DESIGN AND HAPPINESS

There is a story about the philosopher who was once asked whether in his opinion ambiguity was the foremost reality of the human condition; to which the philosopher replied "No… and Yes." The following question has been put before us: "Is design a catalyst for community?" To which my own brief and I think correct answer is: No…and Yes. But although the question posed to us refers to "design and community," I have entitled my remarks "Design and Happiness;" and I mean this as a clue to at least one direction in which I would like to point our discussion, because I think it makes no sense to consider the value of "community" apart from the relationship of community to human happiness. What I would like to do here therefore is first to "unpack" my own "no…and yes" answer to the question "Is design a catalyst for community?"---and then suggest a different way of describing the issues implicit in the question. This "different way" of describing the issues also represents a certain considered departure from positivism in both science and the art of urban design, though not from either rigorous social science or philosophical realism; and is also a direction in which I would urge theorists and practitioners of New Urbanism conscientiously to move for the sake of our own intellectual and artistic coherence.

Let me begin therefore with two related assertions: First, that good design cannot "cause" happiness, but good design can be an occasion for and manifestation of happiness. Second, that good design cannot "cause" community, but good design can both foster and be an expression of community. Now, one inference to draw from these two assertions is that the language of causality and determinism is mis-applied to design; another is that there is indeed, potentially if not actually, some relationship between design and both happiness and community—a relationship I will try to describe in greater detail shortly. But if my two opening assertions are true, how and why are they so? They are true, I would suggest, because of our nature; and this is the first big issue for us to consider: the issue of human nature.

I am acutely conscious of the delicacy of raising this issue to an audience populated in part by social scientists, in an individualist culture legitimated by a post-modern academic culture in which it is widely taken for granted that 1) human beings are social constructs; 2) that society itself is a human construct; 3) that human social forms are not "given" in nature; and 4) that "human nature" generally is much less directive of any specific human behavior than is the "second nature" of culture—which, of course, varies widely in time and place. So let me state at the outset that I myself concur with these propositions, detailed defenses of the truth of which are among the intellectual fruits of several generations of modern social science. Nevertheless, I want to distance myself here at the beginning from that thriving contemporary cultural industry that, on the basis of these often poorly comprehended propositions, denies on the one hand that there is any such thing as "human nature," and on the other hand both mandates and celebrates the post-modern cultural project of individual self-creation—a project which from a social science perspective is, of course, totally illusory. For though I take it to be true that "human nature" generally is less directive of any specific human behavior than is the "second nature" of culture, it does not follow from this that we cannot speak truly of human nature. In what follows, therefore, I want to suggest that the "social constructionist" argument (an argument perhaps most rigorously advanced by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their 1966 book *The Social Construction of Reality*) is somewhat paradoxically more intellectually congruous with certain older pre-modern views of human nature and reality than it is with the view of human nature and reality

taken by today's anti-foundational post-modernists, for which *The Social Construction of Reality* only *seems* a more obvious and logical foundation [sic].

The Aristotelian-Thomist Natural Law Tradition

One of these older pre-modern traditions is the tradition of Aristotelian-Thomist natural law theory, that I will hereafter simply refer to as the Aristotelian tradition;[1] and as I move now to a consideration of design and human happiness from the perspective of that tradition I am moving quite deliberately from social science to philosophy. The social sciences by their very nature cannot address such primary philosophical questions as What is real? How do I know? and What is the best way to live? Its concerns are rather more modest, essentially descriptive. Philosophy on the other hand---or at least philosophical realism---cannot address these aforementioned questions in disregard of the empirical observations of scientists. And so it is important to note at the outset that contemporary Aristotelians make philosophical arguments about human nature and the good life for human beings not in disregard of but rather informed by and open to social scientific perspectives, and indeed science in general. I would go so far as to say that the Aristotelian natural law tradition, far from being superceded by contemporary phenomenological sociology has rather been deepened by it; and that Berger and Luckmann's own work is implicitly Aristotelian, not only in its scientific methodology, but even also in some of Peter Berger's subsequent ventures as an "amateur" into the disciplines of theology and political theory.

So what does the contemporary Aristotelian natural law tradition, deepened by the contributions of the social sciences, have to say about human nature? From a stance I would characterize philosophically as realist but not essentialist—the better to distinguish it from the Platonist tradition that is realist *and* essentialist—the Aristotelian tradition contends first that nature exists independently of human beings; that human nature is part of nature; that human nature is (and can only be) defined teleologically with reference to the end or purpose of a human life; and that it is part of human nature to make culture, including physical culture made from found nature transformed by human efforts into cultural artifacts. It affirms moreover that human beings are by nature social; and that different cultures are properly understood as the social and historical forms of individual and communal human aspirations for, and understandings of, the very best kind of life. The cultivated landscape, buildings, and cities are, in turn, the physical and spatial forms of culture. Arts such as agriculture, architecture, and city making are therefore cultural interventions in nature, but are also themselves in some sense natural. Indeed, it is in this sense that Thomas Aquinas meant that reason is the tool with and by which man (male and female) participates in nature; and that art is "reason in making." It is also this sense in which Aristotle meant that "art imitates nature," i.e., the human artist acts towards his or her desired ends in a manner analogous to the way nature acts towards her ends; and human beings do so owing to our peculiar place in nature as the "rational animal."

Now, such a view of human nature seems to me entirely consonant with contemporary social constructionist views of the human being as both a producer and a product of culture. And clearly, if it is in our nature to make culture, this has implications for the

[1] Technically speaking there is no "natural law" theory in Aristotle; but the very sophisticated natural law theory of Thomas Aquinas is grounded in both Aristotelian epistemology and anthropology, including the centrality of virtues to the good life for human beings and the city as the foremost community that exists for the sake of the good life.

place of design in achieving human happiness. Where the Aristotelian natural law tradition parts company from the post-moderns is in its philosophical insistence that in spite of the variety of human cultures empirically available to us in the world, there is really only one way for human beings to live a good life, to be happy, to fulfill our nature. Admittedly, there are different forms in and through which this one way of being happy can and does occur; but the claim of the Aristotelian tradition is that the essential outline of human happiness is everywhere the same. It is therefore possible from within this tradition to make such elementary but important philosophical distinctions as between good and bad, and between better and worse ways to live, with intellectual honesty and in good faith. Moreover, the Aristotelian natural law tradition makes analogous claims in the realm of aesthetic judgment, a subject to which I will return later.

Happiness and Moral Virtue

In speaking of happiness as it is understood within the Aristotelian natural law tradition, it may be useful first to look at the Greek word *eudaimonia*, which is the word typically translated into English as "happiness." *Eudaimonia* has a somewhat different connotation than our word "happiness," insofar as the former term refers not to some temporary emotional state, but rather to a state of being well, and doing well in being well, over the course of a lifetime. In the natural law tradition if one is "happy," one is by definition living or has lived a good life; and it is in terms of "the good life" that the tradition typically speaks of and around the issue of happiness.

On the substance of "the good life" the tradition is quite clear: the good life for individual human beings is the life of individual moral and intellectual virtue (or *excellence*) lived with others in communities. Aristotle himself characterized the four components of the good life as good health, sufficient wealth to satisfy our bodily needs, good habits, and good fortune. Of these four—health, wealth, good habits, and good fortune—the most important are good habits, both because only good habits are entirely within the agency of the human person to achieve, and because good habits can enable a person both to better achieve health and / or wealth *and* to better endure ill health, poverty, or misfortune. And by "good habits" the Aristotelian tradition is referring specifically to moral and intellectual virtue.

It is critical here to note the importance of both moral *and* intellectual excellence, as well as the distinction between them; for I think they provide us with a clue to how happiness both is and is not related to design. Consider first the subject of moral excellence.

By "moral excellence" I mean character habits such as courage, temperance, justice, friendship, patience, magnanimity, good judgment, faith, hope, and love. Now the relationship of these to human happiness is a huge subject, absolutely central to the natural law understanding of the good life. I have addressed this subject at greater length elsewhere,[2] and here can only mention it in passing. Suffice it to say that the natural law claim is simple: that a human being will live a better life if he or she is habitually courageous rather than habitually cowardly; habitually just rather than habitually unjust; prudent rather than foolish; generous rather than miserly; hopeful rather than despairing; loving rather than indifferent, etc etc. The acquisition of many or most of these virtues sounds easier to attain than it actually is; natural law theory simply

[2] See especially chapter 2 here, originally published as "Virtuous Reality: Aristotle, Critical Realism and the Reconstruction of Architectural and Urban Theory" in *The Classicist, Volume 3* (1996): pp.6-18.

maintains that it is necessary to acquire many or most of them if one is to live a good life, i.e., if one is to be happy.

Now here it seems to me quite clear that if you lack these moral excellences, design cannot make you happy. Some well designed thing or place may indeed be the bright spot of your day; but if you are, say, habitually resentful rather than grateful, you may take less pleasure in good design than it warrants; or may not give it sufficient notice; or *in extremis* may even be inclined to damage or destroy it, as did that poor soul several years back who took a sledge hammer to Michelangelo's *Pieta*. But ultimately, even if good design brings you occasional or recurring pleasure, if you are seriously deficient in moral excellence, and if the Aristotelian natural law understanding of nature and human nature is correct, good design cannot make you happy.

Happiness and Intellectual Virtue

The relationship of design to intellectual excellences is somewhat more complex. Aristotle divided intellectual excellences into two broad categories, Science and Art. The former referred to disciplines requiring theoretical knowledge, such as mathematics; the latter referred to disciplines requiring productive knowledge, such as shoemaking or cooking. Among the arts there were further sub-categories: useful arts, such as carpentry or metallurgy; cooperative arts, such as agriculture and medicine; and fine arts, such as sculpture and music (parenthetically, architecture, urban design, and historically even engineering would by this typification seem to possess aspects of all three kinds of art). Again, I will return later to the subjects of both art and aesthetics.

As cumbersome as some of these categories may seem today, we must not allow them to obscure what the tradition is saying: viz., that individual human well-being (including the development of moral virtue) is intrinsically related to knowing and participating and striving for excellence in various scientific, artistic, and even athletic disciplines—which I cannot emphasize too strongly are *communities*, i.e., groups of persons who pursue a common purpose or purposes. It may be odd to us to think of music or basketball or chess or physics as examples of "intellectual virtue;" or to reconsider seriously the pep talks we used to get from our football coaches or piano teachers that playing football or the piano tests and builds character. But this is in fact exactly what the tradition is saying: that an essential component of the good life for individual human beings is participation in such activities, and that such activities are by their very nature communal and often trans-generational. Thus, even though the essential structure of the good life is the same for every human being, there is in fact a difference between living a good life as a dancer, or an actor, or a chef, or a nurse, or a rabbi, or a baseball player; and these differences are precisely the differences in the moral and intellectual excellences required for successful participation in these activities.

Nevertheless, whatever the differences peculiar to any particular activity, the tradition contends that individual happiness is impossible apart from the duties and privileges that attend a variety of specific human practices, relationships, and roles. It is only in such roles and within such relationships that, over a lifetime, an individual will discover or fail to discover the meaning of, and achieve or fail to achieve, his or her well-being. Such relationships are communal insofar as their individual members seek a common end; and will vary in size depending upon the specific goods and ends for which each community exists. For the Aristotelian tradition however, the foremost human community was the city, understood best perhaps as a community of communities the

chief end of which is the best possible life for its citizens; a community that like any community requires of its members certain virtues for the achievement of its ends and for the creation and maintenance of its multiple and overlapping environmental, economic, moral, and formal orders. This understanding of the city remains central to the Aristotelian tradition incidentally, albeit in my view under-emphasized; and I think its implications for the theory and practice of New Urbanism warrant much more attention then they have to date received.

Before turning again to the issue of design, I want to make one other observation about human nature, or at least about human desire: an observation once again consistent with the Aristotelian understanding of ourselves as 1) *rational,* and 2) *animals*. From all appearances human beings desire not only communal belonging but also individual freedom. These are both great goods, consistent with our dual and composite nature; and not necessarily in conflict if one can learn to properly order one's desires, arguably the foremost task of living well. Nevertheless, their potential for conflict is both obvious and constant. Again, I don't have time in this context to explore this complicated issue in any depth. But unquestionably, human beings want and find it good to belong. And unquestionably human beings want and find it good to be free. Different cultures place different emphases upon these goods, and exhibit corresponding cultural markers, not least in the physical environment. Twenty years---1980 to 2000---passed between my first two visits to Italy, where one can see some of the most beautiful landscapes and cities on earth; but where sprawl is now happening and the Italians are in love with everything American, and where I passed the turn of the millennium in the half-full cathedral square of the small and magical Umbrian hill town of Todi, and where they passed out free champagne and shot off fireworks to the oddly charming sound of several bad local rock and roll bands. Scarcely a week later I was back in the land of the free and the home of cheap gas and inexpensive Coca-Cola, at a conference convened to think about how and whether we might be able to create (or recreate) places that promote community, and also the occasion for these remarks. My sense of this juxtaposition is that these experiences perhaps say something about a certain essential incompleteness in our collective and individual sense of well-being that may in fact be endemic to the human condition. Our desires are infinite; we, alas, are not.

Happiness and Design

Turning again to design and happiness, let me recall my opening assertions: that good design cannot "cause" happiness, but good design can be an occasion for and manifestation of happiness; and that good design cannot "cause" community, but good design can promote and be an expression of community. If the position I have laid out here is true, then we should recognize that although design cannot create either moral virtue or community, design is clearly an aspect of intellectual excellence insofar as it is intrinsic to art in the broadest sense. Therefore, given even all the complexities and qualifications of my argument thus far, we can say with both philosophical confidence and the confidence born of common experience that design can go a long way towards making its *makers* happy. The question for us is whether good architecture and urban design can also be the occasion of or contribute to the well-being of others, especially to specific communities (including cities) that grow and gather around a place? But this is a no-brainer: of course it can, and it does. At issue is the nature of design's effects, and also I think the origins of its effectiveness, which once again---if we think about it---are related to certain virtues. If I may paraphrase G.K. Chesterton here: a great city may be loved because it is great; but it first became great because it was loved. The original agency, in other words is not the physical and spatial form shaped by the designer, but

rather the moral form (within both the designer and the community within which the designer works) that shapes the design. At best the design of a town plan or a building creates a framework or a place for the recognition by a community that it is or is becoming a community--a process that necessarily can only occur over time and time's accumulated births and baptisms, pre-school play sessions and confirmations, bar and bat mitzvahs, little league and soccer seasons, graduations and marriages, personal and professional successes and failures, unexpected tragedies and illnesses, the death of parents and on occasion the even more heart-breaking death of children, the memorialization of persons both great and humble, and the grand gestures of hope for and generosity to the unborn undertaken by those who are living. In even the best of places, community requires both time and care; and the best of places are themselves products of time and care.

Aesthetic Experience and the Sacred

I'd like to conclude with a broader consideration of art within the Aristotelian natural law tradition, including a consideration of aesthetics---the logic of which in my opinion unavoidably points us even beyond the realm of natural law theory and into the realm of theology.

In this natural law view of human nature and human making, the historic triad of Goodness, Beauty, and Truth relate directly to and are understood to be the highest ends of the human capacity for acting, for making, and for knowing, respectively. In this view, "art" is a generic term for *all* the products of human making—as is evident in the relationship between the word "art" and the words "artifact," "artisan," "artifice," and "artificial." However, as I mentioned earlier, distinctions routinely have been made between various arts: liberal and servile arts, cooperative arts, useful and fine arts, etc. "Beauty" in particular has been a if not the primary objective of the fine arts, and begs a definition. (Incidentally, it is not coincidental that "beauty" is for all practical purposes a meaningless category of modernist aesthetic theory.)

Let me refer to three more-or-less famous and related philosophical considerations of beauty; and suggest that they are or should be again central to traditional and New Urbanist architectural and urban discourse. The first is Mortimer Adler's characterization of Aristotle's thoughts about beauty, in which he says that we commonly tend to characterize something as beautiful if it is well made and if it gives us pleasure. I would suggest that this definition is helpful but insufficient; but that it does correctly establish an important objective criterion for beauty, viz. that the beautiful object is well-made. It is likewise true that if we recognize something as beautiful it will please us. But it is also true that a beautiful thing may fail to please us due to some defect in ourselves.

The second consideration of beauty, well known to architects, is Leon Battista Alberti's; who in the 15th century defined beauty as "the reasoned harmony of all the parts within whatsoever subject it appears, such that nothing could be added, diminished, or altered, but for the worse." This further elaboration upon and extension of Aristotle's / Adler's points about craftsmanship and pleasure remains both useful and valid, not least because Alberti's definition does *not*, or at least *need not*, presuppose a static realm of beautiful and eternal Platonic forms. To put this another way: whether or not Alberti himself was a Platonist, there is nothing in this definition that requires belief in a single essential set of ideal forms---philosophically, Alberti's definition is realist but not essentialist. In other words, like the Aristotelian characterization of the good life, the Albertian definition of beauty does *not* say that beauty is completely subjective, but it

does suggest that beauty's defining characteristics are not necessarily limited to a single set of fixed forms. It also suggests that beauty is *relational*. Equally important, Alberti's definition allows one to make necessarily inexact but still more-or-less valid judgments that something is objectively beautiful, or ugly, or somewhere in between.

The third consideration of beauty is that of Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, who anticipated Alberti in his (Aquinas's) characterization of beauty as demonstrating both unity and the harmony of its components; but also added that beauty manifests the virtue of "clarity," by which he meant that a beautiful object self-evidently embodies the essence of the kind of thing it is, what Aquinas called its *quiditas*. Among other things, Aquinas's considerations underscore again that in this intellectual tradition beauty, though not necessarily "fixed" for all time, is not simply in the eye of the beholder but is also to some degree a quality of the object itself.

Now, as a practical matter, New Urbanists routinely are upbraided by their critics for making buildings and town plans that are not "authentic." But this aesthetic judgment comes from the heart of a modernist and historicist view of reality that has always been problematic, but today is increasingly recognized as intellectually and spiritually bankrupt. Virtually no modernist or post-modernist today in good faith believes in the *zeitgeist*, or in an *avant garde* that is revealing the purposes of the *zeitgeist* to the rest of the world. And if they do, the *zeitgeist* they believe and proclaim is that *there is no zeitgeist*; from which it appears to follow that the new role of the would-be *avant garde* is not to lead, but rather to create novelties *a propos* of nothing. Anxiety about "authenticity"---the quintessentially modernist anxiety---therefore is (or should be) outside the discourse of traditional architecture and urbanism, the proper language of which is (or should be) the language of "craft" in the sense of "skilled artistry." Concern for the qualities of beauty I have just mentioned---for unity, harmony, quality of construction, and clarity---is more than enough with which to occupy ourselves; but this, as the late Colin Rowe once observed, would require cultivating a studied disregard of the *zeitgeist* and a more serious courting of the *heiligegeist*.

Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann conclude their book *The Social Construction of Reality* with the following words:

> Our conception of the sociology of knowledge implies a specific conception of sociology in general. It does not imply that sociology is not a science, that its methods should be other than empirical, or that it cannot be "value free." It does imply that sociology takes its place in the company of the sciences that deal with man as man; that it is, in that specific sense, a humanistic discipline. An important consequence of this conception is that sociology must be carried on in a continuous conversation with both history and philosophy or lose the proper object of inquiry. This object is society as part of a human world, made by human beings, inhabited by human beings, and, in turn, making human beings, in an ongoing historical process. It is not the least fruit of a humanistic sociology that it reawakens our wonder at this astonishing phenomenon.

This concluding paragraph locates its authors at the intellectual boundary where social science ends and philosophy begins, as it was observed long ago that "philosophy begins in wonder." But art is in the wonder business every bit as much as philosophy; and I'd like to end with just the briefest observation of an aspect of aesthetic experience,

the implications of which perhaps point beyond the order of nature that is the proper subject matter of the natural law tradition we here have been considering.

As we have seen, a consistent theme of that tradition is that the natural order is real but necessarily unfinished, in the sense that reality is never all at one time everything it can be. Gilbert Chesterton once illustrated this point with the comment that the world has a quality not unlike a box of fireworks or a packet of seeds: it's a real thing, but incomplete; it has not yet arrived at what it is ultimately going to be. Changing the metaphor (and looking more deeply at a cliché), he adds that reality is indeed unfolding; but the implication of this is that it's an unfolding of something already complete, something that is folded. That something, unknown (and in any comprehensive sense unknowable) to us, is God.

This is not the place---and I'm probably not the person---to explore at length the complex truth of Chesterton's assertion. But there is an important sense in which "ordinary" aesthetic experience in an important sense corroborates his point; and this can be illustrated both anecdotally and academically. You may have had the experience of thinking, or had some one say to you: "I've *seen* [say] the vestibule of the Laurentian Library in Florence; I *know* there's a God." And moving from the anecdotal to the academic, recalling our earlier consideration of beauty, we consistently find the idea that one of the characteristics of objects we describe as "beautiful" is their unity; which is to say their completeness, "to which nothing could be added, diminished, or altered but for the worse," as Alberti put it.[3] But *completeness* is precisely what the natural order lacks; and this is exactly why aesthetic experience has religious implications, because it seems to reveal to us a glimpse of some other order outside of nature. Not unlike language, shame, play, and humor, aesthetic experience---though it occurs within the natural order---nevertheless has some difficulty explaining itself as a strictly natural phenomenon.

But here I will stop. I love traditional cities and neighborhoods, both in general and the specific one in which I live. But I also carry around a mental image of the kind of city in which I would like to live, an image that also informs what I do in my professional life and what I teach to students. It's the mental image of a city the inhabitants and guardians of which understand and respect the cycles of nature; that in its practical pedestrian qualities is scaled to the physiology of the human person; that is economically healthy; that is more rather than less just, and more rather than less inclusive; that promotes individual freedom, respect for others, the life of the mind, and the life of the spirit; that is beautiful…

I think of this city as something like the City of God; it may even be something like the city of New Urbanism. If it is the latter, and if you share this or some similar image, I would urge you to consider that we will neither achieve it nor comprehend it with the modernist language of causality and determinism. My sense is that, fundamentally,

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[3] Recall also the essentially relational character of Alberti's understanding of beauty. I must acknowledge here what I regard as the ultimate inferiority of philosophical language to Christian sacramental language in their respective efforts to characterize beauty. I cannot think other than that genuine aesthetic experience is, even for unbelievers, an experience of God. *If* Christians have any advantage in understanding aesthetic experience, it *might* be in recognizing the unified and relational character of beauty as consonant with that Mysterious eternal unity and relational character of God as One-in-Three.

great cities have been made not to “determine behavior” or even to “create community.” We make all our cities in some better-or-worse conception of and effort to achieve the good life, but our greatest cities are products of love. They are artifacts made in imitation not only of nature (as Aristotle would have it), but even more fundamentally in imitation of the divine—what Dante called “the Love that moves the sun and other stars.” In that imitative process we create a shared world, a common realm that is---quite precisely---lovely.

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