The New Urbanism: From Aristotle and God to Baseball

Local Liberty interviewed architect and author Philip Bess on the moral, aesthetic, and political significance of the new urbanist movement. Bess is author of *Inland Architecture: Subterranean Essays on Moral Order and Formal Order in Chicago* and *City Baseball Magic: Plain Talk and Uncommon Sense about Cities and Baseball Parks*. He teaches at Andrews University; his Chicago architecture firm is Thursday Architects.

LL: Why has the New Urbanism—please define this movement—been so attractive to a fairly broad spectrum of people? What does this say about the failure of the prevalent urban architecture and planning?

PB: This is not an entirely uncontroversial definition, but New Urbanism is really nothing more than traditional urbanism advocated and pursued in the legal and cultural context of post-WWII sprawl. The essence of traditional urbanism—and inter alia, of New Urbanism—is entirely Aristotelian (in reality if not necessarily theory): the city [*polis*] is a community of communities that exists to promote the best life possible for its citizens, both individually and collectively. Hence, this view of cities assumes that the best human life necessarily entails both individual freedom and communal belonging and obligation, and recognizes both of these as goods necessary for the good life for human beings. Nevertheless, it has also been recognized that these goods also exist in tension, and each is subject to corruption: freedom can become license; communal belonging and obligation can become tyranny. So the first point about New Urbanism (in contrast to the view that has grown since the rise of the Industrial City from the mid-18th century and now prevails in much of contemporary culture) is that it views urbanism positively, as something that human beings will naturally do in order to live a good life.

The second point is that traditional urbanism has recognizable formal characteristics that are directly related to the physiology and comfort of the human person, viz.: a mix of uses—housing, commercial, civic, recreational—arranged within easy walking distance (about a half-mile diameter, which translates as a ten-minute walk from edge to edge, and a five-minute walk from center to edge) in networks of streets and blocks that form a public realm of squares, streets, and civic buildings, and a private realm of houses and commercial buildings (and frequently buildings that combine both of these private functions in one, on different floors). Such a formal environment—approximately 150 acres—is about the size of the smallest communities that Aristotle would have recognized as a *polis*; and is the size both of what we would recognize as a small town or an urban quarter or neighborhood, larger towns and cities being made up of lesser or greater accumulations of these mixed-use neighborhoods. This is the pattern of all great cities and small towns in Europe and the United States; and has its analogues in non-Western cultures as well.

New Urbanists view modern transportation technologies as extenders of the freedom of human beings, but not as replacements for the traditional mixed-use formal order of

town/neighborhood/city. Now the reality of post-WWII sprawl culture is this: that it has through its zoning ordinances and street design regulations made illegal the creation of mixed-use traditional urban environments that before 1945 were both legally and culturally normative. Thus what is new about New Urbanism is its promotion of traditional urbanism—not uninformed by the positive technological achievements of modern society—in the legal and cultural context of sprawl.

Why is this so attractive to so many people? There are no doubt many reasons; but I will suggest it is due in no small part to the fact that good traditional urban neighborhoods are both convenient and beautiful, whereas sprawl suburbs (as opposed to, say, 19th century railroad suburbs, which are formally just another version of traditional small towns) are typically both inconvenient and ugly; and that traditional urban neighborhoods really are conducive to common life and the common good, while at the same time affording individuals as much privacy and even anonymity as they like. It is freeing (and even more importantly, good) to be able to perform daily tasks in a beautiful environment that can be traversed without the necessity of an automobile for each of those separate tasks. And there is a reason why words like "civility," "polite," "polished," and "urbane" are all derived from root words meaning "city," which is that for most people throughout most of human history urban life really has been and is the way of life most conducive to human well-being.

As to what this says about the failure of modern planning: it has to be understood that modern planning is first of all a reflection of the positivist and Cartesian bureaucratic sensibilities that characterize the modern world; and second of all that it has been implemented not by market forces alone (or even primarily) but rather by post-war governmental housing and transportation policies that favored sprawl development over traditional urban development. That said, it is undeniable that these policies had and continue to have significant popular (and hence political) appeal; and I attribute this to one of the darker cultural tendencies of the general good of democratic politics, which is that democracies of their very nature tend to encourage what Tocqueville famously identified as "individualism" (of which sprawl is precisely the physical embodiment), which he correctly recognized as a corrosive threat to democracy itself; and about which I will say a little more below.

LL: Is there something peculiarly American about the New Urbanism, and how would you relate it to American political and social traditions? We certainly see architectural and design atrocities abroad—what about good ideas for us?

PB: There is in my opinion something peculiarly American indeed about New Urbanism; and it goes directly back to Tocqueville's observations about American tendencies to individualism and how Americans tend to pursue matters of the common good and in the process fight this individualist tendency: through free associations. The CNU is derided by critics from the left as tools of market interests, and by critics from the right as harbingers of Big Government; but New Urbanists are nothing if not a classic Tocquevillian association formed and impressively organized to promote the virtues of traditional urbanism. Jennifer Hurley, a fellow New Urbanist private sector planner from Philadelphia, recently described succinctly and eloquently the way that New Urbanists work:

"New Urbanists have developed a methodology for dealing with obstacles: co-opt specialized fields, look to history, and develop new solutions . . . .

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When New Urbanists had trouble getting good places built because of rules by traffic engineers, they learned basic traffic engineering, found sympathetic traffic engineers to become New Urban road design experts, and re-wrote the standards. When New Urbanists were disappointed in the quality of built places, they looked to history and renewed the practice of using pattern books to guide builders. When municipal officials refused to approve new urban developments because they did not meet zoning codes, New Urbanists developed entirely new kinds of codes."

And sociologist David Brain notes another feature of the practical consequences of New Urbanist efforts to build community consensus by means of the intensive public design workshops known among New Urbanists as "charrettes":

"[T]he New Urbanism represents a fascinating and pragmatic effort . . . to re-build the public sphere by way of re-creating the techniques of place-making. It's 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 . . . 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."

This convergence across political lines occasions interesting methodological debates among New Urbanists; but is in fact a good and salutary thing in that it underscores how New Urbanists themselves embody one of the essential features of traditional urban life, viz.: the city as a community that embraces debate about its common life as essential to the vitality to the community itself. Critics may deride New Urbanists as just another "special interest group;" but the New Urbanist point is that the city is precisely that larger community that embraces all "special interests" and attempts (literally) to civilize them.

As to "architectural and design atrocities abroad": the culture of modern architecture is largely in intellectual, academic, and professional disarray on both sides of the Atlantic; and sprawl is not one of our better American cultural exports. As a largely but not exclusively American phenomenon, New Urbanists tend to take as our preferred models for American contexts the best cities and small towns of America: Boston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Charleston, Savannah, Annapolis, Cooperstown, Nantucket, Key West, Santa Fe, Santa Barbara, etc.—though I would hasten to add that virtually any place in America that has an intact pre-1945 neighborhood or town center could serve as such a model. But the issues at stake with regard to American cultural exports (including sprawl) include not only political freedom—a great good—but also the goods (including communal goods) toward and in service to which that political freedom is to be directed. Many Americans cease our philosophical commitments with the advocacy of freedom, but we shouldn't stop there. New Urbanists are pressing the question about what really are the best ways to order the public realm; and are doing so as responsible citizens in the context of democratic political processes of self-government.

LL: What are the principal promises and pitfalls you see in the New Urbanism? Does it necessarily require more or less government regulation? What are their best ideas, their worst?

PB: The principal promise of New Urbanism is that it will succeed in helping to create a cultural (and following that a political and legal) climate for traditional urbanism in the United States. The principal pitfall is if New Urbanists think that this goal will be accomplished quickly; or if they think it can be achieved simply by making better physical environments (and a legal environment in which they are permitted), which is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for good urbanism. The danger is if New Urbanism is satisfied simply to occupy a specific market niche—which I suspect a refined and sophisticated real estate market would be only too happy to supply—and becomes just another aesthetic choice for that class of people that can afford to buy a living environment as art. This would be tantamount to a retreat from the issues of community-building and justice and environmental responsibility that are so prominent in the New Urbanists' own founding Charter.

The reality is that there is a reciprocal relationship between cultural character and the physical environment. "We shape our buildings, and then our buildings shape us," said Winston Churchill famously; and, I might add, vice versa. Sprawl is a (perhaps unintended) flower of a long modernizing cultural process that has produced great goods for the United States and the world; but a process that has also produced a kind of therapeutic individualism that formidable and sympathetic (and culturally conservative) contemporary thinkers like Philip Rieff, Alasdair MacIntyre, Christopher Lasch, Daniel Bell, and others have aptly characterized as an impossible and incoherent culture. There's no reason I can see to think that a revival of communal sensibility—and *eo ipso*, of urban culture—is not a long term cultural project that will require both all the communal cultural resources at our disposal (especially Tocquevillian/American free associations, including churches: see below) and careful attention to that balance between communal obligation and individual freedom that has always been the ideal of the mainstream Western political tradition.

Regarding the need for more or less government regulation: the paradox of the New Urbanist political agenda—and given our current cultural situation, it's a necessary paradox—is that the urban and architectural order of the great cities of the past was largely a consequence of shared cultural habits of city-building. There were laws and codes; but these tended to be minimal. Those traditional city-building cultural habits have been lost, and replaced by a modernist/positivist/ bureaucratic structure of law that over the past two-to-three generations itself has engendered a new set of cultural habits. The paradox of New Urbanism is that what it seeks is to relearn and restore the habits of good urbanism; but that in order to do that, it must first change the legal environment to make traditional urbanism even possible. (Again, changing the current legal environment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for good urbanism.) So the New Urbanists of necessity DO stress the need to establish a regulatory environment conducive to good urbanism. But the way that New Urbanists in fact press this agenda is not in the "top down" manner that its critics claim, but in fact is exactly the opposite. The New Urbanists, primarily through the charrette process, seek above all to build local consensus in specific places on behalf of good urbanism; and then to fight the larger existing prohibitive legal structure with specific alternatives for which there exists a significant political constituency—i.e., New Urbanism is arguably democracy in action! And if New Urbanists also succeed in getting some larger regulatory framework changed to become more sympathetic to traditional urbanism? Well, that too seems to me part of the workings of democracy, and consistent with the recognition that what new Urbanists are trying to change is the culture.

As to the best ideas of New Urbanism? Well, as a traditional urbanist (and looking at the CNU Charter), I have yet to see the CNU as an organization officially embrace a bad idea; and they have a very good track record of either fashioning good responses to the arguments of their critics, or of embracing those arguments and incorporating them into their own critique of the culture of sprawl. As to the worst of their ideas? There is a kind of default secularist liberalism evident among some my urbanist confreres; but this seems to me more attributable to the mental habits common to

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those on the left than to anything inherent in New Urbanism itself.

LL: What should be the place of churches and other religious institutions in New Urbanist thinking?

PB: I think religious institutions should be of great importance to New Urbanism as part of a vital civic realm. The formal order of towns and cities also manifest and promote both a moral order and an economic order, so churches clearly have an interest in the form of cities and a potentially important role to play in the revival of traditional urbanism. It is worth noting that that New Urbanists derive their ideas about public space and formal order in large part from traditional cities in which churches and their ancillary institutions have been key players. Church communities continue to erect buildings—for worship, for education, for health care, for dwelling—that are potentially important components of traditional neighborhoods. Moreover, churches are a kind of community in which at least in principle (unlike suburbia) membership is not primarily a function of class or age. Religious communities therefore would seem to have much to offer the New Urbanist enterprise out of their own specific intellectual and spiritual traditions—not least (in the case of Judaism and Christianity) a serious and sophisticated view of human nature and human community, a pastoral mandate to rich and poor, and (in the case of Christianity) a long history of urban and architectural patronage.

At the same time, the lessons about place and character that the New Urbanists are relearning are lessons that many religious communities also need to relearn. All too often religious communities unthinkingly comply with the cultural presuppositions of suburban sprawl. This compliance is evident in new religious buildings located in the midst of large surface parking lots; in the frequent attempts by older neighborhood churches or synagogues to tear down adjacent buildings to provide parking for a suburban constituency; in well-meaning but misconceived programs that create housing for elderly or low-income persons as concentrated enclaves rather than components of walkable mixed-use neighborhoods; and in their almost complete indifference to the aesthetics of a shared public realm.

The First Amendment guarantees of nonestablishment and free exercise have historically provided ample room for physical expressions of religious faith in the civic realm; and to the extent that New Urbanists are serious about the trans-generational and inclusive character of cities as an ideal, religious institutions should be seen and should see themselves as allies.

LL: The EPA has an office of "Smart Growth." Good or bad idea?

PB: This is a tough one. Why the EPA rather than the Department of the Interior or HUD? The Charter for the New Urbanism in its first article says that "The Congress for the New Urbanism views disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge."

So implicit in the New Urbanist view of things is that the bureaucratic division of these issues is an inadequate response to the inherent inter-related complexity of the problems. That said, I think New Urbanists are generally happy to leverage whatever kind of political influence they can in order to forward their agenda.

I am not enough of a scientist or ecologist to claim competence on issues such as "environmental protection" or the virtues of biodiversity. New Urbanists are adamant in opposing radical environmentalist suggestions or claims that all species have rights except human beings. But although New Urbanists are interested above all in creating human habitats, they recognize that human beings have an interest in not fouling the natural environment; an interest in environmental "sustainability' if you will. And there is a clear potential convergence of Conservationist and New Urbanist agendas in this respect: preservation of the natural and/or agricultural landscape is better promoted by compact human settlements with distinct boundaries between the settlement and the landscape (i.e., by traditional towns and cities) than by suburban sprawl; and the former are also both more convenient for their inhabitants and generally more attractive places to live. This raises the issue of to what extent it should be public policy to promote traditional urbanism in lieu of sprawl (and vice versa); and at what levels of government such public policy should be pursued.

At present, it would be a major achievement for the New Urbanists to be able to compete on a level legal playing field; and most New Urbanist objectives are pursued at local rather than state or federal levels of government. But there are major issues—open land conservation and transportation (whether cars or alternatives such as rail) in particular—that are at least regional and arguably national in scope. I am as occasionally frustrated by bureaucratic administration as anybody; and I'm willing to entertain alternative suggestions for addressing at regional and national levels issues pertaining to the common good. But there are issues—and land use issues are among them—that do pertain to "the general welfare," and that therefore need to be identified and addressed as such. Should that be done through the EPA? I don't know . . . .

LL: Philip, you have written quite a bit about baseball stadiums. Is the desire for old-style baseball parks (Jacobs Field, Coors Field, and Camden Yards, for example) related to New Urbanism?

PB: I think so, but only indirectly. I've tried for almost twenty years (and with only varying degrees of success) to use baseball parks to make an argument on behalf of architecture and urbanism. The argument goes something like this: the primary symbolic import of architecture is not as an emblem of its "age" or its structural "honesty," but rather as a symbol of its commissioning institution; and ultimately, of the legitimate authority of the community represented by that institution. I've chosen to focus upon ballparks as an example of this once intuitively understood but now largely forgotten sensibility because there truly is a "community of baseball" of which baseball parks are and remain tangible architectural symbols. Nevertheless, the community of professional baseball is now in my opinion every bit as disarrayed as the community of architecture; and stadiums have become weapons wielded by the professional sports industry to extort public monies that are justified by both the sports industry and public agencies by appeals to what remains of this communal sensibility about and affection for baseball and other sports.

That's my one-paragraph critique of the stadium boom of the fifteen years. To the extent that stadiums such as Camden Yards, Jacobs Field, and Coors Field are located in urban rather than suburban locations, I think this is an improvement over the generation of stadia that were built in the 1960s and 70s. But there are two huge differences between the former and the ballparks such as Wrigley Field and Fenway Park that they are supposedly emulating. First, Wrigley and Fenway are both much smaller in scale (and hence more intimate) than the newest generation of urban stadia. Second (and more importantly), Wrigley and Fenway are located in traditional mixed-use neighborhoods, whereas the new downtown stadia are located where they are to be a destination component of a downtown "entertainment zone." In other words, the former were (and are) components of traditional urban neighborhoods. The latter still reflect the suburban cultural bias that cities are good

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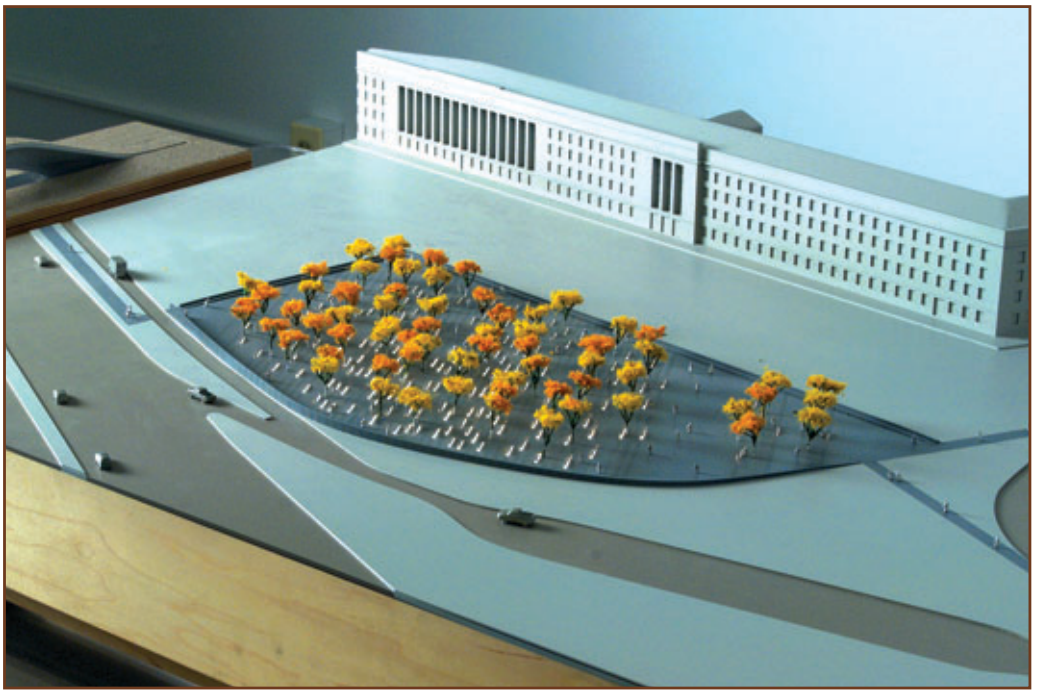
Postmodernism at the Pentagon

by Elliott Banfield



Is George W. Bush a postmodernist? Judging by the September 11 memorial planned for the Pentagon, the answer, sadly, is yes.

According to Julie Beckman, one of the memorial's designers, September 11, 2001 was a unique day in American history, so her design should likewise be unique. And it will be. A two-acre plot will be carved out of a parking lot: onto this area will be planted 75 maple trees. So far so good. There will be no grass, however. Gravel instead. And the memorial? A scattering of 184 aluminum "benches," each with halogen lights that will somehow illuminate at night pools of water that will be located under each bench. Why 184? Because that's the number of people who died—minus the hijackers, of course. The name of a victim will be inscribed on each bench. So one can rest one's behind on the person's tombstone, as it were, and contemplate the profound lack of significance of it all.

In the battle of the giants versus the gods, the giants have won. Note how every element of the plan establishes the particular at the expense of the universal:

1. September 11 was unique, unrelated to any other day, or to history in general. And therefore, according to the historicist way of thinking, it calls for a unique design, unlike anything conceived before. (Although the idea of benches bears a suspicious resemblance to the chairs of the Oklahoma City memorial.) The insistence on the particular rules out representations of the ideal: hence the rejection of sculpture, military insignia, or any elements associated with classical art, which were the reliable standbys in earlier, less enlightened times. Architecture, bereft of its precedents, ceases to be a profession. The architect becomes an "artist," a person who is admired by all for his uniqueness and creativity—i.e., his nuttiness.
2. The memorial is not dedicated to a group of people sharing a human nature, but to scattered individuals, isolated in death as they were in life. (That these people, as individuals, will be forgotten in the course of a few decades does not deter the business of tagging each bench with the name of a particular person.)
3. Because there is no axis of symmetry and no focal point of interest, each visitor will experience the memorial from his unique point of view. The person who comes to mourn and the person who comes to eat a ham sandwich will be equally welcome.

Most disturbing about this work is its location. When a postmodern artifact finds its way into some fashionable apartment or some white-walled gallery, where everyone is speaking French, one can shrug it off. But when it's placed in front of an American public building, with the intention of articulating the significance of a great historical event, the alarm bells ring. The technicians in our military headquarters are (let us hope) good at their work; but so were Hitler's men. Unless wise and good leaders direct our generals, we are lost. Postmodernism, which denies truth, cannot be the basis of a wise and good regime. Yet, with the tacit approval of the President of the United States, one of its emblems is now destined for the Pentagon.

Back in 1850, the United States faced a crisis greater than that of September 11. The North and the South were at odds over the question of slavery. The future of the Union was in doubt. A compromise was worked out, one that postponed the Civil War for a while. America celebrated by extensively rebuilding its Capitol. A great dome, which is also a great symbol, was designed as its final embellishment. This dome should remind us of a time when our art and our politics complemented one another. A time, sadly, far off.

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places in which to be entertained, but only poor people and chumps would actually live there. But I take it as evidence of the truth of the New Urbanist thesis that 1) Wrigley and Fenway arguably remain the two most popular venues not only in baseball but in all of professional sports; and 2) the value of residential and commercial real estate in their neighborhoods is very high and continues to appreciate. Good urban neighborhoods are expensive; and the reason is because people like living in them. The way to make traditional urbanism less expensive is to make it less rare.

LL: Thanks very much, we look forward to future contributions to *Local Liberty*.

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