



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

- 📖 The New Urbanism  
(*Cities and Towns*,  
pp. 28-36)

### Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Building a City that  
Honors God  
(*Cities and Towns*,  
pp. 83-88)
- 📖 An Ordered  
Neighborhood  
(*Cities and Towns*,  
pp. 56-60)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu)

### Christian Reflection

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# The New Urbanism

The New Urbanists are reviving the ancient practice of civic art. They are bringing together experts, residents, and stakeholders to articulate a vision for their communities—based on historical models of blocks, streets, and buildings that form a coherent and aesthetically pleasing urban fabric.

## Prayer

Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

## Responsive Reading†

Babylon.

**Not simply an evil territory or a dirty word,  
as we are prone to believe.**

But a place where God's people were sent in exile,  
on purpose, on mission,  
to offer their culture to the culture there, in love.

**For God so loved the world.**

Like Israel in exile, still we hope for our homecoming  
in the city of God, where there will be no more tears.

**Let us hope not in closed communion,  
in isolated sanctuaries, apart from the Babylon-world.**

Rather let us hope in the fullness of God's love  
in the life of the cities and towns  
where we work and love and worship and play.

**And remember that God so loved not only us,  
but the world.**

Let us hope for Babylon as we hope for ourselves.

**Let us embrace its people, its buildings, its streets,  
and fill them with the beauty of God's temple.**

Let us hope with doors wide open,  
welcome the city in and pour ourselves out.

**For God so loved the world.**

## Reflection

"We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be and if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer," C. S. Lewis observed in *Mere Christianity*. "Going back is the quickest way on."

Given the centerless sprawl and deteriorating neighborhoods in many cities, Eric Jacobsen believes we've taken a wrong turn in urban design. The Congress of the New Urbanism (CNU) is headed in the right direction—by *going back* to planning traditional neighborhoods in a more cooperative way. Jacobsen commends the CNU path not because it's nostalgic, but because it may restore the built environment and foster community.

- ▶ *Traditional neighborhood design* is the CNU response to "the faulty logic behind post-WWII suburban development," he explains. "Density in the suburbs tends to be low, which further discourages pedestrian activity (as well as public transit) and the public realm is so undervalued that the experience of getting about tends to be demeaning as well as frustrating. In contrast to this



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recipe for the abdication of citizenship,” the CNU endorses a traditional neighborhood that “has a clear center and edge, is about a five-minute walk from center to edge, is mixed-use (includes places for living, working, shopping, playing, and worshipping), and gives priority to public places (sidewalks, good public buildings, parks, and plazas).” And despite their name, New Urbanists do not focus only on cities; their transect scheme describes neighborhoods appropriate to six density levels, from an urban core to a rural setting.

▶ *The charrette planning process* is a breath of fresh air “for anyone who has ever been frustrated at a public review meeting where developers or policy makers pretend to listen to community concerns and people come to read angry speeches,” Jacobsen promises. The CNU encourages “everyone who has a stake in the outcome to come and join the process. On hand are architects who can quickly draw ideas as they come up and technical experts who can offer definitive answers to questions about culverts and fire codes. Most of the work is done by multiple small groups around tables who collaborate on ideas and then share them with the group as a whole.” By the end of the week participants not only trust one another, they also discover “a focused idea [for the neighborhood] that is better than anyone’s personal agenda.”

“If we build new traditional neighborhoods that attract homeowners who have lived their entire lives in the privatized world of a suburban subdivision,” Jacobsen wonders, “will these people automatically act more neighborly toward one another?” True community needs both good “hardware” — “buildings, streets, and blocks that dignify daily life, connect us to the physical realities of our local context, and encourage (or, at least, do not discourage) spontaneous social interaction” — and good “software,” or patterns of care among neighbors. Christians are in the software business, announcing the gospel of God’s *shalom* and restored relationships. “If church members are sensitive to the different perspectives represented in their community, a congregation can be an effective catalyst for community development. Members can invest their lives in the neighborhood by enjoying its amenities and advocating for its improvement.”

### Study Questions

1. As we seek the shalom of the city, what value might we see in traditional neighborhoods? In the charrette process?
2. How does Jacobsen respond to those critics who accuse the New Urbanists of being against cars and freedom, but for sentimental architecture and gentrification? Do you agree?
3. What New Urbanist projects are underway in your area?
4. Discuss Jacobsen’s suggestion that we should see ourselves as stewards of the built environment, just as we are God’s stewards for the natural world. Is this analogy illuminating?
5. Which traits of Greenwich Village does Edward Hopper celebrate in *Early Sunday Morning* and *Nighthawks*?

### Departing Hymn: “Crate and Castle”

†Adapted from Ann Bell Worley’s poem “Babylon” in *Cities and Towns*, pp. 47-48.

# The New Urbanism

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the shalom (or, peace) of cities and towns must include the welfare and order of their built environment.
2. To understand why the New Urbanists value traditional neighborhoods and the charrette process for planning them.
3. To explore what it means to be God's stewards of the built environment.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Cities and Towns (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

Eric Jacobsen reminds us that "Jeremiah's message to the Babylonian exiles was to 'seek the *shalom* of the city to which you have been called.' Shalom includes peace, wholeness, and restored relationships. In the Church we have interpreted this prophetic call too abstractly; we have set up programs to benefit individuals, but neglected the shalom of the physical city."

Jacobson observes, "Following the destruction by Hurricane Katrina of eleven municipalities stretched out along 120 miles of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Governor Haley Barbour invited architect and cofounder of the Congress for the New Urbanism Andres Duany to help with the rebuilding. The governor instructed him to 'do what you do and do it well.' Duany responded by gathering 100 fellow New Urbanists and about the same number of Mississippians in Biloxi for a week to formulate a coherent plan for recovery...."

"The eleven Mississippi cities destroyed by Hurricane Katrina are not the only North American cities that need an infusion of shalom, but their dire situation is helping us to see some interesting realities more clearly" (*Cities and Towns*, pp. 28, 35-36).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members will grow in Christian community, bound together by their love for God, one another, and their neighbors.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

This study examines the New Urbanism, an urban planning movement that promotes traditional neighborhood design as a way to restore the built environment of our cities and towns. It is a fitting companion to two other study guides: "Dysfunctional Cities: Where Did We Go Wrong," in which Lee Hardy explores some causes of

the woes of our built environment, and “The Church Building as Sacramental Sign,” in which leading New Urbanist architect Philip Bess urges congregations to be catalysts in restoring traditional communities.

It is important to distinguish between *architecture* (the design and styling of individual or small groups of buildings) and *urbanism* (the design of spaces among the buildings that shape the public realm). “Urbanism involves making streets feel like hallways and plazas feel like welcoming rooms that invite people to explore, rest, and enjoy social interaction with one another,” Jacobsen writes. “For urbanists, the architecture of the individual buildings is significant, but it is definitely secondary to the central task of urban planning.”

Jacobsen disputes the idea that urban design is insignificant or, at most, peripheral to important moral concerns. He believes we are called to be God’s stewards of the built environment (on analogy with our stewardship of the natural world). Authentic community requires a good physical form (the “hardware”) as well as caring practices of neighbor love (the “software”).

### Study Questions

1. Jacobsen suggests traditional neighborhoods are “coherent and aesthetically pleasing” and what people want their communities to look like. Things are accessible to more people—the poor and rich and the old and young members of the community. The design encourages interaction and mutual care for common spaces.

The charrette planning process encourages trust, a mutual vision, and a sense of common ownership among neighbors. It breaks down barriers between experts and community members. Thus it contributes to wholeness and restored relationships.

2. Jacobsen explains that New Urbanists (1) want “to create viable alternatives to using a car for every trip,” to allow more freedom and “reclaim the romance of driving”; (2) rely on market mechanisms and seek less government regulation (just the opposite of the Smart Growth movement, which also favors traditional neighborhoods); (3) are less concerned with architecture (the design of individual buildings) than with urbanism (the placement of buildings, parks, and plazas in a neighborhood); and (4) “are not causing gentrification nor are they able to stop it by some sort of authoritative decree. Gentrification can only be tempered by government policies that protect the rights of the poor or by the work of churches and other institutions of compassion.”
3. To help members identify New Urbanist projects in their region, visit the CNU website, [www.cnu.org](http://www.cnu.org). It lists representative projects and designers in each state or province. It also identifies representative projects for each transect zone, from urban core to rural preserve. Many projects have links web pages that describe the goals and progress of the project.
4. Jacobsen’s analogy suggests that the built environment is part of God’s handiwork (executed through human art) and belongs to God. Like the natural world, our good depends upon our respecting and caring for the built environment. It is meant to be shared for the common good. It is ultimately good, though now we encounter it in a distorted, fallen state. This analogy highlights our responsibilities to God and neighbor through the design and maintenance of the built environment. It prevents us from sentimentalizing either nature or human construction, or playing one off the other.
5. Hopper celebrates the individuality of his neighbors (in “the varying types of curtains, heights of shades, and colors in the windows—of their personally decorated homes”), their shared community life (through “a barber pole and fire hydrant [that] become, along with the building façade, the main ‘characters’ in the composition”), and the peaceful calm of the Greenwich Village neighborhood. These traits are even more pronounced when we realize that he was painting during the horrors of the Great Depression and World War II. “Hopper was able to communicate the American Realism of an ordered neighborhood at a time when the rest of the world was looking to the United States for solutions to chaos,” Hornik notes.

### Departing Hymn

“Crate and Castle” is on pp. 43-45 of *Cities and Towns*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.