Charter of the New Urbanism, 2nd Edition

Commentary on the Andres Duany comments on Charter Principle #25
by Philip Bess

Architecture always symbolizes power, and aspires to symbolize legitimate authority. This Iron Law covers even private buildings, but is most germane to the CNU Charter's call for important civic buildings "to reinforce community identity and the culture of democracy." Alas, *reinforcing community identity* suggests a utilitarian endeavor, itself the very bane of a beautiful civic realm. Even worse, it is likely our own *culture of democracy* itself that is responsible for our dearth of good civic buildings.

Why is it so hard to make good civic buildings in the modern world, even in those few places where architectural and artisanal skill are being revived? As Andres Duany has noted, Tocqueville, observing the practice of a young American democracy, recognized extra-governmental free associations to be necessary to democratic flourishing. But why were--why *are*--such associations necessary? They are necessary because even in the 1830s Tocqueville recognized that democratic cultures, professing to value both, would tend to emphasize equality-of-condition more than liberty, and thereby to promote a then-novel cultural phenomenon that is now triumphant. This phenomenon Tocqueville called *individualism*, a "mature and calm feeling" of self-sufficiency (and ultimately entitlement) which he feared would cause democracy to succumb to despotism if not combated by free associations.

Americans continue to associate for common causes, but that was then and this is now. Individualist self-sufficiency in contemporary consumer culture has expanded to include individualist self-expression, one consequence of which among architects (and their most elite patrons) has been a virtual moral imperative to subvert the institutions of legitimate authority that architecture--in the western tradition, *classical* architecture--has typically sought to symbolize. New Urbanists who simultaneously promote both a traditional urban spatial realm *and* modernist architecture seem blithely indifferent to the inherent contradiction of their position: if it's okay for modernist architects to subvert the symbolic content of traditional architecture, why is it not okay for modernist urbanists to subvert the symbolic content of cities by monumentalizing the non-civic? And if the New Urbanist answer to *that* question is to justify traditional urbanism in utilitarian terms, we have answered the question of why we no longer make good civic buildings, because until the modern era civic buildings were *never* justified in utilitarian terms.

I fear it's much worse than we think, and that our inability to make good civic buildings as a matter of course denotes a cultural problem that runs deep. Tocqueville argued that the individualism-countering efficacy of American associations circa 1835 depended themselves upon the strength of two other foundational institutions: the family and religion. Indeed, Tocqueville--who was enthusiastic about America's separation of religion and government--referred to religion as America's foremost *political* institution, because however disputed religious doctrine is, the practice of religion itself grounded American democracy and democratic institutions in sacred order. In modern America no such strong consensus about either the family or religion exists. Here then---wearing masks variously called Pragmatism, Utility, The Bottom Line---is the foundational reason for our collective [sic] inability to make good civic architecture: it is no longer the Good, the True and the Beautiful that are sacred but rather the Individual and his or her (limitless) Choice/s.

From within sacred order, Chesterton wrote that the surest sign of human happiness is gratitude; and noted that human beings demonstrate our happiness, our gratitude, in two different but related ways: by *lavish offering*, and by *self-restraint.* This suggests that good civic building and good urbanism may require not an expansion but rather a selective, intelligent and communally disciplined self-limitation of our choices--e.g. limited palettes of good building materials; foregoing consumerism--in service to some shared understanding of human flourishing that extends beyond ourselves and our own moment and

interests. Absent such shared cultural sensibilities, there is only so much the CNU as the CNU can do. Charter Principle #25 and Andres Duany's commentary cover all the ground that can be covered if the CNU worldview presumes New Urbanists as agents acting in indifferent nature, full of willful human beings looking to make a quick buck, building with borrowed money.

But there is another worldview that understands urbanism as a genuine good grounded in human nature, which is grounded in nature, which is grounded in sacred order. It would be good for New Urbanists to at least recognize and acknowledge the elephant in the room, which is that historically great civic architecture is an achievement of human beings understanding themselves to exist in sacred order. Better for New Urbanists to be open to the possibility that such self-understanding though not sufficient remains necessary to good civic buildings. Best of all for New Urbanists to believe it; to say it; and as (and in company with other) worshipping human beings, to do it.

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Commentary for the 2013 *Charter of the New Urbanism, 2nd Edition*

Charter Principle #25:
Civic buildings and public gathering places require important sites to reinforce community identity and the culture of democracy. They deserve distinctive form, because their role is different from that of other buildings and places that constitute the fabric of the city.

by Andrés Duany

It is surely one of the minor mysteries of modern times that civic buildings in America have become cheap to the point of squalor when they were once quite magnificent as a matter of course. Our post offices, public schools and colleges, fire stations, town halls, and all the rest are no longer honored with an architecture of fine materials, tall spaces, and grandeur of form. The new civic buildings are useful enough, but they are incapable of providing identity or pride for their communities.

Today's civic buildings tend to be less accomplished even than run-of-the-mill commercial structures. Indeed, citizens would be surprised if their local post office were as well built as a new restaurant, if the town hall were as fine as a department store, or the community college as grand as a regional shopping mall.

This inversion in the civic and private hierarchy has no precedent in American society and is alien to the sensibility of most cultures. Why should this sad situation be uniquely ours? As late as the 1950s, civic structures were still the best buildings in town.

At the heart of the change is the definition of infrastructure. Infrastructure is the supporting armature of urbanism. Today's definition is constrained by utilitarian thinking. It has long included only thoroughfares, utilities, and recently "green infrastructure," also explained as a function or a "flow," not as a cultural artifact. Indeed the term *infrastructure* is a neologism including the technical while excluding the civic.

Civic buildings were once included with thoroughfares and utilities in the term *public works*. Voters could decide with equanimity between, say, a school *or* a road. Given the choice they would often fund the civic building. After all, civic buildings are the *social* infrastructure, no less important than the *movement* infrastructure of vehicles, fluids, and power.

The postwar process by which urban planning became a collection of specialties destroyed the unified conception of public works and, as with so much else in planning, a bias for the technical prevailed. Investment in roads now receives the dedicated gasoline tax., but civic buildings must be "subsidized" from other sources. And in the case of cultural buildings like museums, these sources are reduced to random private benefactors.

The United States, where roads are repaired sooner than schools, thus boasts of the world's best infrastructure and the civic buildings of an underdeveloped country. Only if horizontal and vertical infrastructure are joined again as public works can there be an intelligent, indeed democratic, allocation of available resources.

Public buildings are those sponsored exclusively by government: the city halls, town hall, armories, transportation and postal facilities, public schools and colleges, as well as the few cultural facilities of national importance, such as the Smithsonian. However, many equally important communal organizations such as the Metropolitan Museum and the Boston Symphony are funded privately. These belong to the civic category.

Civic buildings may receive government sponsorship, but they are administered by nonprofit groups. The distinction between the civic and the public is not particularly important in America, where government prefers to confine its investment to public infrastructure and private nonprofits must compensate.[1]

Associations—already identified by De Tocqueville as central to American society, and which do not receive government subsidy, but nevertheless perform a communal function, should too be considered civic. And, not entirely outside of this category, are the many places that play a communal role while belonging neither to the civic nor the public categories. These are the common, informal daily gathering places between the poles of workplace and residence. They are typically diners, corner stores, cafes, rathskellers, pubs, barber shops, hotel lobbies, and the like categorized as "third places" by Ray Oldenburg in *The Great Good Place*.[2]

Within a new community, public and civic buildings will come into being as the urbanism evolves, but only if some provision is made for them early in the planning process. To overcome the innate resistance to public expenditure, the master plan can reserve lots for generic civic buildings. The type of buildings is left to be determined by the society eventually. In the early phases of build-out, civic investment may seem utopian, but citizens of a successful place will eventually want to endow themselves with cultures, and to embellish their beloved community with civic buildings. Evidence of these sentiments can be seen in every great American city and many towns. The availability of a site acts as a constant reminder that in itself may well catalyze the civic institution.

The natural evolution of civic buildings, however, cannot occur within private community associations as currently conceived. These are structured to achieve stasis, to avoid deterioration, but consequently making impossible improvements to the community. These associations are enabled to collect normal dues for maintenance and even for periodic reconstruction of infrastructure, but not for the kind of investment that creates civic facilities. But the articles of association can easily incorporate this important role by providing for a small, dedicated, and permanent tax. This trickle of funds will accumulate for a periodic civic improvement.[3]

Another promising strategy is currently evolving. Studies by the Bay Area marketing firm American Lives have identified certain civic buildings that the buyers prefer to the "amenities" commonly provided by developers. These amenities are usually golf courses, guarded entries, club houses, and other costly items included primarily for marketing purposes. The new studies have determined that an amenity such as a small library is considered more desirable than on of the elaborate, guarded "entry features" at approximately the same cost. For most developments, such budget allocations are normal, and it is only a matter of slightly altering standard practice to fund authentic civic buildings from the outset of the construction of the community.

As a consequence of the demise of the concept of public works, once the horizontal infrastructure is built there may not be much budget remaining for civic buildings. Consequently they are often smaller than the private buildings that surround them. But there are ways to overcome this problem. Reserving a location at the termination of an axis can powerfully enhance the importance of a building. It is remarkable how even a rudimentary buildings (such as a fire station housed in a prefabricated metal structure) gains in importance and dignity when it sits squarely at the end of an avenue or within a square. To waste such sites on private buildings is a cultural loss.

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[1] The situation has become acute as municipal coffers dry up. The state of Arizona actually sold its capitol building!

[2] The recent emergence of "tactical urbanism" has already demonstrated a certain agility in catalyzing third places of a new kind—places that are contingent and periodic.

[3] This was implemented in the Kentlands.

Another, more subtle way to enhance a civic building is recommended by Leon Krier. Since terminated axes are not often available, he would reserve the classical language (columns, pediments, and all the rest) for civic buildings, with the private buildings remaining in the common or vernacular language. This dialectic of classical and vernacular taps into deep cultural and perhaps even physiological roots. This effect can be experienced in the Lyceum in Alexandria, Virginia. The Lyceum is a small classical building that establishes its precedence although it is much smaller than the rowhouses around it.

At the very least there should be an architectural code limiting the private buildings to tectonic modesty (a visual silence), while the public buildings are allowed to remain uncoded, thus able to be fully expressive of the aspirations of the institutions they embody or, less interestingly, the inspirations of their architects.

Another technique to characterize an otherwise undistinguished civic buildings is to place it within a site developed in an exceptional manner. This is called the entourage. The simplest entourage consists of setting the building farther back from the common building line of the street, creating a forecourt. A more elaborate strategy is to surround the civic building with yards that are formally landscaped and equipped with fountains, benches, or streetlights superior to the standard. This was a preferred device of the City Beautiful movement, which was responsible for much of what is successfully civic in cities today.

The concentration of civic buildings has ancient roots. In the Hispanic settlements of the Southwest, the church, city hall, and other government buildings were located around the central plaza. This layout resulted from a code called the Law of the Indies. The practice is less consistent in the early New England settlements, but not unknown. A particularly well-known example is in New Haven, where three churches sit on the green, while the library, city hall, and Yale University share the edges. This works well, as it tends to concentrate pedestrians.

The alternative of dispersing the civic buildings throughout the community also has positive secondary effects. The common disparagement of suburban housing as “cookie cutter” may even be overcome. This term refers not merely to monotony, but to the greater problem of disorientation, which cannot be effectively relieved by varying the architectural style of the buildings. It can only be positively affected by the provision of what Kevin Lynch called *landmarks*. Although these vary, and may even include natural features, the landmark most securely under the control of the planner is the allocation of sites for civic buildings. Such buildings are intrinsically different and therefore memorable.

Utilitarian analysis, however, has led to policies that discourage the interspersing of civic buildings throughout the community. For example, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the courthouse, the city hall, and much of the bureaucracy reside within a single high-rise called the Government Services Building. Even the mayor’s office within is difficult to identify. The entire building looks bureaucratic and provides little civic pride.

This way of thinking is even more devastating when applied to schools. Efficiency of administration does not yield what is best for the students or for the community. It leads only to very large centralized schools. To deprive neighborhoods of small schools that also act as local civic centers is a great loss. But, as expected in a democracy, where mistakes are not avoided but eventually corrected the movement to smaller, community-based charter schools is expanding.

If a community is to be successful in the long run—and all planning is for the long run—it is essential that sites be reserved for such schools in every neighborhood. Such is the duty of the planner toward the most important of the civic buildings.