**BUILDING THE CHURCH: THE FUTURE OF CATHOLIC CHURCH ARCHITECTURE IN LIGHT OF NARRATIVE VIRTUE ETHICS AND NEW URBANISM**

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# ABSTRACT

## BUILDING THE CHURCH: THE FUTURE OF CATHOLIC CHURCH ARCHITECTURE IN LIGHT OF NARRATIVE VIRTUE ETHICS AND NEW URBANISM

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Current discussions of Catholic Church architecture tend to focus on the interior design and layout of the church building, and often become polarized. Through a cultural and historical analysis of Catholic Church building practice, this thesis suggests turning attention to the exterior of church buildings and their location within communities as a more fruitful source of discussion. Using narrative virtue ethics and collaborating with New Urbanism, the Catholic Church may, through her architecture, encourage a built environment more conducive to the practice of Christian virtue than the present suburban paradigm.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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*The reason we fly from the city is not that it is not poetical; it is that its poetry is too fierce, too fascinating and too practical in its demands.*

*~ G. K. Chesterton[1]*

*The only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments, namely, the* saints *the Church has produced and the* art *which has grown in her womb...*

*~Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger[2]*

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[1] As quoted in Anderw Greeley, *The Church and the Suburbs* (Chicago: Sheed & Ward, Inc., 1959, 1963), 4.

[2] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church,* trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 129.

# INTRODUCTION

Every built environment has an implicit, and occasionally an explicit, theological meaning. It requires a certain type of lens in order to be able to see this, but there is no doubt that theological meaning is everywhere. For Catholics, this theological meaning is often easily seen in church architecture. The shape and design of a church emphasizes different aspects of theology. Examples include emphasizing the "body of Christ" or the "people of God" through spatial arrangements of seating, altar, and tabernacle. They also include the soaring heights of a Gothic cathedral and the noble simplicity of post-Vatican II churches. In beginning to look at the theological implications of church design, I found myself wondering about the theological implications of other buildings with which we surround ourselves. This thesis is a result of thinking about those implications.

Along the way, however, I became interested in an aspect of church architecture that is not present in current conversation. The interior design and layout of a church is a topic of much contention in the current American Catholic church. Broadly speaking, there are two sides to this debate. One view, offered by Steven Schloeder, Duncan Stroik, and Michael Rose, desires a return to the classical design of churches that existed before Vatican II; this often involves traditional seating arrangements focused on the sanctuary at one end of the building, the return of the tabernacle to a place of central importance, and an emphasis upon iconography in the church.[1] On the other hand are

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[1] See Steven J. Schloeder, *Architecture in Communion: Implementing the Second Vatican Council through Liturgy and Architecture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998); Duncan Stroik, "Ten Myths of

those such as Richard Vosko who view the liturgical documents of Vatican II as license to embrace the minimalist style of Modern architecture, focus on functionality, and who tend to design churches in the round, emphasizing the people of God as the foremost metaphor for the presence of God.[2] It is frustrating to try to synthesize these two viewpoints, for it often seems that they speak at cross-purposes. One side seeks to avoid any sort of change and return to an idealized past, while the other seeks to abandon much that was good in the past tradition of architecture. Looking at virtue ethics might offer a way to bridge the gap between the two sides, trading issues of style for a better understanding of what a church is. Specifically, the use of narrative ethics provides both a framework for incorporating the history of the Christian tradition as well as the context of contemporary church buildings into church architecture, as well as a look towards the future eschaton to provide a needed critique of the current modes of building. Additionally, narrative virtue ethics point to the importance of practice in shaping virtue. The practice of worship is often seen as the primary action that a church building is involved in. I would like to argue that church buildings, indeed our built environment in general, may reflect and encourage the practice of Christian virtues.

As a result of the frustration I felt from the varying theological positions regarding church buildings, my attention turned to the exterior of the church. The exterior is not just the façade of the building, the skin covering the liturgical action which takes place inside. Rather, a concern for the outer appearance of the church takes into

Contemporary Church Architecture," 6, *Sacred Architecture*, Fall 1998, accessed through The Catholic Liturgical Library, http://www.catholicliturgy.com/index.cfm/FuseAction/ArticleText/Index/15/SubIndex/0/ArticleIndex/24, 14 April 2002; and Michael Rose, *Ugly as Sin: Why They Changed Our Churches from Sacred Places to Meeting Spaces and How We Can Change Them Back Again* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2001).

[2] See Richard Vosko, *Through the Eye of a Rose Window: A Perspective on the Environment of Worship* (Saratoga, CA: Resource Publications, 1981). Also, Richard Vosko, "A House for the Church: Structures for Public Worship in a New Millennium," *Worship* 74, no. 3 (May 2000): 194-212.

account how the church building relates to and interacts with the surrounding built environment. Such a relationship between the building and the site carries cultural, social, and theological meanings rarely mentioned in Catholic documents, or among the Catholic liturgists who constitute many of those involved in discussion of church design.

Because it is often acknowledged that the Catholic Church will never adopt a particular architectural style for her churches,[3] it seems wise to focus on other elements of church architecture that may be lacking present attention. Architectural buildings do not exist in a vacuum. A church is not built without being built in a certain place, with a certain relationship to its surroundings. My interest was peaked by the question of how our churches reflect the action which takes place both inside and outside of the Eucharist. That is, how do our churches reflect the Christian narrative out of which we are called to live our lives? The practices of service and worship, hallmarks of the Christian narrative, may both be emphasized through architecture. While the practice of worship may be emphasized through the interior layout and design, the practice of service may be emphasized through the building's relationship with its surroundings. This latter dimension of church architecture has not been attended to as much as the interior practice of worship within a church.

Why pay so much attention to the surroundings and placement of a church? Its interior design and functionality for the liturgy appears to be of more concern to Christians. I want to suggest that if we continue to build churches without regard to how their exteriors are read by strangers and believers, without regard to the surrounding

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[3] "The Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her own. She has admitted styles from every period, in keeping with the natural characteristics and conditions of peoples and the needs of various rites." *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §123, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1992), 35.

neighborhood, we fail in our mission as Christians. Because of the present context of suburbia, our churches are ignoring (or are blind to) the potential to create and foster communities that are not segregated by race, economic status, or any other divisive classification that occurs within suburbia.

Beginning with a brief look at the cultural theory of architecture, this thesis will examine the connection between architecture, theology, and culture. The sacramental nature of the church building will be established as the most useful view for this examination. The second chapter will address the history of church architecture, demonstrating that the location of churches within cities played an integral part in their architectural style, as well as their theological implications. The American context of the past 50 years will then be explored to demonstrate the problems resulting from suburban sprawl and the effect they had upon Christians and their churches. The influence of post-Vatican II liturgical documents and bishops' statements upon Catholic architecture will be examined. Finally, the combination of virtue ethics with the New Urbanism movement will be offered as a new direction for church planning to take. The New Urbanism movement in architecture and design focuses upon integration within the built environment, as well as the practice of looking at past neighborhood development for suggestions regarding current building and development practices. Combining the approach of New Urbanism with the focus upon tradition, narrative and practice of virtue ethics calls for a more holistic view of church architecture than is currently in practice. Churches are not merely places that house the liturgical life of Christians. They are that and also the public witness of the presence of the church in the world, a beacon on a hill, reminding us of the heavenly New Jerusalem yet to come.

This thesis is aimed at Catholic theologians and church designers, those within the Catholic tradition who are responsible for the current state of church architecture. As Paula Kane has noted, "there is a need for scholarly discussion of the current status of sacred architecture among Catholics because it has become an endangered enterprise."[4] This thesis asks for a broader view of for whom a church is built, and a design which goes beyond mere functionality. It is a request for Christians to consider the effects of built environment upon the Christian narrative. Finally, it is a call to acknowledge the tension between suburban life and Christian living and virtue, and to offer some suggestions for ways to overcome this tension. It is my hope that by bringing up the issue of exterior design and placement within neighborhoods, the Church may find new ways to further her mission to spread the Good News.

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[4] Paula Kane, "Is That a Beer Vat Under the Baldochino? From Antimodernism to Postmodernism in Catholic Church Architecture," *US Catholic Historian* 15, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 1.

# CHAPTER 1

## LAYING THE FOUNDATION

This thesis focuses upon the connection between architecture, theology, and culture. Church architecture represents a particular type of theology in its style. Church architecture is also shaped by cultural forces, which in modern America primarily involve the suburban paradigm of development and lifestyle.[1] The fact that modern church architecture is shaped by this American culture, however, is problematic for Christians. It is problematic because the values of suburban culture are often in tension with the Christian narrative, as will be demonstrated. First, however, the importance of the material, built environment will be explained, followed by a brief exposition of the cultural theory of architecture. Finally, a discussion of the sacramental nature of the church building will be offered, providing an argument for the implications of church architecture towards the broader community to be considered by anyone concerned with church architectural design.

## A Turn to the Built Environment

In her book, *Material Christianity*, Colleen McDannell addresses the lack of scholarly work done to examine the role of material items in shaping and expressing Christian belief. She argues that such a lack of scholarship ignores an important

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[1] Such a notion is based primarily upon anecdotal evidence of personal observation. However, it is acknowledged in historical research of Catholicism. For example, Jay Dolan notes the increase in suburban Catholic church growth during the 1920-60 era, from 75 percent of parishes established within the city of Chicago from the early 1900s, compared to 50 percent established in suburban communities during the 1920-1940 period. Also, he notes that the 1970 US census showed that more Americans live in suburbs than live in cities. Jay Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience:A History from Colonial Time to the Present* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985), 357-8.

manifestation of worship, for "[e]xperiencing the physical dimension of religion helps bring about religious values, norms, behaviors, and attitudes."[2]  Here she echoes the "lex orandi, lex credendi" (the law of worship is the law of belief) stated by the Catholic Church throughout history.  Because of this relationship, attention to physical structures such as the architecture of a church provides important insight into the values and beliefs of a worshipping community.  Acknowledging that our worship environment affects us leads us to consider more seriously the architecture and design of our churches.  Indeed, within a church where the liturgy is the primary means of expressing religious devotion, the importance of environment cannot be overstressed.  As McDannell succinctly states, "churches with a liturgical orientation take seriously how the visual arts enhance or detract from worship."[3]

Beyond the material nature of the interior of our worship spaces, the exterior of our buildings also have an impact upon our Christian lives.  This impact stems from the public nature of the church building, as it stands as a witness to the presence of Christianity in a particular neighborhood.  Such a building can inspire its congregants, as well as those who do not worship within it.  Indeed, there are cases wherein even those in the neighborhood who do not attend the church may still look to it as an important symbol in the neighborhood.[4]  The specific location of a church within a neighborhood environment communicates the church's role within that environment.  For example, in medieval times churches and cathedrals often towered over their central location in the town.  This represented the overarching role that the church played in people's lives

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[2] Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 2.
[3] McDannell, 187.
[4] See, for example, Gretchen T. Buggeln, "Architecture as Community Service: West Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, Delaware," in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, ed. David Morgan and Sally M. Promey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 87-104.

during this time.[5] In our modern society, the prevalence of large, flat churches surrounded by parking lots can be argued to represent the desire of American Catholics to fit into the secular culture by imitating the consumer-oriented shopping centers in their design.

One critique of modern Catholic church architecture is that it has lost its symbolic power to assert theological truths. In part this is a result of the influence of postmodern culture upon architecture. Paula Kane has argued that

> American Catholics unwittingly reflect the condition of postmodernity in two ways: first by inhabiting a world of *simulacra* – signifiers for which the signified has been forgotten, a realm of reproductions without originals; and second, by esteeming personal experience (what sociologists call an individual-expressive ethic) derived from memory or emotion, above a collective-expressive identity which dominated prior Catholic identifications.[6]

This turn from the past, whether through forgotten symbols or unacknowledged collective identity, is harmful to Catholicism in America today. If our church buildings are meant to communicate the redeeming power of Christ, and yet have lost their ability to be correctly read, there obviously needs to be a correction in our building practice in order to more clearly communicate this vital message. As American culture becomes increasingly suburban, focused on privatization, geographic isolation, homogeneity and consumerism, it is more important than ever for churches to speak the gospel. One of the ways in which this can be spoken is through the built environment. In the cultural theory of architecture, this ability of buildings to speak is argued by numerous architects and theorists. Let us turn now to see what they have to say.

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[5] Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 54-5.
[6] Kane, 2.

## The Cultural Theory of Architecture

A turn to the cultural theory of architecture is intended to demonstrate the significance of the surrounding environment, as well as to illuminate cultural challenges to Catholic church architecture. Additionally, such a theory argues that the built environment reflects culture, similar to the argument that our churches reflect theology. Thus it may be argued that church buildings reflect two cultures, one the dominant American culture, and the other the Catholic Christian culture. The difficulty of the current situation in American Catholic church architecture is the dominance of the American cultural influence upon architecture. The Church has lost much of her ability to speak the gospel through her church buildings. A recovery of that ability would be advantageous not only to the Catholic community, but also to the greater American community, for whom Christians are called to witness.

From an architectural perspective, it is a fundamental principle that the built environment affects those who live within it. This affect is achieved, in part, by our ability to read buildings. The first step in reading buildings begins with examining how buildings possess the ability to inspire a reaction from those who experience the building. Umberto Eco's writing on semiotics is particularly intriguing for a discussion of architecture as communication. His idea that there is an underlying structure to the meaning of buildings, or that there is something inherent to be read in the forms that make up a building, supports the notion that it matters what our buildings, specifically churches, look like, because they tell us things, about ourselves, about the world, about God, and about the Church herself. Eco clearly delineates the two roles of architecture:

to function, and to communicate.[7] It is often the functional role of architecture which is over-emphasized. Indeed, this can be seen in church design which views the church building as merely a worship space, defined only by the liturgy that takes place therein. Eco does not deny the functional role of architecture, but argues from a semiotic view that buildings do communicate things to people, and that we experience this communication even as we are aware of the function of the architecture.[8] This communicative nature requires the architect to "think in terms of the totality." [9] Thinking in terms of the totality is something at which the current practice of Catholic church architecture is not often successful.

A building's form denotes its function, while its connotations vary with time and culture. If the recognizable form of a church is not present, it is difficult for the building's function to be known. This suggests that whatever it may mean for a church to "look like a church," there is some merit to the criticism that modern Catholic churches do not look like churches. Unreadable buildings offer more confusion than understanding. Part of the purpose of a church is to be recognizable as such. Eco is careful to point out that what buildings connote changes over time, much as language itself changes over time.[10] This brings up the interesting question of how we learn to read buildings. There is something in our present situation that denies us the ability to read church buildings properly. I suggest that that something is the suburban context of America, and will discuss this in further detail in a later chapter.

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[7] Umberto Eco, "Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture," in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1997), 182.

[8] Eco, 182.

[9] Eco, 199.

[10] Eco, 189.

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        As philospoher Michel Foucault and cultural theorist Frederic Jameson have both

argued, architecture and buildings create and define space, and have the power to force

certain behavior, and to reinforce certain societal norms.[11]  For church architecture, this

means that the influence of secular culture and secular architectural developments must

be examined, if we are to understand what our churches are saying to us.  While

providing merely a brief view into the world of architectural theory, the points made by

Foucault and Jameson raise questions about the nature of modern church architecture.

Who is asserting power through church architecture?  What sort of power is being

asserted?  How is the liturgical experience of Mass shaped by the exertion of a building's

power upon the congregation?  This question of the power of the church building brings

to light new and wider questions about the cultural power of the church on the public

landscape.  It also brings into question the source of the power exerted upon the buildings

themselves.  The social power of suburbia is clearly exerted upon church architecture,

especially in the realms of privatization and homogeneity.  Such suburban influence will

be discussed in more detail later in the thesis, but it is important to note now the reality of

power expressed through architecture.

        The privatization of churches is a result of their loss of distinctiveness upon the

architectural landscape.  Frederic Jameson speaks of the modern attempt of architecture

to become part of the vernacular fabric of cities, so that buildings blend in with their

surroundings:

    [T]hey no longer attempt, as did the masterworks and monuments of high
    modernism, to insert a different, a distinct, an elevated, a new Utopian language

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[11] Michel Foucault, "Space, Knowledge and Power (Interview Conducted with Paul Rabinow)," in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1997), 367-379.  Also Frederic Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1997), 238-246.

into the tawdry and commercial sign system of the surrounding city, but rather they seek to speak that very language, using its lexicon and syntax as that has been emblematically 'learned from Las Vegas'.[12]

Here is an abdication of power, as buildings abandon their distinctiveness in order to fit into their surroundings. Such an abdication may be seen in the influence of suburban culture and design style upon recent Catholic church architecture. There is a struggle between the desire of Catholics to fit in with the secular culture, and so make use of secular architectural styles, and the desire to retain some distinctiveness.

Churches that are designed to look like any other building demonstrate a type of privatization, which manifests itself in the lack of recognizable church buildings. That is, the church is not accessible and recognizable for anyone who wishes to worship there, but instead is recognizable only to those who are already members of the congregation. In such a situation, only those who know that the building is a church are able to make use of it as such. Public access to such a building is denied, if the public cannot recognize the building for what it is. Jameson's discussion of the possibility of confusion regarding spatial orientation that is provided by modern buildings parallels the confusion one may feel upon regarding a building that looks like a supermarket, but is really a church. If, as is stated in various church documents, the church is a beacon on the hill, calling people to know Christ, it is imperative that church buildings not cause such confusion.[13] For churches to abandon their distinctive and recognizable form as a church is to also lose a part of the prophetic voice of the church, a voice which challenges modern culture. Losing this architectural voice is not often acknowledged by the church.

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[12] Jameson, 242.

[13] For example, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* refers to the importance of the local parish, saying "in some way they represent the visible Church constituted throughout the world." *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §42. See also Duncan Stroik, "Ten Myths," myth 5.

It is time for Catholics to "think in terms of the totality," and consider not only the interior design, but also the exterior, public statement of church buildings.

The influence of suburban homogeneity is seen in the social organization of space. Thomas Markus argues that "It is reasonable to regard buildings as material classifying devices; they organize people, things and ideas in space so as to make conceptual systems concrete."[14] The conceptual system predominant in suburbia is that of mono-purpose zones. That is, each aspect of life tends towards compartmentalization. Church architecture demonstrates this through the church's physical separation from daily neighborhood life and the dependence upon the automobile for access. Markus' point regarding the social organization of space offers a reason to think about and question the environment surrounding our churches, and the way our churches connect to that environment.

In establishing some highlights of cultural theory in architecture, it is clear that there is a relationship between buildings and their surroundings, a relationship which is often seen incompletely. Because cultural forces operate so strongly upon buildings, it is imperative that those who design church buildings be aware of the cultural forces dominating their design. Additionally, church architects are cultural actors, not merely cultural observers or reflectors. Church architects need to be aware of their role as a creator of culture within the larger community in which their buildings exist. Later in the thesis the dominating culture of current American building will be examined, as well as the potential for church architecture to act upon that culture in a transformative manner. Now, however, we move to the explanation of why a church is more than merely a

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[14] Thomas Markus, *Buildings and Power: Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types* (London: Routledge, 1993), 19.

building to house liturgy, and why a church's relationship to culture ought to matter to Christians.

## A Brief Ecclesiology

To fully understand the differing theological emphases of the meaning of "church" in pre- and post-conciliar Catholicism, a brief discussion of various understandings of ecclesiology within Roman Catholicism is in order. There are two referents of the term "church." One is the physical building in which worship takes place. The second is the group of worshippers itself, the faithful. This second meaning is rightly the primary focus of most discussion of church. Without the faithful there is no need for a church building. Yet there is more to a church building than the gathered assembly. It is instructive to examine the variety of understandings regarding the nature of this church, in order to understand more fully the telos of a church building.

In *Lumen Gentium*, the Council document also known as the "Dogmatic Constitution of the Church," the church is referred to as the "People of God," the "Body of Christ," the "Temple of the Holy Spirit," the "Bride of Christ," and as the "Pilgrim Church," just to name a few.[15]  After the Second Vatican Council, an understanding of the church as the "People of God" is often seen as the primary theological description of the church.[16] It is indeed true that the Council emphasizes this notion of the church.[17] However, *Lumen Gentium* also speaks of the Church as hierarchical, emphasizing the shared priesthood of the "People of God" but with an emphasis on the different roles and

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[15] *Lumen Gentium*, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1992), 350-426.

[16] Steven J. Schloeder, *Architecture in Communion: Implementing the Second Vatican Council through Liturgy and Architecture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 27.

[17] For example, it is the first description of the church given in detail in *Lumen Gentium*.

gifts given to clergy, religious and laity. Such a hierarchical understanding implies a sense of order within the church. Such order is relevant to church architecture, as will soon be discussed. *Lumen Gentium* and the Catechism also both use a trinitarian formulation of the church through description of the church as the "People of God", the "Body of Christ", and the "Temple of the Holy Spirit."[18] What is important to note from this discussion is that several descriptions are used for the church. A dichotomy between the "People of God" and the "Body of Christ," such as is often created in current church architecture discussions, is not necessary. The variety of descriptions of church points to the mystery that is made present within the church. It is in trying to house this mystery in a physical reality that problems result.

Using the "People of God" model as the primary understanding of the church has resulted in numerous attempts to make such a model a physical reality. But as Steven Schloeder notes in his discussion of architecture and theology, notions of church as "people of God" prove difficult to turn into architectural reality: "The main architectural problem is that "people of God" is an amorphous term – it evokes images of an unstructured crowd – and it says nothing of order, and nothing of structure, on which to base an architecture."[19] Often a result of working with the "People of God" image is that of the fan-shaped, semi-circular seating arrangement. The purpose of such a design, centered on the altar, is to allow the entire congregation to be able to see the altar, as well as to see the other members of the "People of God." Its use is also legitimated as a means of encouraging participation from the congregation. Duncan Stroik, an architect and professor at the University of Notre Dame, notes the irony of this use, for while "the

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[18] *Lumen Gentium*, §17. Also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 781-810, passim.
[19] Schloeder, 29.

reason often stated for using the fan shape is to encourage participation, …the semicircular shape is derived from a room for entertainment,"[20] the participation in which is typically a passive enterprise.

Schloeder goes on to argue that using the "Body of Christ" and "temple of the Holy Spirit" models for the church prove to be more conducive to architectural design. Such models involve elements of hierarchy, and provide more order with which the architect can work. The cruciform plan is one such design which functions as the physical representation of the "Body of Christ." (*See Figure 1.*) One detailed description of how this is accomplished follows:

> Christ's head is at the apse, which is the seat of governance represented by the bishop's cathedra; the choir is the throat, from which the chants of the monks issue forth the praise of God; the transepts are his extended arms; his torso and legs form the nave, since the gathered faithful are his body; the narthex represents his feet, where the faithful enter the church; and at the crossing is the altar, which is the heart of the church.[21]

Additionally, such a design lends itself to a sense of procession, "the movement of the faithful along a path, at the end of which---in the sacrament of the Eucharist---we encounter God." [22]

> In short, "Body of Christ" and "temple of the Holy Spirit" lend themselves, in a way that "people of God" cannot, more easily to an articulated building, because they imply different roles and functions while preserving the senses of unity and integration.[23]

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[20] Duncan Stroik, "Ten Myths," myth 6.

[21] Schloeder, 30.

[22] Philip Bess, *Liturgy and the Logic of Architectural Form: Church Architecture in the 21st Century* (paper presented at the University of Notre Dame symposium, "Cathedrals for a New Century: Church Architecture at the Beginning of the Third Millennium," South Bend, Indiana, 23 October 2001), courtesy of the author.

[23] Schloeder, 30. It is interesting to note that while Schloeder commends the "temple of the Holy Spirit" as a proper way to model a church building, he never actually demonstrates how this is so. Instead,

The debate between which model of the church is best, or indeed if one is even to be preferred over the other, is currently being argued in liturgical and architectural circles. There is no consensus as to the ideal form of a church design as of yet, particularly because such design is so entangled in theological debate.

### The Description of the Church Building

Having established a sense of the ecclesiology involved in church architecture, we turn to a related discussion, different ways of describing church buildings. Just as there are different ways to speak of the Church, there are different ways to speak of the church building. There are two basic descriptions of church buildings in Christianity. One is that of the *domus dei*, or house of God, which finds its root in the temple tradition, and tends to emphasize the special presence of God which is present in a church, particularly through the Blessed Sacrament and the gathered assembly. This is the view often expressed by the Catholic Church. For example, the Catechism states:

> Often, too, the Church is called the *building* of God. The Lord compared himself to the stone which the builders rejected, but which was made into the corner stone. On this foundation the Church is built by the apostles and from it the Church receives solidity and unity. This edifice has many names to describe it: the house of God in which his *family* dwells; the household of God in the Spirit; the dwelling-place of God among men; and, especially, the holy *temple*. This temple, symbolized in places of worship built out of stone, is praised by the Fathers and, not without reason, is compared in the liturgy to the Holy City, the New Jerusalem.[24]

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much like those who focus exclusively upon the "people of God" image, Schloeder focuses almost exclusively upon the "body of Christ" image in his explication of architectural church design. Most likely, he is referring to the temple aspect of the "temple of the Holy Spirit," and assuming that the reader will be cognizant of what such a temple organization and design would encompass.

[24] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §756.

Here, the *domus dei* emphasis is clear, as is the centrality of Christ as the foundation of this temple/church, and the variety of ways in which God is present in the church.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the *domus ecclesiae* model has come to the forefront as the primary view of the church building, resulting in a focus upon the gathered assembly.[25] This model is a result of the influence of the "people of God" ecclesiology discussed above. Such a description of the church building has interesting repercussions in Catholic architecture, once again demonstrating the connection between theology and architecture. The resulting churches often have an "in-the-round" seating formation, with the altar placed at or near the center of the congregation. Such churches are meant to emphasize the gathered community, and encourage greater participation in the Eucharist by the assembly. An additional way in which this *domus ecclesiae* model is expressed through architecture involves the lowering of church ceilings to bring a sense of closeness to the assembly, rather than the lofty spaces promoted by high vaulted ceilings of older architectural types. What is lost in an architectural style which emphasizes that theology is the multifaceted understanding of God's presence at Mass through the Eucharistic presence of Christ, the priest, *and* the gathered assembly.[26] While a shift towards the acknowledgment of the people of God as the locus of God's

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[25] Such an emphasis is clear in the language of *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (EACW), the American Bishops document on church architecture from 1978. *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy (Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1978). This document, despite having little authoritative power, nonetheless continues to inform much of the current debate regarding church architecture. See, for example, Robert D. Habiger, "Designing the Post-Vatican II Worship Space," *Modern Liturgy* (November 1993): 8-11. Also Mary Kay Oosdyke, OP, "Liturgy and Life: Art and Architecture in Christian Worship – An Invitation to Contemplation," *Catechist*, (March 1994): 41-47.

[26] As M. Francis Mannion, current rector of the Cathedral of the Madeleine in Salt Lake City, Utah, as well as former president of the Society for Catholic Liturgy, points out, "In a liturgical event, the ritual form, the ordained minister, and the worshipping congregation exist in principle in an integrated and mutually extended relationship. ... There is, then, not one primary element in the liturgy; there are three primary elements. The ascendancy of any of the three generates one of the recurring deviations of Christian liturgical history: ritualism, clericalism, or congregationalism." From M. Francis Mannion, "Toward a New Era in Church Architecture," *Catholic International*, 8 no. 4 (April 1997): 172.

presence is welcome as a corrective to the clerical and ritualistic emphases of the past, it should not come at the cost of acknowledging the multivalent presence of God present in the celebration of Mass. The both/and nature of Catholicism does not warrant the extremes to which Catholic church architecture presently is pushed.

Harold Turner argues that the change from *domus dei*, or temple tradition, to *domus ecclesiae* represents progress in the Christian understanding of the church building.[27] What this change certainly represents is the continuing struggle to have a building that expresses each understanding as representative of the tradition of the Church and its narrative. On the one hand, the temple tradition of the Jewish people influences the *domus dei* model. This story is one of the presence of God at a specific place, one that is revered as the holy of holies. Designing churches to emphasize the presence of God in the Blessed Sacrament focuses attention on the Eucharistic presence of Christ within the community, and symbolically speaks of the importance of a Eucharistic, sacramental element of worship.

On the other hand, the *domus ecclesiae* places attention upon the gathered community as the primary way in which God is present. This is traditionally the position of Protestant church design, which on occasion results in a focus more on the comfort of the congregation and the facilitation of worship services than on the overall aesthetic appeal of a church building. Since the Second Vatican Council, emphasis has been placed upon the *domus ecclesiae* model by those who argue that such an emphasis is required by the documents of the Council, particularly the liturgical changes made by *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

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[27] Harold Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House: The Phenomenology and Theology of Places of Worship* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 150-154.

Tracing the path from the temple tradition of Judaism, to the *domus dei* and *domus ecclesiae* models of the more recent past, demonstrates constantly shifting emphases in theology. With the coming of Jesus, Turner argues, the idea of the temple as the dwelling place of God changed forever. Instead, Jesus himself is the new temple, functioning in the ways that the old understanding of the temple did, providing us with a center, being a microcosm of the world, a meeting point, and an immanent-transcendent presence.[28] This sense of God's presence as not relegated to a particular space greatly changed the way in which church architecture was viewed. Thus early Christians met in homes, upper rooms, or any available space for their worship services. While Turner makes this assertion of the impact of Christian belief about Jesus upon church architecture, it is not until the Reformation that there is a serious attempt to create worship space that is purposely focused not on the space itself, but on the gathered assembly. Recent scholarship suggests that the shift from such modest accommodations to large churches was, while not a completely organic growth from the house-church, still an adaptation and evolution from that place of worship.

In Jesus' time, temples were the *domus dei* model. Turner argues that after the resurrection, Jesus became the new temple, and made the *domus dei* model obsolete. Now God's temple dwells in each of us, and churches merely function as meeting places for those who desire to worship God. This is not a view entirely shared by the Catholic church, for whom a church will always retain the sacredness of the *domus dei*. It is precisely the sacramental focus of Catholicism that shapes the tradition of Catholic church architecture. A recovery of this sacramental focus from the tradition may help to move conversations about church architecture beyond their present stalled position.

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[28] Turner, 134-147 passim.

This stalled position is in part due to a lack of understanding about the language of architecture. Too often in our current age, Catholics dismiss old churches because of a perceived lack of liturgical functionality, while innovation in architectural style is just as often dismissed because it is not understood. What is currently lacking in the Catholic worshipper is knowledge of the language of church architecture, and what different buildings may communicate to those who use them. How is such a lack of fluency to be remedied? Reintroducing architecture as a topic of common conversation would help.

One suggestion, which correlates with Stanley Hauerwas' and Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion that to live holy lives we must begin by imitating saints, would be to look at the churches built throughout the history of Christianity. It would behoove us to begin by studying churches that conform to past designs, which have brought so many into the church, and have inspired so many of her faithful. This is not to say that innovation and new ideas should not be tried. Rather, it suggests that an appeal to history and the past is not without value, and any innovation must have its roots within the tradition. Otherwise, it would represent a break in the narrative, i.e. seem out of character. As Alasdair MacIntyre argues, "living traditions, just because they continue as a not-yet-completed narrative, confront a future whose determinate and determinable character, so far as it possess any, derives from the past."[29] Those who reject what has gone before rob themselves of their past, without which we cannot build a future. Those who refuse to move into the future ignore the constant challenge to Christians to look beyond the present state, out of the past, and into the future of the eschatological promise of Christ.

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[29] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 223.

Another suggestion is to consider a more holistic means of understanding church. The work of Avery Dulles and M. Francis Mannion point to a sacramental notion of both Church and church building that offers a way to overcome some of the controversies within Catholicism regarding church architecture. We now turn to an examination of church as sacramental sign, and what such an understanding may mean for church architecture.

## The Church Building as Sacramental Sign

In his book, *Models of the Church*, Avery Dulles describes the Church as a sacrament.[30] Such a description entails that the Church is a visible sign of an invisible grace. This ecclesiological understanding is important to understanding the role of the church building. In its physical form also, the church is a sacramental sign. This sacramental nature of a church building requires more than just a symbolic meaning. It is also efficacious, that is, "the sign itself produces or intensifies that of which it is a sign."[31] This efficacious aspect of church architecture is vastly underused in Catholic churches. If Catholics are to take seriously the sacramental nature of the Church, both the Christian community and the building which that name entails, then the interior, exterior, and physical situation of a church building are all important for the communication of the building to the surrounding environment.

M. Francis Mannion describes the sacramental church as a building which "becomes a lens through which is revealed God's omnipresence. As Cardinal Newman so beautifully pointed out, the church building prefigures the end to which all creation is

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[30] Avery Dulles, S.J., *Models of the Church*, expanded edition (New York: Image, Doubleday, 1974, 1987), 63-75.

[31] Dulles, 66.

called."[32] Often this is expressed as the way a church models the New Jerusalem. The special way in which God is present within a church is a result not only of the building itself, nor only of the gathered assembly, but rather of a combination thereof. As Mannion describes it, "God is indeed intensely present in the sacramental place of worship, but this presence is one that mediates, reveals, and celebrates the holiness and action of God in creation, history, and culture."[33] Here, in the sacramental nature of the church building, is the connection between the history of church architecture, the influence of culture, and the need to consider the environment (creation) in which churches are built.

An additional point about the church as sacrament is that a church building speaks to those who will never cross its threshold, as well as to those who worship inside. The church as sacrament has the responsibility to consider more than the mere functionality of the building. Catholics have the responsibility to think of the church building as being for more than just the parish community. The Catechism makes clear that the church is to be a sign and symbol of the presence of the Church in a living community: "These visible churches are not simply gathering places but signify and make visible the Church living in this place, the dwelling of God with men reconciled and united in Christ."[34] However, Catholic churches often fail to conceive of an architectural plan which purposefully sets itself in the surrounding environment as a witness to the presence and beauty of God. The paradox is that churches ought to be public, available to anyone who needs them, and yet at the same time can only be understood in a sacramental way by those who profess the faith for which the church stands. In a church both universal and

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[32] Mannion, "New Era," 171.

[33] Ibid, 171.

[34] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1180.

parochial, concerns regarding the public nature of Catholic worship must be taken into account. Entailed in a sacramental understanding of the church (and the Church) is the public nature of worship. The Code of Canon Law acknowledges this when it defines the church as a sacred building dedicated to divine cult. As a public edifice, it should be available to all the faithful for the public exercise of divine worship.[35]

Viewing the church as a sacrament, a visible sign of an invisible reality, presents architecture with a giant task. Not only are churches buildings meant to house liturgy, which itself contains sacramental presence, but they are also, in and of themselves, meant to point to and signify something other than what they are. While the interior of a church is usually designed with some sort of functionality in mind, so that the space may better serve the liturgical needs of the congregation, the exterior of the building may serve to witness to the public. As James White points out in his book on Protestant church architecture, "[m]any people have their concept of the Church largely determined by the exterior of the churches they know."[36] Catholic churches are also more than just the functional interior:

> A beautiful church is also a house for the poor, a place of spiritual feeding, and a catechism in stone. The church is a beacon and a city set on a hill. It can evangelize, by expressing the beauty, permanence, and transcendence of Christianity. Most importantly, the church building is an image of our Lord's body, and in constructing a place of worship we become like the woman anointing Christ's body with precious ointment. (Mark 14:3-9).[37]

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[35] Code of Canon Law, Canon 1161, as quoted by R. Kevin Seasoltz, *The House of God: Sacred Art and Church Architecture* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 23.

[36] James White, *Protestant Worship and Church Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 199.

[37] Duncan Stroik, "Ten Myths," myth 5.

Note the argument here that creating a beautiful church is not a superfluous detail, but an integral part of the role a church building plays in proclaiming the presence of the church in its environment.

Here one may draw a connection between Umberto Eco's semiotics and the Catholic understanding of sacraments, as well as Eco's notion of the communication of architecture. Catholics are taught how to recognize sacraments, and what they mean. In a similar way, buildings speak to us as a visible form of some invisible reality but we must be able to read the building appropriately. Otherwise, as with sacraments, all one may see are bread and wine, or bricks and mortar, instead of the invisible reality expressed beyond them. In terms of communication, church buildings communicate the reality of the incarnation and the good news of the gospel through their materials, their beauty, and their location.

Thus both Dulles and Mannion suggest a middle path in their vision of the Church and the church as sacramental. For Dulles, the Church as sacrament more fully represents both the human reality of the church, as well as the divine reality, than do the other four models he offers (that of Church as Institution, Mystical Communion, Herald, and Servant). For Mannion, understanding the church as a sacramental building offers a way

> to overcome the polarity between those who, on one hand, argue that church buildings are merely functional – and thus no more God's dwelling place than any other building, place, or institution – and those who seek to safeguard the traditional belief that God dwells in a special way in the church building, but who easily resort to a temple mentality in the process.[38]

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[38] Mannion, "New Era," 171.

Thus the use of a sacramental understanding of church architecture offers a way to overcome some of the arguments in current Catholic church architecture conversations. Additionally, a sacramental understanding of the church building gives credence to the importance of a building's physical appearance, for it is through the physical that the invisible is revealed.

## CHAPTER 2

## THE CHURCH AND ARCHITECTURE IN THE PAST

In order to understand the current connection between theology, architecture, and culture, it is important to briefly examine the past history of the interrelationship between the Church, architecture and culture. Building on the foundation of the previous chapter, an examination of early Christian church architecture, centering upon the changes wrought by Constantine in the 4th century, is offered. From there, the chapter turns to the relationship between the church and architecture, followed by an explication of the connection between the church and the city.

### The Past: Buildings of the Early Church

Christians have worshipped in a variety of settings since the beginning of the church two thousand years ago. These settings include early Christian house churches, Roman basilicas, Gothic cathedrals, and Modern worship spaces. As architectural styles change, so too does church architecture, and vice versa. The first major shift in architectural design of churches begins with Constantine, and the creation of a Christian empire. Whereas previously, Christians operated as a relatively small community, after 312 CE Christianity became the official faith of the empire. As such, churches were built on a larger scale than previously. This turning point in the Christian story, the establishment of the Constantinian church, has repercussions up to the present time. This section will examine the change in church architecture spawned by this event, noting that

while there was indeed a radical change in the nature of church architecture, such a change is not necessarily one without continuity with the past.

The first two centuries of Christianity found worship celebrated in house-churches. The use of domestic space to celebrate the Eucharist occurred for several reasons. Turner points to three reasons for these house-churches:

> [T]he Christians in any one place were usually not numerous and belonged on the whole to the poorer classes; local hostility was common and outbreaks of violence or of official persecution occurred from time to time until the early fourth century, so that there was every incentive to maintain an inconspicuous existence; and finally, the house-church was entirely congruent with the teaching of Jesus and with the community's own understanding of itself as a new spiritual temple that abrogated the Jerusalem temple and all such sacred places.[1]

These three factors, combining societal and theological issues, reflect the tension that is always present in creating a building for the celebration of the saving power of Christ. As society changed, and the position of the church within society changed, so too did the architecture. In the early Christian church, keeping a low profile was the norm.

Recent scholarship has challenged long-held assumptions about the nature and location of early Christian worship. As L. Michael White argues in a recent book

> On the social level, it is regularly assumed that the earliest Christians met in houses in order to avoid the idolatrous practices of Greek and Roman temples, and because the Christian movement came from among the poor and dispossessed. On the architectural level, it is too often assumed that there was little or no direct line of continuity from the domus ecclesiae to the basilica, and that after 314 basilical form universally and almost immediately superseded all

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[1] Turner, 158.

existing church buildings.  In the course of the present study we shall see that none of these assumptions can be upheld.[2]

Compared to Turner's explication of changes in church architecture, White's argument relies upon more recent archaeological work, and new analyses of older archaeology. Whatever differences there are in interpretation of the evidence available, there is general consensus that the Edict of Milan in 312 caused a great change in both the Church herself, as well as the buildings she used for worship.

At issue is the continuity, or lack thereof, between the house-church model of the early church and the basilican model which began to take precedence in the Roman world after Constantine.  It is quite common to see a break in architectural style and tradition centering on Constantine's declaration.  The creation of a Christian empire elevated the church to a position within society that needed to be demonstrated through architecture. Yet White argues that the split between house-church and Roman basilica is not as clean as that. House-churches continued to be built and used, side by side with the creation of new basilican churches.[3]  With the growth of Christianity, house-churches experienced changes in size and style. "The passage of time, the movement beyond the limited scope of the Jewish mission, and the experience of the broader Diaspora environment for private religious groups gradually prompted new need for accommodation and adaptation."[4]  This model of accommodation and adaptation is more indicative of the way in which church architecture continued to evolve from the house-church model, even as basilicas were becoming the norm.  In part, this renovation was a result of the urban

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[2] L. Michael White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture, vol. 1, Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians,* Harvard Theological Studies 42 (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 21.

[3] L. M. White, 23.  See also E. O. James, *From Cave to Cathedral: Temples and Shrines of Prehistoric Classical and Early Christian Times* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 321.

[4] L. M. White, 103.

environment in which Christianity was thriving. As White points out, "Construction, renovation, and remodeling were the order of the day in the Roman world; they were social realities of urban life."[5]

The influence of the Roman setting upon Christianity is seen in other ways, as well. The layout of Roman homes lent themselves rather easily to the needs of liturgy, until the house-churches became buildings in their own right, as opposed to being someone's home. Through these changes, the domus ecclesiae model gave way to the domus dei model:

> [A]s corporate worship developed liturgically the larger Roman houses with their atrium leading to an enclosed hall and smaller chambers, were readily adapted for these requirements. In the third century the domus ecclesiae gave way to the domus Dei.... This was erected and used exclusively for public worship, but was based on very much the same plan as the 'House of the Church' except that certain parts were omitted while others acquired a sacred character they had not had before.[6]

The use of the basilican plan for churches served to demonstrate the newfound importance of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Previously seen as unsuitable for Christian worship, in part because of their pagan connotations, basilicas after 312 served to place Christian churches on the same level as other public civic buildings.[7]

> [C]urrent architectural consensus sees the Christian basilica as a direct result of Constantinian policy in the years following the Edict of Milan. It was based on standard forms of monumental public architecture in Rome. Derived from civil halls, imperial palaces, or classical hypostyle architecture, it was self-consciously

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[5] L. M. White, 28.
[6] James, 322.
[7] James, 319.

adapted to the new social position of the Christian Church under imperial patronage.[8]

This new social position was demonstrated not only through the style of architecture employed, but also through the situation of the basilicas among other civic buildings in Rome. "Side by side with the civic basilicas, which continued their customary administrative functions, were ecclesiastical edifices..."[9] This side by side location of the church and other civic institutions demonstrates the public presence of Christianity. Such public presence was part and parcel of the urban environment in which Christianity grew and thrived during the first centuries following Christ's death.

With the creation of a Christian empire by Constantine, churches were able to reflect the dominance of Christianity on the landscape. Throughout its history, Christian architecture revolves around liturgy and worship, but also evolves into a statement of the presence of the church within a community. Without desiring a return to the days of a Christian empire, the reciprocal relationship of Christianity to culture should be noted.

## The Church and Architecture

Any look at church architecture must acknowledge that there is much more at stake than mere architectural style. The space in which Christians worship has theological significance, as well as social significance in how the church relates to the surrounding world. Developments in church design speak more broadly about Christianity than just its architecture. As L. Michael White notes regarding the early church,

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[8] L. M. White, 18.
[9] James, 323.

Fundamental changes in the nature and setting of Christian assembly, therefore, are of more significance than for the development of architecture alone. They are inextricably tied to all aspects of Christian practice, precisely because assembly and worship were at the center of the religious experience as well as the social expansion of the movement.[10]

The church was not just concerned with the building of her churches. For many centuries, it was the building practices of the church which led the way in architectural innovation. This in turn affected the form of cities, as the church was primarily an urban phenomenon. In his history of western cities, Lewis Mumford argues that it is the model of the monastery that influenced the design of medieval cities.[11] Their offer of sanctuary during the uncertain times following the fall of the Roman Empire is echoed by the creation of walled cities during the Middle Ages. Indeed, the monastery acted as a city, through its preservation and transmission of the social heritage.[12]

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the church remained as the single powerful and universal institution. The influence of the church was felt in all areas of life, and the practice of building was no exception. As Lewis Mumford explains,

> No small part of the economic life was devoted to the glorification of God, the support of the clergy and of those who waited on the clergy, and to the construction and maintenance of ecclesiastical buildings – cathedrals, churches, monasteries, hospitals, schools.[13]

Note here the concern and interest of the church in building a number of different types of buildings in order to foster Christian practices of worship, caring for the sick, and education. As the powerful institution with money and a desire to glorify God through

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[10] L. M. White, 5.
[11] Mumford, *Culture*, 17.
[12] Ibid, 17.
[13] Ibid, 28.

beautiful buildings, the church exerted much influence upon architecture. Because of this influence, the church was often at the forefront of architectural innovation.

## Theological and Cultural Influence on Church Architecture

Even a cursory view of the history of church architecture shows that theological developments are reflected in architectural styles. With Romanesque design, dating from around the 11th century, the eye is drawn downward, and the weight of the building seems to press itself upon the viewer. This reflects a theology "that is affected by a profound sense of our finitude, our earthbound and fallen state."[14] The theology of this time period was heavily Augustinian, wherein humans are helpless without the saving grace of God through Christ. This period was followed by the early and high Gothic periods, approximately 1130 – 1230. In theology of this period, one may find a new sense of confidence and optimism in humanity's capacity for spirituality and reason. This is reflected in Gothic architecture, which reaches to the heavens, drawing the eye upwards and reflecting the idea that humans are capable of reaching up towards God through the use of their own reason.[15] The Reformation brought about a new emphasis upon the church being the gathered community. In some Protestant churches, such as the Mennonite, Quaker and Congregational denominations, this resulted in simple and plain style churches such as those meeting-houses common in early America.

In America, the influence of Romanticism's notion of culture as a living thing created the desire to somehow incorporate cultural developments into church architecture, and is still felt today. The influence of secular culture may be seen in

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[14] Ronald Goetz, "Protestant Houses of God: A Contradiction in Terms?" *The Christian Century*, 20-27 March 1985, 296.
    [15] Ibid, 297.

In the years following the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church in America succumbed to the influence of modernism on her church architecture. This influence is nowhere more apparent than in the Bishop's document "Environment and Art in Catholic Worship" (EACW).[18] The introduction of multi-functional worship spaces, as opposed to churches, was a result of the numerous tasks taken on by parish churches, and a sincere desire to make better use of resources. The simplicity (some would argue starkness) of many of the resulting church designs found their basis in the emphasis upon "noble simplicity" as mentioned in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.[19]

Modernism's effects upon the built environment have been many and unfortunate. There is no more damning account of the negative effects of Modernism upon America's landscape than that of James Howard Kunstler:

> Modernism did its immense damage in these ways: by divorcing the practice of building from the history and traditional meanings of building; by promoting a species of urbanism that destroyed age-old social arrangements and, with them, urban life as a general proposition; and by creating a physical setting for man that failed to respect the limits of scale, growth, and the consumption of natural resources, or to respect the lives of other living things. The result of Modernism, especially in America, is a crisis of the human habitat: cities ruined by corporate gigantism and abstract renewal schemes, public buildings and public spaces unworthy of human affection, vast sprawling suburbs that lack any sense of community, housing that the un-rich cannot afford to live in, a slavish obeisance to the needs of automobiles and their dependent industries at the expense of

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[18] *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy (Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1978).

[19] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §34. Note that this use of "noble simplicity" refers to the rites used, not necessarily the architectural style. In reference to church design, SC notes that churches and artists should "seek for noble beauty rather than sumptuous display." SC, §124.

human needs, and a gathering ecological calamity that we have only begun to measure.[20]

It is unfortunate that the Church allowed such an ideology to drive the creation of her churches, for it is clear that much of Modern ideology is antithetical to Catholicism. M. Francis Mannion describes the problem in the following way:

> The modern style is characteristically driven by self-consciously rational conceptions of function and performance. In its philosophical outlook, it is mechanistic, univocal, emotionally inhibited and positivistic. From its inception, the modern style has carried strong anti-historical and anti-traditional impulses. Architectural modernism embodies an explicit social agenda that is reconstructionist and revolutionary; thus it holds a general disdain for the past. The modernist outlook is obsessed by the grounding of form in function. Its operative model is the machine.[21]

An ideology that so clearly rejects history and tradition has little place expressing the theology of Catholicism. Indeed, the church documents of the Second Vatican Council make clear that any innovation must spring from the tradition, and not represent a radical change from the past, lest the faithful be harmed in their faith.[22] A mechanistic view of the world does not fit with the incarnational reality of Catholicism, nor the dignity Christianity gives to the human person. A one-dimensional functional outlook does not adequately represent the multi-faceted theology of Catholicism.

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[20] James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 59-60.

[21] Mannion, "New Era," 175.

[22] "There must be no innovations unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them, and care must be taken that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing." *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §23. Note that this statement is meant in regards to liturgy, not towards architecture. However, because of the theological ramifications of church buildings, it is not difficult to imagine that such an admonition is relevant to church architecture, as well as liturgy.

## The Church and the City

A historical view of church architecture would not be complete without acknowledging the role of the city in the growth and development of Christianity and the Church's architecture. From the very beginnings of Christianity, the city has played an important role in its growth and spread. The first churches were urban in nature. House churches were not a rural phenomenon, but rather were possible precisely because of their urban location. As L. Michael White notes,

> Recent studies have shown how this "house church" setting conditioned the nature of assembly, worship, and communal organization. It was first and foremost an urban phenomenon. The constituency and social location of Pauline communities reflected the character and conditions of urban households and other private domestic activities.[23]

These private activities became public, particularly following Constantine's edict.

It is within cities that the public nature of Christianity is most obviously expressed. This public nature of the church began to be emphasized as a result of Constantine's edict, but is also a valid theological development of Christianity. Because the Christian faith requires witness to the Gospel, our churches must be public places. Since at least 312 C.E., then, churches have primarily been built in "central and highly visible locations."[24] This is a result of the acknowledgement that "to be authentic, Christian presence in the world must be public."[25] This public nature of the church has its roots in the very early church. Aidan Kavanaugh and John Baldovin both "have shown how early Christian worship was a highly civic affair, just as the Church itself was

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[23] L. M. White, 4.
[24] M. Francis Mannion, "The Church and the City," *First Things*, no. 100 (February 2000): 31.
[25] Ibid, 31.

from the beginning a public, urban institution."[26] Such a public nature only makes sense for a faith that requires the spreading of the Gospel to others.

Eric Jacobsen discusses the role of cities within Christian scripture. He makes the valuable observation that despite the negative qualities associated with cities, what is shown in the Bible is the redemptive power that God gives to cities. Jacobsen notes three cities in the Old Testament that demonstrate some of the negative qualities often associated with cities. First is the city of Enoch, built by Cain after he kills Abel, as a result of his broken relationship with God. The city is a place that offers an alternative kind of protection to the one which Cain lost from God. Then there is the city of Babel, wherein the people attempt to reach the heavens on their own, to "make a name for themselves." Finally, there is the third city of Ramses, built by the Israelites while they are enslaved by the Egyptians. This is the city that represents oppression and enslavement. Looking at these examples, it seems obvious that cities are a result of the fall, and are occasions of escape from God, pride, and oppression. What, then, can be said about the city that would encourage churches to desire a return to traditional urban planning?

Jacobsen goes on to examine three other cities in the scriptures, cities which demonstrate the redemptive uses to which God puts them. In each case, these "good" cities respond to the problems of the "bad" ones.

> Cain's desire to flee to Enoch after killing his brother later finds a redeemed expression in the cities of refuge. The fear of the residents of Babel that they might be scattered is redeemed when the Israelites find cities in the Promised Land in which they can gather. The Hebrews longed to be free of their tyrant, Pharaoh, and eventually found a good king in the city of David. And finally, the

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[26] Ibid, 32. See also L. Michael White.

Babel residents' desire to make a name for themselves is met in Jerusalem, where God has caused his name to dwell.[27]

Despite the fact that cities can be seen as a result of the fall and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Jacobsen demonstrates that cities are also locations of grace and possibility. John of Patmos envisions the New Jerusalem descending from heaven. This eschatological view provides us with hope in the redeeming power of cities. Note, as Jacobsen puts it,

> [John] does not see Eden restored in some kind of agrarian utopia; nor does he see the American ideal of a single-family detached house surrounded by a huge yard for every inhabitant of the kingdom. What he sees is a city – New Jerusalem descending from heaven onto earth.[28]

Such a vision calls Christians to take seriously the challenges of cities, as well as the possibilities. Using Jerusalem as a model city also suggests that one measure of a city's excellence is the care exhibited for the least of its inhabitants.[29] Church architecture today may aid the development of new building practices that may help us to reclaim this city heritage from the suburban sprawl that threatens to consume our society.

The urban nature of Christianity has been lost in the American context. The dominent culture today is that of suburbia, and indeed, suburbia is the area of greatest church growth. Yet this context provides serious challenges to Christianity. We turn now to an examination of those challenges, and how they developed in post-war suburbia.

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[27] Eric O. Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 44.

[28] Ibid, 15-16.

[29] Philip Bess, "Design Matters: The City and the Good Life," *The Christian Century*, 19 April 2003, 20.

# CHAPTER 3

## THE AMERICAN SUBURBAN CONTEXT OF ARCHITECTURE

The current cultural context of most new Catholic church architecture is suburban.

While the continued growth of the church, which results in demands for new buildings, is

a hopeful sign, the current paradigm of suburban growth and development presents a

challenge to Christianity. These challenges arise from the secular suburban tendency to

emphasize individualism, material wealth, privatization, and segregation by race and

income. Such tendencies run counter to the Christian narrative, and yet are often taken in

stride by those who live in suburbia. How did this environment come to be the dominant

model of American living? And where was the church when such communities began to

be built? The answers to these questions are not easy to find, but must be examined in

order to understand the present situation of Catholic church architecture. Additionally,

the context of suburbia demonstrates the need for churches to consider not only their own

architectural style and neighborhood integration, but also the broader implications

suburban ideology has upon Christian living.

## The Challenge of Suburbia

Christians who live out of the Christian narrative are called to an eschatological

view. This view provides a way to critique contemporary culture, because it uses the

Kingdom of God as the vision of what the world should be like. In this kingdom there is

justice for all, and peaceful existence among nations. In this kingdom, the last shall be

first, and the first, last.[1]  In contrast, suburbia does not look beyond the present world, but

rather

> Suburbia symbolizes the fullest, most unadulterated embodiment of contemporary
> culture; it is a manifestation of such fundamental characteristics of American
> society as conspicuous consumption, a reliance upon the private automobile,
> upward mobility, the separation of the family into nuclear units, the widening
> division between work and leisure, and a tendency toward racial and economic
> exclusiveness.[2]

The suburban lifestyle offers little if any critique of culture; rather, suburbia embraces

contemporary culture.  How is a Christian able to maintain an eschatological perspective

while living in an environment that emphasizes wealth, privatization, and separation from

those at the bottom rungs of society?  In considering this question it becomes easier to see

why the Christian should be concerned with the built environment in which he or she

lives.

The challenge suburbia presents to Christians comes in several implicit ways.

The primary challenge is that of encouraging the notion that unpleasantness may be

avoided.  As Philip Bess argues, "The postwar suburban ideal caters to the illusion that

unpleasantness in life can be avoided.  Christians especially should understand that

unpleasantness in life cannot be avoided."[3]  This desire to avoid unpleasantness, while

understandable, is not what Jesus meant in his teachings, or demonstrated in his life.

Lewis Mumford describes the suburb as a child-centered, childish world:

> In the suburb one might live and die without marring the image of an innocent
> world, except when some shadow of its evil fell over a column in the newspaper.

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[1] Mt. 20:16 NRSV (New Revised Standard Version).

[2] Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

[3] Bess, "Design Matters," 21.

> Thus the suburb served as an asylum for the preservation of illusion. Here domesticity could flourish, forgetful of the exploitation on which so much of it was based. Here individuality could prosper, oblivious of the pervasive regimentation beyond. This was not merely a child-centered environment: it was based on a childish view of the world, in which reality was sacrificied to the pleasure principle.[4]

Suburban life helped Christians forget or ignore the deep sinfulness of the world. Such ignorance poses a grave danger for Christianity, which calls individuals, communities, and institutions to repent and seek forgiveness for sins.

A second, and equally important, challenge of the suburbs to Christians is their exclusive and homogeneous nature. This exclusivity and homogeneity results from the economic and racial segregation that traditionally resulted from suburban development practices. In part, this segregation was a result of the single-purpose zoning of the suburbs. As James Howard Kunstler notes, "the suburbs were places without economies of their own. This was intrinsic to their charm. Economic activity remained behind in the city and workers stayed there with it, near their work."[5] When home life is separated from work location, it creates enclaves of neighborhoods separated by income. It is the unfortunate history of America that racial segregation often follows this economic division. Suburbia and its built environment perpetuates the continuing difficulties of race relations in America. While cities are unfortunately not always known for their inclusivity, at least they offer chance encounters. As Mumford describes it, "the metropolis was a mixture of people who came from different places, practiced different occupations, encountered other personalities, meeting and mingling, co-operating and

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[4] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961), 494.
[5] Kunstler, 55.

clashing, the rich with the poor, the proud with the humble."[6] Christians ought to be

concerned with these encounters with others, offering opportunities for witness.

Christians are called to love their neighbors, with the understanding that it is more

difficult, but just as necessary, to love the neighbor with whom one has nothing in

common.

## The Growth of Suburbia

There are several factors which contributed to the growth of suburbia. The years

following the Second World War began with a boom in housing that had not been

experienced in several decades. Because most production in the country had been geared

towards production for the war, new houses were few and far between. The existing

housing stock was sub-par, and the combined effects of the Depression and the war

meant that there was a large group of people just getting married and beginning their own

families.[7] Such new beginnings needed homes in which to thrive. There were large

tracts of farmland available for purchase and development around the edges of the city.

This land, with relatively few land use restrictions and low taxation rates, seemed like a

perfect solution to satisfy the demand for new housing.[8] The result: suburbia.

Lest we place the blame for suburban problems only at the feet of the developers

who rushed to take advantage of the economic boon suburbs proved to be, we must also

examine the public policy developments during the 1930s and 1940s. In 1933 the Home

Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) was signed into law. HOLC helped to refinance

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[6] Mumford, *City in History*, 493.
[7] James Hudnut-Brumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 3. Also Kenneth T. Jackson, 232.
[8] Hudnut-Brumler, 3.

home loans on a long-term, low-interest basis, but also created the practice of "red-lining" through its appraisal method.[9] The appraisal method "undervalued neighborhoods that were dense, mixed, or aging," and HOLC appraisers often had negative attitudes towards city living which were reflected in their appraisals.[10] Additionally, the history of bigotry in America and previous tendencies to consider race and ethnicity in real-estate appraisal made themselves apparent in HOLC red-lining. The result was a tendency to rate neighborhoods with even small proportions of black in habitants as Fourth grade, or "hazardous."[11]

In addition to the creation of HOLC, President Franklin D. Roosevelt also oversaw the creation of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) in 1934. The FHA radically changed home ownership in America by providing banks with federal guarantees for home loans. This meant that the size of down payments decreased from thirty or more percent to ten percent, and the length of the mortgage expanded from ten years to twenty or thirty years.[12] The results were suburban single-family homes that were often more affordable than remaining in city apartments.[13] The FHA used HOLC appraisal standards, which had the effect of continuing the racial divisions of society. Kenneth Jackson quotes the *Underwriting Manual* of the FHA as saying "if a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes."[14]

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[9] Jackson, 197.
[10] Ibid, 197, 201.
[11] Ibid, 201.
[12] Kunstler, 102.
[13] Jackson, 206.
[14] Ibid, 208.

Jackson later goes on to posit five characteristics of the postwar suburb, which are helpful for establishing a Christian critique of the suburbs.[15] The first is that of peripheral location, that is, the suburban developments were not built within city boundaries, but rather in larger vacant areas, often in farmland surrounding the city. Christians should be concerned by the loss of farmland to housing developments, especially in so often an indiscriminate manner. The agrarian basis of our society receives little consideration, and yet is perhaps the most vital part of our lives. Without the food grown on these farms, we are forced to spend increasing amounts of money on meeting our daily hunger needs.

The second characteristic, relatively low density, was a result of the detached single-family dwelling that became the norm for development. Wider streets and more open spaces also contributed to this low density. Such low density was based upon the assumption that residents would have automobiles. The resulting suburban design "meant that those without cars faced severe handicaps in access to jobs and shopping facilities."[16] Low density housing, while desirable from an individual standpoint, is often not the best scenario for accessible community living. In particular, Christians should be concerned with the lack of access provided for those too young, too old, or too poor to drive.

The third characteristic of the postwar suburb is that of architectural similarity. Aside from a wealthy few who could afford custom designed houses, buyers were left to choose from at most a half dozen house models offered by the developers. This small offering of choices allowed the developers to simplify their production methods and to reduce their design fees. Jackson notes that not only were there similarities within

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[15] Ibid, 239 ff.
[16] Ibid, 239.

individual developments, but that the regional differences in housing began eroding as the New England colonial, Atlantic row-house, and Charleston town houses were replaced by the fads of the split-level, the ranch, the modified colonial. The result was that it became difficult to tell whether a suburb was in Boston or Chicago or Dallas.[17] The loss of community identifiers is worrisome for a church that values both the parochial church and the universal church. Such an undifferentiated environment is often spatially confusing, making it difficult to navigate.

Jackson's fourth characteristic of the postwar suburb is its easy availability. Never before in America had it been so affordable to own a home. Often, buying a suburban house was cheaper than renting or investing in central city property.[18] They also offered the attraction of the suggestion of wealth. Previously, only the wealthy had been able to afford such large homes and lots. Now, the "American dream" was more affordable to a wider number of people.

The fifth and final characteristic of the postwar suburb, and in Jackson's opinion the most important, was the economic and racial homogeneity that resulted. Racial segregation was not a new phenomenon in America, but was more thorough in its physical form in the separation brought about by the growth of suburbs. This was a result of housing policies that refused to sell houses to blacks, accentuated by the necessity of owning an automobile for much of suburban living. The economic homogeneity resulted primarily from the zoning ordinances of suburban developments. As Jackson points out, "In theory zoning was designed to protect the interests of all citizens by limiting land speculation and congestion.... In actuality zoning was a device to keep poor people and

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[17] Ibid, 240.
[18] Ibid, 241.

obnoxious industries out of affluent areas."[19]  Such segregation, whether be it by race or income, is absolutely antithetical to Christianity.  We are called to be the body of Christ, in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free.

Notwithstanding the popularity of suburban living among Americans, there were and are plenty of critics of the suburbs, particularly the homogeneity often produced by them.  Lewis Mumford is especially vociferous on this topic:

> In the mass movement into suburban areas a new kind of community was produced, which caricatured both the historic city and the archetypal suburban refuge: a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis.  Thus, the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our own time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible.[20]

Where in this landscape is the value of each person respected?  How are we challenged to love our neighbor if all the neighbors are just like us?  How did the Church respond to the suburbs in the postwar era, and how does the Church think about suburbs today?

## The Church and the Suburbs

Father Andrew Greeley first wrote *The Church and the Suburbs* in 1959.[21]  The concerns he has regarding the effect of suburban living upon Catholics are remarkable for their astuteness, and are readily recognizable as problems which still exist today, after

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[19] Ibid, 242.

[20] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, as quoted in Jackson, 244.

[21] Andrew M. Greeley, *The Church and the Suburbs* (New York: Deus Books Paulist Press, 1959, 1963).

nearly fifty years of American postwar suburbia. Fr. Greeley notes three consequences of

suburban living which particularly bear repeating in this discussion. One is the attempt to

escape the evils of the city and achieve peace and tranquility by moving to the suburbs;

one is the use of the church as a social organization; and the third is the assimilation of

Catholics into mainstream America. Each of these consequences of suburban living

demonstrates the challenge to the Christian narrative that comes from the suburban

lifestyle, as it is manifested in American culture.

Greeley notes that the desire for peace and tranquility, while understandable, is

not a desire that the local parish is meant to fulfill. The fact is that we live in a world of

fallen institutions and fallen people, and the church is meant to guide us in the

redemption of these fallen things and people. As Greeley puts it,

> The local church is to be not so much a place where he will find tranquility and
> solace amid the confusions of life, as a place where he will obtain the spiritual
> strength he needs to transform the institutions in which men must live and work
> and try to save their souls. The neighborhood community (even if it is a suburb)
> is not an escape from the horrors of industrialism, but a center for the eventual
> reconquest and humanization of the city.[22]

Here we see the idea that the church emphasizes the redemptive possibilities of the city,

rather than advocating its abandonment in order to flee to the suburbs. Suburbs are seen

as the locus for the "good life," but as Greeley points out, much of that good life has to

do with material wants, and often gaining material wants does not result in happier

people.

One of the results of the suburban lifestyle is the view of the church as a social

organization. The parish church becomes the locus of weekly committee meetings, of

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[22] Ibid, 123.

various social activities. The parishoner seeks to conform to the social groups, while at the same time questions the authority of the Church. This view was also noted in Protestant churches by the editors of the *Christian Century*, who noted that "in too many instances Suburbia breeds a sense of self-satisfaction, of complacency, on occasion even of self-congratulation, which tends to look on the church as little more than a social convenience."[23]

The third point Greeley makes is that the move to suburbia marks the assimilation of Catholics into mainstream America. As a result, there is a loss of Catholic identity, as it is subsumed under the desire to conform to the lifestyles of those around one. Greeley posits that Catholics "begin to share the common American notion that one religion is practically as good as another."[24] This may be seen in the present state of church architecture, wherein church buildings are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from other civic buildings, and where it may be nearly impossible to distinguish a Catholic church from a Protestant church based upon its exterior design. Particularly if Christians wish to be a witness to the best way of living, the assimilation of Christians into mainstream American culture cannot be viewed as the ultimate good.

Another issue regarding the church in the suburbs is that of accessability. Locating churches in the suburbs introduce difficulty regarding the accessibility of the church, particularly access to the exterior of the building from the surrounding neighborhood. If there is presently concern for eliminating some of the barriers that traditionally existed in Catholic churches (e.g., some view altar rails as barring the laity from the altar), then there should be a corresponding concern with eliminating some of

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[23] From the 1950 series, "Great Churches of America" in the *Christian Century*, as quoted in Hudnut-Brumler, 6.

[24] Greeley, 59.

the barriers which keep people from attending church at all. This means rethinking the suburban paradigm of Catholic church architecture, and the dependence upon the automobile that it assumes. Such a presumption denies those who are too young, too old, or too poor to own a car the ability to attend church. It also diminishes the variety of activity which may take place within a church. In an urban environment, where churches are within walking distance from people's homes, the possibility exists to drop in to the church for a few minutes of quiet prayer and devotion. Such accessibility encourages the creation of a spirituality that does not require planning a trip in the car, but may be spontaneous. While not denying the value or importance of any programming that the parish may do, here is a situation where the architecture and location of a church helps shape the religious experience and integration of the faithful.

Having delineated a brief history of the American suburb, and argued against the cultural assumptions upon which the suburb is based, it is time to move on to hope for the future. Despite the seemingly bleak outlook of suburban America and the contemporary Catholic church architecture debate, there are new avenues to explore. The next chapter introduces a new way (or a return to an old way) of thinking about the role of the built environment in shaping character and virtue, and the ways in which church architecture may help Christians to once again think about the consequences of the built environment.

# CHAPTER 4

## VIRTUE ETHICS, THE CHRISTIAN NARRATIVE, AND NEW URBANISM

Having thus far established the connections between culture, architecture, and churches, it is time to argue for a manner of thinking about church architecture that takes into consideration the tradition of the Church in architecture, the narrative of both the Christian life and the American suburb, and the practices of architecture, worship, and service. Utilizing virtue ethics as explained by Alasdair MacIntyre, understanding the Christian narrative which shapes that ethic, and combining those with the ideology of New Urbanism presents Catholics and all Christians with a way to understand the role of architecture and the built environment for Christian living.

## Why Virtue Ethics

Most, if not all, current discussions of church architecture do not use the language of ethics in articulating church design. This is understandable in a world where ethical issues focus upon specific topics. For example, there are experts in business ethics and health care ethics. The relevance and challenge of virtue ethics is that it assumes that our entire lives are made up of ethical choices and decisions. In this case, ethics are not the answer to a particular situation, answering the question "what ought I to do," but rather answer the question "what sort of person ought I be?" Incorporating the Christian narrative into virtue ethics expands this question from the individual to the communal – "what sort of people ought we be?" As the previous three chapters have shown, church architecture specifically (and the built environment in general) affects those who dwell

within buildings. The public nature of church architecture and its location within a community relates to the communal focus of virtue ethics. It is in living within a community that character is shaped and virtues formed. At this point it makes sense to examine how Christians ought to think about church architecture, in such a way as to encourage the development of Christian virtues.

In his book *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre presents a view of virtue ethics that calls upon tradition, narrative, and practice to form virtue. MacIntyre's argument that we need to return to Aristotelian ethics, and concern ourselves with the telos of human life, resonates with the Christian narrative. The application of his approach to church architecture, and further, the role that churches may play in urban and suburban development, challenges Christians to incorporate their faith and eschatological vision into all aspects of human life. A narrative approach to ethics that takes some of its structure from Aristotelian philosophy concerns itself with answering the teleological question "what is the purpose of human life?" In approaching this question, Stanley Hauerwas and others change the question to "what sort of people ought we be?" and speak of the Christian community, and the narrative out of which they live. This narrative encompasses a broad range of topics. This chapter will trace the application of MacIntyre's ideas and Hauerwas' focus on the Christian community to church architecture, specifically focusing on the church building's role in carrying on the Christian narrative, and proceed to critique the current suburban mega-church paradigm of growth. Our call to witness to the gospel message of Jesus pertains to every aspect of our lives, including that of the physical structures which surround us.

## MacIntyre and Virtue

MacIntyre creates a threefold definition of virtue, one which draws upon narrative, tradition and practice.

> The virtues find their point and purpose not only in sustaining those relationships necessary if the variety of goods internal to practices are to be achieved and not only in sustaining the form of an individual life in which that individual may seek out his or her good as the good of his or her whole life, but also in sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context.[1]

Note here that there are both individual and social aspects to developing virtue. Kallenberg diagrams this relationship as a triangle, wherein the center place is occupied by virtue. He explains MacIntyre's defining virtue in this way:

> because narratives intersect at social practices, and practices constitute traditions, and traditions are historically (that is, narratively) extended, to understand virtue adequately as those qualities that assist pursuit of telos at all three levels, virtue itself must be given a threefold definition.[2]

The determination of the virtuosity of an action, or a building, is a result of how well that action, or building, achieves its telos. This telos is learned through tradition, practice, and narrative. In the case of church architecture, churches are built using the practice of architecture, for the practice of Christian worship. These practices come out of a tradition over 2000 years old, and conform (or should conform) to the Christian narrative.

Our first question, then, is what is the telos of a church building? There are many answers possible, and no one completely encompasses all that a church building should

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[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 223.

[2] Brad J. Kallenberg, "The Master Argument of MacIntyre's After Virtue," in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics After MacIntyre*, ed. Nancy Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, Mark Thiessen Nation (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press Int'l, 1997), 28.

be. A church building is a place for Christian worship; it is sacred space for prayer; it houses the sacramental life of the church (e.g. baptism, confession, communion); it acts as a public witness to the presence of the people of God; it is a pedagogical and evangelizing tool; and it is a potential neighborhood anchor. The United States bishops acknowledge this variety in their most recent document on church design:

> Churches are never "simply gathering spaces but signify and make visible the Church living in [a particular] place, the dwelling of God" among us, now "reconciled and united in Christ." As such, the building itself becomes "a sign of the pilgrim Church on earth and reflects the Church dwelling in heaven." Every church building is a gathering place for the assembly, a resting place, a place of encounter with God, as well as a point of departure on the Church's unfinished journey toward the reign of God.[3]

With so many teleological aspects, it is clear that designing a church is not an easy task. Part of the continual arguments over church design depends upon the desire to reduce the teleology of the church to only one of the above, or an unwillingness to consider how to integrate so many teleologies into one building.

Another part of the problem comes through the multiple meanings attributed to the word "church," as was discussed in Chapter One. Neither side of the debate seems willing to acknowledge that "church" has many meanings. Most, if not all, of these meanings, refer to actions which take place within and around the building. This makes the idea of a "functional" church much more complex than merely a church that allows liturgy to be done well. Each of these aspects of a church come out of the Christian tradition of worship and sacramental life, as well as the narrative of how churches fit into their surrounding contexts.

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[3] National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), § 17.

According to MacIntyre, tradition is "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[4] By this definition, the tradition of Catholic church architecture is alive and well! The continuing argument over the purpose of a church building (i.e. sacred place vs. multi-functional house of worship) is driven by both the historical reality of church architecture, and the social and cultural location of churches. An appeal to tradition alone to define what a church building ought to look like will never decide the debate, nor will a complete disregard for the past tradition. As MacIntyre points out, the tradition *is* the debate. In the last 2000 years, there has been a multiplicity of church designs, some more successful than others. It is the continued conversation about the purpose of a church, and how theology and liturgy influence church design, that give us a rich tradition of church architecture upon which to draw.

The Christian narrative is a difficult thing to pin down, for part of what narrative means is a historically specific life. The best way to understand the Christian narrative is to view it as the tradition of Christianity as lived out by Christians in the past. This life is shaped primarily by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. As John Howard Yoder puts it, Christians are called to live a "cruciform life," one which follows the pattern of the life of Jesus and the Christians who have gone before the present time. Viewing narrative as the story told by individual and communal lives is important in relating this narrative to the practice of church architecture. Because of the communal and historical emphasis of the Christian narrative, it is possible for the Christian to take architecture seriously as a moral practice of community building.

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[4] MacIntyre, 222.

In addition, the model of virtue ethics demonstrates that there is a narrative aspect to all communal life. This leads to questioning what narrative contemporary churches are being built out of. Because the built environment helps to shape virtues, it is necessary to ask what is the narrative which currently shapes the practice of church building. Chapter three established the suburban context of contemporary church architecture. What narrative, then, informs contemporary suburbia's traditions and practices? That is the question we turn to now.

### The Effects of the Contemporary American Narrative

Far from being a Christian narrative, the American narrative of the past 50 years is one involving individualism, consumerism, suburban sprawl, and continued segregation, particularly racial and economic. With such a bleak outlook, it becomes clear that Christians have an important witness to give to our country, one which focuses on the communal interconnectedness of each member of society. The Christian narrative calls us to give particular attention to the least of those in our society, those who have been marginalized in one way or another. It also challenges Christians to engage in practices which shape Christian character. Christians need to turn to their tradition to find the stories of the practices which enable them to counteract the problems of American society.

In the years following the post-war boom in suburban development, Americans and their developers sought to escape the problems of industrialization that plagued the cities. One result of this escape from the cities was the separation of different modes of life. The result of that separation is suburban zoning ordinances. Typically, in modern suburbia,

zoning ordinances result in "housing separated from industry …low-density housing is separated from medium-density housing, which is separated from high-density housing. Medical offices are separated from general offices, which in turn are separated from restaurants and shopping."[5] This fragmentation of our lives is partly responsible for, and partly a response to, the increased dependence upon the automobile. (*See Figures 2 through 5*). At first, this separation seems like a good idea, or at least a neutral one. But if we compare this separation with the fragmentation of our narrative lives that MacIntyre critiques, we soon realize that there may be some problematic repercussions to living a suburban lifestyle. As MacIntyre puts it:

> Any contemporary attempt to envisage each human life as a whole, as a unity, whose character provides the virtues with an adequate *telos* encounters two different kinds of obstacle, one social and one philosophical. The social obstacles derive from the way in which modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behavior. So work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms. And all these separations have been achieved so that it is the distinctiveness of each and not the unity of the life of the individual who passes through those parts in terms of which we are taught to think and to feel.[6]

Is it any wonder that we find it difficult to think of our lives as a unified whole when our current lives are so compartmentalized just in terms of physical space? (*See Figure 6*).

In contrast, the narrative approach to ethics puts actions within their appropriate context. The Congress for New Urbanism, a relatively new organization of planners,

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[5] Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000), 10.

[6] MacIntyre, 204.

architects, and citizens concerned with preventing the continuation of suburban sprawl (which will be discussed in further detail below), places housing, commerce, and industry within a single zone.[7] The combination of New Urbanism with the ethical basis of the Christian narrative could prove a powerful counter to this compartmentalizing of our lives. The integration of the areas used for daily living provides a rich context for human interactions. An additional benefit of this integration is the close proximity of work, home, and shopping, creating less of a dependence upon the automobile and enabling those who are too young, too old, too frail, or too poor to own and operate a car to have independence of movement, via ambulation.[8] For Christians, the suburban paradigm's disregard for the needs of those without access to an automobile is deplorable.

The Christian narrative speaks more of how we ought to live together than what our churches should look like. Such an approach shifts the conversation from increasing internal bickering to the role of churches in a community. While the built environment itself cannot care for the least among us, it may be able to bring people into contact with those whom they can serve, or those who can help them with their own struggles. Fostering a built environment which encourages the building of relationships, rather than isolation from the world, corresponds to the Christian narrative. In America, economic divisions are some of the biggest challenges facing the true integration of our society. Racial divisions and integration face similar and related challenges. Over the past 50 years, it has become clear that the suburban phenomenon of white flight, and the increasing distance between the wealthy and the rich, provide the Christian with deep challenges to Christ's gospel message. Suburban sprawl has much to do with this

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[7] Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck, 258.
[8] Ibid, 115.

challenge. Some of the negative results of suburban sprawl are described as "cul-de-sac kids, soccer moms, bored teenagers, stranded elderly, weary commuters, bankrupt municipalities, and the immobile poor."[9] In each situation, it is the physical surroundings that keep the person from experiencing their proper independence from the automobile. Another sampling of negative impacts of sprawl includes "disinvestments in historic city centers; excessive separation of people by age, race, and income; extreme inequality of educational opportunity; pollution and the loss of agricultural lands and wilderness; record rates of obesity; and sheer ugliness."[10] This list sounds surprisingly counter to the Christian narrative and the gospel message. If narrative ethics calls us to examine the story that is being told by our current actions and lifestyles, we are not doing so well in America.

## The Christian Narrative

The concept of the Christian narrative encompasses a broad range of activities and stories, all of which are recognizable in their relation to the Christ story, as well as the history of Christian living and theology. This narrative is essentially caught up in the answer to the question of "what sort of people ought Christians to be?" This narrative is the story of a people who believe that Jesus came to us as the Son of God, and through his crucifixion and resurrection we are shown the depth of God's love for us, and are redeemed from our sinful ways. Living out the gospel message, the good news of salvation, shapes the Christian narrative. Using scripture as the initial reference for how to live a Christian life, we find that this life is most often tied up with action. There are

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[9] Ibid, 115.

[10] Bess, "Design Matters," 21.

Jesus' exhortations to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit those in prison. We are called to partake in the Eucharist together, in memory of Jesus' sacrifice. We are called to pray together and individually. Such actions also include the building of churches, and the creation of community. If Christians take seriously the multiple purposes of a church building, it becomes clear that many of the current church building practices fail to achieve more than a handful. Christians need to recognize the potential for better ways of building and growth, growth that would foster the Kingdom of God.

Beyond the biblical sources for the Christian narrative, we also have the history of the Church, and the stories of the people who make up the Church to serve as our examples. The saints are offered as models of what Christian living should be. The virtues which these saints possess, and which are easily identifiable as Christian virtues, are best encouraged through community. Christian church buildings help or hinder the creation of community, both within and outside of the church.

The Christian narrative not only calls on us to look at our past, but to look towards our future. The eschatological nature of our faith points to a time when the Kingdom of God shall be a complete reality. Until then, we are part of the already-not-yet Kingdom. As such, we may provide a critique on our present situation that stands outside of the situation. At the eschaton, God's justice will reign. We know a little of this justice from scripture, and the words of Jesus.

Virtue ethics deals primarily with the notion that humans have a teleological end, and this end in turn shapes our idea of good and evil. In the Christian view, this teleological end is union with God. Our lives and characters are shaped by following the story of Jesus, and adapting our own lives to the tradition of that narrative through a set

of practices. The physical structure of a church is integrally tied in with this. In a church, we carry out a set of practices, primarily those of worship, prayer, reconciliation, and sacraments, which carry on this tradition and narrative. In the current debate over church architectural design there are both unfruitful areas of debate, as well as many unasked questions about the contextual location of the church (i.e. it's situation within a neighborhood). By focusing on the sacramental nature of a church building, we can recognize the need for churches to act as more than houses for liturgy. Indeed, they are pedagogical tools for the young faithful and the new faithful; they are evangelizing tools for those who live in the surrounding area; and they serve as witness to the presence of Christians within a community.

### Church Building as Narrative

The church building acts in such a way as to continue the tradition and narrative of the Christian community by surrounding the congregation with images and forms that tell a particular story. This story, in turn, helps to shape the moral vision of the community, hopefully conforming it to the Christian narrative. The aesthetics of church architecture serve a similar function. The most obvious is that beauty is capable of bringing humans closer to God. Beautiful churches may speak of the grandeur of God, of the wonders of human creativity. As noted in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,

> Of their nature the arts are directed toward expressing in some way the
> infinite beauty of God in works made by human hands. Their dedication
> to the increase of God's praise and of his glory is made more complete,

the more exclusively they are devoted to turning men's minds devoutly to God.[11]

Good and solid craftsmanship give great glory to God, who graces us with the gifts and talents to create beauty in our world.

Church buildings act in a pedagogical manner, as well. This may be an explicit or an implicit education. Explicitly, the symbols present within a church can tell the story of a congregation, of a community, and of a universal church. The presence of a baptismal font speaks of the importance of sacramental initiation. Stained glass windows may tell stories of the ancient prophets, or scenes from the gospels, or the life of Mary. There may be interior decorations particular to the cultural background of the congregation, for example, the presence of Our Lady of Guadalupe in a predominately Mexican church, or the use of tartans to decorate a church of Scottish heritage. In Eastern Orthodox churches, the dome represents the heavenly realm. The interior is designed specifically to bring the worshipper out of the mundane and into the heavenly realm of the New Jerusalem. Such a variety of images can reach the youth of the church, whose minds may wander during the actual worship service or mass. Images may provoke questions that require stories as their answer. Surrounding the congregation with images of the Christian story results in a faithful more literate in the Christian narrative. A church barren of any aesthetic means to convey these stories loses an opportunity to connect with people on a different level, and remind them of their shared narrative past.

Implicitly, the context of the church building tells a story of the way in which a community relates to its surrounding neighbors. Unfortunately, it is this implicit story that is so often ignored by those who design and build churches. For example, in the

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[11] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §122.

latest set of guidelines for church building published by the US Conference of Catholic

Bishops in November of 2000, there is no mention of the placement of new churches

within neighborhoods and/or communities. About the only thing said regarding the

surroundings of the church is the following:

> In suburban and rural parishes, the building approach must ordinarily
> provide access for pedestrians as well as for those who arrive by
> automobile. The building site can be designed so that all who approach are
> helped to make the transition from everyday life to the celebration of the
> mysteries of faith. Parking lots and passenger drop-off areas can be
> convenient yet unobtrusive. Sensitive design of vehicular approaches,
> parking sites and walkways coupled with appropriate landscaping make it
> possible to accommodate the automobile without allowing it to dominate
> the site. Weather considerations will influence the arrangement and the
> choices made by the local parish.[12]

It seems ironic that the bishops are concerned with the aesthetic value of not allowing

cars to dominate the church campus, while speaking of suburban and rural areas. How

many people will really be walking to churches in such areas? Additionally, the problem

of accessibility is raised by the bishops' document. Issues of accessibility require more

than a consideration of wheelchair ramps and elevators. Churches would do well to think

more broadly about the accessibility of the church when choosing a location to build. Is

it within walking distance of homes? Are there safe sidewalks to enable this walk? Are

there modes of public transportation nearby? The lack of concern for the broader context

of a church points to the lack of vision among church designers, who fail to look at the

whole picture of how the church fits into our daily lives. Unfortunately, it is all too easy

for churches to fall into the assumption that the present suburban paradigm of sprawl is

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[12] *Built of Living Stones*, § 209.

all that can be built. It is time for builders and designers of churches, and the congregations building these churches, to recognize the eschatological vision Christians are called to have. There are better ways to build, ways that encourage the flourishing of human life.

## New Urbanism

There is a recent movement in architecture called New Urbanism, which serves a as a resource for developing an understanding of church architecture and its relationship to its surroundings. The Congress for New Urbanism (CNU) was founded in 1994, with the signing of its Charter in 1996. This organization consists of architects, urban designers, planners, engineers, journalists, attorneys, politicians, concerned citizens, and others who are disenchanted with the development trends in America during the past 50 years. Their charter delineates their concerns with the present planning tendencies of America, and points toward the future they envision. The goals of New Urbanism and the CNU Charter should warrant consideration from Christians concerned with finding better ways to live out their Christian calling in our society.

One has only to read the beginning of their Charter to understand both what New Urbanism is a reaction against, as well as towards what it is working:

> The Congress for the New Urbanism views divestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge.
> We stand for the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling

suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of the natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy. We recognize that physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems, but neither can economic vitality, community stability, and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework.

We advocate the restructuring of public policy and development practice to support the following principles: neighborhoods should be diverse in use and population; communities should be designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as the car; cities and towns should be shaped by physically defined and universally accessible public spaces and community institutions; urban places should be framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology, and building practice.[13]

New Urbanism embraces an understanding of architecture and the role of buildings that is instructive to any conversation regarding the building of new churches. One of the most important contributions they may make to the conversation regarding church design is their focus on the context of a building. That is, they acknowledge that the surrounding neighborhood and environment effect and are affected by buildings (in this case, churches) which are located within them. Such reciprocal relationships need a closer examination by the church in its construction policies.

As the Catholic Church is never likely to endorse a particular style of architecture for its churches, neither do the New Urbanists seek monolithic developments. This is precisely one aspect of suburbia against which they are reacting (i.e. the repetition of one housing type and style over and over again within a single development). Instead, they offer principles of design within which architects are free to create new structures. This

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[13] Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck, 256-7.

freedom from stylistic restraints is helpful for churches built in particular communities that wish to incorporate different architectural heritages into their building style.

Additionally, New Urbanism focuses on the public nature of architecture. The privatization of the suburban lifestyle, wherein each family drives into their garage and enters their house without having to interact with anyone else, results in a decreased sense of community. The net result is that many Americans can avoid contact with those who live closest to them. Indeed, many suburbs represent the desire of Americans to live in isolation from the problems present in urban environments. As Christians, we are reminded that we cannot escape from the problems of this world, but are called to redeem them, as Christ redeemed us.

The connections between the values of New Urbanism and the values of Christianity are just beginning to be publicly noticed. In the April 2003 issue of the Christian Century, there were two articles connecting New Urbanist principles to Christian concerns for how to live well.[14] Many of the concerns have to do with the accessibility of churches to those who are not able to drive to church; many involve the unequal distribution of wealth and racial segregation in suburban America. The flight from the inner city to the suburbs represents a failure of society to respond to the Christian call to love our neighbors, not flee from them. In order to act as better witness to our society, Christians would do well to re-examine the building and development practices that have gotten us into our present state.

Still, this leaves us asking the question – what does any of this have to do with church architecture and design? There are a few answers to this. The public nature of

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[14] Bess, "Design Matters," 20-29. Also, Eric O. Jacobsen, "Reclaiming the City: A Church Stays Put," *The Christian Century,* 19 April 2003, 24-25.

architecture needs to be rediscovered. If we once again pay attention to how buildings are read, and design buildings that can be read appropriately, our churches provide a wonderful evangelizing opportunity. The beauty of churches is acknowledged as a means for interesting people in learning more about the church. Another way in which churches can participate in New Urbanism is to avoid falling into the current suburban sprawl paradigm, which most often results in a large, mega-church surrounding by a parking lot, taking up ten acres of land. (*See Figures 7 and 8*). Instead, churches can help to take the lead in New Urban design, working together with developers to create neighborhoods in which their church may serve as an anchor building.

Despite the successes of New Urbanist developments, they still tend to be expensive places to live, in part because they are driven by the housing market. While their ideal is to create mixed-income neighborhoods, walkable communities with a mix of uses (residential and commercial), so far New Urbanist communities have tended to be extremely expensive and desirable places to live. Churches, as bodies that are made up of people of various income, racial, and age groups, could help New Urbanism reach its goals of affordability and better integration, and could provide a much-needed voice to the work of the New Urbanists. As Philip Bess has suggested, one way in which churches could collaborate with New Urbanism would be through building their new churches using Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND), instead of building huge mega-churches surrounded by parking lots, accessible only to those with cars.

Recall the historical discussion of church architecture and the connection Christianity has always had with cities. In the language of New Urbanism, Christianity is more urban than suburban because of what it values. Christianity values community and

is concerned for recognizing physical and social limitations. This is counter to the

suburban model of endless growth and sprawl. Additionally, New Urbanism is sensitive

to how physical surroundings may promote or hinder certain virtues and practices, thus

correlating to the concerns of virtue ethics. For example, their use of greater density

building and mixed zoning offer possibilities for pedestrian interaction and encounters

that auto-based transportation does not allow. Thus New Urbanism is concerned, as is

the Christian narrative and virtue ethics, with the promotion of certain virtues and

practices of community and human personhood which are lacking in suburbia today.

By allowing herself to be dominated by the suburban culture of contemporary

times, the Church has lost her ability to speak a prophetic truth about the best way for

humans to live together. Our churches are called to bear witness to the eschatological

Kingdom of God. They represent the New Jerusalem, come down from heaven. In so

doing, church buildings have a prophetic role in our society. Instead of being forced to

merely follow the dictates of our suburban culture, it is more appropriate for church

architecture to begin to think seriously about the type of development surrounding the

church. Encouraging Traditional Neighborhood Development[15] through the design of a

particular church would serve to bring to consciousness the possibilities for improved

living that exist through the use of better design. Resisting the urge to continue building

indistinguishable churches set in the middle of concrete parking lots, and instead building

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[15] Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND) incorporates six fundamental rules of the traditional neighborhood pattern. These six rules encompass the following:
1. The presence of a clear center within the neighborhood.
2. The five-minute walk is the standard distance between the residents and the ordinary needs of daily life.
3. A street network which provides multiple routes connecting one location to another.
4. Narrow, versatile streets that create a safe, pedestrian-friendly environment.
5. Mixed use of buildings, such as a mix of residential and commercial.
6. Special sites for special buildings, for example civic buildings such as schools, city hall, and churches. Adapted from Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck, 15-17.

churches within higher density neighborhoods, enables the Church to reclaim part of that prophetic voice.

## A Return to the Polis

Aristotle focused on the polis as the location for the creation of the good life. Kallenberg argues that MacIntyre gets around the problem of the practical non-existence of the polis in our world by using narrative as that which connects us within our community. [16] While helpful for MacIntyre's argument, this point overlooks how important the built environment can be to the practice of human flourishing. Rather than just dismiss the lack of polis and move on, we need to consider whether bringing back some version of the polis is better than our current situation. In the present it may not be enough to consider the Church as polis, as Hauerwas does, for this ignores the physical reality of cities and their built environment.[17] The polis of Aristotle was not merely a collection of people who happened to live in the same neighborhood. Rather, the built environment, particularly the walkable scale of the polis, created a public environment in which communal concerns were paramount to individual concerns. Recalling that past situation helps current architects to take seriously the notion that traditional urban planning can help in the formation not only of Christian communities but is also a way to help others live better lives and to enable the witness of Christianity to spread. This is not to say that physical environment alone can shape community – far from it. Rather, the physical environment can make it easier to interact with neighbors, and cultivate certain virtues often identified as Christian, such as hospitality, concern for others, and

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[16] Kallenberg, 24.

[17] Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

identification with the common good rather than self-interest. All of these virtues bring us ever closer to the eschatological vision of the New Jerusalem.

What is it in the Christian narrative that encourages us to take seriously the idea of the polis? One reason is the eschatological focus upon the New Jerusalem, and the City of God. This is the view of heaven that is given to us in the scriptures, particularly in Revelation.

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.[18]

Augustine also contributes to this view, when he writes his "City of God." The city that is described is not one of industry, such as we often think of today, but rather one that involves people living together and participating fully in the life of the community. Another reason to seriously consider a return to the polis is based upon the earlier discussion of the connections between the growth of Christianity and the city. Christianity has historically had a significant urban character, one which thrives on the relationships made possible through close daily interaction with others. The Christian call to witness requires the public expression of faith, especially possible in urban areas.

It may be wondered what church architecture has to do with creating new polis, and how narrative virtue ethics are involved. The connection is primarily for the construction of new churches, although there are considerations to be made by churches presently in urban situations who feel the urge to move out of the city and build a larger church.[19] For those building new churches, the Christian narrative would encourage an

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[18] Rev. 21:1-2, NRSV (New Revised Standard Version).
[19] Jacobsen, "Reclaiming the City," 25.

examination of current building policies, and an attempt to break the cycle of suburban

sprawl that is not conducive to living a Christian life. Christianity offers "a serious and

sophisticated view of human nature and human community, a pastoral mandate to serve

rich and poor, and a long history of urban and architectural patronage" to those interested

in both urban and suburban development.[20]

The current paradigm of church construction, for both Catholics and Protestants,

is that of the suburban mega-church. These churches often hold in excess of 2,000

people, and typically are surrounded by large asphalt parking lots. (*See Figures 9 and

10*). The story that such monstrosities tell is one of sprawl and consumption, and

potentially of isolation from the rest of society. One of the challenges facing church

development in America is that of the split between public and private space. By placing

churches within acres of parking, by building complexes such as the Willow Creek

Community Church, which on 141 acres contains a 4,500 seat auditorium, a chapel, 48

classrooms, an atrium with food court and bookstore, and an activity center containing

basketball courts and a fitness center,[21] Christians turn in on themselves physically,

demonstrating their lack of concern with the surrounding neighborhoods. For example,

St. Charles Borromeo Church in Kettering, OH, is designed so that the two facades of the

building which face the streets are walls barren of any decoration except for an

occasional window. (*See Figure 11*). The entrance faces the parking lot, instead of the

surrounding sidewalks. (*See Figure 12*). The presence of this church in the

neighborhood is a positive, yet the message sent by the private driveways and parking lot

from which the congregation enters speaks of a separation that should be undesirable by

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[20] Bess, "Design Matters," 27.

[21] Goldberger, C1, C6.

Christians seeking to witness their faith to the world. Despite the ideally public nature of church worship, wherein any and all are welcome to attend, and wherein the gospel is proclaimed, modern American design of suburban churches fall into the same privatizing mindset of suburban housing development. In comparison, traditional urban churches present themselves on the street, making their presence known among traffic, parks, and other neighborhood buildings. (*See Figure 13*).

These suburban churches typically sit on 10 to 15 acre plots of land, and usually contain a church, a school, and a parking lot. (*See Figures 7 and 8*). A retention pond may also be present as a result of the size of the parking lot. In my own urban neighborhood in Chicago, our church and school sat on a 10-acre plot that also included over 100 housing units, 15 or more businesses, and 200 on-street parking places. (*See Figure 14*).[22] That is a much better design of integrated living than the mega-church floating in the middle of a parking lot. As suggested by Philip Bess, churches that are building in suburbs have the opportunity today to build outside of the paradigm presently used.[23] Instead of furthering sprawl, churches could work with developers to create walkable neighborhoods anchored by the presence of a church and possibly a school. (*See Figure 15*). This collaboration with developers could have the additional advantage of bringing in further income to the church that owns the land, as well as create more diverse and integrated neighborhoods.

Christians are called to live out a particular narrative, one which finds its basis in the life of Jesus, and is continued through 2000 years of tradition. The lives of Christians who have gone before us stand as witnesses to what it means to be Christian, and what

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[22] Bess, "Design Matters," 28.

[23] Ibid, 28.

our lives should look like if we believe what we claim to. In recent years, there has been a renewal of discussion about virtue ethics, the ethics of character, and how those virtues are shaped and formed by a particular narrative. Alasdair MacIntyre reminds us of Aristotle's emphasis upon the polis as the location which makes such virtue ethics possible. That is, it is the type of living environment which brings people into association with others that enables us to form our characters correctly. Stanley Hauerwas and Brad Kallenberg see the church as replacing the polis as the location for such character growth.[24] While agreeing that the church can and should encourage the character and virtue development Aristotle spoke of, Christians are also in a position to suggest that perhaps a return to the polis is possible. This polis would, of course, be different than that of Aristotle and the ancient Greeks. Yet the type of city in which the polis existed is possible today, but has been rejected by the suburban model of development and growth.

## The Eschatological View

The eschatological vision of Christian narrative ethics can play an important role in calling Christians to look beyond the immediate culture, and into new ways of thinking about church building and community formation. Recall the bishop's statement,

> Churches are never "simply gathering spaces but signify and make visible the Church living in [a particular] place, the dwelling of God" among us, now "reconciled and united in Christ." As such, the building itself becomes "a sign of the pilgrim Church on earth and reflects the Church dwelling in heaven."[25]

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[24] See Hauerwas, *In Good Company,* and Kallenberg, "Master Argument."
[25] *Built of Living Stones*, §17.

If the building is to represent in part the eschatological vision of heaven, its context must

be considered along with its exterior and interior design. In the Book of Revelation,

> When [John] is given a picture of our redeemed state during his exile on
> Patmos, he does not see Eden restored in some kind of agrarian utopia, nor
> does he see the American ideal of a single-family detached house
> surrounded by a huge yard for every inhabitant of the kingdom. What he
> sees is a city – New Jerusalem descending from heaven onto earth.[26]

While not implying that the only way to live is in a city, John's vision does have

important implications for a Christian understanding of what it means to live in

society. If our tradition speaks of the Kingdom of God in terms of a city, what

story does our suburban model of growth tell? As Christians, the way we live is

not merely made up of separate actions occurring in compartmentalized spaces,

but encompasses all aspects of our lives, including the built environment in which

we live. Until we learn that our eschatological vision is applicable to all areas of

our lives, our Christian witness loses some of its power to transform human life.

The Christian narrative, combined with the tradition and practice of Catholic

church architecture, offers a new way of looking at the physical structures with which we

surround ourselves. The concern of how we ought to live together can be radically

presented through the life of Jesus Christ, and also integrated into our daily lives as

American citizens. Problems of suburban sprawl, and a tendency to focus exclusively on

the interior design of churches, are both aided by looking beyond the immediate world

into the eschatological vision of the New Jerusalem. While this new city can never be

fully brought about by humans, it is still possible and desirable to strive towards the

Kingdom of God. Our churches are in prime position to both inform the conversation

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[26] Jacobsen, "Reclaiming the City," 25.

about suburban growth, and to put into practice a concern for the way in which humanity lives. Our narrative tradition, and the practices which are part of that tradition, encourage us to be concerned for the least among us. This means more than driving into the city once a week to volunteer, and then retreating to the (relative) safety of the suburbs. Rather, it means including in our community those who do not have enough. The ideals of New Urbanism correlate to some of these Christian goals, and yet Christians have much more to say about the ways in which we should live. Our narrative impels us to think seriously about our surrounding built environment, and gives us the vision to look beyond the current state of life in American culture. The explicit and implicit narrative of our church buildings is one place to begin utilizing this eschatological vision.

## CONCLUSION

The influence of the built environment upon humans has been noted throughout history. As Winston Churchill famously noted, "We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us."[1] The origins of early Christianity and its growth are inherently urban. Our surrounding environment plays a role in the formation of our character, and the church plays a role in shaping that environment. The importance of our surrounding environment is especially emphasized by the Congress for New Urbanism, and the ideals which are part of New Urbanism correlate well with Christian concerns for how to live according to the gospel.

Church architecture expresses theology. Instead of focusing on interior design debates, it would behoove us to think about the exterior of the church. This includes not only the style of architecture, but also the possibility of evangelization through art, as well as considering the surrounding environment and neighborhood. The public nature of a church building offers Christians an opportunity to witness to others, and a chance to welcome the stranger. The problem with the current paradigm of Catholic church architecture is that it functions within the context of suburbia, a context which is demonstrably in conflict with the Christian narrative. Post-war suburban development in America has resulted in numerous problems. A change in perspective on what sort of development is possible is necessary for churches if they are to help encourage better human flourishing through urban design. Additionally, we as Christians are called to take seriously the possibilities that exist within cities. Far from being locations of evil and escape from God, cities have redemptive opportunities for all. John's vision in

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[1] Winston Churchill, address to the British House of Commons, 28 October 1943.

Revelation of the New Jerusalem requires that Christians take seriously the potential of cities. They are not just places of crime and disease; instead, they are opportunities for ministry and outreach, as well as places in which to encounter people and build relationships. Church architecture does not on first glance appear to have anything to do with this turn to New Urbanism. It is my suggestion, however, that church architects need to consider church placement within a community and neighborhood, which requires concern for the architectural style of the surroundings. Additionally, churches have the opportunity in the suburbs to buck the trend of building huge churches surrounded by parking lots and isolated from the surrounding housing. Instead, they are in prime position to use their construction of new churches to incorporate aspects of New Urbanism, and break out of the suburban mold in which modern mega-churches are confined.

Several challenges face the Church of the future. The phenomenon of white flight has left the inner cities with shrinking parishes, and contributed to continued sprawl in suburbia. The current shortage of priests makes it more likely that the suburban parishes currently being formed are more like their Protestant brethren's mega-churches. Much has been written about the struggle of parishes to form their identities, and to live out the gospel message of Jesus. The societal environment we live in contributes to our inability to understand what it means to live as good Christians. This thesis suggests that a return to the virtue ethics model of Aristotle, as expounded upon by Alasdair MacIntyre, combined with a review of New Urbanism and its practice, can provide direction for how to think about the practice of church architecture in the future.

Sociologists, historians, and architects often address the built environment. Theologians are not included on this list, because it is not common for theologians to tackle issues of the built environment. When designing a church building, much time and money is spent figuring out the size, shape, and style of the building. In modern America, wherein suburbia is the primary location of new Catholic church growth, the only concern given to the area surrounding the new church building is that the walkways from the parking lot look inviting, and that care should be taken so that the parking lot does not surround the entire church building. This thesis proposes that as long as the Church continues to ignore the reality of the neighborhood and community into which a church is built, and which a church could help to shape, it neglects an incredible potential to create communities that will encourage the flourishing of humans.

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# APPENDIX

**Unless otherwise noted, all images and photos courtesy of Philip Bess.**
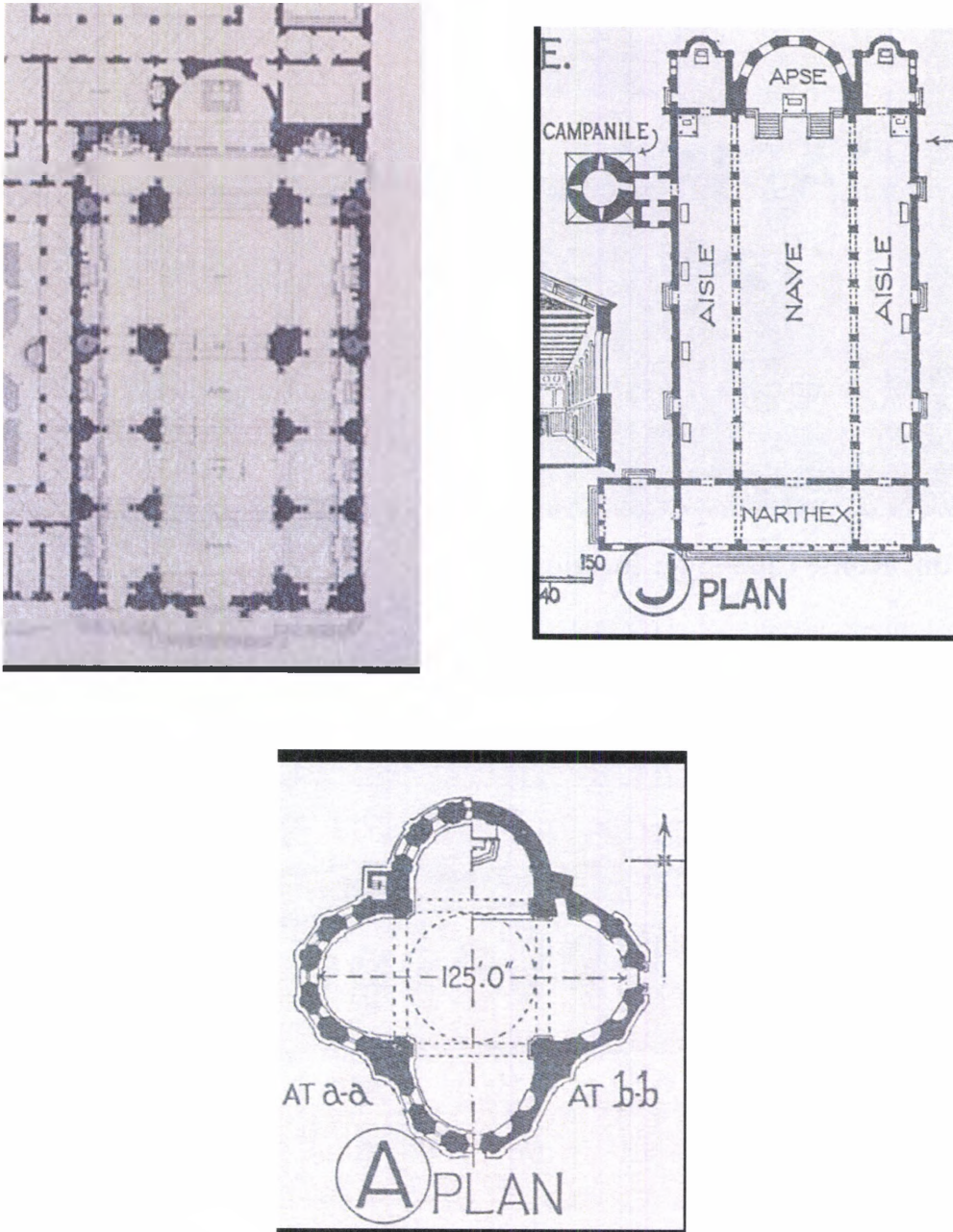


FIGURE 1: Three typical traditional Catholic church floorplans.
Upper left, a cruciform plan, physically exemplifying the Body of Christ.
Upper right, a basilican plan, common after 312 C. E.
Lower center, a centralized plan.

FIGURE 2: Mono-functional housing zone. Note the repetitious architecture, and the dominance of the automobile exemplified by the location of the garages.



FIGURE 3: Mono-functional shopping zone. Note the lack of sidewalks for pedestrian access.

FIGURE 4: Mono-functional zone of office buildings. Note the complete disconnection from other zones.


FIGURE 5: Three mono-use zones: single-family residential, commercial, and apartment residential. Driving is the only option for transportation between the single-family homes and the shopping mall; despite the close proximity, walking is impossible due to a lack of sidewalks and a wall around the rear of the shopping plaza.
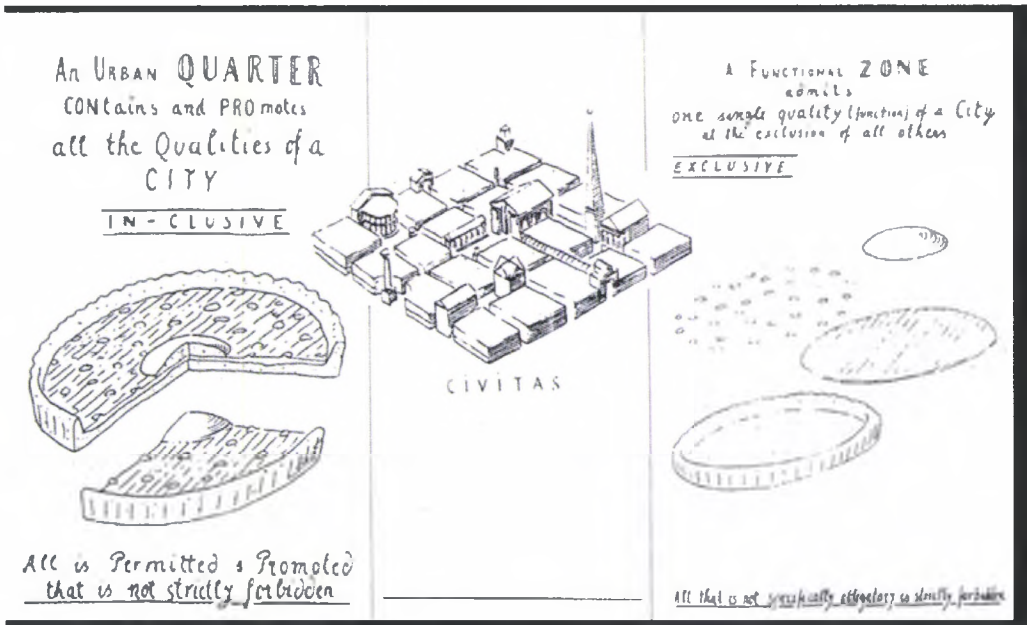
FIGURE 6: Illustration by architect Leon Krier. This demonstrates the difference between
a multi-functional zone (left) and a collection of mono-functional zones (right).
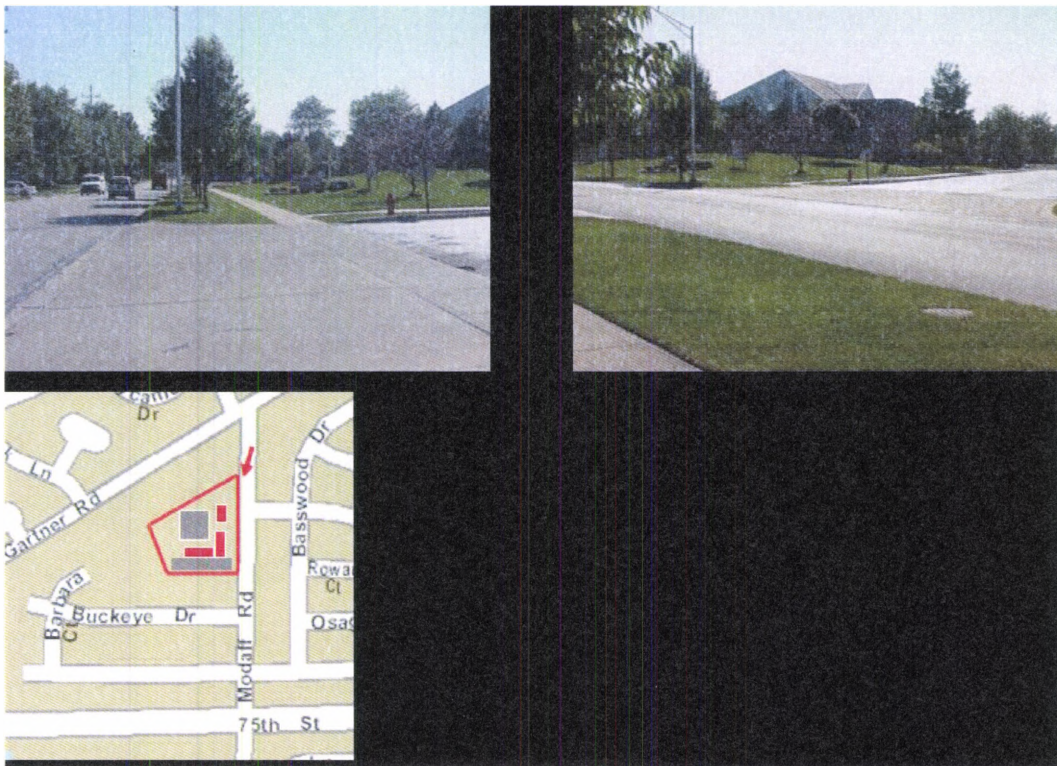Such is the difference between urban and suburban life.



FIGURE 7: A typical suburban Chicago Catholic parish church, as viewed from the street. Below left,
note the same church on its 10-acre plot of land.

FIGURE 8: Same parish as FIGURE 7. Upper left, the church. Upper right, the parking lot.
Bottom panoramic view of church, school, and parking lot.



FIGURE 9: Typical suburban post-conciliar Catholic church, in its typical surrounding landscape.

FIGURE 10: Another typical post-conciliar suburban Catholic church.
Note the surrounding parking lot, and the ambiguous nature of the buildings in the background.
Only the cross and bell tower distinguish this building as a Catholic church.



FIGURE 11: Street-facing façade of St. Charles Borromeo in Kettering, OH.
Note the lack of access to the building for pedestrian approachers, despite the presence of sidewalks.
Photo courtesy of the author.

FIGURE 12: Welcoming plaza of St. Charles Borromeo in Kettering, OH, which faces the parking lot.
Photo courtesy of the author.



FIGURE 13: Front facades of two urban Chicago Catholic churches.
St. Benedict (1909) on the left, Queen of Angels (1937) on the right.
Note their close relationship to the streets in front of them, and their instant recognizability as churches.
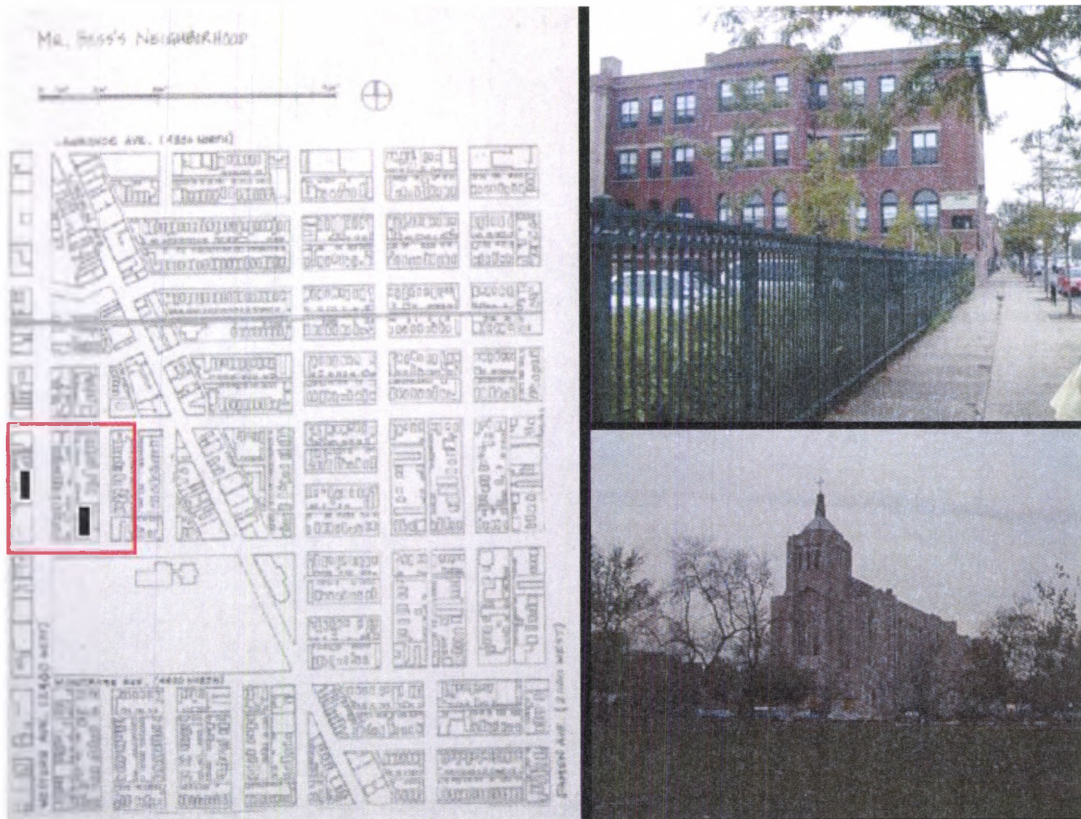
FIGURE 14: Queen of Angels Parish in Chicago. To the left is the 10-acre plot of land on which the church and school fit. Note the numerous other buildings indicated in the plan also on that 10-acre site. Top right is the school, and bottom right is the church, as viewed from the public park which it fronts.
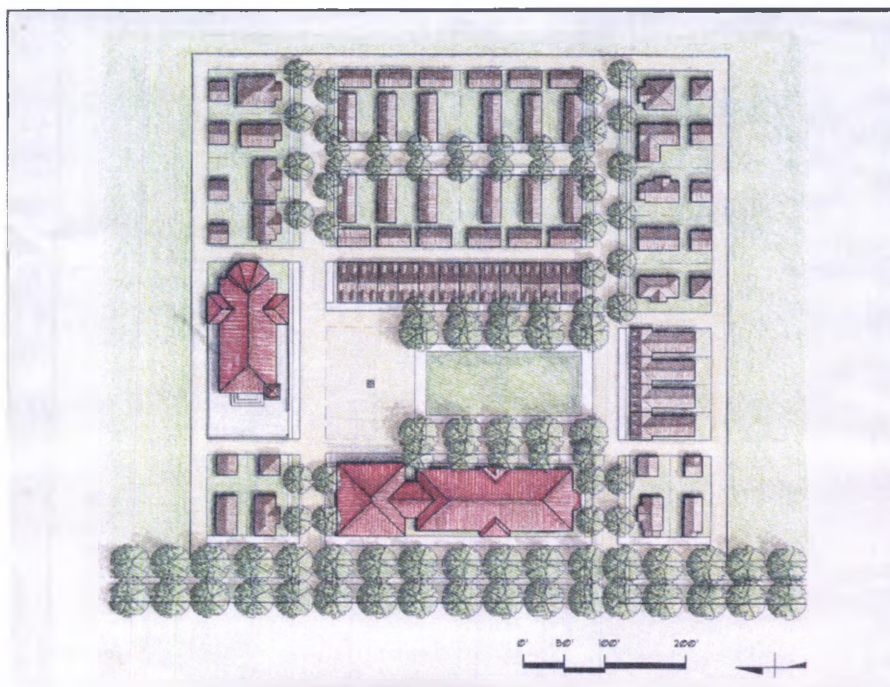


FIGURE 15: Proposal for a 10-acre site. Includes a church, a school, a paved plaza and a green, 70 residential units, 4 ground floor shops, and 388 potential parking places. Design by Philip Bess.