BUILDING BLOCKS: SOUTH WORKS AND THE FUTURE OF URBAN CHICAGO

Western ideas about good cities descend from Athens, Jerusalem, and Rome. From Athens we inherit two seminal ideas: that the good life is the life of moral and intellectual excellence, and that the good city is a community that makes possible for its individual citizens this good life. From Jerusalem comes a third idea: that a city's excellence is also measured by the care it exhibits for its weakest members. And from Rome we inherit the idea that a city's beauty is warranted by and represents its greatness.

This ancient view of cities, though it acknowledged the primacy of economics, was essentially moral and aesthetic. Today's wisdom is different. It sees the city governed by impersonal market forces, and devotes less thought to the good life, the purpose of cities, or the idea that urban aesthetics may be something more fundamental than advertising. Here in Chicago, the pending development of the old United States Steel South Works site will soon test our ideas about the good city.

For millennia cities were compact, characterized by the closeness of residential, commercial, civic, religious, and recreational uses. The industrial revolution changed this; but well into the twentieth century, modern cities retained this traditionally urban compact quality in neighborhoods that approximated pre-modern cities in size, population, and variety of adjacent uses.

Such neighborhoods were characterized by certain common features. They had discernible centers, usually a public square, often located near a train station or public transit. They were pedestrian friendly (and now also accommodate cars). They had a variety of dwelling types, often on the same block, that enabled young and old, singles and families, poor and wealthy, all to find places to live. They had stores and offices within walking distance of residences, facing neighborhood centers and primary streets. They had schools to which children could walk. They had a network of through streets to help disperse traffic. They had narrow residential streets lined with trees, fronted by houses placed close to the street. They often had alleys that accommodated off-street parking and allowed on-street parking. Finally, they usually reserved their most prominent sites for civic and religious buildings and community monuments, sites fronting neighborhood centers or at the end of important streets.

You can see such features today in thriving Chicago neighborhoods as diverse as Bridgeport, Lakeview, Hyde Park, Wrigleyville, South Shore, Logan Square, and Andersonville. These neighborhoods, though not perfect, continue to nourish that good life to which western urbanism has traditionally aspired. Nevertheless, for more than fifty years, neither developers nor architects nor city planners have been guided by the humane design habits that produce such neighborhoods. Post-1945 urbanism has been guided instead by utilitarian ideals: free and rapid traffic flow; parking in quantity; separation of uses; and low building density. These ideals, embodied in modern zoning ordinances, produce contemporary sprawl: shopping malls, office parks, subdivisions, and drive-through restaurants. Which of these two design sensibilities will guide South Works' future development?

South Works' size (nearly one square mile) is comparable to the low-rise, high-density, mixed-use Chicago neighborhoods noted above---in other words, fully capable of accommodating some 15,000 residents, lakefront and neighborhood parks, light industry, and scores of businesses, schools, and religious and cultural institutions. With over three miles of water frontage, spectacular views of Lake Michigan and the Loop, easy connections to nearby transit lines, and an Illinois EPA-certified clean bill of health, South Works is a civic opportunity that could also have a tremendous positive effect on neighboring South Chicago and the entire southeast side.

The Metropolitan Planning Council and the City Planning Department are preparing development guidelines for South Works. These guidelines will reflect Mayor Daley's vision for Chicago. What we will soon learn is whether that vision is consciously urban or habitually suburban. My nightmare for South

Works is vivid: some residential enclaves over there, an office park here, big box retail over there, an industrial park here, some "bold public art statement" over there, with ample parking for all--exactly the sensibilities that have afflicted the City of Chicago with such suburban wannabe embarrassments as Dearborn Park, Clybourn Avenue, new Comiskey Park, and countless others. If the City's South Works planners and architects cannot disentangle themselves from the mental habits that produced these, we should hardly call them *city* planners.

Against today's wisdom and fifty years of bad practices, Chicagoans should insist that the city is not simply a marketplace, nor an entertainment zone, nor even an aesthetic object. The city is all of these and more, but best seen as the location for the good life of its citizens. South Works is a defining moment for the Daley administration and its hopes for "The City That Works." As we shape a new piece of Chicago, we should learn from Chicago's excellent older pieces, and especially from neighborhoods that over time have already proven themselves to work.

This essay was first published on March 3, 1998, on the editorial page of the Chicago *Tribune.* As of 2006 publication, the South Works site remains largely vacant.