Church Life Journal

A Journal of the McGrath Institute for Church Life

The Architecture of an Urbanist Natural Law Principle [Bess Preferred Title: **Nature, Cities and *Laudato Si'***]

by Philip Bess

May 06, 2021

The encyclical *Laudato Si'* locates itself within the tradition of modern Catholic Social Teaching begun by Leo XIII's 1891 *Rerum Novarum*, the first of a succession of papal encyclicals both occasioned and necessitated by the rise and reverberations of modernity. *Modernity* in this context denotes the ongoing worldwide transformations wrought by the industrial revolution that in turn has precipitated not only various political revolutions *and* the sexual revolution, but also a global environmental crisis that is the specific focus of *Laudato Si'*. Pope Francis is adamant about their interrelationship, repeating throughout that in both the natural environment and the man-made world, "everything is connected." Early on he cites his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI, who has contended that both the natural environment and the human social environment have been damaged by an erroneous understanding of human freedom as limitlessness,

> Where we ourselves have the final word, where everything is simply our property and we use it for ourselves alone. The misuse of creation begins when we no longer recognize any higher instance than ourselves, when we see nothing else but ourselves (§6).

The idea of both nature and human nature as *creation* is of course critical. Consistent with scripture and tradition, supported by arguments drawn from both reason and revelation, the fundamental anthropological assumption of *Laudato Si'* is that the human being is most truly understood as an

intermediate being, both part of and transcending the natural order. This mediating status affords human beings both objective privileges and objective obligations of stewardship, but a strong and pervasive obstacle hampers our stewardship. Francis writes:

> *The creation accounts in the book of Genesis . . . suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin . . . our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations (§66).*

To say that human beings are part of the natural order is to say we are a certain kind of animal—classically, a kind of animal that in different circumstances routinely employs productive, practical and theoretical reason to *participate* in nature. Part of that participation entails mortal competition with other living things, of some of which we are eaters and to others of which we are food. But whatever else human beings are—begetters and conceivers; storytellers; wonderers; truth seekers—we are also *artisans*, always acting upon the natural order by and within which we are both sustained and constrained.

We err in imagining either nature or man to be complete, err again in imagining either nature or man simply benign. Human wellbeing both individual and communal requires us to use nature judiciously, to understand nature well, and to intervene in nature cautiously. At the same time, our too often too-dimly-perceived divine vocation as stewards challenges us to act upon and behave toward nature generously. Let no one suggest it is an easy task to be a good intermediate being!

Our capacities include both the ability to improve nature and the ability to spoil nature—and *eo ipso* ourselves—but the very language of "improvement" and "spoliation" implies a source of value that can only come from outside nature itself, an implication graspable by unaided reason but arguably better elucidated by Christian revelation. Human flourishing requires us to understand and respect simultaneously the nature within which we are embedded, the reality of nature within ourselves, and the nature of reality beyond ourselves.

The good news of the Christian gospel is that in Jesus Christ the ruptures to creation caused by sin can be healed, including ruptures in our relationship both to one another and to the natural order of which we are part; and that by turning to God and seeking his help, we are able with divine aid to better fulfill the stewardship responsibilities that in the modern era we have largely neglected or forgotten.

"Grace perfects nature" the Church teaches, not thwarting nature's inherent character and constraints, but rather bringing nature to its proper completion—perhaps, as best we can imagine from what we see and what has been revealed to us, a New Eden that somehow preserves both the wonders of a pre-

historic divinely created nature and the lush landscapes cultivated by human beings ("corn waving in the valleys, meadows green with grass and rich with many-colored flowers, fertile glades and hilltops shaded by forests" per St. Basil of Caesarea), both crowned by the heavenly city, New Jerusalem "coming down . . . prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."

Neither being nor wanting to appear indifferent to the future of the planet or the human race as a whole, nor minimizing the extent and requirements of our collective human work "here below," I descend from these heights to don my architecture-and-urbanism subsidiarity hat and continue with some specific thoughts about an integral human ecology at a scale less-than-global, less-than-national, but greater-than-a-building: viz., the scale of an integral *local* human ecology, the scale of cities and their adjacent landscapes. There is a way of thinking about the mundane character of mundane cities—older than but first articulated systematically by Aristotle—that identifies cities as the primary locus of human flourishing, a way of thinking the Church inherited then elevated to dimensions both eschatological and sacramental via the book of *Revelation* and Augustine's *City of God*.

Over centuries, this elevation reverberated throughout western culture in worship, music, poetry, the visual arts, morality, law, with reciprocal material reverberations in cities (including both buildings and what was once called *political economy*). I want to touch briefly upon earthly cities and *beauty*, and earthly cities and *justice*, not least because today we do not generally think about contemporary city-making in terms of either. The themes of both *Laudato Si'* and its predecessor encyclicals suggest we should.

Understanding any city entails recognizing it on the one hand as a collective human *artifact*, and on the other hand as something *natural* for human beings to make. Any city, as a natural human artifact, must also be understood in terms of several necessary, inter-related, and reciprocal "orders." A city always and everywhere is simultaneously a *demographic* order (i.e., its people, one of the city's two essential material causes); an *environmental* order (cities being the primary way human animals occupy some specific natural landscape); an *economic* order (the way the city's residents produce and exchange material goods); a *moral* order (including both laws that constrain its inhabitants and good life character ideals that inspire them); and finally a *formal* order (the city's patterns and dispositions as a physical artifact—its other essential material cause—that also signifies in physical form the other orders identified above). In addition, prior to the advent of modernity cities were also understood in whole or in part to exist within, represent, and participate in [a larger *sacred* order]—a sensibility that diminishes as modernity and autonomous individualism advance, and virtually absent from the suburbs and hyper-modern global cities of today (to their detriment).

The formal order of pre-modernist cities, neighborhoods, towns, and villages is now a body of design expertise belonging to a minority of architects and patrons of a certain formal education; but also appealing to a [wider audience] of [lay people] possessing a rough common sense epistemological

disposition to regard beauty as an objective aspect of reality. What are the basic elements of good pre-modernist urban form? In the absence here of *images* of such urban form allow me to commend the opening scenes from three Woody Allen movies: *Manhattan*, [1979], *Midnight in Paris* [2011], and *To Rome With Love* [2012]. These are not perfect films—and compelling cinematic scenes can also be assembled to illustrate good urbanism at the scale of smaller cities and towns, as e.g., here—but the opening scene of each, as well as the cities they depict, are made with love and cover a multitude of sins.

Let me mention four elements, prefaced by observations that *urban life* (so characterized from *The Politics* to the present) occurs at less-dense-to-more-dense population and building densities; at scales ranging from villages-and-towns-in-a-landscape to large cities comprised of distinct neighborhoods; their formal order prior to WWII typically entailing elements that converge to make good cities not only beautiful but also resilient, environmentally sustainable, and (I daresay) "creation-friendly":

1. Grounded in our anthropological condition as social beings who are also *walkers*, such settlements locate a proximate mix of quotidian and ceremonial life activities within pedestrian proximity. Note also that in today's world this mixed-use walkability is not just a personal convenience, but is accompanied by various other practical consequences, such as decreasing: a) the quantity of natural and agricultural landscape lost to low-density suburban development; b) the cost of suburban sanitation and federally subsidized local suburban street infrastructures; and c) the consumption of fossil fuels.
2. Pre-WWII human settlements generally display an outdoor public realm of hierarchical and discrete spaces (defined by buildings, trees, or both in combination), most prominently as adorned *plazas* and *squares*, *streets* and *avenues* and *boulevards*. Taken all together this aspirationally beautiful spatial environment at its best has been understood as a common good belonging to rich and poor alike.
3. Pre-WWII settlements display a loose but definite hierarchy of public and private *building types*, with civic and religious buildings most prominent, private residential and commercial buildings less so.
4. Many if not most such settlements are made with locally sourced and low-embodied-energy building materials employed in conditions not far removed (literally and figuratively) from their natural state—think stones, stone blocks, sand, slate tiles, fired clay bricks and tiles, wood timbers, etc., all extracted and prepared from what is close at hand and requiring minimal transit and manufacturing costs. Taken altogether, both the character of these materials and where they come from give their cities "local color," resulting in traditional urban environments not only beautiful, durable, and resilient, but also more clearly of their immediate geographical region.

Observing these features of pre-WWII towns and cities, and the post-1945 advent, rapid spread, and consequences of the historic novelty of automobile-centered settlements, I was once so imprudent as to

hypothesize a derived but previously unarticulated natural law principle about collective human habitat (defended against objections here and here), inspired by Pope Pius XI's 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* which articulated for Catholic Social Teaching the natural law principle of *subsidiarity* in response to the contemporary rise of totalitarian states. That hypothetical natural law principle of human habitat is as follows: *Human beings should* make *walkable mixed-use settlements*.

Why is it important to identify and articulate this natural law principle? The answer to that question presumes the *common good benefits* of living in a beautiful urban environment with some mix of daily uses within walking distance. But as a natural law principle it also touches upon questions of positive law that regulate land use. *A propos* the Thomist characterization of law as *an ordinance of reason for the common good promulgated by a legitimate authority*, our culture is in such disarray that in most places in this country it is literally *illegal* to build beautiful traditional towns and city neighborhoods; and even in those places where it is possible, it is often prohibitively expensive.

Both circumstances are in part a product of a bad building culture (including architecture and planning schools); but they are also in part a product of bad positive law. In particular they are a consequence of *bad zoning law* that mandates the separation of daily uses; and *bad property tax law* that: a) punishes landowners who build on their property by taxing such buildings as improvements; b) rewards land owners who do not build on their property by *not* taxing their unimproved land; and thereby c) rewards *speculation* in land that in turn creates boom-and-bust real estate cycles that wildly distort the nature, meaning, and availability of "housing."

The fact that our current settlement patterns are shaped not only (perhaps not even primarily) by architects and urban designers thus suggests a pertinent if rarely raised question for all people of good will, but especially for Catholic theologians, philosophers, political theorists, lawyers, economists, Catholics in politics, and others who profess belief in the existence and truth of natural law: What would good positive land-use law look like that would first *allow* and then *promote* more beautiful rural landscapes, and more beautiful, convenient, and affordable towns and cities?

This is a huge question of course—a *weird* question in a cultural context of expressive individualism—both political and cultural, one that touches upon any city's deepest sense of both what it is and what it aspires to be. Moreover, addressing that question today requires doing so in a historical moment in which we are free of neither our natural creaturely finitude, nor our fallen nature, nor our present bad natural and human ecologies that make it especially hard for us to both speak and listen to one another.

Nevertheless, as Pope Francis says, everything is connected. *Laudato Si'* invites all people of good will to seriously engage the theological, anthropological, and ecological propositions therein; but those of us who are Catholics are obliged to do so. We are of course not obliged to agree with the pope in every detail. But we are rightly admonished by Francis to do our personal and collective human duties, to

trust in God, and to both look for and be Christ's presence in the world—in this time, always, our time, God's time.

EDITORIAL NOTE: This essay was a contribution to the panel "Laudato Si at 5 Years: Towards an Ecology of Culture," which took place on January 11, 2021, and was co-hosted by the Collegium Institute and the Pontifical Council for Culture.

Featured Image: Mulberry Street, New York City, c. 1900; Source: Wikimedia Commons, PD.

Posted in Pro-Life

Author

Philip Bess

Philip Bess is a Professor of Architecture at the University of Notre Dame and the principal of Thursday Associates in Chicago, a research and consulting office committed to rethinking American architecture and urbanism.

READ MORE BY PHILIP BESS

Previous Article

Thomas Pynchon's Playful Jesuitism

Next Article

Paul Kingsnorth's Green Götterdämmerung