



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Church Building as
Sacramental Sign
(*Cities and Towns*,
pp. 74-82)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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The Church Building as Sacramental Sign

If the Church is to be a witness to the Heavenly City, Christians must once again be not only good patrons of architecture, but also (and even more) good patrons of urbanism. Heralding the City of God is only made more difficult by acquiescing in the Suburb of Man.

Prayer†

Grant us, Lord, the lamp of charity which never fails, that it may burn in us and shed its light on those around us, and that by its brightness we may have a vision of that holy City, where dwells the true and never-failing Light, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 122

Reflection

If “the first duty of the church building is to be an image of the Church as a whole, of that communion of God and human beings across time wrought through the mystery of Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension,” Philip Bess wonders, “what form or forms... should twenty-first-century church buildings take?” He believes, “Good church buildings proclaim the Church’s faith in visible signs and evangelize the neighborhood, the city, and the nation. Nonbelievers point to them as stunning examples of art as well as mysterious, public symbols of Christian piety.”

Bess takes into account not only the architecture but also the immediate context of the church building in a city or town.

- ▶ *The FORM of a church building* should have features common to sacred architecture in most cultures – verticality (in height or depth); a concern for light and shadow; crafted, durable, and specially chosen materials; mathematical and geometric order; artistic composition; and a sense of hierarchy to remind us some things are more important than others. But it also should reflect some aspect of the Trinitarian God we worship. So, a *circle-based plan* reflects “the unity and changeless perfection of God”; a *high-roofed hall in a basilican plan* suggests “the dynamic movement of nature and history toward their end in God”; a *cruciform plan* expresses “the mystical Body of Christ” and “the communion of God and human beings at the axis mundi”; and an *elliptical plan* shows “the dynamic relationship” in liturgy between Word and Eucharist.
- ▶ *The STYLE of the church building* also can express the Church’s mission. “*Classicism*, with its interest in the proportions of the human figure, can be a celebration...of the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity. The *Gothic style’s* verticality and its ethereal quality of light is a celebration of the mystical presence of God the Holy Spirit. *Exuberant localized vernacular expressions* can be a fitting testimony to the endlessly creative energy of God the Father,” Bess suggests. And “a case can be made for *monastic simplicity and austerity* of buildings to express the Church’s voluntary solidarity with the poor.”



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► *A church building should beckon people to God's community. "Unfortunately, it is not the church on the public square but rather the church in the parking lot that is the paradigm for church architecture today," Bess laments. So, he makes this fascinating proposal: "Instead of building a church and a parking lot on their six to ten suburban acres, why not build a church, a public (not private) square, perhaps a school, and the beginnings of a mixed-use neighborhood?... Why couldn't churches use this strategy to begin to integrate affordable housing and commercial buildings into suburbia as part of mixed-use neighborhoods? And who's to say that an initially random proliferation of such developments across suburbia – once the exemplary pattern was established – over time might not become...the very physical and spiritual centers so pointedly lacking in contemporary suburbia?"*

Study Questions

1. Review the *form* and *style* of your church building. Does it have some features that Bess identifies? How does it witness to the Heavenly City and call people to God's community?
2. Consider the location of your church building and the nature of its campus. What role do these suggest for the Church?
3. Identify the key differences between an automobile suburb and a traditional urban neighborhood. What are the problems, according to Bess, with an automobile suburb?
4. Since the 1970s, how have many new church buildings and campuses *been conformed to* rather than *challenged and transformed* the automobile suburb?
5. Discuss the proposal that a congregation (re)develop its campus into the beginnings of a mixed-use neighborhood. How might this work in a suburb? In the inner city? Is this an option for your congregation?

Departing Hymn: "Built by Jehovah's Hand"

Built by Jehovah's hand,
the holy city see:
its happy gates wide open stand:
to enter all are free.

One bright, eternal day
shall in the city reign,
darkness and death are fled away,
ne'er to return again.

O blessèd, happy state!
Great God, we thankful come,
low at your footstool humbly wait,
and make your church our home.

Jerusalem shall be
our peaceful, blest abode:
here we will love and honor you,
our Savior and our God!

Joseph Proud (1745-1826), alt.
Tune: ST. THOMAS (Williams)

† Reprinted from *Book of Common Prayer* (1979)

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Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore how the form and style of a church building can witness to the Heavenly City and beckon people to God's community.
2. To examine the automobile suburb and the traditional urban neighborhood as alternative ideals of community.
3. To consider how a congregation might (re)develop its property into the beginnings of a mixed-use neighborhood.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 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 before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Built by Jehovah's Hand" locate the familiar tune *ST. THOMAS (Williams)* in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

Speaking of the urban church in *Planting and Growing Urban Churches*, Harvie Conn has written, "We are God's demonstration community of the rule of Christ in the city. On a tract of earth's land purchased with the blood of Christ, Jesus the kingdom developer has begun building new housing. As a sample of what will be, he has erected a model home of what will eventually fill the urban neighborhood. Now he invites the urban world into that model home to take a look at what will be" (quoted in *Cities and Towns*, p. 62).

How should Christians live together in love within this home, this urban church? It is a crucial question, and one that we often ask. But we should also ask another question: What should be the physical structure of the urban church, that it can reflect Christians' new relationship to one another and before God, and beckon others to enter? This is the question Philip Bess invites us to explore.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 122 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study examines how a church building and its campus should beckon people to God's inclusive community, how it should be "a visible witness to the mystery of the ongoing life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus." This is increasingly difficult, Philip Bess notes, within the sprawl of an automobile suburb, which celebrates the culture of individualism, separates people by class, and isolates them by their generation and inability to use a car.

Bess concludes with the fascinating proposal that a congregation might become the catalyst in restoring the surrounding community by (re)developing the campus around its church building into the core of a traditional mixed-use neighborhood. Thus, this study 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 environ-

ment, and “The New Urbanism,” in which Eric Jacobsen introduces this urban planning movement that promotes traditional neighborhood design as a way to restore the built environment of our cities and towns.

Study Questions

1. Typically, a sanctuary building will be based on one of the *plans* and executed in one of the *styles* that Bess mentions. It will exhibit a number of the features common to sacred architecture. (For example, the sanctuary in which I was baptized was a long hall—as in a basilican plan—executed in a New England colonial style. Its notable sacred features were verticality in height and depth, geometrically patterned woodwork, finely crafted furniture and pews, and the importance of its raised chancel area and central pulpit.) Encourage members to reflect on features, plans, and styles that have impressed them in other church buildings.
2. Bess contrasts two Chicago-area churches. Which of these is more like your church campus? Is it located at the center of a traditional neighborhood, on the edge of a suburb, along a major artery, or in a business or shopping district? How far do members commute? Do they walk, use public transit, or drive their cars? How do elderly and young members travel to church activities? What do you notice first about the campus—a vast parking lot, a children’s play area, a distinctive sacred architecture? How accessible is the campus to those with disabilities? Are church signs written in several languages? Are the buildings filled with church or community activities through the week? Some church campuses are a hub of neighborhood services and activities; children play on their grounds and people stop in to pray. Some appear to be reserved for members who drive in from other parts of the city.
3. Traditional neighborhoods have several types of housing, private buildings for shopping and work, good schools, parks and plazas, civic buildings, and monuments. Houses and apartments are built close to the street; many buildings have mixed uses. There is public transportation. All the streets have wide sidewalks and on-street parking; most of them connect to others. “Buildings for education, religion, culture, sport, and government are sited either at the end of important street vistas or fronting squares or plazas.” The community is relatively dense, with most of these sites within one-quarter to one-half mile distance.
Suburbs are spread out; buildings are isolated by function; houses are separated from streets and one another by big yards; many streets are cul-de-sacs, a few are major arteries; there are few sidewalks and little on-street parking; driving a car is a necessity rather than a convenience. “Suburban sprawl is problematic because it renders cross-generational, mixed-class communities of place impossible,” Bess objects. “The automobile suburb—of its very nature, owing to its physical characteristics—effectively demobilizes and disenfranchises that significant percentage of the population which is too young, too old, too poor, or too feeble to drive an automobile. Suburbia cannot deliver on its promise of convenience, mobility, beauty of the natural landscape, and individual freedom and well-being for all.”
4. Many church buildings look like shopping malls or suburban office centers surrounded by huge parking lots. Some churches relocate along a freeway or at the intersection of major arteries to encourage automobile commuting. They entice Christians with a particular theology, worship “style,” or social or economic class to drive several miles to the new campus. To compete, churches in traditional neighborhoods experiment with new leadership, worship styles, and special need-based ministries to attract members from across town.
5. Churches on the edge of a city might build a neighborhood core like the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century neighborhoods sponsored by London aristocrats. (View these neighborhoods on *Google Earth*.) An inner-city congregation might redevelop unused buildings for mixed-use, build a park for neighborhood activities, or construct a mix of new housing.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.