

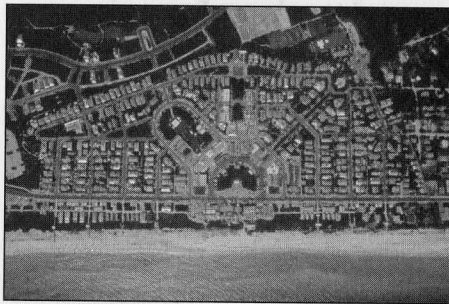
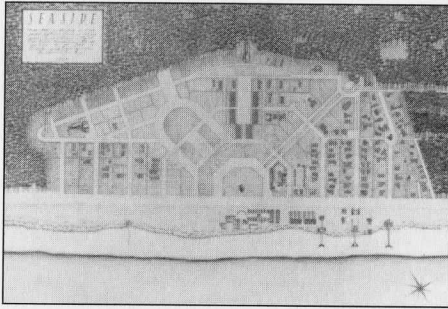
## II

### *Virtuous Reality: Aristotle, Critical Realism, and the Reconstruction of Architectural and Urban Theory*

[O]ur first aim as teachers . . . is neither to win nor to lose, but to de-politicize our teachings. My fellow teachers and I will have to re-teach ourselves un-political recognitions of that sacred order which is always and everywhere in authority. . . . [L]et no one complain that he can but remain somewhere along the vertical in authority. From authority there is no escape. . . . Until my fellow teachers and I know [this] again, upon our bodies . . . our students cannot be expected to know for themselves the truth of what is raising, what is lowering, and what lies there are between. . . . My core courses in the arts and sciences of resistance to the enemy within . . . would have as the first object the criticism of that remorseless criticism of everything raising in life which is our culture industry, high and low. Then and only then, the culture industry of critical criticism . . . negated, can the decision that is credo, and not ideology, become again remotely possible in this radically anti-credal culture.

—Philip Rieff, *Fellow Teachers*

Seaside is the much heralded and vilified new “traditional” resort town that began to rise along the Florida panhandle in the early 1980s [Figs. 1–3]; and



from top to bottom

Fig. 1: Plan of Seaside, Florida circa 1990. Courtesy of Duany and Plater-Zyberk & Company.

Fig. 2: Chapel at Seaside, Florida.

Fig. 3: Aerial view of Seaside, Florida circa 2002. Photo by Alex MacLean, courtesy of Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company.

in a brief but provocative 1991 essay entitled "Organon,"<sup>1</sup> architect and Yale professor Patrick Pinnell argues that the chief planner of Seaside was neither developer Robert Davis, nor architects Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, but rather Aristotle. Pinnell imagines the philosopher strolling Seaside's streets at cocktail hour, the residents admiring Aristotle's tan and attire, Aristotle admiring the residents' "easy civility." His point is not that Aristotle is an efficient cause of Seaside; rather that the designers of Seaside, by the way in which they conceived both its formal and social order, demonstrate a way of thinking that, intended or not, is essentially Aristotelian.

There is merit in Pinnell's contention. Formally, Seaside demonstrates a commitment to limited scale development, and a bias toward site-specific designs rather than Platonic ideal types [Fig. 4], both of which are entirely consonant with Aristotle's discussion of the formal ordering of cities in *Politics*, Book VII [Fig. 5]. There is likewise an implicit antitotalitarianism in Seaside's multicentered

1. Patrick Pinnell, "Organon," in Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk: *Towns and Town-Making Principles*, edited by Alex Krieger with William Lennertz (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), pages 105-8.

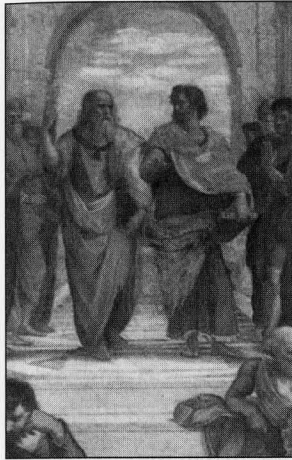


Fig. 4: Detail of Raphael's "School of Athens" from the Vatican Museum, showing Plato (left) pointing heavenward and Aristotle pointing to the earth to underscore—and argue about—the reality of both.

formalism suggestive of the ideal of "subsidiarity," a political theory with roots in Aristotle that flowered more fully in an intellectual tradition subsequently developed most notably by St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, the American founders in the eighteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville in the nineteenth century, and especially in twentieth-century Catholic social theory.

Nevertheless, and in spite of its merits, Pinnell's essay, insofar as it implies that Seaside may be seen as a contemporary manifestation of Aristotle's understanding of a polis, overlooks something quite fundamental. Pinnell speaks of Seaside residents and their "easy civility," and he notes approvingly not only the relative disempowerment at Seaside of large corporate banking interests and automobile manufacturers, but also of Seaside's civic institutions, all displaced, "at least partially, from their monopolistic control over the possibility of difference, over the relationship between individual lives and the world."<sup>2</sup>

For Aristotle, however, civility is not so easy. It presupposes habits of moral and intellectual virtue, which in turn presuppose strong rather than weak ties between citizens and civilizing institutions—a contrast to the conditions noted by Pinnell as characteristic of life at Seaside. "Virtue" is a key concept for any Aristotelian understanding of the polis; and I want to suggest that this is true not only for the latter's moral order, but also for its formal order. What follows therefore is a work of intellectual construc-

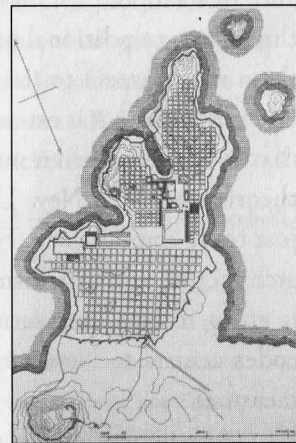


Fig. 5: Plan of Miletus, an ancient Greek polis on the coast of present-day Turkey. The design is attributed to Hippodamus, circa fifth century b.c. (cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book VII, chapter 11).

2. *Ibid.*, 108.

tion: a meditation on and critical reconsideration of the centrality of virtues to a certain kind of traditional understanding of architecture and urbanism.

Seaside is to date the paradigmatic work of a movement that has come to be known as New Urbanism. In the New Urbanist definition, the patterns of physical and environmental development that have emerged since 1945 do not represent (as their current “edge-city” apologist adversaries insist) a new kind of urbanism, but are instead simply anti-urban. New Urbanists seek a renewal of the historically pedestrian-scaled, mixed-use city; hence the name New Urbanists. The traditional city New Urbanists promote should not be seen as a revival of some allegedly perfect city or cities of the past, but rather as a developing City possessing a recognizable continuity with and seeking to improve the best social and aesthetic features of historic urban life.

The New Urbanists provide a helpful but incomplete argument for the traditional city, one that pertains primarily to the social and ecological parsimony of certain traditional urban forms. Although most architects who become traditional urbanists perhaps do so primarily for aesthetic reasons, it is also possible to embrace traditional urbanism for philosophical, religious and/or sociopolitical reasons. While there are certain shared formal sympathies among traditional urbanists, there may or may not be agreement among them with respect to the *cultural* implications of the argument that follows. Moreover, since it is ostensibly over its allegedly sinister cultural implications that modernists, environmentalists, libertarians, and contemporary critical theorists take the New Urbanism and its apologists to task, I will focus on just these implications. For if my cultural thesis with respect to traditional architecture and urbanism is correct, the genuine renewal of these traditions is going to be a long-term endeavor for which the master plans and urban codes central to New Urbanism will be necessary but not at all sufficient measures.

Assuming then a certain basic agreement among New Urbanists about the formal qualities and characteristics of good towns and cities, let me pursue two potentially more controversial topics: first, why good urbanism both tends to and should be characterized by the architectural monumentalization of civilizing institutions; and second, whether in modern societies such institutions are sufficiently strong to make good urbanism possible.

On the first topic there may already be substantial agreement among New Urbanists, but also too much assumed and not enough specified about what it means to be “civilized,” and about the necessary relationship of virtues and institutions to that state of being. The argument that follows therefore devotes considerable space to just such a description.

With regard to the second topic I am of two minds, and therefore propose two alternative scenarios for the future of traditional urbanism. The first and more optimistic of these I call the Tocqueville scenario; the second, less optimistic and more radical, I call the Benedict scenario. Their differences notwithstanding, an essentially Aristotelian notion of virtue and civility is central to each; and each therefore justifies a reevaluation of the culture-building and culture-sustaining role of communal and ascetic disciplines, practices, and institutions.

### *Civility, Virtue, and the Aristotelian “Narrative”*

Aristotle’s *Politics* begins as follows:

[E]very community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the city [polis] or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.<sup>3</sup>

Articulating the role virtues play in that good life which is the *telos* or purpose of the city, Aristotle continues in Book VII, chapter 1:

[N]o one would maintain that he is happy who has not in him a particle of courage or temperance or justice or prudence, who is afraid of every insect which flutters past him, and will commit any crime, however great, in order to gratify his lust of meat or drink, who will sacrifice his dearest friend for the sake of a [dollar], and is as feeble and false in mind as a child or a madman. These propositions are almost universally acknowledged as soon as they are uttered, but men differ about the degree or relative superiority of this or that good.

3. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I, ch. 1.

Some think that a very moderate amount of virtue is enough, but set no limit to their desires of wealth, property, power, reputation, and the like. To whom we reply...that mankind do not acquire or preserve virtue by the help of external goods, but external goods by the help of virtue; and that happiness...is more often found with those who are most highly cultivated in their mind and in their character, and have only a moderate share of external goods, than among those who possess external goods to a useless extent but are deficient in higher qualities.... [We] assume then that the best life, both for individuals and for states, is the life of virtue, when virtue has external goods enough for the performance of good actions.<sup>4</sup>

But here let us pause. For any reader who partakes of the intellectual patrimony of Hegel—i.e., who by habit or belief continues to presume she can divine the progressive direction of the *zeitgeist*—is perhaps already thinking: “This is all well and good; but that was then, and this is now, and that Greek chauvinist, slavery defending, misogynist Aristotle has been intellectually superseded if not thoroughly discredited, and has approximately zero authority today. What has this to do with anything?” This raises a legitimate issue. For if one is going to maintain that a kind of traditional formal order is inseparable from a kind of traditional social order—and further, if one is going to defend some contemporary version of each in Aristotelian terms—then it becomes necessary to indicate just what kind of authority one is claiming for Aristotle.

It is important first to understand that what I mean by the word “authority” is essentially “trustworthiness.” John Huston was an authority on filmmaking, and Thomas Schumacher is an authority on Italian Rationalist architecture. What this means is not that they are tyrants, or that their knowledge of these topics was and is infallible, but rather that we can be confident that on these subjects they are trustworthy sources of genuine knowledge.

It is important secondly to understand that I am not proposing to defend the authority I am claiming for Aristotle by an ahistorical or fundamentalist proof-texting of ostensibly self-evidently true Aristotelian writings. Rather, I am defending the authority of an intellectual tradition both rational and

4. *Ibid.*, Book VII, ch.1.

highly empirical in its methodology, in which Aristotle's works are regarded not as infallible but rather as both a selective and creative summation and improvement of previous philosophical thought, and as primary touchstones for sustained reflection and continuing intellectual development. Among the foremost of many heirs and developers of that tradition in the West, I have already mentioned Thomas Aquinas and Alexis de Tocqueville, and would add most recently Alasdair MacIntyre—none of whom, for example, support slavery and each of whom has improved upon Aristotle in significant ways that can legitimately be called Aristotelian by virtue of being, in their own time and in their own way, *more* Aristotelian than Aristotle.

One can characterize this Aristotelian moral and political tradition in contemporary parlance as an ancient and living “discourse” or “narrative,” coexisting in the contemporary world with competing ancient and modern philosophical narratives such as Platonism, gnosticism, Hegelianism, Marxism, poststructuralism, and various feminisms. But whatever genuine intellectual utility or illuminative value these or other discourses may possess, they are ultimately not all of equal merit because they cannot all be equally true.

It is a point of doctrine in the Nietzschean/poststructuralist philosophical narrative currently popular in neo-avant-garde architectural circles to deny validity to the notion of “truth.” But this very denial raises certain fundamental difficulties internal to the poststructuralist narrative itself. For example, Bernard Tschumi, the architect and critical theorist and then-dean of Columbia University's School of Architecture, asserted in an interview in the inaugural issue of *Architecture New York* [ANY] that previous “[a]rchitectural history is linear and hierarchical and wants to emphasize dominant structures. These are now discredited forms of architectural analysis.”<sup>5</sup> But what might “discredited” mean in this context if not “untrue?” Or, at the very least, “insufficiently true?” The logic of critical theory would seem to suggest that it simply means “no longer dominant.” But this implies that Tschumi's own alternative and presumably more heterogeneous version of history, to the extent that it is credible, is not *better* but simply newly dominant—and therefore that it possesses no more intrinsic merit (i.e., *authority*) than the previous archi-

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5. Bernard Tschumi, interviewed by Cynthia Davidson, “Modes of Inscription,” *Architecture New York*, Issue 0, May/June 1993, 52.

tectural histories it has displaced. If I'm the editor of *ANY* and intellectually serious, that's the end of the interview. For as young Bob Dylan sang, "It ain't no use talkin' to me; it's just the same as talkin' to you"—unless, as many have come to suspect, avant-garde architecture journalism is really best understood as a more high-brow version of *People* magazine.

On the other hand, one may view all histories and theories as narratives and still evaluate their truth value precisely by their ability to give a more rather than less unified and comprehensive account of complexity, difference, and situational specificity. Alasdair MacIntyre's contentions, in his 1981 book *After Virtue*, that human life itself has an inherently narrative structure and that in all our endeavors we human beings are by our *nature* tellers of stories, immediately precede a qualifying and expansive observation: that we are by our *history* tellers of stories that aspire to truth. The "critical foundationalist" contention for which I am about to argue is that the extended Aristotelian intellectual tradition remains *to date* the most resourceful, comprehensive, and rationally compelling philosophical narrative available. It provides a better considered, more complete, and truer understanding of human nature and the moral life than its philosophical competition.

This is nowhere more so than with respect to its account of the centrality of the moral and intellectual virtues to the good life for human beings. But the implications of this for contemporary architecture and urbanism are by no means self-evident. Aristotle himself comments only briefly and generally on the formal order of the polis; and MacIntyre's recent rethinking of the Aristotelian tradition makes no extended claims linking social orders in which virtues are at the center of the moral life to specific kinds of formal order in the built environment. I have already implied, however, that such links exist historically; and I am hypothesizing here that they must exist again if there is to be a genuine renewal and extension of traditional architecture and urbanism. What are the outlines of this neo-Aristotelian understanding of the interrelationship of practices, the city, reason, virtues, and authority with respect to individual human well-being?



### *Self, City, and Eudaimonia*<sup>6</sup>

A fundamental contention of the Aristotelian tradition is that individual human well-being is impossible apart from the duties and privileges that attend a variety of specific human *practices*, relationships, and roles.<sup>7</sup> It is only in such roles and within such relationships that, over the course of a lifetime, an individual will discover (or fail to discover) the meaning of, and achieve (or fail to achieve), his or her well-being.<sup>8</sup> Such relationships—examples in the modern world might include families, churches, schools, dance companies, chess clubs, basketball teams, emergency room crews, choirs, astronauts and their support staff at NASA<sup>9</sup>—are communities insofar as their individual members seek a common end or *telos*, and will vary in size depending upon the specific goods and ends for which the communities exist.

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6. *Eudaimonia* is the term that Aristotle uses for the good life for human beings. It is commonly translated as “happiness,” occasionally as “blessedness” or “prosperity;” but there is no exact English equivalent. It refers not to a temporary emotional state but rather to a state of being well—and doing well in being well—over the course of a lifetime.

7. MacIntyre defines and discusses at length the nature of practices, and their difference from and relationship to both virtues and institutions, in *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 181–203).

8. In the Aristotelian tradition, moral agency is not understood to be exercised by a “self” that exists apart from either the body or social roles. It is a modern idea—albeit with ancient gnostic antecedents—to understand the self as something that exists apart from and not in some necessary way continuous with the human body and its behavior in specific social settings over time. This is not to say that a person’s moral duties are defined exclusively by any one specific role. It remains a genuine and necessary moral insight from the post–World War II Nuremberg tribunals that murder cannot be excused by the fact that the murderer was “just following orders.” Nevertheless, no “self” exists apart from its social relationships. One learns over the course of a lifetime what is required in various roles in various communities: as a son or a daughter, a brother, sister, or cousin, a husband or wife, a mother or father; as a Jew or a Christian or a Hindu or a Bhuddist; as a citizen of a neighborhood, a city, and a country; as a student, an architect, a middle reliever, a soldier, a farmer, or a teacher. Only through such roles, performed better or worse, directed toward such ends as are appropriate to each role, does one come to discover both his or her good as a human being and the goods that he or she shares with others that place limitations on the actions that can be justified by any specific role.

9. This list does not include street gangs, drug cartels, self-appointed militias, or criminal syndicates, not because participants in such activities necessarily lack all virtue, but because many of the activities that such organizations pursue are either inherently unjust or directed toward private rather than shared ends, and therefore not really conducive to the well-being of their members. On the other hand, it seems important to note that even street gangs, drug cartels, militias, and the mafia have forms of social organization and codes of virtue similar in some respects to legitimate institutions.

For Aristotle, the foremost community was the city, which he understood as a community of communities, the chief end of which is the best life possible for its citizens. And even though some of the functions of the Greek polis can and have been allocated to other institutions in historical developments since Aristotle (a degree of moral authority and autonomy to religious institutions; military defense to the nation-state), this understanding of the character and role of the city remains at the core of the Aristotelian intellectual tradition.

*Reason* is the distinctively human faculty by which individuals are able to participate in the life of their several communities; and the moral life is understood less in terms of being obedient to rules than in terms of conscientiously developing various character habits of excellence, or *virtues*, by means of which one is able to pursue and achieve the goods and ends specific to the communities that form around particular practices.<sup>10</sup> Education and success in virtually every type of human practice—"success" being the achievement of the particular goods unique and "internal" to the practice itself, to the best of one's natural abilities—require of the practitioner the virtues of courage, justice, and honesty, whether the practice be medicine, chess, photography, flying, or physics.<sup>11</sup> But specific practices also require other specific virtues. Making and sustaining families, for example, require the virtues of charity, patience, and steadfastness. And making and sustaining cities require of citizens (rulers and ruled) the virtues of temperance, friendship, magnanimity,

10. This is not to say that rules are not essential to civilized life. Philip Rieff argues in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) and elsewhere that the first and foremost mark of every human culture (until ours) is a collection of "sacred prohibitions" that establish limits upon the exercise of human instinct. The *sine qua non* of premodern cultures is some set of "thou shalt nots;" and Rieff notes that all creative freedom in a culture arises in the space between such prohibitions, as well as the possibility of forgiveness for transgressing them. Nor is it to say that Aristotle's emphasis upon the centrality of virtues means that rules were unimportant for Aristotle. It is rather that Aristotle seems to have taken for granted that legitimate rules would be embodied in the laws of a justly governed polis; and moreover, that the genuinely virtuous individual would have little trouble following such rules, nor much inclination not to.

11. All education in both virtue and practices has a structure that is essentially ascetic, presupposing a fundamental distinction between a "person-as-she-happens-to-be" and a "person-as-she-could-be-if-she-realized-her-essential-nature." This marks a differentiation between what any particular person at any particular time takes to be good for him or her and what is really good for him or her as a person. As with a dancer in rehearsal, or an athlete in training, education in virtue has as its goal the liberation of the highest powers of personality from the immediacy of undirected instinct. It seeks not the elimination of instincts and emotions, but rather their repression and/or sublimation into habits conducive to achieving specific goods over the course of a whole life.

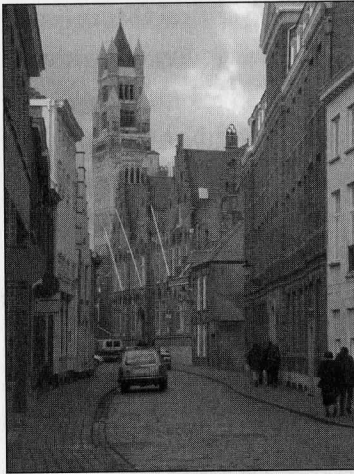


Fig. 6 (above): Market square, Orvieto, Italy.

Fig. 7 (left): Streetscape with tower of the Church of the Holy Savior, Brugge, Belgium.

and prudence; virtues that are specifically civic and which simultaneously both promote and restrain the individual pursuit of lesser goods in other practices.<sup>12</sup> This understanding of the nature and purpose of various virtues also implies, necessarily, some wide agreement about a certain hierarchy of both practices and virtues with respect to achieving the common good of the city.

In all communities, large and small, *authority*, while carrying with it both connotations and the reality of power, is essentially a synonym for “trustworthiness.” The legitimacy of authority (or lack thereof) is a function of both the ability and the trustworthiness of any community’s leadership to achieve and advance the objectives held in common by both the leaders themselves and those over whom leadership is exercised. Moreover, as Philip Rieff observes,

12. Here note that “virtue” as a concept is necessarily secondary to a prior conception of end or purpose. For example, it is not true that a “virtuous person” is always cooperative, gentle, and self-effacing. Neither is it true that he or she is always competitive and aggressive. Rather, any specific virtue requires for its understanding and application some prior social context in terms of which it is to be explained and valued. The notion of a virtue only makes sense in a teleological framework, as a habit the exercise of which is conducive to the achievement of some purpose pursued (almost always) in the company of others; and that also typically is limited by the framework itself. For example, the ends pursued by a football team require of individuals the virtues of both cooperation and competitiveness. Likewise, with respect to football, the virtue of sportsmanship simultaneously encourages certain kinds of violent physical contact within games (e.g., blocking and tackling); discourages other kinds of violent physical contact within games (e.g., holding and clipping); and supplies an internal prohibition against more drastic kinds of violent physical contact after games (e.g., taking crowbars to the heads of one’s opponents).

“from authority there is no escape;” it exists even among critical theory “communities of the alienated” that deny in principal the possibility of legitimate authority.

From this brief outline of the Aristotelian understanding of the relationships between human well-being, practices, the city, reason, virtues, and authority, we may now begin to understand how and why it is that traditional architecture and urban design are precisely the formal expression of this understanding of human nature [Figs. 6–7]. The buildings in traditional cities that shelter the private familial and economic activities—houses and housing; commercial and market activities—are typically backdrops both to figural public spaces and to the buildings sheltering those governmental, religious, and educational institutions that exist to promote and sustain precisely those practices and virtues that simultaneously support and constrain the pursuit of private interest. And it is because the goods promoted by such institutions are goods common to denizens of the city, and necessary for the achievement of its common goals, that such institutions rightly have been regarded as civic. It is therefore neither a surprise nor an accident to find that these “civilizing institutions” have been both prominently sited and architecturally monumentalized in traditional cities and towns. Not merely symbolizing power, architecture in the traditional city has aspired to symbolize legitimate authority in general, and specific (institutionally promoted) practices and virtues in particular.

If, therefore, the good life is “the life of virtue, when virtue has external goods enough for the performance of good actions;”<sup>13</sup> and if the city exists for the sake of the good life; then the formal ordering of the city would seem to warrant (by affinity rather than necessity) some sort of architectural monumentalization of civilizing institutions and public spaces, as indeed the traditional city has historically exhibited. For New Urbanists, however, this conclusion implies what ought to be some sobering thoughts: first, that tra-

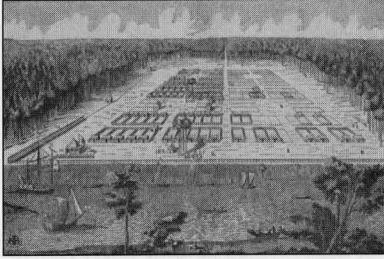
13. Aristotle’s definition here anticipates Marx’s argument about the material foundation of human happiness, but views this as a necessary but insufficient condition for its achievement. Indeed, Marx’s materialist view of human happiness, and his location of evil in social classes to the exclusion of individual character, remain Marxism’s most troublesome intellectual legacies—and are arguably responsible for its worst horrors as a political system. For Aristotle, it is “external goods” in combination with character virtue that bring about human well-being; and it is clear that Aristotle thought that one conceivably could have quite enough of the former, but never enough of the latter.

ditional urbanism is something much more than traditional urban form; and second, that something more than a revival of traditional urban form is going to be required for a genuine renewal of traditional urbanism. To what extent do the realities of contemporary life even allow for, let alone encourage, a new traditional architecture and urbanism? It is to a necessarily brief and speculative consideration of this issue that we now turn.

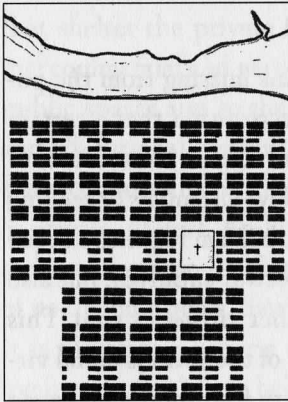
### *Tocqueville and the New Urbanism*

To raise this issue at all suggests that something seems missing from the polemics and practices of the New Urbanists: viz., a recognition that a certain kind of social order is a prerequisite for traditional urbanism. However, contrary to its critics from the left—who falsely accuse New Urbanists of seeking a restoration of *unjust* social structures—traditional urbanism requires a social order that is not only *more just* than contemporary postwar suburbia, but also one that inculcates in its citizens (and is richer in) other virtues as well. This would be a social order that appreciates the centrality of the various moral virtues by means of which individual members of the city find their well-being in pursuit of common goals; and likewise one that appreciates the disciplines imposed by various practices and institutions upon individuals as they pursue the specific goods internal to such practices. For while it seems clear that the formal order of older towns and cities more or less accurately *represents* just such a social order, it is not at all clear that the formal order of New Urbanist-designed “new towns” can *create* such a social order, notwithstanding the potential of such new towns to improve upon contemporary automobile suburbs in significant aesthetic and ecological ways.

It is worth asking whether such a social order of practices, institutions, and their associated moral virtues already exists in contemporary America. If so, it is possible to imagine taking place on a more or less broad scale what the New Urbanists hope will take place: the creation of new neighborhoods and small towns that foster a participatory common life for the most part freely chosen; in which individual lives of learning, filial affection and obligation, respect for the dignity of others, the pursuit of excellence, the competitive creation of wealth, and religious devotion are centered largely in families,



Figs. 8–9: Savannah, Georgia, at its founding and circa 1856. Each fourteen-acre ward has a central square typically fronted by one or more public buildings, creating a peculiarly American democratic and Tocquevillian multicentered monumental public realm.



the workplace, religious communities, schools, libraries, music and theater groups, athletic teams, and other political and voluntary associations—and all this within a beautiful, multicentered, pedestrian-scaled physical environment supportive of and conducive to the common good, in which automobiles are conveniences rather than necessities [Figs. 8–11]. In this scenario, the new urbanism created would be meritorious in part for its aesthetic attributes, but no less for its ability to bring together, make place for, and thereby strengthen the inherently communal practices and institutions that still exist, albeit in an arguably weakened state, in both our

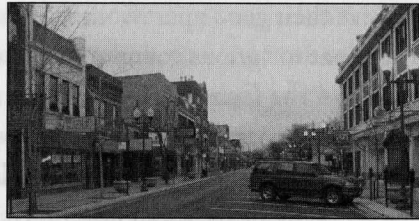
contemporary cities and postwar suburbia.

The above scenario suggests a future for the New Urbanism that I call the Tocqueville scenario, because it envisions the creation of formal arrangements having affinities with certain beneficent American social arrangements observed by Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s and described in *Democracy in America*. There is a conflicting sub-scenario however, for the understanding of which Tocqueville is also a key figure; a sub-scenario in which New Urbanist town planning at best would make only marginal contributions to the common good, and at worst actively if unintentionally perpetrate a way of life almost the exact opposite of what Tocqueville and the Aristotelian tradition have regarded as “civic.”

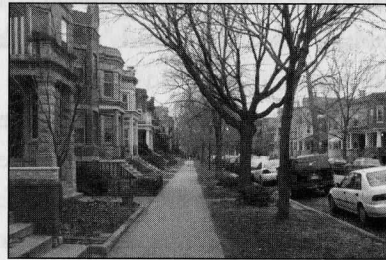
This sub-scenario postulates a conflict between “emotivist” and “communitarian”<sup>14</sup> accounts of the origins, nature, and purposes of America’s ex-

14. The term “emotivism” is discussed at length in the second and third chapters of *After Virtue* (6–35). It can be used more or less synonymously with the term “individualism” and it refers not necessarily to its justifying ideology (known generally as “postmodernism”), but rather to a set of

Figs. 10–11: Chicago neighborhood commercial and residential streets, prototypical elements of pre-World War II American towns and neighborhoods. Though less monumental than Savannah, such urban neighborhood and small town environments remain instructive as mixed-use pedestrian environments that also accommodate automobiles.



periment in democratic self-government, both of which have emerged from an increasingly problematic Enlightenment view of nature, rationality, and human nature (cf. n. 21, p. 178). Moreover, it recognizes affinities between emotivism and architectural postmodernism on the one hand, and communitarianism and New Urbanism on the other.<sup>15</sup> This



conflict is central to many debates about the future of American culture and politics generally, and the future of architecture and urbanism in particular.

At the risk of oversimplification, I would describe some of the distinguishing features of these two accounts as follows. *Emotivists* are highly individualistic and assume an autonomous self whose good is achieved largely by its emancipation and inner detachment from what are perceived to be and experienced as the constraints (“fictions”) of various communal roles and commitments. In contrast, *communitarians* contend that individual selves cannot

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philosophical assumptions and a social and cultural environment that can be described but exist independently of such descriptions. “Communitarianism” is used here as a shorthand notation for that Aristotelian philosophical and political tradition described earlier, which values both individual freedom and communal obligation, and sees both as necessarily interrelated. My employment here of the term “communitarianism” should not be confused with the political movement of the same name associated with sociologist Amitai Etzioni. The implicit and/or explicit Aristotelian tradition to which I am referring shares certain affinities and objectives with Etzioni’s communitarianism, but differs from it in important respects as well. Most importantly, what I mean by communitarianism does not imply that communities are any less subject than individuals to corruption, or to judgment by the criteria of the virtues.

15. The reader can find extended accounts of both postmodernist and traditionalist critiques of Enlightenment epistemology and ethics in MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. There is a consideration of these issues with respect to architecture and urbanism in my “Communitarianism and Emotivism: Two Rival Versions of Ethics and Architecture,” *Inland Architect*, May/June 1993, 74–83.

achieve their good apart from the network of roles, privileges, and obligations attendant to various communal pursuits. Emotivists tend to view law in general (and the Constitution in particular) as being of one type, viz. “positive law,” law that is posited or created by human beings, and which functions as an instrument of political power and privilege. Communitarians tend to view law as being of (at least) two types: positive law generally (and the Constitution in particular) as human-created law to which persons are specifically obliged as citizens; and “natural law,” moral law inferred from and grounded in nature, discovered rather than created, to which (like gravity) all persons are obligated with or without their consent, and from which and with reference to which all positive law derives its validity. Consequently, emotivists generally tend to focus upon issues of power, and to concern themselves with the invention and legal codification of rights, whereas communitarians strive to make positive laws with reference to justice, and purport to concern themselves with making positive law statutes legitimate (albeit necessarily proximate) manifestations of and in conformance to the natural law. Finally, and not unrelated to their differing assessments of metaphysical realism, emotivists—religious or not—tend to be functional secularists, believing that religion is essentially irrational, emotional, individualist, and private. They consequently deny that religious beliefs have any legitimate role in shaping public policy. In contrast, communitarians tend to be sympathetic to a public role for religion, and to regard religious claims as properly subject to rational debate.<sup>16</sup>

These then are a few of the differences between contending parties in what some have called America’s “culture wars.” But although several of these themes have become prominent in recent political campaigns, it is grossly simplistic to identify either major political party (or any major religious denomination) with one or the other of these competing cultural narratives, since both emotivist and communitarian themes find prominent expression across official political (and religious) boundaries. Moreover, beyond partisan politics, law, and religion, these competing narratives inform contemporary

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16. Communitarians read the First Amendment nonestablishment and free-exercise religion clauses as requiring government neutrality in the public realm between religion and irreligion, but not government hostility toward religion in the public realm; and they understand the Constitution’s religion clauses to be precisely the guarantors of the full and free participation of both religious and nonreligious groups in debates that shape public policy.



debates over the nature and purpose of various practices and institutions, ranging from education and the university to architecture and urbanism, to literature and criticism, to medical practice, to environmental management, to marriage and relations between the sexes. That such debates are so often dishonest, uncivil, and acrimonious—lacking the virtues of both charity and humor—is simply a mark of the polarization that these conflicting cultural narratives represent. Perhaps most significant, however, is that this polarization is not only an external matter of conflicts between groups committed to one or the other understanding of what is essentially “American.” It is for many thoughtful persons an equally profound internal conflict in their own hearts and minds.

Tocqueville anticipated with remarkable prescience the possible development of such conflicts in America. *Democracy in America* indicates that however prominent the themes of freedom and equality were even in the 1830s, these were pursued in a context of democratically determined constraints, and that these democratic constraints themselves depend upon both a remarkable American proclivity for what Tocqueville called “the art of association”<sup>17</sup> and the strength of two apolitical but politically significant social institutions: the family and religion.<sup>18</sup> Reading Tocqueville from our present vantage point of politicized family life and secularized public culture is both instructive and sobering; and it is clear that America—though hardly a just nation in its treatment of both Native Americans and African Americans, as Tocqueville wrote about at length—was at its founding more of a communitarian society in its

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17. On Tocqueville’s view of the importance of nongovernmental “free associations” to the maintenance of democratic government and as antidotes to American tendencies toward individualism, see *Democracy in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), Volume II, Second Book, chapters I–V.

18. Peter Berkowitz has noted in the *New Republic* (June 24, 1996, 44–49) how in Tocqueville’s view families and religion shaped the habits of character that enabled Americans to respect, uphold and administer law, and to practice self-government. “In families, women shaped mores, and Americans learned to appreciate simple pleasures, love order, respect enduring ties and understand their happiness in relation to both ancestors and descendants. Christianity in America palliated envy by teaching individuals to appreciate the frailties of human nature and the limits of [human institutions, by teaching them] not to ask too much of the world . . . [and by fostering] the virtues of restraint and forbearance” that promote habits of long-term thinking. For Tocqueville’s views of democracy, sexual equality, and family life, see *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Third Book, chapters VIII–XII. Regarding Tocqueville’s contention that although in America religious and governmental institutions are rightly separated, “religion in America . . . must be regarded as the first of their political institutions,” see Volume I, chapter XVII, 300–314.

smaller local units than it is now. It seems equally clear, however, from post-World War II developments in law, medicine, the arts, urban planning, and elsewhere, that contemporary America has become more emotivist—a possibility that Tocqueville foresaw and described quite succinctly. Democracy, he wrote in 1840, has given birth to the novelty of individualism,

a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends, so that after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself. . . . [Thus] does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, [and] hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.<sup>19</sup>

If Tocqueville was correct that democracy tends intrinsically to encourage individualism, it suggests among other things that the history of suburban development in America—from the nineteenth century railroad suburb to the automobile suburb of today—may be less a cause of the breakdown of traditional civic life in America than it is an expression of the increasing dominance of certain emotivist cultural tendencies inherent in American democracy from its origins. This is not to say that this dominance was either envisioned or hoped for by America's founders; or that it was and is inevitable; or that it is not reversible. It is simply to say that individualism, its physical expression in the American suburb, and even its “high art” expressions in phenomena such as neo-avant-garde architecture, all may represent the historical realization of a peculiarly American tendency—the welcome blossoming of America's full individualist potential if you are an emotivist, kudzu in the garden if you are a communitarian. Nor would this be the first time—or surely the last—that human intentions have unintended social consequences.

These emotivist developments make both possible and plausible an evaluation of the New Urbanism different from that of many if not most of New Urbanism's proponents. I have outlined earlier a Tocqueville scenario for the New Urbanism: some “optimistic” community-building possibilities where

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19. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Second Book, chapter II, 98–99.

in small towns, suburbs, and existing urban neighborhoods traditional urban form would help to revitalize the authority of currently existing communal and civic institutions, and thereby help to foster multicentered, peculiarly American forms of traditional urban life.

But suppose America is too far along the individualist path to turn back? Suppose that our institutions of government, religion, education, and art are so infected by the emotivist superstition of the autonomous self that they have lost their ability to promote and sustain a public culture of urbanity and civility, and to restrain the immediacy of our individual fears, appetites, and passions?

Certainly the recent history of and immediate prospects for the American city suggest this possibility. The downtown high-rise commercial center—that American invention which became *the* symbol of twentieth-century urbanism—for a while supported both economically and symbolically the reality of a livable modern city. But the traditional social understanding of the city as a durable association of institutions that promotes the well-being of its citizens requires for its modern reality the vitality of both commerce and its neighborhoods, and in many American cities the future of both appears problematic.

Ironically, as contemporary developments in production practices, transportation, and communications technologies make the need for concentrations of tall office buildings obsolete, it is possible to imagine a twenty-first century city composed of multiple centers of commerce, with businesses dispersed and located in moderately scaled mixed-use buildings, where electronic communication dispels the need for a concentrated “downtown.” It is possible, in other words, to envision a city bearing a closer physical resemblance to its pre-twentieth-century antecedents than its twentieth-century predecessor; and this vision in theory lends itself well to the project of rebuilding existing urban neighborhoods.

In reality, however, what we have is the migration of much of the middle class and a good part of its commerce from existing urban centers to the growing “edge cities” of suburbia. In turn, urban officials have become desperate to promote, if not publicly finance, the transformation of declining downtown areas into revenue-generating “theme parks” and entertainment zones, to the

delight of professional sports owners, casino developers, and other “entertainment industry” officials. And even relatively healthy and intact urban neighborhoods are being “suburbanized” by the development within them of super-block projects, mini-malls, and strip shopping centers.

These are all government and market responses to an undeniable fact: that post-WWII prosperity—nothing to sneer at, incidentally—and the automobile have made suburbia the definition of an achievable good life for tens of millions of Americans. But suburbanization has problematic ramifications, both environmental and cultural.

Environmentally—and quite separately from the issue of air pollution, which I suspect is a relatively easy problem to fix insofar as it is merely (sic) technological—the automobile, which made the postwar suburb possible, has become its *sine qua non*. This has happened ironically, insofar as the automobile has caused both the consumption of the landscape that was an original object of suburban desire, and the creation of traffic congestion equal to any city’s but without the city’s redeeming pedestrian qualities. The result has been an ongoing post-1945 transformation of the physical environment: away from comparatively crowded cities characterized by a dense building fabric containing a mix of pedestrian-proximate uses relieved by open space (both in the city as plazas, squares, greens, parks and public gardens, and beyond the city as open landscape); toward today’s conflation of city and landscape that has resulted in the condition commonly known as “sprawl”—a *crowded landscape* in which the various activities of daily life have been by law zoned apart from each other and rendered accessible only by automobile.

Culturally, it is impossible not to see physical suburbanization as one of the fruits of America’s historic inclination towards individualism. This is not to suggest that our suburbs lack or must necessarily lack the communal associations regarded by Tocqueville as essential to virtue, civility, and just democratic politics. Nevertheless, compared to the traditional city, suburbia seems morally and culturally deficient in two noteworthy respects. The first is suburbia’s comparative class homogeneity, most starkly evident when one compares the uniformity of housing in virtually any suburban residential development with the variety of housing types that can be found on urban residential streets. The second is that the very nature of the postwar suburb

requires a dissociation of daily communal life from physical place, a dissociation that not only fails to sustain both the social reality and the aesthetics of communal life but positively undermines them.

Still, though post-1945 suburban sprawl is for these and other reasons both unfortunate and deserving of honorable sustained resistance, neither car owners nor suburbanites are by these facts alone either more or less “moral” than bicyclists or urban pedestrians. Suburbia’s problems are arguably an unintended consequence of a legitimate desire and a genuine good: the freedom of mobility originally promised by the automobile. New Urbanists do not fail to understand this, and a renewal of the physical patterns of traditional urbanism would not only restore an effective pedestrian mobility now denied to suburbanites too young, too old, too poor, or too infirm to drive, but might also better fulfill the automobile’s original promise for those who do drive.

But even this does not really address the cultural problem of suburbia; and it is all too easy to imagine the New Urbanists, in spite of their best intentions, being co-opted by and for the consumerist aesthetic tendencies that are another fruit of contemporary emotivist life. New Urbanist that I am, I am not alone among either New Urbanists or our critics in fearing that “traditional” town master plans financed by developers and geared to the sensibilities of the marketplace are going to result in “new towns” that are highly class-specific. And if this is indeed what transpires at any significant scale, it is important to be clear about the net losses and gains that the New Urbanism will represent.

The net gains will be primarily ecological, and not unimportant: a decrease in the necessary use of the automobile, perhaps a better stewardship of farmlands and forests, the possibility of these new town plans promoting genuine towns sometime in the future simply by virtue of their patterns of physical infrastructure—a possibility absolutely precluded in postwar sprawl by virtue of the latter’s own infrastructure patterns. The net loss, however, will be greater, insofar as a movement aspiring to the rich social and civic textures of traditional urban life will in fact be reinforcing and extending the breakdown of civic life to which American suburbs in various forms have been contributing, wittingly or not, for over a hundred years. In this tragicomic scenario, emotivist culture and a global market economy conspire to create a “market

niche” for “traditional urbanism” that in reality they cannot succor. New Urbanist towns turn out to be merely one more aesthetic option for the private lives of a relatively wealthy and elite class of people, and tend to obscure even further the historic relationship between traditional urban aesthetics and traditional urban culture. In perhaps the greatest irony of all, the New Urbanism would function culturally exactly like the art and architecture of its *avant-garde* critical theory antagonists, its success or failure a simple consequence of the individual tastes of that class of people who can afford to buy art. For in an emotivist society, unlike a traditional city, *de gustibus non disputandum est*.

### ***Benedict and the New Urbanism***

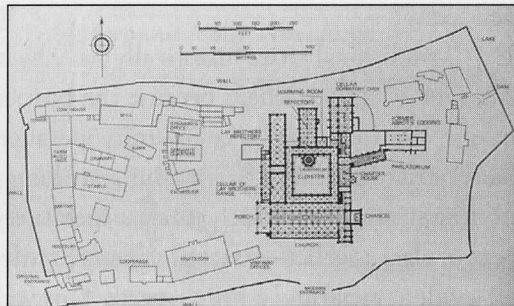
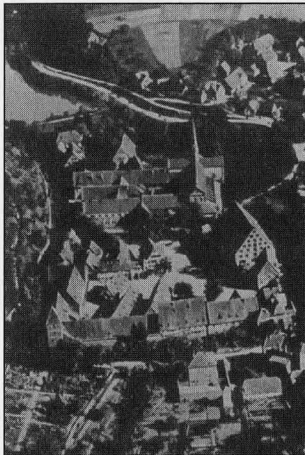
If the preceding is a warning about the degradations to which the New Urbanism may be vulnerable, its emotivist corruption is not foreordained. But if we moderns are indeed so far down the road in our cultural tendency to atomize ourselves as to make traditional urbanism impossible on a broad scale, a second traditionalist scenario—a necessarily longer, and likely more painful, historical process—suggests itself: the less optimistic, more radical prospect I characterized earlier as the Benedict scenario.

It is designated the Benedict scenario after MacIntyre’s conclusion in *After Virtue*, in which he asks rhetorically about the contemporary political relevance of the Aristotelian/communitarian moral tradition he has been defending:

It is always dangerous to draw too precise parallels between one historical period and another; and among the most mis-leading of such parallels are those which have been drawn between our own age and the epoch in which the Roman empire declined into the Dark Ages. Nonetheless, certain parallels there are. A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*. What they set themselves to achieve instead—often not recognizing fully what they were doing—was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life

could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. If my account of our moral condition is correct, we too for some time now have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time, however, the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are not waiting for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.<sup>20</sup>

The kind of life to which MacIntyre here alludes is historically called “ascetic;” and the value of the ascetic life for individuals presupposes a voluntary acceptance of its disciplines [Figs. 12–13]. But the value of the ascetic life for a culture depends upon its status as a shared character ideal, an ideal honored even in the breach both by conscience and hypocrisy. Whether for spiritual athletes or in everyday life, the goal of asceticism is misunder-



Figs. 12–13: Plan and aerial view of twelfth-century Cistercian monastery at Maulbronn, Germany, organizing community life after sixth-century Rule of St. Benedict.

20. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 263.

stood to be the elimination of either desire or pleasure. Ascetic culture—arguably a redundancy—is not about desire’s elimination, but rather its limitation for the sake of a larger, more lasting pleasure. The ascetic insight, so contrary to the grain of contemporary culture, is that unlimited desire destroys both civil society and human happiness. As Philip Rieff has observed, the social effect of culture is that individuals learn through a variety of ritual roles and actions to express fixed wants; and the limitation of possibilities is the first prerequisite of human happiness.<sup>21</sup>

In positing the Benedict scenario, I am not saying that a renewal of the formal and social arrangements characteristic of traditional urbanism necessarily entails a revival of monastic Christianity. I am saying that such a renewal would entail a creation or revival of communities in which the place of the moral virtues and the intellectual life would be central, and would thus necessarily entail forms of social organization more ascetic than our own—and I would be surprised if at least some of these communities were not religious. Moreover, I am not certain that it is yet time for thoughtful people of good will—including architects and town planners—to turn away from the dominant institutions of modern life towards more genuine forms of moral community. But suppose the Benedict scenario is correct. How then might persons with a commitment to traditional urban form and a revitalized civic life proceed today?

If traditional cities historically have been able to accommodate a variety of economic classes, this is because the purpose of the city’s major civic institutions, and the basis for community membership, has been something other than a strict function of class. But a striking fact in the history of American suburbanization is precisely its class specificity, and thus its symbolic embodiment of class conflict—a fact much more striking, I would argue, than even its self-evident racial and ethnic aspects. This was true in the nineteenth century, when an elite upper managerial class sought suburban refuge from the urban working class, and it has been true in the twentieth century, as the working middle class has in turn sought suburban refuge from the urban underclass. Today this flight from city to suburb is often and understandably motivated

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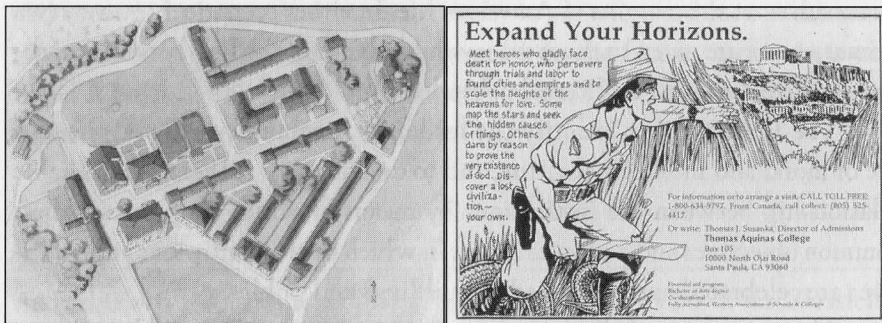
21. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 1–27, and especially page 15.



by a desire to escape street crime and woefully deficient public schools—a desire shared by urban residents of all classes, races, and ethnic backgrounds. But whatever motives have prompted America's mass movement to the suburbs, it is clear that the history of suburban development has both fueled and been fueled by real estate speculation. Perhaps therefore the way to begin promoting development that is not so class exclusive is to encourage and promote physical development by institutions and individuals whose primary interests include objectives other than maximizing their return on real estate holdings.

Skeptics will regard this as an entirely quixotic and naïve suggestion, so accustomed have we all become to the idea that only for-profit developers build cities. But I am not suggesting that land speculation is not intrinsic to the creation and growth of cities. I simply note that historically such speculation has often occurred in tandem with if not subsequent to an intention to build for some common purpose. The agents of such communal projects are known as “founders.”

Do such persons still exist? If so, where are they likely to be found? To put this another way, what kinds of communities and institutions, pursuing what kinds of practices, can we find in contemporary America where membership is, or at least could be, based upon factors other than class? Several



Figs. 14–15: 1992 campus plan proposal by Thursday Associates for Thomas Aquinas College, Santa Paula, California, and early 1990s magazine advertisement for same. On behalf of a “very different” contemporary Benedictine-like community, the advertisement uses architecture to symbolize civilization; and the infill master plan for what was then a suburb-like campus proposed to weave new and existing buildings into a traditional urban physical and spatial environment. Figure 14 drawing by Anthony Grumbine, courtesy of Thursday Associates.

communities and institutions come immediately to mind, all with numerous historical antecedents: religious communities; ethnic groups (particularly recently arrived immigrants); and college and university communities [Figs. 14–15]. Perhaps there are others: the commercial corporation, provided its primary objective is the stable, profitable, and long-term production of particular goods and services; the burgeoning medical community; perhaps the American military. Are there would-be town founders/developers from among such communities interested in the re-association of community and place, willing to make provisions in town and neighborhood master plans for both their affluent and less affluent members? If so, how do the New Urbanists find and identify them?

### *Two Tasks for the New Urbanists*

The two New Urbanist scenarios I have outlined both presume the kinds of social orders and character virtues historically represented in and by traditional architecture and cities. The Tocqueville scenario would be corrective of but continuous with modern liberal culture, taking place at the center of American life. The Benedict scenario implies the bankruptcy of modern liberal culture, and sees the hope for a new traditional urbanism in communities residing at the margins of American life. In either scenario, however, two primary tasks are given to those who would maintain the link between traditional urban form and traditional urban life.

The first task is to identify the leaders of communities that aspire to a life of moral and intellectual virtue, and to demonstrate to them the desirable relationship between the institutions by means of which they pursue their common objectives and a physical order in which those institutions and objectives are celebrated and embodied in buildings and public spaces.

The second is equally necessary. Persons committed to traditional urbanism must be clear about their ultimate goals and intellectual foundations, because their long-term architectural and urban objectives are not going to be achieved quickly. Such objectives will surely not be achieved rapidly enough to survive the seven-to-ten-year cycles of fame that the institutional organs of contemporary art and architecture in speedy succession inspire, sustain, and

terminate. The demand for novelty in emotivist culture is too relentless, and media fame too fleeting; the New Urbanists must be prepared for the long haul.

This second task necessarily entails the ability to describe how civility has affinities with but also differs from good intentions and aesthetic refinement. Countless are the architects and developers among us who both mean well and dress well, who enjoy Mozart, speak Italian as a third or fourth language, know their way around a wine list—and yet are the knowing or unknowing enemies of civilized life. The rationale for a new traditional urbanism therefore cannot be based upon either cocktail party chatter about “civic virtue” or the market appeal of an autonomous traditional aesthetic. Rather, it requires reconciliation between traditional urban aesthetics and a teleological/communitarian view of human nature.

It cannot be reiterated too often that the city is not simply a marketplace, not simply a “culture center” or entertainment zone, and not simply an aesthetic object. The city is all of these, but is above all the locus of the best life for human beings, including the life of specific moral and intellectual virtues. Defending this city and its pleasures as both an idea and a built reality is a project worthy of both a lifetime and a tradition; as such it bears the marks of what I have earlier described as a “practice.” To identify, to learn, to exercise, and to teach the particular virtues necessary to revitalize and sustain this practice in the present, and to further advance it in the future, is the city’s only hope. It must be the happy duty not only of the New Urbanists, but of city lovers everywhere.

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