floor; and buildings primarily intended as residences may also shelter small offices or businesses.

**Figure 13**  
**Commercial Buildings:**  
**Cooperstown, New York**



**Figure 14**  
**Residential Buildings:**  
**Chicago, Illinois**



- 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 is that the young and the old, singles and families, the poor and the wealthy, can all find places to live. 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.
- A good neighborhood has good schools in the neighborhood, and particularly elementary schools within walking distance of both students and teachers (and because of the variety of housing types in the neighborhood, teachers can afford to live there if they so choose).
- Good cities provide parks of various sizes for passive and active recreation.
- Good neighborhoods 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 streets, vistas [Figure 15], or fronting squares, or plazas [Figure 16].

**Figure 15**

**Church Tower Terminating Street Axis:  
Charleston, South Carolina**



**Figure 16**

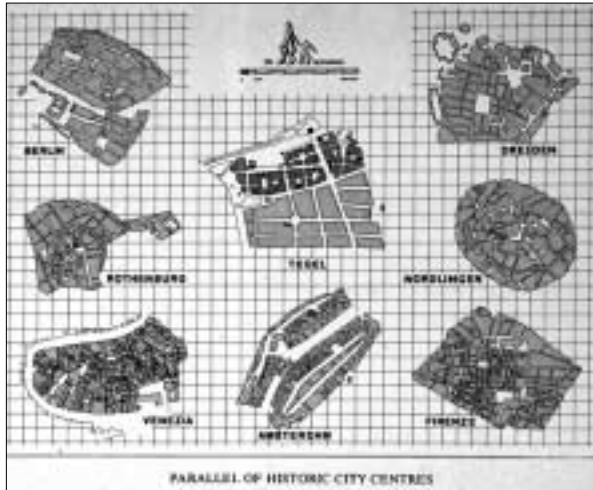
**Town Hall Fronting Plaza:  
Siena, Italy**



- All of these civic, commercial, residential, and recreation buildings and uses are within pedestrian proximity of each other—a five-to-ten minute/one-quarter-to-one-half-mile walk [Figure 17]. 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.

**Figure 17**

The “half-mile diameter/ten-minute walk” size of historic European urban centers: human habitation on 120–150 acres of land that suggests the population density, mix of uses, and quality of culture achievable in a low-rise city where most of the activities of daily life are within walking distance. (Drawing courtesy of Leon Krier)



These, then, are some of the formal characteristics of traditional urban neighborhoods. I can summarize our current situation by saying that on the one hand, 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; and, on the other hand, that 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—to complicate matters even further—that we have lost the cultural habit of doing so.

I have so far been contrasting two formal paradigms of human settlement: the traditional urban neighborhood and the post-war automobile suburb. If I seem to exaggerate the point by dividing the history of human settlements into pre-1945 and post-1945 periods, I contend that this essential division is warranted, *precisely* because it represents the temporal demarcation between walkable human settlements and those that require mechanical transportation to perform the majority of life's daily tasks—although I will be the first to admit that the *cultural* antecedents of sprawl go back much further. Be that as it may, there is now a rising tide of voices claiming that the social and cultural costs of sprawl are excessive and that sprawl itself, both culturally and environmentally, is unsustainable. Among the most eloquent of these voices is that of the Congress for the New Urbanism.

## New Urbanism

The question is frequently asked: What is new about New Urbanism? The novelty of New Urbanism is not the formal order that it advocates but, rather, its promotion of traditional neighborhoods in a physical context of suburban sprawl and the cultural context that promotes it. So, even though New Urbanism is promoting something different from the way that we typically do things now (i.e., something new), it is also promoting something tested, something that we know does work. New Urbanism is the attempt to employ—which also necessarily has entailed relearning—in our current circumstances the best practices of city-making from the past, toward the end of making better cities for the future.

The Congress for the New Urbanism was founded in 1992 with the primary objective of promoting traditional urbanism as an alternative to sprawl development.<sup>10</sup> Although its members include politicians, academics, engineers, environmentalists, journalists, developers, and stay-at-home moms, it is a movement founded by architects and urban designers whose first objection to sprawl is largely aesthetic. This sounds more elitist than it actually is, however, because New Urbanists recognize, on the one hand, that urban aesthetics are marks of cultural character; and on the other hand, that the aesthetics of sprawl are, in fact, physical markers of a larger cultural condition, the problems of which go far beyond aesthetics. The New Urbanists, for all our collected specialized expertise, are aspiring generalists; and New Urbanism will rise or fall on the basis of its appeal to the good sense of generalists.

To date, there are four primary types of New Urbanist projects, all of which have as their goal the creation of low-rise, high density, walkable, mixed-use

settlements with a legible hierarchy of squares, streets, and civic buildings. These are: (1) “greenfield” projects, on vacant forest or farm land that would otherwise be developed as sprawl; (2) “brownfield” projects, on vacant land formerly used for industrial purposes; (3) urban in-fill projects, in which the objective is to densify an already existing town or neighborhood by building on smaller vacant parcels therein; and (4) suburban redevelopment—in particular on the sites of dead shopping malls—in which the objective is to create walkable, mixed-use environments that might become a local urban core for an existing suburb.

To make such projects a built reality, New Urbanists typically have to change the zoning ordinances and the street design and parking regulations that effectively make traditional neighborhood design illegal. This, New Urbanists do by first proposing that a given area be designated as a “Traditional Neighborhood District” (TND) to be overlaid on whatever existing zoning map currently governs the use of the site; and then by creating for the proposed TND alternative, three, related legal devices: a *regulating plan*, a simple and diagrammatic *urban code*, and a brief *zoning ordinance* written in more-or-less plain English. The order of these devices (regulating plan/code/ordinance) is important, because the regulating plan is primarily a visual rather than a written document, to which the subsequent code and ordinance are in service.

I cannot emphasize too strongly this difference between New Urbanist intention and methodology and those of conventional sprawl development. A New Urbanist proposal for any particular piece of land is a positive vision that the accompanying code and ordinance support. In contrast, the zoning ordinances that permit and promote sprawl have been conceived largely as negative controls intended to prevent the mixing of uses, and they lack the definite and positive vision of New Urbanist proposals.

The primary means both for designing the regulating plan and achieving public consensus about it is a five-to-ten-day intensive design workshop known in New Urbanist circles as a “charrette.”<sup>11</sup> A charrette brings together in one place several groups of people important to any land development process. Among these groups are the many professionals needed to do traditional neighborhood design. This includes the urban designers, the architects, the landscape architects, the civil engineers, the transportation engineers, the hydrologists, the sanitation engineers, the fire and police departments, and so forth. Then there are the various project stakeholders—most obviously the developer—but also persons from the local planning department, bankers, various civic and business leaders, and so forth.



Last but not least, there is the general public. It is important to note that the assumption of a charrette is that every person brings his or her own particular interests to it. New Urbanists are candid and up-front about our bias for traditional urbanism and are confident of good urbanism's enviable track record of addressing genuine human needs; and this premise is made clear at the outset. That said, the charrette is a no-holds-barred, public process with built-in feedback mechanisms by means of which, objectives are articulated, problems are identified and addressed, and community consensus is built around an end product that is visual, easy to understand, and represents about eighty percent of the schematic design work needed in order to begin the permit application process.<sup>12</sup>

Developers like charrettes because charrettes ease the permit application process. Planning officials like charrettes because they yield a large amount of refined and specific information to which they can hold developers accountable. And the public likes charrettes because the end-product is visual so that they can see in advance what is being proposed, and because they have had the opportunity to make their concerns known and to hear them addressed from the beginning.

The objectives of New Urbanists are both procedural and substantive. Procedurally, the immediate goal is simply to create a level, legal, playing field that will allow developers to build traditional towns and neighborhoods *as-of-right* (i.e., without having to always seek variances), and will allow local communities to preserve more of their adjacent landscapes by means of concentrating patterns of physical development. Thus, the typical New Urbanist legal approach is not to try to rewrite or amend the existing zoning ordinances that mandate sprawl but, rather, to propose a parallel TND ordinance that gives both towns and developers the legal right to build traditional neighborhoods.

Substantively, New Urbanists surely prefer the sharp demarcation between the built environment and the natural or cultivated landscape that still exists in large parts of Europe and once was common in the United States. For, while it is true that New Urbanists are mostly city-folk, there is a clear recognition among New Urbanists that the fate of the landscape is necessarily intertwined with patterns of physical development—it is, after all, exactly this landscape that sprawl is consuming. This makes New Urbanists in some ways natural allies with environmentalists but also pits New Urbanists against a certain kind of environmentalist who views human beings as enemies of nature rather than—through the culture of cities—both stewards and a part of nature.

New Urbanist theory and discourse cuts across political and religious lines and is, above all, pragmatic but tends, in my opinion, toward the politically liberal and the culturally secular.<sup>13</sup> That said, I would add that there is a significant vocal and articulate, politically conservative and culturally religious minority within the New Urbanist community—and that New Urbanists generally are open to arguments and have demonstrated both a willingness and an ability to change their minds and practices in the presence of good arguments. It is worth noting that just as New Urbanists themselves come from across the political spectrum, so do their critics. Libertarians paint New Urbanists as harbingers of Big Government, while the avant garde, artistic Left sees New Urbanists as reactionary capitalist tools and faults them for working too closely with the marketplace. In my view, however, New Urbanists are nothing so much as a classic American “association” in the Tocquevillean sense, as when Tocqueville wrote that “Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you are sure to find an association.”<sup>14</sup>

What my own associations with New Urbanists over several years have driven home to me is the basic intellectual and cultural seriousness of the New Urbanist enterprise. Not only is New Urbanism itself a communal movement in the service of both freedom and community, New Urbanists are also the only folks around with a coherent and programmatic physical and political alternative to sprawl development. They are relentless in subjecting their ideas to both the literal marketplace and the marketplace of ideas, and they are continually correcting and refining their theories and practices toward the renewal and improvement of traditional town and urban neighborhood life. And though not all of them know it, the philosophical and anthropological assumptions of the New Urbanists are at least implicitly Aristotelian, and therefore represent a potentially important counterweight to our ruinously emotivist culture, of which both suburban sprawl and contemporary architecture are manifest physical expressions.

If there is currently a major weakness in the New Urbanist approach to greenfield and brownfield projects, it is that such projects are driven too much by the housing industry; with the result that there is a clear “lag” between the communal aspirations of New Urbanists and the physical manifestations of community in such projects. (Think of lots of houses arranged along traditional urban streets and squares, with either too small or nonexistent civic and religious institutions on the lots for which they have been designated.) It is easy to criticize such developments, and indeed, the New Urbanists expose

themselves to such criticisms because their standards and objectives are so high. What their critics overlook, of course, is the factor of time.

These new developments may not be authentic neighborhoods yet, but because of their physical infrastructure, they have the opportunity (unlike the typical automobile suburb) to someday become so. But what this criticism does underscore is that although New Urbanist objectives are—and will necessarily be—produced *with* the marketplace, they cannot be quickly (if ever) achieved *by* the marketplace alone. And this suggests that traditional urbanism might be more apt to be revived if New Urbanist projects were to engage not only developers but also different kinds of communities at the very beginning of the development process. One example of such communities might be Christian churches, and I conclude with some suggestions for how this might be done and the benefits that might accrue to both churches and new traditional neighborhoods.

## New Urbanism and Christian Evangelism

Let me begin by comparing two good-sized, and by certain standards, thriving Catholic churches. The first is in west suburban Chicago, on a site just under ten acres, 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 now serves as a depressed, that is, below-grade, athletic field.) This programmatic arrangement is not necessarily what the architect wanted, incidentally, but it is what the parish asked for and, more importantly, what the suburban zoning either required or allowed.

Compare, by way of contrast, my parish church and its associated elementary school, which are located on two adjacent Chicago city blocks, of which the total area (i.e., of the two city blocks) is also ten acres. The difference is that on these ten acres in the city, in addition to the church and the school, there are more than 150 on-street and off-street public parking spaces, as well as more than a dozen businesses and over one hundred dwelling units, in buildings predominantly two or three stories tall. My urban parish church is a genuine neighborhood center, easily accessible by both car and foot from its dense urban surroundings. In contrast, the suburban parish church lacks a sufficiently dense and pedestrian-accessible adjacent neighborhood of which to be the center.

Alasdair MacIntyre famously concluded *After Virtue* with the declaration that our culture is not waiting for Godot but for a new and doubtless very different Saint Benedict. There are ascetic and moral implications to this proposition, of course, but there is another implication that we might overlook if we are not attentive—an evangelical implication. A popular book of several years ago argued that Irish monks saved civilization, but we must not forget, either, that Benedictine monks of various nationalities converted Europe to Christianity. How they did so is instructive, for it was not by preaching alone, or perhaps even primarily—it was by embodying Christian faith and virtue in their lives, and—not least—the physical organization of their communities.<sup>15</sup> A monastery is, after all, almost a *polis*; and for several hundred years monasteries were as much of a *polis* as anything that Western Europe had to offer. And this, too, is instructive. Roman Catholic Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger has remarked that

the only really effective *apologia* for Christianity comes down to two arguments, namely, the *saints* that the Church has produced and the *art* that has grown in her womb. Better witness is borne to the Lord by the splendor of holiness and art that have arisen in the community of believers than by the clever excuses that apologetics has come up with to justify the dark sides which, sadly, are so frequent in the Church's human history....<sup>16</sup>

If MacIntyre and the good cardinal are correct here, this represents an enormous challenge to Christians today. What are some of the outlines of this challenge with respect to architecture and urbanism? One aspect of this challenge is that Christians must relearn not only to be good patrons of architecture but, perhaps, even before that, to be good patrons of urbanism. Urbanism is the default context that allows good architecture to transcend itself; the context that gives most good architecture its pedagogical and evangelical force. Church buildings have traditionally aspired to represent and anticipate the heavenly city and have often succeeded, but heralding the City of God is only made more difficult by acquiescing in the Suburb of Man.

Fortunately, the opportunities to be more urban are increasing. Some of these opportunities are being provided by New Urbanists; and where they are not, the Christian churches could take a stronger role in seeking out and/or creating such opportunities. Just as New Urbanism is neither liberal nor conservative in its overall objectives, neither is it overtly pro- or anti-religious. Nevertheless, there is an interesting convergence of intellectual, cultural, and social factors that make the encounter of New Urbanists and the Christian churches potentially fruitful.

Let me mention three: First, New Urbanists derive their ideas in part from traditional cities, in which churches and their ancillary institutions have obviously been key players in the history of Western urbanism; second, even today churches build buildings not only for worship but also for education, for health care, and for dwellings that are potentially important components of traditional neighborhoods; and third, the Charter for the New Urbanism explicitly advocates mixed-class and mixed-age neighborhoods, and churches are often transgenerational communities in which membership is not primarily a function of class. So, what are some possible models for how Christians actually might engage and be engaged by the New Urbanist agenda?

Let me suggest three and describe one. The first is the most obvious, and though rare, the most common: The Christian citizen-developer who, out of his or her own faith commitment, conscientiously attempts to do traditional neighborhood developments. A second model is the Christian institution *as* a developer. This model is actually not uncommon. Its prototype is the church-based community development corporations that historically have focused on providing housing but, in principle, could be both broader in their concerns and more sociologically and formally savvy by engaging in and promoting traditional neighborhood development. A third model is the Christian institution that partners *with* developers. This is the rarest model, and the one that I describe in greater detail as a potential new strategy for American churches anywhere, but especially for new, suburban, parish church developments. Its precedent is a variation on the development in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the London residential square.

Beginning in seventeenth-century London, which at the time 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.<sup>17</sup> This happened around the outskirts of London for a period of about two hundred years. Small residential square developments (some 350–400 of them) proliferated over the landscape; eventually, housing filled in between the squares; and what they eventually ended up with was 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 we build, why cannot churches today play the 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? Why could not a church 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 could not churches use this strategy to begin to integrate affordable housing and commercial buildings into suburbia as part of mixed-use neighborhoods? And who is to say that an initially random proliferation of such developments across suburbia—once the exemplary pattern is established—over time might not become, as it did in London, the very physical and spiritual centers so pointedly lacking in contemporary suburbia?

I have been arguing here that good cities are an essential component of the good life for human beings and that urbanism is therefore not surprisingly a privileged symbol of the historic Christian imagination. Post-World War II suburban sprawl is the antithesis of good urbanism; and, to the extent that Christian churches simply accept the premises of suburban culture, we compromise both the substance and the effectiveness of our evangelical efforts. Christian churches can better contribute both to the good of the City of Man and our witness to the City of God by more conscientiously seeking within our means to promote the physical forms of good traditional urbanism.

This, of course, presumes that contemporary Christians have at hand or can develop the aesthetic and spiritual resources—not least, the *desire*—needed to make good cities; and this may be assuming a lot, at least at the present time. Nevertheless, one hopes that Christian churches will become more actively involved in the kind of cultural project represented by the New Urbanists. G. K. Chesterton observed in 1908 that Rome may be loved because it is great, but that it first became great because it was loved.<sup>18</sup> What he wrote of Rome—which was not built in a day—is also true of every other one of our cities and suburbs.

No one should ever underestimate the power of active, disciplined love, which is (of course) of God. We make all of our cities to achieve the good life, but our greatest cities are products of love: artifacts made in imitation not only of nature (as Aristotle would have it) but even more fundamentally in imitation of the divine. In that imitative process we create a shared world, a common world that is—quite precisely—lovely; and this should be a common vocation of all of us who call ourselves Christians.

## Notes

1. See my “Virtuous Reality: Aristotle, Critical Realism, and the Reconstruction of Architectural and Urban Theory,” *The Classicist* 3 (1996): 6–18.
2. Aristotle, *Politics*, book 1, chap. 1; from *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 9, ed. Robert M. Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 445.
3. Perhaps no painting in the history of Christian art manages to combine, with such artistic and theological sophistication, the themes of Paradise as Eden and Paradise as Jerusalem as does Hubert and Jan van Eyck’s fifteenth-century Ghent Altarpiece, located in the cathedral of Saint Bavo in Ghent, Belgium.
4. Augustine, *The City of God*, book 19, chap. 17; from *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 18, ed. Robert M. Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 522–23.
5. See especially *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, book 2, chap. 2.
6. *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: The Uses of Faith After Freud* (University of Chicago Press, 1966) and Rieff’s subsequent book *Fellow Teachers: On Culture and Its Second Death* (University of Chicago Press, 1973) are themselves triumphs, classics of their genre. Other important analyses of the sociohistorical origins of the rise of the autonomous self include Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) and Peter Berger’s *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (with Thomas Luckmann, Anchor Doubleday, 1966) and “Towards a Sociological Understanding of Psychoanalysis,” from *Facing Up to Modernity* (Basic Books, 1977).
7. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 11.
8. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 61.
9. The Apostles’ Creed tells us that Christ descended into hell; and there is Patristic and Reformation-era speculation that he did so to offer redemption to those who lived before his coming. We should have no reason therefore to doubt that he visits suburbia, or that the Church is obligated to preach him there.
10. The objectives of the Congress for the New Urbanism are spelled out in “The Charter of the New Urbanism,” available online at their website: [www.cnu.org](http://www.cnu.org).
11. “Charrette” means, literally, “little cart” and is derived from the nineteenth-century culture of architecture at the Parisian Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where students who were late in finishing their drawings would jump on the little cart that

came to collect those drawings and would continue working. Such students were said to be *en charrette*; and the term *charrette* has since come to be used for any intensive period of design work.

12. Though I have unfortunately lost the exact date of his post, University of South Florida professor of sociology David Brain made the following astute observation about New Urbanism and the charrette process on an internet listserv discussion early in 2002:

[T]he New Urbanism represents a fascinating and pragmatic effort ... to rebuild the public sphere by way of recreating the techniques of place-making. It is actually a perfect reversal of the trajectory of technical specialization, bureaucratization, and modernist State-building that has taken place since the Progressive era, quite in line (although not in a theoretically elaborated way) with the contemporary convergence between certain Left-wing political theory and the revival of interest in civic republicanism. Of interest [to the social theorist] is that New Urbanist practice represents a tangible and practical manifestation of what have been little more than broad notions and wishful thinking among some political theorists.

13. I base this comment upon five years of participation in wide-ranging, on-line listserv discussions with other New Urbanists about New Urbanism; other participants would, no doubt, challenge my claim. What is evident to me, however, is how a commitment to traditional urbanism crosses political and religious lines—as one would expect, since cities themselves do the same.

At the same time, because practically every New Urbanist has come of age in the individualist cultural environment that has produced sprawl, it is perhaps not surprising that there are modernist habits of thinking that persist among some New Urbanists, habits of mind that have not yet caught up to the increasing sophistication of New Urbanist thinking about the physical form of cities. One example of such a habit is the persistence among some New Urbanists of abstract views of both “religion” and “community” that could only be held by persons ignorant of the communal obligations, pleasures, and public truth claims of shared and particular religious belief.

14. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 106.
15. An English Cardinal Gasquet, in his 1966 preface to a then-new edition of Saint Benedict’s *Rule*, writes

It is undeniable that most of the nations of modern Europe were converted to the Christian faith ... by the influence of the mode of life known as monastic.... The ... thousands of Benedictine abbeys which ... exist ... in Europe ... all testify that it was the monastic life lived by monk-apostles in the midst of the people they hoped to convert, upon which their success mainly depended.... History can tell us nothing of their preaching and teaching....



[W]hat we know of their work is that they lived their life according to the *Rule*; they built up other places and formed other [monastic] colonies, and then they died; and behold! The peoples among whom they dwelt were Christian.

16. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 129–30.
17. For a more detailed discussion of the development of the London residential square, see A. E. J. Morris's *History of Urban Form Prior to the Industrial Revolution*, 2d ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), 248–91.
18. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image, 1959), 68.