

Architecture and Man: A Reciprocal Relationship

In a culture that tends to have a scientific and technological view of the human person, how is our understanding of man embodied in the buildings and cities we construct? *Traces* interviews PHILIP BESS, Director of Graduate Studies at the University of Notre Dame's School of Architecture, to understand more about the relationship between urban design and human flourishing.

BY PAIGE SMITH

Philip Bess is the Director of Graduate Studies for the School of Architecture at the University of Notre Dame. He teaches graduate urban design and theory while continuing his professional work at Thursday Associates as a design consultant for municipalities, architects, and community development corporations. He is also a baseball fan who has offered his skills and insights as the former director and principal designer of the Urban Baseball Park Design Project of the Society for American Baseball Research and director of the successful "Save Fenway Park!" design charrette. As an accomplished author in the field, he shares his expertise in exploring the



Phil Bess.

connection of architecture to culture, community, and the human soul.

Professor Bess, what does it really mean for human beings to build?

The human animal has no species-specific environment—human beings have the ability to live in and adapt to a variety of environmental and climatic conditions. But one theory, a theory for which there is evidence and which I find plausible, holds that architecture originated in the human orientation toward sacred order. The first structures that human beings built were not for ourselves but for the gods: temples, tombs for heroic leaders, and other offerings to the sacred. Then, somebody made the



connection that if we can build houses for the gods then we can build houses for human beings. Human beings have gradually come to recognize the "practical" benefits of buildings, to the point today where—with the exception of avant-garde architecture, which is in no way practical—we regard building almost entirely as a practical activity, but narrowly conceived for the short term, and ultimately both culturally and environmentally unsustainable. But to the extent we now regard building as an exclusively practical activity, what implications does that have for the form of our cities? If there are no sacred precincts, no public spaces, no clear hierarchy or differentiation between sacred, civic, and private buildings, no concern for eternity or even for generations of



A view of the traditional urban town of Bruges, Belgium, where Prof. Bess annually takes his graduate students to study.

human beings across time, perhaps that explains the kind of environment we have today. So, why do we build? In an obvious practical sense because we have to; but more originally and perhaps more fundamentally, we build out of gratitude, memory, and transcendent hope.

It seems that in the way we build we give physical form to our presuppositions about the human person.

I think this is true, both in terms of how we build and what we build. For example, in Modernist arguments about architecture and urbanism there is an implicit but operative assumption that if you get the built environment right, human beings will necessarily flourish. So, there's this Modernist view of human beings—

“the masses”—as essentially malleable, essentially passive; and that if you get certain physical and mechanical relationships ordered correctly then human beings will be happy, with happiness defined in strictly material terms. But that's just not true; or rather—from a Catholic point of view—it's inadequate and misleading because it is at best only partially true.

Human happiness isn't caused by the design of cities but, at the same time, it seems that urban design has something to do with it . .

You've hit on an issue I've been trying hard for a long time to articulate in a concise way, and with difficulty. Maybe the best I can do is to say that if we look at it from a strictly natural point

of view—let's leave Thomas Aquinas out of it for now and just talk about Aristotle—human happiness is the life of moral and intellectual virtue lived in community with others, most typically in a city. And when Aristotle talks about happiness as the *telos* or end or purpose of a human life, he means a human being living well over the course of a lifetime. For Aristotle, happiness depends in part on good fortune, but above all it depends upon virtues. (Aquinas takes this understanding of the relationship of virtue to happiness and, without altering its basic structure, puts it in a transcendent context that recognizes the good of the human being as not just a temporal matter but an eternal one.) The role of urbanism in all this—and remember that for Aristotle the >>

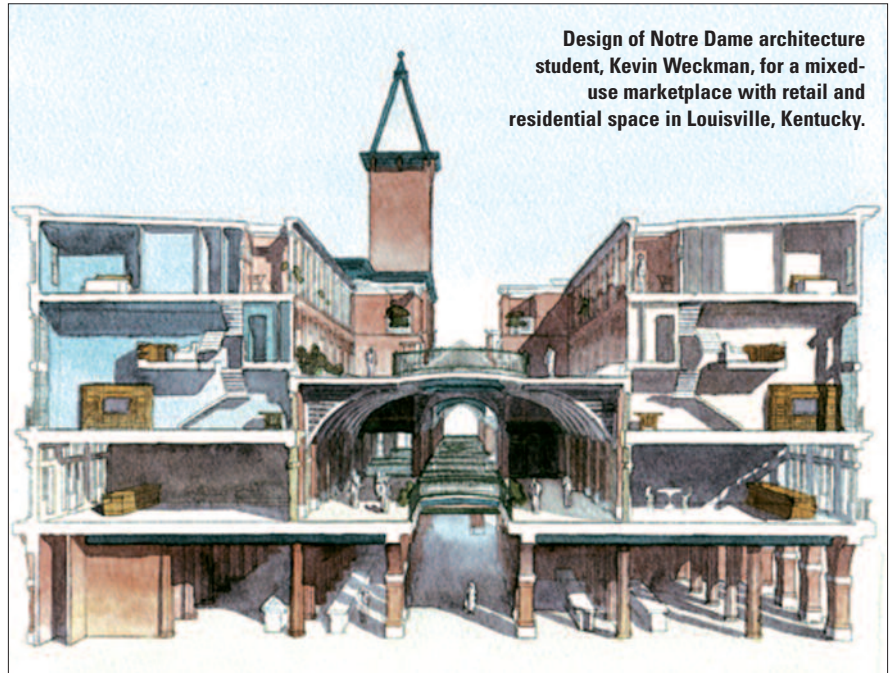
» purpose of a city is to promote not merely living but living well; and that for Christians our ultimate life in God is conceived as urban—is that good cities make it possible for us to live better than if we lived without cities. Nevertheless, even the best city can't *make* a person good, can't *make* a person happy. Aristotle, the first great urban theorist, understood that clearly, but we don't. We miss that there's a *reciprocal relationship* between good cities and human flourishing.

How do you understand the relationship between cities and the suburbs, and why are people drawn to suburbia?

The attraction to suburbia has its roots in the Industrial Revolution. From before Aristotle until the Industrial Revolution, cities were understood as places for humans to flourish. With the Industrial Revolution and the massive influx of population into cities that it prompted, cities became associated with crime and disease. Cities were bad and “nature” was benign and even therapeutic. This sensibility is still with us, and it informs today's suburban ideal. But our suburban ideal is not really the tract house on the undistinguishable cul-de-sac that is automobile proximate to the shopping mall. Our suburban ideal is the country estate. This underscores the inherent contradiction of the suburban ideal: democratized it is lost, because suburbia consumes the landscape it desires. What we have, instead of the suburban ideal, is post-1945 sprawl.

So, historically, did the culture itself invite the not-so-ideal suburbs to come about?

Suburbia was anticipated by Tocqueville's second volume of *Democracy in America* in which he writes about the culture of individualism.



Design of Notre Dame architecture student, Kevin Weckman, for a mixed-use marketplace with retail and residential space in Louisville, Kentucky.

Tocqueville is careful to distinguish between individualism and selfishness. Selfishness is a vice endemic to human nature, but individualism represents a nascent cultural ideology. Tocqueville writes that in an individualist society, human beings imagine they can live their lives entirely unto themselves, not particularly mindful of generations past or generations to come—it's as if in 1835 he's describing the post-1945 American suburb. He concludes that the problem with individualism is that in the end it becomes selfishness, which ultimately undermines both democracy and human happiness. But Tocqueville also writes hopefully of how in America the family, churches, and above all free associations combat the American tendency toward individualism—and of how these institutions are necessary because they promote the moral and intellectual virtues essential to both democracy and human flourishing. While suburbia is certainly a prominent ideal now, I'm not sure that it is either environmental-ly or culturally sustainable, especial-

ly insofar as its cultural ethos is individualist. I also think that both historic Catholic culture and modern Catholic social teaching provide substantial intellectual resources for rethinking the modern suburban ideal...

You quote G.K. Chesterton's contention that "Rome became great because it was loved," and you have written that the greatest cities are products of love. How do you understand the place of love in architecture?

Christians really do believe that love makes the world go round. The reason there is anything at all is because of the love of God; and somehow our full participation in the Being of which we are part requires of us a similar kind of love. It's certainly true that great and lovely places have become that way because they've been loved, and I'm quite certain that most if not all of my New Urbanist friends would agree. But some of them remain reluctant to buy into the theological implications that follow. So for now it remains Christianity's open little secret. **T**