

**“A Realist Philosophical Case For Urbanism and Against Sprawl: Part One”
by Philip Bess / July 11, 2011**

Arguments for traditional urbanism are de facto truth claims about nature and human nature, and point to and are supported by the natural law. Why we can and should think normatively about our building patterns. Part one of two.

For many years, I have lectured and written that post-1945 sprawl suburbs are a peculiarly modern mistake, one both long aborning and now itself a cause of further significant and unhappy environmental and cultural consequences. I have argued that human beings should not make sprawl and that, as a hypothetical natural law precept and as we did always and everywhere prior to about 1950, human beings should make walkable mixed-use settlements. In the course of defending these propositions, I also have defended the metaphysical realism and natural law implications that follow from considered employment of the words *should* and *should not*.

Except for the references to natural law, traditional urbanists (including but not limited to New Urbanists) generally concur with these propositions. Across political and religious lines, the propositions themselves have been affirmed by both liberal humanists and social conservatives, and been found objectionable by both environmentalists and *avant gardists* on the left and by libertarians on the right. Today’s generally leftist environmental regulations and modernist design orthodoxies would make it impossible and unthinkable to build pre-1930 Washington, D.C., or Boston or Savannah or Cooperstown; but so, too, would a Libertarian regime make it impossible to build pre-1930 Washington, D.C., or Boston or Savannah or Cooperstown, all of which would be decried by many on the right as “planning.”

Following are some questions and objections that these propositions have elicited, and my attempt to answer and address them.

Are you saying that one can't live in sprawl and be moral?

Emphatically, *No*: I am *not* saying that. Morality has to do largely though not exclusively with character virtues. Character virtues originate in the context of what Alasdair MacIntyre has characterized as *practices*, which are a certain kind of community existing in time and sometimes across many generations: a group of human beings who share a common *telos*, such as football or music or theater or architecture, necessarily pursued through institutions such as a football team or an orchestra or a theater company or a classical school of architecture. Clearly, such communities can and do exist both in traditional towns and neighborhoods and in contemporary sprawl suburbs. Moreover, both the inclination to selfishness that is the very essence of sin, as well as specific sins themselves—the usual suspects: pride, avarice, envy, despair, sloth, gluttony, lust, etc.—appear pretty evenly distributed across human populations, rural, urban, and suburban. So the answer is: No, one doesn't have to live in a traditional town or urban neighborhood in order to acquire habits of moral virtue.

Are you saying that most people should live in a traditional town or urban neighborhood?

Yes, I am saying that: certainly for all the environmental and health and justice and sustainability reasons I have cited [elsewhere](#), but also for reasons of good character formation and for the sake of an integrated life, which I will take up at greater length below. It is quite another matter, however, if, owing to one's life circumstances (not least a dearth of traditional urban environments), one is *unable* to live in a traditional town or an urban neighborhood. One cannot be held morally culpable for not doing what it is not possible to do. Indeed, this is why I phrase my hypothetical natural law precept to say *human beings should make walkable mixed-use settlements*.

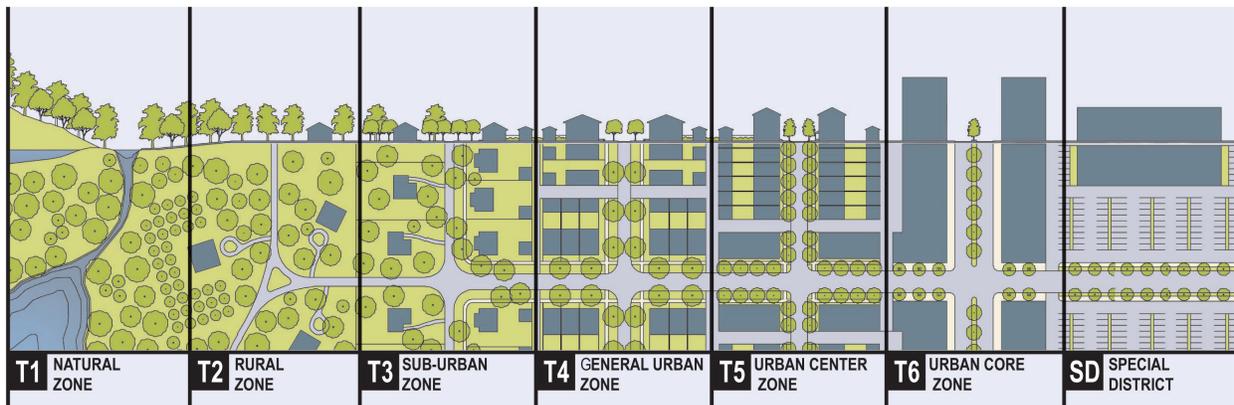
The proposition *human beings should make walkable mixed-use settlements* ascribes moral obligation to what many think is properly a matter of moral indifference. Does not such a proposition---implicit, for example, in New Urbanism's founding documents---represent an attempt by one group of people to "impose their morality" on others? Why is it not more correct to understand the mixed-use, walkable human settlement as, at best, just one morally viable option among many?

To these two questions, I have a complex answer surrounding another question and answer. Questions of morality have to do with what is genuinely good for all human beings, which traditional urbanists declare traditional urbanism to be. So with regard to the matter of urbanists "imposing our morality," note again that my hypothetical natural law precept is that human beings should *make* walkable mixed-use settlements. Note as well that our modern culture of building and development simply does not allow everyone to *live*

in walkable mixed-use settlements at this time. As I've said, this inability cannot count as a moral failing to those who would live in traditional urbanism if they were able. Nevertheless, this fact does not change the obligatory status of the hypothetical natural law precept, if indeed it is a natural law precept. To take another example by way of illustration: It is not a moral failing that persons ruled by a totalitarian government are unable to freely and safely participate in subsidiary social institutions; but this fact does not make subsidiarity any less a natural law principle, nor remove from human beings the obligation to promote, participate in, and acknowledge the rightful authority of subsidiary social institutions.

In my view—and this is an issue about which I disagree with some of my progressive New Urbanist friends—one political implication of the shortage of walkable mixed-use settlements in the context of a democracy is that, as a matter of prudential judgment, traditional urbanists should not try to abolish sprawl by legislative or bureaucratic fiat, but rather fight first to make it legal to build traditional towns and urban neighborhoods as-of-right: to level the legal playing field, as it were. If, on a level legal playing field, there eventually develops a cultural consensus about the goods of traditional urbanism across a Rural-to-Urban Transect, traditional urbanists (and New Urbanists) might hope and expect that, in a democracy, laws and policies incentivizing traditional urbanism across a Transect will follow.

This raises an intermediate question: *What is a Rural-to-Urban Transect?* At the risk of simplifying a sophisticated body of ideas, a Transect is a diagram illustrating gradations of natural and/or man-made environments; and a Rural-to-Urban Transect is a diagram that illustrates gradations of both. (Think of it as a “reality sausage,” which theoretically can be cut into an infinite number of slices, but which for practical purposes is cut into only a few.) Rural-to-Urban Transect diagrams are employed by some members of the Congress for the New Urbanism to represent general patterns of historic land use and human settlement. One such diagram is illustrated here:



A Rural-to-Urban Transect. Diagram courtesy of Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company.

This particular Rural-to-Urban Transect diagram depicts six distinct Transect Zones (T-1 through T-6), and a separate Special District Zone. Zones T-1 and T-2 refer to *Rural Transect* zones in the most general way, insofar as these relate to the development of human habitat. The Urban Transect is constituted by zones T-3 through T-6, and together with the

Rural Transect zones T-1 and T-2 make a Rural-to-Urban Transect proper. A Rural-to-Urban Transect describes some general conditions of good human settlements in nature, and can itself be used as the basis for form-based zoning law rather than today's more common (and sprawl-producing) use-based zoning law; and, at the most basic level, each Urban Transect-zone denotes a walkable and mixed-use human environment wherein, *within each **Urban** T-zone*, many if not most of the necessities and activities of daily life are within a five-to-ten-minute walk for persons of differing ages and economic classes.

To the second original question—whether there is not a moral equivalence between sprawl and walkable mixed-use settlements, such that both may be considered “morally viable options”—I reply *No*. The primary arguments against sprawl are 1) that sprawl is unjust; 2) that sprawl is culturally and environmentally unsustainable; and 3) that sprawl is aesthetically problematic, even (dare I say it?) ugly. Specifically, simply as a physical pattern of development:

- sprawl makes it impossible for people of different generations and different incomes, even in the same (extended) family, to live in proximity to one another, and to work, shop, play, learn, and worship in the same neighborhood;
- sprawl injures the common good in three inter-related ways: as the primary means by which both wealth and poverty are physically concentrated and isolated; by separating people according to income, age, and race; and, perhaps most importantly, by failing to provide a genuinely public realm shared by all;
- sprawl, by separating housing settlements according to class, promotes extreme inequalities of educational opportunity;
- sprawl effectively de-mobilizes and deprives of their independence persons without cars and / or unable to drive, most notably the poor, children, and the elderly;
- sprawl, by its auto-dependent lifestyle, [contributes to unprecedented obesity](#) and its attendant personal and public health consequences;
- sprawl, by its auto-dependent lifestyle, increases our reliance on unstable political regimes and discourages national energy self-sufficiency in a period of global political conflict;
- sprawl hastens the loss of agricultural lands and wilderness in exchange for a bad combination of ephemeral buildings and inflexible infrastructure;
- sprawl, as the physical embodiment of a suburban cultural ideal, contradicts that ideal, because it consumes the landscape that is a key element of the suburban promise;
- sprawl, as the physical embodiment of an individualist cultural ideal, promotes the unjust and politically unsustainable phenomenon of NIMBYism, uncompensated by a genuine and decent public realm; and finally,

- sprawl, consistent with the fact that nothing in an individualist culture properly can be deemed either ugly or beautiful, produces nothing in the public realm that prompts or warrants sustained, shared aesthetic contemplation.

Sprawl, therefore, is only “justifiable” as the physical form of a Tocquevillian individualist culture, and is only “viable” if one has a car (in which case, as Flannery O’Connor wryly observed, one has no need to be justified). Sprawl undoubtedly possesses popular appeal. It embodies prominent cultural aspirations, most notably the appeal to choice and personal freedom and private property and home ownership---goods which can also be accommodated, but more justly, in an Urban Transect. But sprawl does not currently compete with traditional urbanism on a level legal playing field. Rather, sprawl is the beneficiary of [various historic governmental policies](#) that have favored and promoted it, an irony often lost on both libertarian defenders of post-1945 suburbs and progressive New Urbanist defenders of increased governmental activism. The principle for the proper relationship between good law and a good culture of building, therefore, is neither that there should be *no* governmental regulation, nor that there should be *extensive* governmental regulation. It is rather that there should be *good* governmental regulation, determination of which is a matter of prudential judgment that includes acknowledgement and respect for the authority of subsidiary private and public social institutions.

Does living in a traditional town or neighborhood mean I have to give up my car or despise automobiles?

No. A traditional town or urban neighborhood is by definition a walkable and mixed-use environment. “Walkable” necessarily implies *walkability*, but it does not necessarily imply *no cars*. Living in a traditional town or neighborhood simply means that 1) you do not need a car for every task or destination of your daily life; 2) if you have a car, you possess a great convenience; and 3) the formal order of human settlements *should* be designed for pedestrians, *may* be designed to accommodate cars, but *should not* be designed for cars alone. In short, owning a car should be a convenience rather than a necessity.

Some say that living in a traditional urban environment means having to live in a high-rise or to give up having a yard. Is this true?

This is an assertion frequently heard from Libertarian critics of New Urbanism (e.g., [Joel Kotkin](#) and [Stephen Greenhut](#)); but nobody who understands traditional urbanism, New Urbanism, or the idea of a Rural-to-Urban Transect can possibly make such a claim in good faith. The short answer, therefore, is *No*. Living in a traditional urban environment *may* but does not *have to* mean, either necessarily or commonly, living in a high-rise. In some Urban Transect zones, it may mean some residents will have only a small yard, and in some cases no yard at all. But the precise point of an Urban Transect as both diagram and idea is that walkable mixed-use settlements come in a variety of densities, and can give residents a variety of sustainable urban residential choices subject to their means: with yards large or

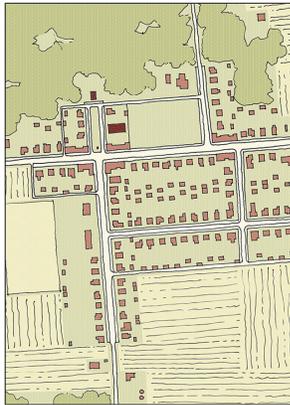
small, or without yards; but also, and critically, with access to a shared public spatial realm of streets and squares and parks, *regardless of their means*.

Aren't suburbs more family and child-friendly than cities and small towns? And aren't suburbs safer, with better school systems?

Some suburbs are safer than some city neighborhoods and small towns, and some aren't; and this almost always depends upon the presence or absence of strong, virtue-inculcating, mediating structures and associations, especially strong families and religious institutions. Likewise, the availability of good schools—including school choice, especially for poor families—is critical for any healthy small town or urban neighborhood. But is there something inherent in the physical organization of suburbia that makes single-use zoned suburbs safer for children than small town and city mixed-use neighborhood networks of streets and blocks? Perhaps, but not necessarily: and [probably not](#). What we know is that in sprawl suburbs, unlike small towns and city neighborhoods, children must be driven virtually everywhere, and lead a more dependent if not more sheltered life. Is this better for the well-being of children in the long run? Again: conservatively, and accounting for any number of pertinent variables, not necessarily.

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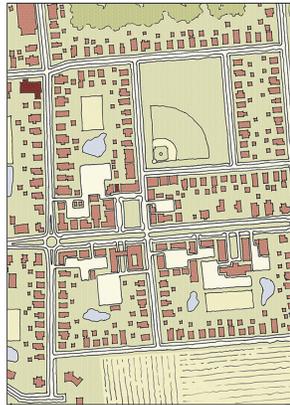
Part one of this essay has addressed some objections to and questions about traditional urbanism, and identified some practical problems associated with post-1945 sprawl development. In part two, I will address some questions about urbanism, modernity, and human nature.



HAMLET

<40 Acres

Population: 4,800-8,000/Square Mile
Density: 3-5 Dwelling Units/Acre



VILLAGE

40-640 Acres

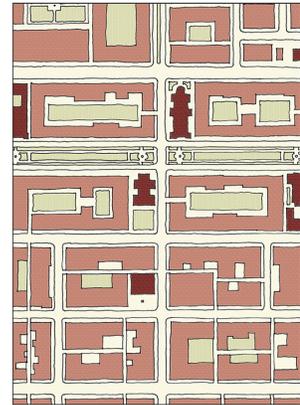
Population: 4,800-12,000/Square Mile
Density: 3-7.5 Dwelling Units/Acre



TOWN

1-4 Sq. Mi.

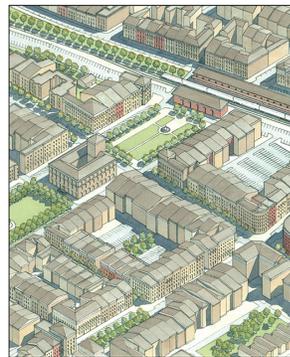
Population: 9,600-20,000/Square Mile
Density: 6-12.5 Dwelling Units/Acre



CITY (neighborhood)

> 4 Sq. Mi.

Population: 16,000-40,000/Square Mile
Density: 10-25 Dwelling Units/Acre



**“A Realist Philosophical Case For Urbanism and Against Sprawl: Part Two”
by Philip Bess / July 13, 2011**

Arguments for traditional urbanism are de facto truth claims about nature and human nature, and point to and are supported by the natural law. Why we can and should think normatively about our building patterns. Part two of two.

In part one of this series, I addressed some objections to and questions about traditional urbanism, and identified some practical problems associated with post-1945 sprawl development. In this sequel, I address some questions about urbanism, modernity, and human nature.

Law professor [Greg Sisk](#) and Libertarian transportation consultant [Randall O'Toole](#) have argued that sprawl development is, on the whole, a welcome result of the modern economy, economic growth, and the possibility of upward mobility. They argue that walkable mixed- use urbanism is a remnant of stagnant economies and a way of life that modernity has rendered obsolete. Is this true?

The urbanist contention is that human beings should make walkable mixed-use settlements because such settlements accord with our social and embodied nature and will help

us to flourish. The objection that walkable human settlements reflect historically contingent demographic patterns (and are therefore unnecessary) suggests one of two things: either 1) that modernity (more precisely: post-1945 sprawl development) has in some fundamental way changed our social and embodied human nature *for the better*; or 2) that human nature and human flourishing are not in some essential way related to our bodies. *Neither of these propositions is true.*

Let us suppose, though not too cavalierly, that mechanical means of transport are genuine goods, are not themselves a historically contingent aberration, and will be with us for the long term. Why would it still not be good to make walkable mixed-use settlements in which bicycles and cars and trains and airplanes are conveniences that supplement walking, rather than make single-use settlements that require mechanical means of transport for every one of life's everyday activities? There is nothing "obsolete"—not least economically—about beautiful, low-rise, mixed-use walkable towns like Savannah and Santa Barbara and Cooperstown and Galena; or great low-rise city neighborhoods like Boston's Beacon Hill, North End and Back Bay, or Chicago's Lincoln Park; places where even today real estate prices alone indicate their economic value. Nor was there anything economically or culturally stagnant about such medieval cities as Bruges or Florence or Oxford.

Prosperity comes and goes, and every one of these aforementioned now thriving pre-modern cities and neighborhoods have at one time been poor. But one argument for building beautiful and durable walkable mixed-use places is that such places are able to endure physically through economic cycles. They may or may not be thriving neighborhoods now, but their building and spatial infrastructure always has the potential to be renewed. In contrast, we can be certain that the poorly built subdivisions and shopping malls of suburban sprawl have no long-term economic value, because they are both poorly built and inconvenient. This being the case, perhaps we should ask ourselves: are the choices and consumer goods afforded by the modern economy worth the price of a culture in which public places are unloved, and permanent things neither have value nor are represented and embodied in a durable public realm of buildings and spaces?

Does one have to be a metaphysical realist and believe in the natural law in order to be a traditional urbanist? Or, at least, in order to have an intellectually coherent view of traditional urbanism?

My brief answer to the former question is *No*, because [there are any number of traditional urbanists who do not believe in the natural law](#); but to the latter question is *Yes* — *if*, as an urbanist, one holds that traditional urbanism is a genuine human good that really does promote human flourishing. Apart from metaphysical realism and natural law, I don't see how this latter view of traditional urbanism as *good* can be defended except in emotivist and relativist terms—in other words, as ultimately anything more than subjective preference. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many if not most of my New Urbanist colleagues disagree; but that, I think, is because most New Urbanists fail to recognize the philosophical implications of the normative character of our own arguments. How so?

Alasdair MacIntyre, meeting with a group of my graduate urban design students, observed that contemporary moral discourse, both “liberal” and “conservative,” typically if unwittingly swings back and forth between pronouncements of Kantian categorical imperatives on the one hand and the articulation of Utilitarian exceptions on the other—the latter invariably having to do with defenses of either the modern growth economy, national defense, or the protection and exercise of individual (most typically sexual) autonomy. The inherent irresolvability of the disputes that characterize modern moral discourse (whether about war, the economy, nature, or abortion) mark that discourse’s subjective and emotivist nature, and reveal it to be deeply incoherent. A more coherent moral discourse, one understood less in terms of absolute rules and subjectively determined exceptions and more in terms of character ideals, judgment and good habits, would understand that virtues, goods and the good imply (and in fact require) a teleological view of human nature—which is precisely what modern liberal culture by definition lacks.

The New Urbanist case for traditional urbanism is grounded in an implicitly substantive view of human nature, and is *prima facie* not a subjectivist argument. New Urbanists observe correctly that traditional towns and urban neighborhoods demonstrate historically that they promote human flourishing and reflect human sociability, and that such places both support and are supported by the free exchange of both ideas and material goods (including private property). For the sake of both the human animal and the natural environment that sustains human animals, New Urbanists fight for compact, walkable, mixed-use, and mixed-income communities that inhabit a public realm of plazas, squares, and pedestrian-friendly streets, in the proximity of open landscapes. The pursuit of this effort marks the Congress for the New Urbanism as a classic American Tocquevillian association, one that pursues a public good and performs a public service. Nevertheless, some New Urbanists reveal their residual modernist assumptions about human nature in their unwillingness or inability to argue that human beings have a *telos*, that the good life for human beings has a minimally substantive content necessarily related to moral and intellectual virtue, and that traditional urbanism itself calls into question the culture of modern individualism in both its “liberal” and “conservative” manifestations. This may explain the enthusiasm of some New Urbanists for expansive national and international solutions to the problems of sprawl, as if legal solutions are not merely a necessary element but also a sufficient remedy for an essentially cultural problem. This occasional enthusiasm for large-scale political prescriptions, combined with our reluctance or inability to articulate a coherent account of human nature, makes New Urbanists vulnerable to the charge that we ourselves harbor the old determinist conceit of Modernist architects and urbanists that a well-built environment will *make* people good—as if human beings are manipulable objects rather than free persons with wills of their own, capable of reason and subject to rational persuasion. Without a substantive anthropological argument to the contrary, New Urbanists should not be surprised to find ourselves recurringly subject to accusations from the Libertarian right that we are architectural determinists and social engineers---and, as tellingly, from the political left that New Urbanism panders to consumers.

This reluctance or inability of New Urbanists to articulate and embrace a substantive view of human nature and human well being contrasts markedly with the New Urbanist view of nature itself as something objective---i.e. as something real, of which human beings are part

and to which we have a certain responsibility. The Congress for the New Urbanism from its founding has promoted the beneficial environmental consequences of traditional urbanism, but this enthusiasm for a stewardship-and-conservationist ethos masks an anthropological ambivalence at the heart of New Urbanist theory. Just as New Urbanists publicly and famously take no substantive communal position on matters of architecture and construction, more quietly do we avoid a substantive communal position on matters of human sociability and human nature, including most especially the relationship between human freedom, human obligation and human well being. And yet both aesthetics and human nature are issues that New Urbanists cannot avoid forever, not least because a subjectivist view of both aesthetics and morality may be irreconcilable with an argument for the objective goods of traditional urbanism.

New Urbanist indifference to or confusion about metaphysical realism and virtue ethics notwithstanding, there are natural law inferences that can be drawn from the beliefs and behaviors even of ordinary modern emotivists, even those who imagine themselves moral relativists and multi-culturalists. For example, if one thinks adults really should take care of their children and their elderly parents; if one thinks it really is wrong to intentionally harm the innocent; if one really does think human beings best flourish in mixed-use walkable settlements, one *already* believes implicitly in the natural law. But we're talking here about deep cultural and intellectual divisions; and realistically, there is probably no reason to think that virtue ethics and natural law arguments will prevail any more quickly (or slowly) than a culture-wide normative re-establishment of traditional urbanism itself.

Finally, is there a *necessary* relationship between living in a traditional urban environment and the acquisition of those good character habits we call virtues?

This question—which also asks whether and in what way it is possible to assert truly that traditional urbanism is a genuine moral imperative—is one to which a strong declarative *No* requires immediate qualification, because even though good urbanism cannot “make people good,” it nevertheless seems true that certain kinds of environments facilitate certain kinds of behavior. Thus, for example, have Catholic teachers, parents and moralists often encouraged their charges to avoid certain environments as “proximate occasions of sin.” Can we not correctly infer there are also certain kinds of environments that may be proximate occasions of goodness? Let us grant that beautiful, traditional urban environments are themselves the *product* of communities to which certain moral and intellectual virtues are central; and, also, that such environments cannot *cause* their individual inhabitants to be virtuous. It nonetheless may be true, all things being equal, that moral and intellectual virtue is better promoted in traditional urban environments than in suburban sprawl environments.

Our everyday language makes a *prima facie* case that this is so. Human beings who are *civilized*, *urbane*, *polite*, and *polished* are being described by words more or less closely associated with Greek or Latin words for *city*; and all urban cultures from which these words were derived were walkable mixed-use settlements of streets, blocks, squares, religious and civic foreground buildings, and private background buildings. The relationship need not be

causal, but it does raise the question: Does such an environment, characterized by a compact proximity of both activities and people across classes and generations, better promote the virtues than environments lacking such characteristics? Again, without suggesting there are no virtuous persons in suburbia, nor persons deficient in virtue in traditional towns and cities (after all, our literature of virtue is full of references to *wicked cities*), let me nevertheless hypothesize that, all other things being equal, traditional urbanism better promotes the virtues than does sprawl. And here let me see if I can illuminate this point with an analogy.

Several years ago, a friend and I went to see an Illinois State High School Football quarter-final playoff game that pitted the top-ranked Chicago-city public high school against a suburban- Chicago public high school from the DuPage Valley Conference, which year-in and year-out produces at least one and sometimes as many as three teams that compete in the semi-finals of the big-school divisions, and wins a statistically disproportionate share of state championships. (In contrast, few Chicago public schools have made it past the quarter-finals for several decades.) That night, however, the very best football player on the field was from the Chicago-city public school: a 6'-5" 245-pound junior defensive end and future Division I star who seemed to spend the entire night in the suburban team's backfield. He had at least five quarterback sacks, numerous near sacks, and was in on well over half his team's tackles. He was always around the ball; he played as a man among boys. And yet the suburban team won the game—*by five touchdowns*. Here is my point: the Chicago-city public school defensive end was clearly and objectively a *good football player*; nevertheless, the football culture of the DuPage Valley Conference is clearly and objectively more conducive to producing good football teams and good football players than is the football culture of the Chicago public schools.

I am conscious of the irony that in the culture of high school football, suburban public schools are more successful at producing good football teams than are urban public schools. (Had I chosen the example of high school basketball, the urban and suburban roles would arguably be reversed.) And I grant that in contemporary American culture, it is much easier to agree upon what kind of community best produces good high school football teams and players than to agree upon what kind of community best succeeds in producing good human beings who flourish over the course of a whole life and for generations. Nevertheless, I hope this analogy helps suggest how, in traditional towns and neighborhoods, the sheer propinquity of both people and communal practices—bearing in mind that communal practices are the greenhouses of moral and intellectual virtue—make such places more conducive to human beings acquiring the virtues we all need for a good life than environments lacking such propinquity of both people and communal practices.

A colleague of mine likes to say that whatever the talent of a student, a good education in classical architecture makes good architectural design easier and bad architectural design more difficult. But what is true of architectural education in particular is also true of traditional urbanism: traditional towns and neighborhoods exist to make the good easier, and the bad more difficult. And what is true of architecture and urbanism is true of culture generally: the good is made easier by the acquisition of those good fixed character habits we call virtues, and the bad is made more difficult by the pains of a well-formed conscience. The

built environment can neither determine behavior nor cause happiness. But insofar as the built environment embodies moral intent—and it does—we err in regarding it as a matter of moral indifference. Human beings should make walkable mixed-use settlements.

Philip Bess is a Professor of Architecture at the University of Notre Dame, and a member of the Congress for the New Urbanism. These essays appeared in the July 11 and July 13, 2011 issues of the online journal Public Discourse.